



# BEND ME OVER

SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

Loose Id

*Hawkeye Two:  
Bend Me Over*

*Sierra Cartwright*



## **Hawkeye Two: Bend Me Over**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** BDSM Multicultural

**Series:** Hawkeye; **Previous Title:** *Danger Zone*

*Tall, dark, handsome, and oh-so dangerous.*

Aimee has no desire to share her home with anyone, especially a Hawkeye operative who invades her space and thoroughly dominates her.

If it were up to him, Trace Romero would be in a South American jungle, mixing it up with bad guys instead of playing bodyguard to the uptight college professor who makes him anything but welcome.

But when he finds a stash of her BDSM novels, protecting the professor's body suddenly gets more interesting. The first thing he wants to do is get her out of her clothes, and then out of her own way long enough to respond to him in the way he wants and she secretly dreams of.

Aimee would send him on his way, if her sister weren't so concerned about the break-in at house, and if she hadn't threatened protective custody. But protective custody might have been slightly less overwhelming than Trace demanding her complete capitulation, mind and body, and more her total trust. Her trust may be the only thing standing between her and a madman determined to kill her.

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, BDSM theme and content, violence.*

## Dedication

*For MG—thanks for the wonderful help! For BAB and her wonderful husband, Don, I love ya and appreciate your patience. And for the crack editorial team at Loose Id, with special gratitude to Kym, Jill, and MT.*

## Chapter One

*Oh crap.*

The sight of the large if gorgeous man on her porch when she was heading out for her run scared the snot out of her, and Aimee leaned her whole body into the door and tried to slam it shut.

His booted foot stopped her efforts. Not just a booted foot, she noted a bit wildly, a massive booted foot, the leather showing nicks, bumps, and bruises from years of hard work.

*Crap, crap, crap.*

Her heart slammed into overdrive.

“Trace Romero,” the man said, pushing back against the door.

A potential bad guy wouldn't introduce himself, would he? What the heck did she know, beyond a few spy movies? Her sister was the one with a gun; Aimee was the nerd with the iPod, ponytail, workout gear, and a scientific mind that rarely shut down.

“I'm with Hawkeye. Your sister sent me.”

Her breath whooshed out.

If he was from Hawkeye and knew her sister, she should feel relieved. After all, she too worked for Hawkeye, Inc., one of the world's most exclusive security firms. As the world changed, became more global, more dangerous, there were more resources that needed protecting—celebs, corporate barons, and their family members. And there were areas in which the military wasn't authorized to operate.

Since its mission was to keep the planet and its inhabitants safe, Hawkeye added employees by the dozens every month, and its hiring rate showed no signs of slowing down. Aimee guessed this man was probably former military or a former cop, but that didn't matter to her.

She had no intention of letting any man, even one who looked like Trace Romero—*especially* one who looked like Trace Romero, tall, dark, and dangerous—inside her house.

She cursed herself for having called her sister in a panic. It was just like her protective older sibling to call out the cavalry. “You can tell her you were here and I sent you away. Mission accomplished.”

“If I don't answer your phone when she calls, I might as well turn in my resignation and throw myself off Pikes Peak, save her the effort of hunting down my sorry carcass.”

Aimee's running shoes slipped as he pushed on the door. For all the success her efforts were having at keeping him out, she might as well be trying to hold back a Colorado blizzard.

Maybe she couldn't beat him when it came to brute strength, but she could batter his ego and get under his defenses. “I can't believe a big, strong man is frightened of my sister!”

“Scared shitless,” he admitted.

“Damn.” She groaned. His ego was intact enough not to rise to her bait.

She heard him draw in a breath before he said, “We can do it my way, Aimee.” He paused for a couple of beats, then added, “Or we can do it my way.”

Through the small opening, she saw him move inexorably forward.

She hated having people in her space. It was bad enough sharing the fifteen hundred square feet with an obnoxious parrot that never shut up, but she refused to share with someone who would touch her stuff, eat her food, discover her secrets...

He'd been in her life less than thirty seconds, and he'd already interrupted her run, throwing off her routine. Unless she was so focused on her work that the rest of the world ceased to exist, she kept a rigid schedule.

The brute of a man budged her back another few inches. “You can stop the Big Bad Wolf act anytime,” she said. But a panicky little part of her was afraid it wasn't an act at all.

“Step away from the door, and I will.”

So maybe she didn't carry a gun and act all tough-ass, but she'd learned a few things from listening to her sister. If you can't go through, go around. “Okay. You win.”

He stopped pushing. She counted to two. When he let down his guard, she grunted and then shoved forward with every scrap of irritation she could summon.

But her pissed-off best wasn't good enough.

His foot was still firmly lodged in the entrance.

Within seconds, he filled the space.

Good God, he was big. Bigger than big.

Instinctively she took a protective step back. No matter how mad she was, she would never be able to win against this man.

He dominated the space and sucked up the air she'd been intending to breathe. He stood well over six feet tall, and his shoulders almost filled the entire width of the opening. Faded blue jeans snuggled his hips, and a well-worn navy T-shirt hugged his torso.

She, who rarely got flustered, just stood there and blinked. He made her oh so aware of being a woman. In her shorts and sports bra, she felt small, vulnerable, while he was spectacular, from his angular cheekbones to his military-precision black haircut and rich, deep brown eyes. His skin was dark, emphasizing his Spanish heritage, and it might have been a shade or two richer for being in the sun. Damn, she was always a sucker for men who looked like him.

But before her mind could race off, she became hyperconscious of the set of his jaw. It brooked no argument, and intuitively she knew this man spelled danger to her.

She wondered if he would continue to stand in the entrance and argue with her, but he didn't. He grabbed her by the shoulders, unceremoniously moved her back a foot, then released her long enough to turn, slam the door, turn both locks, and slide the safety latch across...all before she could even draw a protesting breath.

"My way," he reminded her.

From the other room, Eureka squawked.

"What the hell is that racket?"

She should probably tell him about her attack parrot, but it would be a heck of a lot more fun for him to find out himself; well, fun for her, if not him. "It's a bird."

"Inside? A pet?"

"He owns me," she said, as if that said it all. When it came to Eureka, it did.

"Anything else I need to know about?"



That was a loaded question. “How much do you know?” Surely her sister had left her *some* secrets.

He raised his eyebrows. “How much is there to know?” he countered.

“I’m pretty boring.”

“That’s why someone broke in?”

“It was probably a random thing. Kids.” She wished. Hoped. But she knew better. She’d dashed out for her morning coffee, extra-large vanilla soy latte, and come straight back. She hadn’t been gone even half an hour.

When she returned, the back patio door was open, and the only place anything had been disturbed was her home office. Her electronics were still in place; none of her jewelry was missing. Even her emergency stash of twenty-dollar bills remained untouched in her dresser drawer.

“The local police said there have been no other reported break-ins.”

Which brought her back to her original question. *How much did he know?* Surely her sister hadn’t told him what, exactly, she was working on. And as for the other—her deep, dark secret—please God, don’t let him find out about that.

“I understand nothing was taken?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Which means it wasn’t a random thing, and you and Ms. Inamorata know it. Want to show me around?”

“No. Not really,” she said, not even trying to disarm her words with a smile.

“My way,” he said again. “You can show me, or I can look myself.”

“There’s not much to see. My bedroom, which you’re not going into, my office, which you’re not going into, my kitchen, dining room, two bathrooms, and my living room...which you’re standing in. That’s it. You can go now.”

He took another step toward her.

Damn if he didn’t look as good as he smelled, like a cool Colorado breeze and the spice of night.

Reluctantly she ceded the ground; just as fast, she regretted her action. Instead of remaining where he was, Trace took another step in her direction. This time she forced herself to stand still. She crossed her arms across her bare midriff, fighting the natural instinct to get the hell away from him.

“I will be going into your bedroom and your office. I'll show myself around.”

Arguing with him was like trying to turn back a tornado. “Fine,” she said with false bravado. “In that case, I'll just go for my run while you have a look-see.” She started to brush past him. He grabbed her wrist, not hard but firmly enough to say he meant business.

“You run, I run.”

“Me Tarzan, you Jane,” she snapped.

“That's the natural order of things,” he said.

She rolled her eyes, but her heart was pounding, at least 80 percent of her target heart rate. She wouldn't need a cardio workout if he stayed under her roof another five minutes. His touch bothered her. His aggressive style bothered her. But what bothered her most was her own, way-too-feminine reaction to him. “You're interrupting my schedule, Mr. Romero...Agent Romero. Whatever your name is.”

“Trace.”

“You won't be here long enough for us to get that familiar.”

“Don't count on it.”

She snatched her hand back from his grip. “Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do—”

“What I've been *ordered* to do,” he said.

“But my sister overreacted, probably because *I* overreacted.”

“Why would someone break in?”

She frowned. There wasn't a good answer to that question.

“Your sister is the least likely person I know to overreact,” he said, his voice more patient than she'd heard it so far. “If she thinks someone should be here to protect your body and your secrets”—his glance started at her head and slowly traveled downward, igniting too-long-dormant senses—“then I'm going to be here for as long as she says.”

“The police said they'd be happy to drive by.”

“Periodically,” he agreed. “But they're not going to provide the kind of protection I can.”

“I—”

“Show me around,” he said.

She sighed. “Can I finish a sentence?”

“Depends whether you're going to agree with me or not.” He grinned then, and strange things happened to her insides.

“Just for the record,” he continued, “there are other ways to shut you up. Who knows?” He leaned in a bit closer. “You might enjoy them. I would.”

Her heart increased its tempo to at least 85 percent of her target heart rate. She told herself he wouldn't kiss her, told herself she wouldn't let him if he tried.

*Right?*

The phone rang, thankfully shattering the moment.

“That'll be your sister, for me.”

The phone shrilled a second time.

She sighed. “Through there,” she said, pointing to the kitchen. It wasn't lost on her that he was winning every single battle.

He nodded and headed into the heart of her home.

She trailed him, fully intending to eavesdrop.

“Bombs away!”

“What the...?”

“Eureka! No.” *God, no.* But she knew it was already too late.

The phone, the shrieking bird, her tension, all created sudden pandemonium.

From nowhere and everywhere at once, Eureka flew into the room, a fury of green feathers and obnoxious noise.

“Duck!” she warned.

Too late.

Eureka swooped low over Trace's head.

Aimee pushed her palms against her eyes, unable to watch.

“Crap!”

Her word exactly.

“Return to base,” the parrot shrieked. “Return to base! Mission accomplished.”

The phone stopped ringing. Eureka landed on his perch and rang a bell that hung beneath a mirror. Then silence, sudden and oppressive, echoed.

“Sorry about that,” she said, slowly pulling her hands away from her face. “I should have warned you about his...tendencies.”

“Does he do that a lot?”

“Only when he's upset. Hopefully he got the intruders. Bastards for leaving a door open, anyway. If anything happened to him—”

“I think he's okay,” Trace said.

She was glad for his interruption. That ridiculous, bad-mannered bird was her best friend.

“Did he get me?” Trace ran a hand across the top of his head, then looked at his palm.

“You'll need to change your shirt,” she said. For the first time, she smiled at him. “Since you probably don't have another one, you can just go home.”

“Stubborn woman.”

“Stubborn man,” she countered.

“It will wash.” He dragged the hem from the waistband.

“Er...”

He exposed part of his stomach. *Oh. My. Talk about tanned and toned...*

He pulled the shirt a bit higher. “Don't!” she said. “Please.” Having him this close was bad enough; half-naked would undo her.

The phone rang again. Eureka squawked.

“No,” she warned, looking at the bird.

Eureka stretched his neck out and looked at her. He cocked his head to one side, as if contemplating her order.

“No,” she said again.

The bird began to preen himself, but he kept an eye on Trace as the man crossed the room.

“I mean it.”

Eureka lifted a foot from the perch, as if considering his options; then he put it back down again.

“Good boy,” she said softly to her unruly pet. She too had her eye on Trace. His boots were loud on her tile floor, and as large as he was, he dwarfed the space.

“Romero,” he said, answering her phone.

“Is it my sister?” she whispered.

He nodded.

He was a man of few words, until he looked directly at her and said, “No. She hasn't been the least bit hospitable. I have a bruised foot and parrot shit on my shirt.”

Rat bastard.

“Yeah, no problem.” He held out the phone toward her.

Reluctantly she crossed to him, not wanting to get any closer to him than she needed to. Her mind might not have wanted him in her space, but her body most definitely did. Aimee Inamorata was not used to men upsetting her equilibrium. They had their uses, no doubt, and sometimes they were even good for conversation.

She took the handset from him and, to her sister, said, “Hey.”

For the next two minutes, the oldest Inamorata gave Aimee hell, finishing with, “I know you can take care of yourself, but you've got to think about the project.”

“Exactly,” Aimee said. “Now you see the issue. I can't work with someone breathing down my neck.”

“Is that what he's doing?”

Actually he *was* close enough that she could feel the warmth of him. And it wasn't all terrible. But it sure as hell was a distraction.

“How soon will you be done with the project?”

“I don't know. A couple of days. Maybe more.”

“So it's not like he'll be a pain in your ass for more than a few days. Live with it, otherwise we can talk about a safe house.”

“Not fair,” Aimee protested.

“The project is too important,” her sister said. “*You* are too important.”

Aimee was the scientist, calm and rational, or she had been until ten minutes ago when Tall, Dark, and Dangerous showed up on her porch. She sighed.

“Do it for me?”

“This is under duress,” she said.

“So noted.”

Aimee hung up.

“The formidable Ms. Inamorata wins another round?” he asked. His arms were folded across his chest, and he didn't gloat.

“Could you look smug or triumphant or something? It's easier to dislike you that way.”

“Surprisingly, most people like me.”

She couldn't afford to be one of them, as easy as that promised to be with him standing only inches away and smelling so damn good. “You're right. That is surprising.”

“I already checked out the front of the house and the backyard. I wish you had a privacy fence rather than a chain-link one.”

“The neighbors have a dog.”

“Good to know. Show me the rest of the house,” he asked again.

If he wanted to explore, he could do it on his own. No way was she watching as he uncovered her secrets. “You still need to wash your shirt,” she countered.

“I have a duffel bag in the truck.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Deductive reasoning? I'm told you are a scientist.”

“There is that.”

“And I fully intended to stay, regardless of your reception. I do have workout clothes as well.”

“But if we both go for a run, no one will be protecting the house.”

“Wrong again. Your sister has a couple of details assigned. There's at least one stationed down the block.”

She tugged on her ponytail. "She thinks of everything."

He headed for the front door. "Be back in less than thirty seconds."

She thought about locking him out, but Trace Romero was every bit as stubborn, and maybe more determined, as he was.

The dark glance he shot her, combined with that set of his jaw, promised retribution if she crossed him again. *His way*, his attitude screamed.

She stood in the doorway, watching him jog across the road to his big, black, badass sports utility vehicle.

Under other circumstances, she would find him unbelievably attractive. Faded denim hugged his powerful thighs and showed the long length of his legs. But if she were honest, she'd admit she liked the way they showed off his butt. No flat butt for Mr. Romero. It appeared as nicely shaped and as honed as the rest of him. She wondered absently what he wore beneath those ancient jeans. Tightly whities? Boxers? Briefs? Commando? Lord help her, what if there was nothing but that zipper between her and him?

Aimee mentally gave herself a shake. She shouldn't be having random fantasies about her jailer. She needed to focus on her project. Hawkeye was counting on her.

He grabbed an army green duffel bag from the passenger seat; then he slammed the door shut and sprinted back toward her. She noticed him give a thumbs-up to a white Suburban parked down the street.

Her sister really had called out the cavalry.

Aimee had to take a step back to let him into the house.

"Should I change in your bedroom?"

"That's off-limits, I told you."

Right there, in her entry, he pulled off the navy cotton shirt.

She should have known better than to forbid him to do something.

Carefully he wadded the T-shirt. She stood there, mouth agape. As she'd already surmised, he was seriously one sexy man. She might not like his being in her house, but facts were facts, and he was totally smoking, sizzling hot.

He had no excess fat around the middle, and a smattering of dark hair arrowed down the center of his chest to disappear behind the brass button holding his pants together.

Her pulse easily reached 87, maybe 88, percent of her target heart rate. She didn't need a monitor to tell her that. "I'll throw that in the washer," she said.

He handed the T-shirt over and bent to unzip his bag.

"Is that a freaking gun tucked in your waistband?"

"GLOCK," he said.

"No. No guns in my house. No way, no how."

He sighed, but he didn't stop rifling through his bag. And heaven help her, she couldn't help but cast a surreptitious glance at the contents, looking to see if he had underwear there. He pulled out a gray shirt, but she didn't see any boxers, briefs, or tighty whities. That realization didn't do much to tame her libido.

"I mean it, Trace."

He stood. "I appreciate that you don't want me here. I realize having a gun in your house is uncomfortable. I know I'll be invading your privacy."

"And?"

"Tough."

"Tough?"

He took her by the shoulders. "Tough."

When he released her, she slumped.

How did everything get to be so out of control? She hated this, despised all of Hawkeye at the moment.

Needing to do something useful, something she could control, she headed down the hallway to the bathroom that also served as a laundry room. A man in her house. Protective detail. A damn pistol. Two hours ago, life had been totally normal, now nothing was.

She turned on the washer to the smallest load setting. She had some darks she could wash, but throwing their stuff in together seemed...intimate.



She had never in her life washed clothes belonging to a man. During her brief and only live-in relationship, she'd been with a nice guy. Jack. He'd cooked half the meals, paid half the bills, did the grocery shopping and his own laundry.

After barely eight weeks, she'd realized she was so bored that she'd rather have a root canal than endure another missionary, vanilla night in bed. With a root canal, at least she'd get meds to numb the pain.

She was aware of all Trace's movements as he went through her house, invading her privacy without compunction.

She saw him enter her office, and she followed, standing and watching him from the doorway. He was thorough. He opened drawers and the closet doors, looked behind the curtains, checked the window. He pulled the cord on the drapes and said, "Leave them closed, if you don't mind."

She did mind, not that it mattered.

He moved aside her Georgia O'Keeffe print, and she clenched her back teeth together. "Have you seen enough?"

"Just doing my job."

When he left the room, she didn't follow him. Instead she went into her home office, moved the O'Keeffe back into place, and powered up her computer.

If she couldn't run, she could work, or at least pretend to.

*Madre de Dios.*

Trace hadn't been sure what to expect when Ms. Inamorata summoned him to her office. Fierce, loyal, trusted, the woman had looked rattled. She was always composed, calm under pressure, which was why Hawkeye trusted her implicitly and added her to his inner circle. Whenever a situation got out of hand, she could always be counted on to deal with it and with the local and federal authorities, smoothing over all the details. Hawkeye himself said she batted cleanup better than any major leaguer.

So when Trace saw her, blonde hair mussed as if she'd dragged a hand through it, worrying a pen between her teeth, he'd closed the door, taken a seat, and never considered refusing the assignment.

And now he was glad he hadn't.

Although Inamorata the younger was a self-proclaimed nerd, nothing could be further from the truth.

She had the sculptured body of an athlete, and a fiery personality that was contrasted by her blonde hair and made his protective instincts flare.

He opened her closet and wasn't surprised at all. She had half a dozen pairs of running shoes, lots of outdoor and sports gear, including a racquetball racquet—she definitely was his kind of woman—a bunch of slim-fitting skirts and slacks, and several blouses. The slinky black dress tucked in the corner intrigued him, and he had to forcibly remind himself he was here for work. If he'd met her at the annual holiday party, things would have been different...way different.

Technically after checking beneath her bed and in the closet and making sure the windows were secure, he didn't need to look any deeper.

But he was still a red-blooded male intrigued by an appealing woman.

He crouched in front of her bookcase. *Well, well.* Judging by the books on the bottom shelf, she had carnal desires that rivaled his own.

BDSM.

He wondered how much experience she had, what her interest level was. He toyed with the idea that she might be an avid practitioner, but he quickly dismissed the thought. She'd have picked up the signals earlier, once her panic had subsided. And she would have been more responsive once she was in his arms.

The idea of introducing her to a scene turned him on. Having her bent over, ready for his touch, appealed on every level. She was a spitfire, and when she capitulated, her surrender would be all the sweeter.

Protecting the professor's body had suddenly gotten more interesting.

He plucked a well-worn book from the set and flipped it over to read the back cover. The novel was about a woman who wanted to be a submissive and lied to a Dom in order to be accepted for training. Hard stuff, not a simple “tie me up while we enjoy some slap and tickle.” No, Aimee's taste was a bit more extreme, very much in line with his practices.

He thought about looking in her drawers to see if she had toys. He'd told her he didn't mind invading her privacy, but even he had limits. Keeping her safe was one thing; snooping was another. Besides, it would be more fun when she showed him herself.

After returning the book to the shelf, he stood and left the room, but not before noticing that the bed, with a slatted headboard and footboard, would be perfect for restraining her while she begged him to punish her.

He paused when he passed her office. She pretended not to hear him.

Grinning, he continued into the living room.

He killed an hour; then he headed for the back door, intending to take another trip around the exterior of the house. He was going to leave the door open, but the crazy *loro* jumped down from the top of his cage and began a ridiculous waddle walk toward the opening.

Knowing Aimee wouldn't appreciate it if he turned the bird loose, he said, “Stay.” Then he realized he had no idea whether it understood him.

He closed the door and swept the backyard from left to right, looking for anything that was different from an hour ago. He hopped the chain-link fence, acknowledged the team stationed near the house, and then circled behind her evergreen trees.

Everything checked clear.

Since the front door was closed, he returned to the backyard, this time using the gate. It squeaked, which he appreciated. One more sound to be aware of.

He entered the house, and Aimee was in the kitchen, a glass of water in hand. “Find anything interesting?”

“Everything's secure from outside.”

“Good.”

She turned, her ponytail swishing as she headed out of the kitchen.

“Along with a few books in your bedroom,” he said experimentally.

She stopped walking. “You were right that you were going to invade my privacy.”

He pushed a bit more. “You have an extensive collection of erotic fiction.”

“I read a lot. I have a shelf full of murder mysteries as well.” She slowly turned back to face him.

“BDSM?” he asked. She hadn't run. She hadn't shut him down, either politely or with scorching rudeness. She was a woman more than capable of cutting a guy off at the knees and stuffing his balls down his throat. But she hadn't. “You have at least half a dozen titles. You even have a couple of manuals on erotic restraints and a complete how-to on being a proper submissive.”

Her mouth and body said one thing, but the heightened flush said another.

“Let's be clear, Mr. Romero—”

“Trace.” Fuck, throwing her off her stride was fun.

She tilted her chin back, but he noticed that her breathing had changed just a little, becoming more shallow. “Just because there's a shelf full of murder mysteries doesn't mean I've killed anyone.” She paused a long beat, then added, “Yet.”

He raised a brow, considering her. She was a study in leashed intensity. Her legs, very shapely legs, were spread about shoulder-width apart, and her hands were propped on her hips. She glared at him. Her eyes were deep, dark blue. He'd seen the same color in the depths of a Rocky Mountain alpine lake at twelve thousand feet. He was sure she thought she looked formidable. To him, she was a challenge wrapped in an intriguing package.

Her bare midriff would fuel fantasies for weeks, maybe months. He'd be in some nameless South American jungle, and he'd get this very picture in his head, her bare skin and sexy little body. “But the fantasy...?”

“The fantasy of killing someone and burying his body in the backyard is very compelling at the moment,” she said with a vicious little smile.

Oh yeah. He was hooked. “I have more than a passing interest in BDSM,” he said. He kept his distance, moving to the far counter and leaning against it. He crossed his arms across his chest.

“Maybe I'll interview you for a scholarly book I'm planning to write on the topic.”

“Ah. So your interest is strictly scholarly?”

“Certainly.”

She couldn't tell a lie if her well-being depended on it. “Have you had any experience of your own to write about?”

“I don't have to face all the ethical dilemmas that I write about.”

“True enough.” Her blonde hair had been yanked back into a severe ponytail. Instead of being loosely held, barely swept back from her face, her hair was corralled into a confined knot. He wondered if the way she wore her hair was a metaphor for the way she ran her life. Trace relished the thought of her capitulation as he made her whimper in his arms. “There's a particular book about a woman tricking a Dom into training her.”

“We are so not having this conversation,” she said.

Anyone else looking at her might believe what she was saying. They might miss the clues her body was telegraphing, the way she folded her arms across her chest but ruined the effect by rubbing her hands up and down her bare skin, the way her gaze kept straying to the waistband of his jeans, the way she'd moistened her lower lip. Now that he knew what to look for, he saw she wanted this discussion every bit as much as he did.

“Think of it purely in scientific terms,” he said. “Research for your book. Like you suggested, you can interview me. I'll be a resource. Have you thought about being trained yourself, actually going through the experience?”

“It's not about me,” she repeated, but she was fidgeting.

“I find it interesting that none of the BDSM ones are about a female being the Domme.” He took a step toward her. “None are strictly about bondage or fetish play. They all have a common theme. If they were all research, wouldn't you have a more diverse collection?” He pushed away from the counter and took a step toward her.

“I'm, er, just starting the research.”

“I see. So I take it you've never been tied up before you were spanked, Aimee? And you have no desire to find out for yourself what you're missing?”

“No. None.” She stood her ground.

He nodded curtly. “In that case, I won't keep you from your work.”

She blinked, evidently unaccustomed to being dismissed. “Right.” She left her water, forgotten, on the counter.

Aimee sat in her office chair, and her hands shook.

This was a nightmare. A living, breathing, ripped-from-the-headlines nightmare. And it was exactly what she wanted.

She wanted a big, strong man to sweep her off her feet. Wasn't that her fantasy? She'd dreamed of meeting a man as strong as she was, not some milquetoast who split the bills and the laundry.

Her perfect man would see through her carefully constructed facade to the needy woman beneath.

But now that he was here, in living flesh, offering her what she craved, she was scared right down to her size 6 running shoes.

It bothered her that her panties had gotten damp when he'd asked if she'd wanted to get trained. Her body was much more honest than she was. Yes, she wanted to get trained, and yes, she wanted to do it at his hands.

But couldn't take a risk, wouldn't take the risk. She was far too sensible for that. Wasn't she?

For the next hour, she tried to concentrate on work. Nothing happened, and she ended up zoning out, playing a few hands of solitaire.

She couldn't get thoughts of Trace out of her mind. His questions tumbled over and over. He hadn't bought, even for a minute, that she was doing research. He'd clearly noticed everything about her, like a good Dom would. He was paying attention to her reactions, probably more than the words that came out of her mouth.

She heard the back door open, heard it close again. He was definitely focused, and when he had something in mind, he followed through. She exhaled shakily. All that probably meant he wasn't through with her yet.

She was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to withstand it.

Keeping up the pretense, she stayed in her office when he reentered the house. He'd been gone three minutes and thirty-seven seconds, not that she'd noticed.

She heard his booted steps in the living room, then down the hallway. She flipped from solitaire to a spreadsheet and leaned forward as if studying a formula on the screen. He was in and out of every room, rechecking the windows.

She turned in her chair as he passed her office. "Does my sister know what you're into?"

"Yes," he said without stopping.

Curse him. Curse him, curse him, curse him.

He was out to drive her batshit crazy.

She swung back to the computer and dropped her head onto her desk.

Her sister knew his secrets, and she'd sent him here regardless.

She heard a muffled sound from the television in the living room. Cozy. Just *cozy*.

After another half hour of games, both on the computer and in her head, she went into the living room and stood in front of him.

"Aimee! Aimee!" Eureka called from the kitchen.

Trace hit the Mute button on the remote. That scored big points with her. Of course, how interesting was a Colorado Rockies baseball game, when they had no hope of even a wild-card slot in the playoffs?

He looked at her and waited. Couldn't he help her out, at least a little?

"If you... If I..."

He waited, his brows raised patiently. Her mouth dried. This man was so appealing, his masculinity making her instinctively feel more feminine. "Have you ever trained a novice sub?"

"Trained? In what way?"

She closed her eyes for a minute. He was definitely not going to make this easy. "Introduced a woman to being a submissive." Her heart missed a beat. "Your submissive?"

"I'm not into lifestyle BDSM. I've had subs, and I'm happy to tell you about the experience. I don't require my subs to be full-time slaves, if that's what you're asking. But I often do require they wear collars."

She tried to keep her hands from going to her neck, and she settled for clasping them in front of her. “Where would you start? I mean, theoretically.”

“Theoretically?”

“Research...for my book.”

“The first place I start is with honesty. Then we go to trust.”

Her mouth felt dry suddenly.

“I have no tolerance for bullshit. If you're curious, we can explore; there will be nothing theoretical about it. It will be raw, and it will be real. Your sister trusts me with your life. If you can do the same, be real, be honest, learn to trust, then say so, straight up.”

Her mind reeled. “If I said I was interested, where would we start?”



## Chapter Two

Trace's cock was rock hard.

Her innocence thrilled him. He wanted to be the one to introduce her, to explore the dark side with her. She licked her lower lip. Damn, if he'd ever seen a more appealing woman, he didn't remember when. "We'd start with you honestly answering a few questions. And you'd do that from that chair, right there."

It was his first test, and they both knew it.

With her energy level, he knew she would prefer to stand, maybe even pace. But it wasn't about what she preferred.

Slowly she crossed the room. Men moved toward a hangman's noose with more enthusiasm.

She sat, legs pressed together, across from him.

"How much experience do you have?"

"None."

"By none, you mean...what, exactly?"

She tugged on her ponytail, but not a single strand of hair became dislodged. "I have no experience. Nada. Zero. Zilch."

"You've never been tied up?"

"No," she whispered.

"Never been spanked?"

"Oh God."

He took that as a no. "Nipple clamps?"

"I own a set."

"But a man, a Dom, a master, hasn't put them on you?"

“Trace...”

“I asked you a question.” Part of him was tempted to just draw her close and kiss her senseless. *Caramba*. She was so damn perfect.

“No.”

“I’ll watch you put them on.” The color on her cheeks darkened to scarlet. Dios, he hoped she never lost this intriguing innocence. “Butt plug?”

“I have a stainless steel one. And no, no one has ever put one in me.”

“Or fucked you with it?”

Her eyes opened wide and stayed that way for a long second before she blinked. “Certainly not.”

His cock chafed against the inside of his jeans. “How much experience do you want to have?” He pictured her bare bottom over his lap, her body wiggling as he pressed one hand to the small of her back and then used the other to teach her a thing or two. He wondered if she’d fight to be quiet while he pleased her, while he punished her. Or would she give into it completely, abandoning all reserve while she was perfectly responsive?

Instead of answering him, she asked one of her own. “How much experience do you have?”

It was a fair question. He opted for the honesty he would soon demand from her. “I’ve had several subs, two of them long-term. I ended my last relationship about six months ago, with no animosity. She just couldn’t handle how long I was gone from her. I don’t blame her, and if I saw her at a club, I’d happily play with her. I love exploring a woman’s boundaries, your boundaries,” he clarified, “and pushing them.”

He saw her take that information and feed it through her extensive brain.

“You’re interested in it too. The psychological implications along with the sexual ones. My guess is you want a man you can’t steamroll.”

“Not fair.”

“But true?”

She frowned.

“It takes a strong man,” he said, “to tame a strong woman.”

“I don't need taming.”

“Or spanking?”

“Or spanking,” she said, but the words were unsteady.

They were still separated by several feet, but he saw how hard she struggled to breathe. He continued to push. “You have no desire to be so outside yourself that you experience orgasm after orgasm?”

She blinked.

Into the sudden silence, he asked, “How long, Aimee, since you've been with a man who's been so focused on you that your pleasure was the only thing that mattered?”

“That's not what BDSM is about.”

“Oh? Enlighten me. What is BDSM all about?”

“Not having this conversation,” she said again.

He was relentless. “Tell me, Aimee. What is it about?”

“It's about your...” She stopped; then she scowled, a deep furrow appearing between her finely sculptured eyebrows.

Her innocence appealed to him on so many levels. It had been years since he'd been with a woman who wasn't jaded.

Such depths were hidden inside Aimee. He could see it in her eyes, and he wanted to be the one who showed her everything she craved.

His cock began to throb, and not just from the anticipation of eventually fucking her, but from the knowledge he'd be the first to dominate her.

She started again. “It's about the Dom's pleasure. About the sub being so focused on her Dom's pleasure that she, or he, takes pleasure from that.”

He hadn't missed her Freudian slip. “Maybe to some people,” he said. “And if you've got a great relationship, that definitely is part of it. While I have certain expectations from a woman who submits to me, I also make certain she receives pleasure from me. Take out your ponytail.”

Her mouth opened before she snapped it shut again.

“Tell me you're not curious.” He waited. “Tell me you're not wondering what the first thing is that I might do to you. Tell me you're not anticipating obeying my commands.”

“I...”

“Honesty,” he reminded her.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He stood and closed the distance between them. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her up. Every motion deliberate, wanting to communicate with her on a level that words never could, showing he was controlled, that he could be trusted with the gift of her submission, he tipped back her head with the pad of his thumb.

She was so small in his hands. The top of her head barely reached his chin. He meant what he said. He wanted to explore her boundaries, shatter them, but she would be a willing participant each step of the way.

Her mouth slowly parted.

“I'm going to kiss you,” he said. “And you're going to kiss me back.” He waited for a response.

She nodded.

“But first, you're going to take down your ponytail.”

His second test.

Aimee knew exactly what he was doing. Or at least she thought she did. In her fantasies, none of this head-game stuff existed. A Dom issued an order, his sub complied. There was no hesitation.

But the reality was so much different.

She was questioning everything, including her own sanity.

The feel of his thumb pressing inexorably beneath her chin was breathtaking. His right hand gripped her left shoulder with undeniable force. Yet she knew, totally, she could get away if she wanted. She could have dodged him earlier, could have turned around and left the room. But she didn't want to.

Despite her wildest dreams, all the books she read, the chat rooms she studied with academic interest, it went against her nature to willingly submit to anyone. After their parents died, it had been her and her big sis against the world. They'd both struggled for scholarships,

had worked full-time jobs while attending school. At times she'd had three roommates just to make ends meet. Aimee had learned self-sufficiency early, and she liked living her life that way now.

Trace captured her gaze. With the force of his own, he compelled her not to look away. Truthfully she didn't want to look away. She wanted to get lost in the depths of his brown eyes. His scent, his presence, overwhelmed her.

"Scared?"

"Not at all."

"Liar."

He said the word without malice, but quickly enough for her to realize he was watching her intently. He'd told her he wanted her honesty, and regardless, she wouldn't be able to hide from him. Suddenly that terrified her more than anything ever had.

He continued to wait.

"Yes," she admitted. "I'm scared." That wasn't an easy confession. Life had taught her not to show weakness, and standing here emotionally exposed revealed her every vulnerability.

"Take out your ponytail," he repeated.

They both knew this was about more than her hair. It was about him exerting his will and whether she'd comply. It was her first step. If she pulled the band from her hair, she was submitting to him, and she had no idea where it would end. "I've never done anything like this before. I'm not sure exactly what to do."

"But you're intrigued? When you masturbate, it's what you think about."

"Yes," she whispered, feeling heat chasing into her face once again. She tried to look away, but he held her chin more firmly. She had never admitted to anyone that she masturbated, maybe because of some deep belief that it was wrong. And here he was, assuming she did, not questioning.

"Take one step."

"What if it's the one that sends me off the edge of the cliff?"

"It will be," he promised.

Her nerves shot, she laughed, the sound nervous, bordering on brittle. "That's reassuring."

“The option is not to take the step,” he told her. “That's certainly your choice. I won't force you into anything, ever. But let me ask you this, Professor. What's more risky, taking the chance or never knowing the outcome? Never knowing if it's right for you? Never experimenting? Never knowing if fantasy is better than reality?”

She mulled that over thoughtfully. Even though it wasn't really in her nature to turn herself over to anyone, she thought about her relationship with boring Jack. The lack of excitement hadn't worked for her either. Jack had never told her what to do. He politely asked, then thanked her when he turned off the light. For what, she'd wanted to ask, for being as unimaginative as he was?

“But after you take down your hair, you're going to take off your sports bra.”

*She was?*

“Then you'll cup your breasts and offer them to me.”

She shivered, from fear, from excitement.

“And then...”

*There was more?*

“If you choose to take that first step, you'll beg me to suck your nipples until they're hard.”

Oh. Uh.

He leaned in and drew her lower lip between his teeth, gently at first, then with a bit more force.

Resistance eased away.

Almost instantly she gave herself over to the slight pain, buried beneath intense pleasure. She wanted to let her inhibitions slide, wanted to be with a man strong enough to urge her to dig deeper.

And this man did.

Intuitively she knew he was the one she'd been waiting for.

While he held her captive, her thoughts continued to tumble. Resist? Submit? Take a leap? Retreat in fear?

He continued the pressure on her lower lip. Rational thought was all but impossible.

Subtly he changed what he was doing, demanding entrance to her mouth.

Willingly she surrendered.

She liked to be kissed, and this man knew how to kiss. He tasted of temptation and determination. There was no hiding from him or his demands.

Her arms went around him. She flattened one palm on his back, and with the other hand, she dug her fingers into his black hair. She raised on tiptoes to meet him more completely.

Within seconds, she knew he'd been right.

He was kissing her, and she was kissing him back.

Their tongues met in thrust and parry. She had a taste of what sex with him would be like, and she wanted more. She liked his insistence, and she especially liked the way he drew her tight against him and held her there. She felt safe in his arms. And like her sister had intended, Aimee felt protected.

Finally, like she did with most decisions in her life, she stopped the internal debate. She'd looked at the pros and cons unemotionally, and she made up her mind. Better to take the risk and find out...

She pulled back from him slightly, letting go with the hand she'd feathered into his hair. She reached up and pulled out the band that cinched her hair.

Expert that he was, he'd continued to kiss her, hold her. But she noticed his eyes had darkened almost imperceptibly.

He released her shoulder and then ran his fingers through her hair, fluffing it, playing with it.

She was no less a prisoner now, though, since he cradled the back of her head.

He slowly drew back, ending the kiss, then finally, after one last nip, let go of her lip. "Good girl," he said.

The approval in his husky voice sent a tiny jolt of excitement through her. She'd taken that first step. Instead of terrifying, it was liberating.

"More?" he asked.

They both knew what he meant. Was she ready to go deeper? Would she follow all his orders? Slowly, her lower lip throbbing, she nodded.

Then he let her go entirely and took a step back.

Eureka flew into the room in his usual graceless, noisy manner. She realized he'd called her name a couple of times, and she hadn't answered. "Everything's okay," she told him.

He cocked his head in Trace's direction.

"Nap time," she told the bird.

"Nap time," he repeated.

"Return to base," she said. "I'll be right back," she added to Trace. She exhaled, grateful for the reprieve. Covering Eureka's cage would take a few minutes, giving her enough time to drag her breathing back under control and to think about whether she was truly prepared to take action on Trace's request.

Sitting where he instructed and taking out her ponytail had been minor compared to his next request. If she took the third and fourth steps, she knew he'd demand a fifth, then more, until she was truly submitting to him.

"Return to base," Eureka said. "Nap time." He hopped onto his perch; then she put her hand in front of him. He climbed onto her forefinger and said, "Wheee!" as she placed him in his cage.

She grinned at him, not at all upset. She covered the cage, and the thought that she could have lost him earlier this morning sent a cold chill up her spine.

This wasn't fun and games, not that she would ever allow herself to lose sight of reality long enough to think it was.

Her pulse rate had returned to near-normal when she went back into living room. Trace was still there, in much the same place she'd left him, but he'd turned off the television. Another point in his favor.

He said nothing. He folded his arms across his chest, waiting, watching.

He looked sexy but unapproachable, which in a weird way only made him seem even sexier. It was as if this man had opened up her brain to take a look at what made her tick.

Her older sister always told her to live with no regrets. Aimee realized that if she were to look back on this moment ten years from now, she would regret being timid more than she would regret taking a chance.



She boldly went to stand only a foot or so away from him. Her heart rate had surged to the level it would have if she'd actually gone for her run.

Trace said nothing, and she might have thought he was uninterested in her decision, except for the barely perceptible way his eyelids momentarily shuttered his eyes.

She hooked her thumbs underneath the elastic of her sports bra and then pulled the material up and off. She closed her eyes as she dropped it to the tiled floor.

*"Muy bonita,"* he said. "Very pretty."

That raw huskiness in his voice thrilled her. She'd be a lemming, if only his voice urged her on.

She opened her eyes to see him looking at her intently. "Touch me?" she asked, the words more a plea than she'd intended them to be. She had wanted to sound forceful, perhaps a bit demanding, and certainly competent and in control, like she always was. But standing in front of Trace, she was none of those things. She was a woman who wanted this man's hands on her half-naked body. "Touch me, Trace."

"Offer yourself to me," he reminded her. "Beg me."

She noticed the bulge at his crotch. He was as turned on as she was. That knowledge was heady and all she needed. Rather than succumbing to embarrassment like she ordinarily would, she kept her gaze focused below his belt as she cupped her breasts in her palms. Quietly she said, "I want you to suck on my nipples."

"Look at me."

The words, in the silence, were a whiplash.

She looked up and kept her gaze focused on his face. Drawing a steadying breath, she softly said, "Please, Trace, suck on my nipples. I need..."

He waited in that patient, maddening way of his.

"I need your touch. I want to feel your hands on me. I want your mouth on my breasts, your tongue on my nipples." She lifted her breasts a bit. "Please, Trace." And she did want it, need it, need him.

His motions deliberate, he unfolded his arms. Her body felt weak as nerve suddenly deserted her. Then he was there, his arms around her, supporting her, one palm pressed against the small of her back, the other cradling her nape.

He lowered his head to capture a nipple between his tongue and top teeth. Then he sucked, hard.

Her knees buckled.

He caught her, sweeping her from the ground and carrying her down the hallway to her bedroom.

"Please," she whispered.

"I haven't even started with you yet," he promised, setting her on the floor.

He put his pistol on the nightstand. She was so caught up with what he was doing that she didn't even protest the gun being in her bedroom. Her arms fell to her sides as she surrendered to him. He sucked her right nipple while he pinched the other between his thumb and forefinger. She arched her back, asking for more.

"Keep still," he told her.

"Keep still?" Had he lost his mind? Because she was definitely losing hers. She'd never experienced anything like this, exquisite and painful, creating a demand from the inside out.

"Part of your lessons," he said, returning to her nipple and torturing it relentlessly.

She'd taken the first steps, she realized, and he was exerting his will more powerfully. He'd force her to be an active participant. Already she was learning there was nothing passive about being involved with him.

She began to squirm. Heat flooded her body. She wanted more. More pressure. More intensity. She wanted to orgasm.

"Distract yourself," he said. "Think about something else, anything else other than how your body is responding to what I'm doing. Think about the fact I want you to keep still. Think about pleasing me."

"I..."

"Can," he told her. "You can. You're a runner. Breathe. Use the same techniques you use there."

“But—”

“Breathe.” He suckled, gently at first, then with unyielding force.

She squirmed. She was coming undone. He couldn't possibly have any idea what he was asking of her, demanding of her. He'd assigned her a task, and she was doomed to failure. Staying still was nearly impossible with the way he tormented her. She'd never realized how sensitive her nipples were, never knew she could get so totally turned on from breast play.

She tried to follow his instructions.

When the only thing she could think of was how much she wanted to come, she forced her thoughts to her project and looming deadline. She met his gaze, saw the slight smile that toyed with his lips before he moved that skillful mouth to the tip of her other breast.

She wanted to do what he said, she realized, wanted to please him, wanted to see him smile at her.

He moved one of his hands between her legs. Helplessly, shamelessly, she ground her crotch against him, wishing she'd taken off her shorts, and he responded, unerringly finding her swollen clit and pushing his thumb against it. When she could no longer breathe in a controlled way, she settled for panting. Hearing his instructions echoing in her mind, she tried to fight the orgasm. She tried to hold it back, tried to keep still.

He moved to her other nipple and bit. She cried out.

The orgasm caught her. In a powerful wave, it crashed into her, over her.

She moved faster and faster against him, riding the wave of the climax, her pussy clenching.

He kept doing what he was doing as she ground it out, damn near achieving a second orgasm.

She was shattered. Complete. Overwhelmed. He continued to hold her in his strong arms, offering support and whispering soft, reassuring sounds.

Seconds later, when her breathing had returned to normal and her brain regained its functionality, she realized she was lying on the bed and he was beside her. She placed her head on his chest and said, “That never happens quite so fast.”

“You're as responsive as I hoped.” He kissed her forehead.

She'd always believed there was something wrong with her. When she'd been at MIT, her roommates had talked about their experiences, and she didn't have much to share in return. She slept with few men, achieved the big O with even fewer. It seemed her friends enjoyed sex a whole lot more than she did. But now she was wondering if she'd just been with the wrong men.

“How are you feeling?”

“Satisfied.” She wanted to wrap her arms around herself. “I'd love to curl up and drift off to sleep for a few minutes.” Even better, she wanted him to hold her as she dozed. And when she awoke, maybe they could do it all over again.

After only a minute, maybe two, she lifted her head off his chest, not entirely sure she was comfortable with the intimacy. She wasn't the kind of woman who relied on men, who turned to them for comfort. Self-sufficient, and independent, she needed no one. She ignored the little whisper inside that said it might be nice to allow someone to get close, might be nice to share the load, might be nice to have someone to hold on to, at least sometimes.

She met his gaze. Was it possible to get lost in the depths of his eyes?

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth, until he said, “You were disobedient.”

*That* got her attention.

“You didn't have permission to come, sub.”

“But...” She needed permission to orgasm?

“I told you to distract yourself, to think about anything but the way I was pleasuring you. I told you to keep still, to concentrate on pleasing me.” He paused, maybe to let his words sink in. “This time, I'm feeling generous. I'll let you choose your own punishment.”

Sleepiness was banished. Nerves dried her mouth. “You want me to choose my own punishment? For orgasming without permission?”

His gaze returned to the collection of books on the bottom shelf. “I think you know exactly what I'm asking of you.”

Erotic fear churned inside her.

This man would never let her off the hook. Secretly she didn't want him to.

She had already started to trust him. Her sister had handpicked him, and the older Inamorata would kick his ass from Colorado to Colombia if he hurt her, and the long arm of

Hawkeye would hunt him down wherever he tried to hide. Despite those realizations, terror made her freeze in place.

“But I will tell you this. No matter what punishment you choose, it will start with your being totally naked,” he said.

While he was still dressed. Suddenly she knew that was part of it. He was stripping her defenses, one by one, starting with her ponytail, continuing with her sports bra, and now with the rest of her clothing. She saw the power in it. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

“Now.”

## Chapter Three

Even as she questioned if she'd actually go through with it, she climbed off the bed and took a couple of steps backward. She toed off her shoes, holding on to the dresser top for balance.

She bent to take off her ankle socks.

He stood there, saying nothing.

Her nipples were still hardened into little pebbles, the cool whisper of air from the overhead fan keeping them taut.

She hooked her fingers beneath the band of her shorts and wiggled until they slid down her legs. She stepped from them, leaving them in a pile on the floor with her other discarded pieces. They both knew she could have simultaneously removed her underwear, but she didn't have the guts for that.

"A thong?"

She nodded.

"Leaves your ass bare. Are you always hoping for a spanking, Aimee?"

"No!"

He laughed.

But...maybe. There was a reason she chose her underwear, she knew, even if she didn't admit those things to herself.

He patiently waited while she discarded the scrap of material. The crotch was damp from her earlier climax and from the continual wetness his words caused.

Finally she stood there in front of him, naked. She tipped back her head, then folded and unfolded her arms a couple of times, not quite sure what to do with them.

"Lovely," he said. "I had no idea whether or not I'd find you shaven."

She was. But she wasn't sure he approved.

"I like you bare," he said, eliminating her worry. "I would have shaved you myself."

That idea sent a tiny shiver down her spine. To have him so close, so intimate, while she was totally vulnerable.

"When in doubt, keep your arms behind your back."

"Do you miss anything?"

"With you? I plan not to."

There was a little frisson of excitement that passed through her body at his words. That his attention was so focused on her... It was heady indeed.

She moved her hands behind her back, and she realized that thrust out her breasts a little more.

"Keep your legs spread, whether you're kneeling or standing. Farther," he said. "Shoulder width, at least. I always want access to your pussy."

Her insides felt molten.

"Face away from me."

She turned.

"Now bend over and grab your ankles."

Bent over, with her legs spread, she would present an obscene image. Humiliation threatened to pull her into an undertow. She almost protested, but she stopped herself. He knew exactly what he was asking her to do. She had been honest about her level of experience, and he'd been honest that he'd had submissives before. Aimee was willing to bet he was as skillful with his first woman as he was with her. He had the instincts that made him an operative her sister trusted. And he had a way of looking at her, of reading her that made him adept at knowing which buttons to push.

This time, he didn't repeat his command. He just waited.

She could refuse, or she could embrace her fantasy.

She bent and grabbed her ankles. The sight of the world upside down was too much, and she closed her eyes.

As she waited, schooling herself to be patient, she focused on the sound of the overhead fan and felt the air on her exposed parts, and she wondered what he was doing.

Looking at her, that was for sure. Thinking? Planning? Enjoying the sight? Please God, she was vain enough to hope he liked what he saw.

All her senses seemed supercharged.

She inhaled the scent of him, that intoxicating blend of man and spice. She hungered, she realized, for the sound of his voice. That strong, unyielding tone was a lifeline. Suddenly she felt adrift.

“Spread your legs a few more inches.” He got off the bed and moved in behind her. He used his right foot to exert pressure against the inside of her right ankle, forcing her into the position he wanted. “Your ass needs to be stretched by that plug.”

She told herself she couldn't actually die from feelings of mortification.

“You've never been fucked with a plug, but have you had anal sex?”

“I tried it once, in grad school.”

“Tell me about the experience.”

When this was over, she'd have no secrets left. “It was awful. I'd had too much to drink, and so had he. It hurt. He never actually...” She swallowed, not something that was easy when she was hanging upside down. “There was very little penetration. He ended up... Ah... He didn't last long enough... I mean... He came all over the sheets.”

He stroked her between the legs, long, sweeping motions with his large fingers.

“You're wet,” he said.

She was.

“Your body is so responsive, so honest.” He parted her labia and glided a fingertip across her clit.

Involuntarily her body jerked.

“Nice,” he said. “But keep still.”

This time, she struggled to obey. He feathered her clit again, and she gasped. But instead of moving, she squeezed her eyes shut just a little more and drew a deep breath.



“Quick learner,” he said. He pressed a finger firmly on her clit. She moved forward a scant inch, trying to get away from the maddening, delicious intensity of the feeling.

He put a palm against the middle of her back, keeping her bent and preventing her from moving away. Then he increased the pressure on her tiny, already swollen nub.

“Trace,” she said. Unbelievably she was feeling a tiny orgasm already building inside. She told herself she could come from just this tiny amount of sensation, but she knew she was wrong. It wasn't just about his touch; it was about his mastery of her. It was the combination of the words he used and the force he exerted.

Even she could smell her arousal.

He began to move his finger in a tiny circle, and at the same time, with his palm, he held her firmly, making sure she couldn't escape his touch. “Distract yourself,” he reminded her.

She whimpered. Her hips began to sway, even though she fought against it. “Actinium,” she said. “Aluminum. Americium.”

“The periodic table?”

She didn't answer him; instead, she focused. “Antimony...” She trailed off as he continued his relentless assault on her body. “Argon... Please! Please stop. Otherwise I'm going to come.”

“Not yet.”

“Trace!”

“Hang in there.”

“I—”

“Breathe!”

Her knees were threatening to give out. She could barely hold on to her ankles. Thinking about anything except what he was doing was impossible. She needed to let him know that, but she couldn't find the words. “I...”

“I want you fighting it out, Aimee.”

She did. Her eyes still scrunched closed, still panting, she said, “Arsenic, astatine, barium...”

“Now,” he said, sliding a finger inside her. “Come now.”

The orgasm swamped her. She lost her footing as her knees finally buckled, but he was there, holding her, supporting her, never letting her crash headlong into the ground.

He scooped her up and carried her to the bed. He lay down with her, careful to keep his boots off the mattress. He held her close, cradled her tenderly, her head on the soft material of his T-shirt. "Thank you," she whispered. Until now she'd never understood why the female subs in the stories she read would be so appreciative after a climax. She figured they were because that's what their Doms demanded. Now she knew differently.

She would have never survived his actually entering her. She would have splintered from the inside out.

Her gratitude wasn't just for the earthmoving orgasm. It wasn't just because he'd relented and given his permission. It was so much deeper. Her gratitude was for all that and the way he read her so perfectly, recognizing what she needed, when she needed it, and for having her hang on longer than she might have so that the experience was even deeper. Most of all, it was for catching her, caring for her when she wasn't sure she was able to.

"Have you decided?" he asked, his breath warm against her hair.

"Decided?"

"What your punishment will be."

She swallowed. She'd totally forgotten, and she told him that, adding, "I hoped you'd forgotten too. Or that I'd gotten a reprieve. You know, kind of like time off for good behavior."

He laughed. "No chance. You're always expected to obey me. Good behavior will not mitigate disobedience. So what's it to be?"

"Can I get back to you on that?" She wasn't sure she could take anything more. Aimee was convinced she was at the edge of her endurance.

"Within the next thirty seconds. Sure."

"Trace!"

"Tell me, in your reading, in your most private fantasies, when you've imagined yourself being punished, what that experience was like."

Again, he didn't ask if she had those kinds of thoughts. He assumed she did, and he would probe until she revealed the details. She was already learning that he wouldn't allow her to hide

behind embarrassment. He wanted her secrets exposed, and he'd keep at her until they were. "There's always an awareness," she said, "about what I've done wrong, how I could have behaved differently." That naughty arousal was starting to unfurl again, despite how tired she was.

"You've read enough to know the difference between punishment and discipline?"

Was it possible for her face to get any hotter? "I think so."

"Tell me."

She wiggled around, trying to face him. The scratch of his denim jeans felt rough against her bare leg.

She thought of the way he'd masturbated her earlier, the way she'd ground her crotch against his hand. Her imagination took flight as she wondered what it might feel like to have his leg between hers as she rubbed against the strength of his thigh.

"The difference between punishment and discipline," he repeated.

"Punishment is correction. Physical..." Despite herself, she was picturing herself across his lap, her bottom exposed to his hand, maybe his belt. She shivered, and he drew her closer against him.

"I guess punishment could also be mental. It's meant to reinforce behavior that a Dom expects."

"Good enough. Discipline?"

"That trips me up a bit. Discipline can also reinforce behavior, but I guess there's a punitive side that's missing."

"Fair distinction. Discipline, with my subs, is also about training. It can be as painful as punishment. It can also be very enjoyable. For both of us."

"I think I'd rather be disciplined than punished."

"I'm sure you would. You mentioned the mental part of punishment. It can be very effective, so I use it sparingly. You don't follow an order, you'll be punished, generally very quickly."

"In that case, can we get this over with?"

"Nervous?"

“In college, I'd volunteer to take tests early.”

“Masochist,” he said. “It will make you a good sub.”

“I want to be across your lap,” she said. She couldn't believe she was admitting this, something she'd never told another human being. She'd always kept her secrets locked away, never hinting at them, never mentioning them to anyone. “And...”

He waited, as she should have guessed he would.

“Your hand. I want you to use your hand to punish me.”

“Anything else?”

“And...”

“And?”

“I want you to take it easy. Virgin spankee, and all that.”

He laughed. “When I said you got to choose your own punishment, I didn't say you got to choose all the details.”

“It was worth a try,” she said.

“Not really. Now you'll just get punished for trying to get out of your punishment.”

Her stomach took a nosedive and landed somewhere around her knees. Good thing she was still lying down.

“How many spanks do you deserve?”

She squirmed. She had no idea what to suggest. Too few, and she'd be in trouble for that, no doubt. Too many, and she might come up with a number higher than one he'd choose.

“And how many extra for trying to get out of a hard spanking?”

She hadn't finished in the top of her class for nothing. “I think the ones for trying to get out of my punishment should be harder than the others.”

He stroked her hair. It would be almost possible to believe they were lovers, just enjoying a few minutes of intimacy, rather than a Dom and a wannabe sub discussing her induction into BDSM.

“Do you agree?”

“In this case, that sounds reasonable. Still waiting for numbers.”

“Ten,” she said. “Ten for the first infraction. Three for the second. That's an additional thirty percent.”

“If we started at a more reasonable twelve, what's the percentage, then?”

“More like twenty-five percent.”

“And?”

“Four is reasonable,” she said before he came up with something even more outrageous. She'd hoped to only take a handful of strokes for her first official spanking, and now she was at sixteen. “Do I get a safe word?”

“You have been reading. Do you want one?”

She wondered what it would be like to fly without one. None of the subs in the books she read went without a word to either slow down or stop a scene. “Krypton.”

“*Preciosa*, I think you're going to be my kryptonite. Nothing else on the periodic table you'd rather choose?”

“I like krypton.”

“Krypton it is. But I want you to know something, Aimee. It's my intention that you never need to use your safe word. I don't want you using it just because you're a little scared. I want you to discuss those things with me. This experience will be about taking you to the edge.” Trace climbed from the bed and offered her a hand.

“Here? Now?” She took his hand and let him guide her up.

He pulled her against him and took hold of one of her wrists lightly, but with enough force that if she chickened out, she wouldn't make it far.

She'd always wondered what it would be like to actually be in this situation. But it was nothing like she imagined. In her own fantasies, she was always in control of her own reaction; she was never afraid: she welcomed anything her Dom threw at her. She was always the perfect sub. Well, unless she'd decided she wanted to be punished, in which case, she was very bad, just to get what she really wanted.

The reality was so different.

She'd always figured her imaginations would have to stay exactly that, flights of fantasy she indulged in on those rare occasions she pulled out her toys and books. She'd never dreamed she'd find a man who would take her, as he promised, to the edge.

She hadn't counted on her deepest, darkest secrets coming to light.

Now that they had, she realized she'd been completely unprepared for any of it. How could she have known that her heart would race like it was right now? She'd definitely had no idea her brain would feel as if it had been scrambled. She had not suspected that she could feel this sense of overwhelming arousal or that her Dom's voice—Trace's voice—would be something she would cling to. And she hadn't realized she'd turn to him for comfort, even as he was the one who caused her the pain.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, tested its firmness, then said, “Count each spank. Aloud.”

She nodded, since her vocal chords no longer wanted to work.

“Oh, and Aimee?”

Since he was sitting and she was standing, they were eye to eye. His gaze was all-seeing. “Yes?” she whispered.

“You may not come.”

She almost laughed. “You're forbidding me from orgasming from a *spanking*? You are kidding me, right?”

He grinned, and for a moment, she almost forgot to be nervous. “If you orgasm, we'll have to start the spanking over.”

*No chance.*

He exerted a small amount of force on her wrist, enough to let her know they were done talking.

She moved in closer, glad that he kept hold of her. If he'd lessened the pressure, she would have made a mad dash out of there... Well, after she found her clothes.

Blood was pounding in her ears. If he said anything, she didn't hear it.

He tipped her over his lap. She noticed how powerful his thighs were, how unyielding the strength of his muscles was beneath her belly. She was terribly aware of how much smaller she was than him. Of his strength and power. Of his masculinity.

She realized in only seconds that there was nothing for her to grip.

“Spread your legs,” he reminded her.

She did, knowing how exposed she was. He could see everything, touch every part of her. She was upside down, across his lap, helpless.

A tendril of panic crawled through her, and the word *krypton* pinged around in her mind. Krypton, krypton, krypton. If her brain could have completed a circuit and gotten the word from her subconscious and out of her mouth, she might have used it.

As it was, in this position, even gravity worked against her, and her hair fell forward, framing her face, a few strands getting in her eyes.

“You okay?”

She thought she nodded, but he prompted, “Aimee? I need you to answer me.”

Was she okay? She was terrified. Excited. Anxious. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’m okay.”

He rubbed her rear, and she liked the feel of his skin on hers. When he dipped a couple of fingers between her legs, she was stunned to feel moisture there.

“Nice,” he said.

She forgot to be self-conscious. She just wanted him, wanted to be satisfied. He’d already given her a couple of orgasms today, and now she was craving another. If he’d just touch her *there...*

“Now point your feet inward.”

That would expose her even more.

She fought against her natural inclination to refuse, to protect herself as much as possible.

“Point your feet inward,” he repeated quietly, patiently. “Good girl,” he said when she complied.

She hadn’t been completely aware of following his order, but there was something hypnotic about him that compelled her response.

Before she was fully prepared, the first spank landed hard on her buttocks. Good God, *it hurt*. She started to squirm. Some people actually liked this? Were they out of their minds? And she was supposed to get sixteen of these?

But he was there, soothing the hurt with his palm.

“Count,” he reminded her.

“One,” she whispered. Then, a second spank landed. “Damn!”

“Damn is not a number,” he said, and she was sure she heard amusement in his voice, which meant at least one of them was enjoying this torture.

“Two,” she said. She wiggled. He placed a hand on the small of her back, effectively imprisoning her. He was so much bigger, so much stronger than her. She was aware of her vulnerability.

He spanked her again.

“Three!”

He rubbed over the sore spots, and she was surprised to find herself relaxing. It shouldn't be possible.

“Good. Relax into it.”

“Relax into it?”

“If you fight it, your muscles will be tense. And you'll enjoy it less.”

“Enjoy it. Right.” Since she was still imprisoned, hanging upside down, she couldn't draw a full breath, and her words sounded muffled.

“I hope you do,” he said. “I want you to.”

He stroked between her legs, unerringly finding her clit. She moaned and shifted, trying to encourage him to put more pressure there.

“Naughty girl,” he said.

He took away his hand, and she whimpered in protest.

He placed the fourth spank at that tender spot on her right side, on her thigh, right below her buttock.

She gasped but somehow managed the word “four.”



He delivered the next one to her left thigh.

“Five.” She whimpered. Tears swam in her eyes. The punishment wasn't even halfway over, and the four hardest ones were still to come. She wasn't sure she could do this. In fact, she was sure she couldn't.

“You're fighting,” he told her, rubbing the tender areas. “Breathe into it.” He slid a hand between her legs again.

No way could this be arousing her.

“You look so beautiful,” he told her. “You were made to be across my lap with your cute ass begging for my punishment.”

His words did something to her, just like what happened when she read. She had never had a man's words so turn her on before. But the appreciative tone in his voice almost made it all worthwhile.

He spanked her three times in quick succession. The pain was so fast, so stinging, she couldn't even count.

“Six, seven, and eight,” he said.

Somehow, though, the pain receded quickly, leaving her warm. The overhead fan turned slowly, cooling the droplets of sweat that dotted her back.

Silently he masturbated her. She was wetter than she ever remembered being. Her hips began to jerk, from the combination of his touch and the heat in her buttocks and thighs. Her toes dug into the floor as she struggled for control.

“I wish you could see what you look like,” he said. “How perfect. How desirable. Feel how hard my cock is from looking at your red ass.”

“Trace!” Despite his earlier warning, the beginnings of an orgasm began to unfold. It didn't matter how much she told herself it was impossible: it was real. “Stop,” she begged. “Please. Spank me. Spank me!”

“You'd rather I spank you than stroke your swollen clit?”

“Yes!” The word was somewhere between a demand and a plea.

He drew some of her moisture over the nub. His finger slipped effortlessly, and she was going to go out of her mind.

“You would prefer I didn't do this?”

Her body became rigid as she forced away thoughts of her impending orgasm. Silently she started through the elements of the periodic table again. *Actinium. Aluminum. Americium. Antimony. Argon...*

But it wasn't working.

The man was diabolical. Diabolical and good. He knew exactly what he was doing, just how to touch her to make her shatter. He could keep her on the edge as long as he wanted. But just as frightening, maybe more frightening, she knew he could force her past it at any moment.

*Arsenic.*

Now there was a good one.

Arsenic, arsenic, *arsenic.*

“Please...” She realized absently that the only word she wasn't thinking of was *krypton*.

“You're not going to come, are you?”

He slid a finger into her vagina, and she bucked against him.

She was no longer certain what she was begging for. For him to keep it up until she climaxed, or for him to stop so she wouldn't earn a second punishment.

“Tell me what you want.”

“Spank...spank me!”

He did, finishing up the last four.

“Twelve,” she said, barely able to breathe.

“How many more?”

“Twenty-five percent,” she said, anything to distract herself. He still had one hand pressed against the small of her back. The other, he rested across the fleshiest part of her butt cheeks. Even though he wasn't touching her intimately, her pussy was throbbing. She was still moist.

“The last four are for what?”

“For trying to get out of my punishment.” There was a change inside her. She felt more compliant, softer. She took a shallow breath. At the beginning, she didn't think she could survive the first six. Now she was mentally ready for the last four.

She tried to remember everything he told her. *Breathe. Relax. Don't fight it.* She focused on the last one and braced herself with her fingertips and toes. She spread her legs again, without being told.

“Could you be any more perfect?” he asked.

Patiently she waited, even though she wanted it to be over.

He spanked her right cheek so hard, her breath whooshed out of her lungs. She had no time to recover before he added another to her left cheek.

The third, a scorcher, landed between them.

Even without him touching her between the legs, she was damp. The idea of him looking at her, seeing her so exposed, made her want his touch in ways she'd never craved a man before. Not just any man, she realized, lying there, gently shifting. She wanted him. She wanted Trace, inside her, dominating her, seeing things about her that even she didn't recognize.

“One more,” he said.

She closed her eyes, opened her legs wider, shamelessly.

He spanked her there, on her exposed vulva.

She screamed, her body going rigid as the pain ripped at her.

Instantly she was in his arms, but instead of holding her as she expected, he laid her on the edge of the bed. He knelt on the floor and placed her legs over his shoulders.

No.

He wouldn't.

She couldn't let him.

She'd never... “Trace...”

With his strong hands, ones that had just relentlessly punished her, delivering unimaginable pain, he kept her thighs spread wide apart. He kissed her tortured pussy, then licked her with long strokes of his tongue.

She tried to escape, but she was helpless.

He took away the pain and simultaneously made it worse. “I—”

“Come for me,” he said. He entered her with two fingers, stretching her, seeking and finding her G-spot.

An orgasm, all the more intense from the physical assault on her private parts and mental assault on her thought process, swamped her.

She was dragged under, gasping and panting.

And when she recovered, he was there. He was lying next to her, trying to tame her messy hair. She blinked, unsure what to think, how to feel.

“How was your first spanking?”

It wasn't just the spanking, though; it was her first submissive experience, and it was the first time a guy had ever gone down on her. Any of the three would have been enough, but to combine them into a single encounter altered her.

She sought the right words to let him know what she was feeling. She couldn't find anything. It was difficult to believe she'd won a spelling bee in elementary school, when right now she wasn't sure she could spell her own name, her first one, not her surname. She settled for “unimaginable.”

“Ready for your run?”

“Run?”

“Like outside, one foot in front of the other.”

She turned to face him. “Are you serious?”

“Wouldn't want to get in the way of your schedule.” He left the bed, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

He bent to take off his boots, and he tossed them in the general direction of her closet. The action made it clear he wouldn't be spending the night on her sleeper couch.

Then he unbuckled his belt, pulled it free of its loops, and dropped it on her dresser.

She lifted her head off the pillow. “You are serious.” She dropped her head back down again.

Insatiably curious, she propped her elbows behind her and watched him unfasten the snap on his jeans and lower the zipper.

*Oh. God. Oh God. Oh. God.*

Commando.

And his cock was enormous. The color was beautiful, darker at the bottom of the shaft, a bit lighter near the head. His cock was hard, and it pointed straight at her. Her mouth dried.

She wanted him like she'd never wanted anyone before.

## Chapter Four

“Uh, looks as if you need something more urgently than you need a run,” Aimee said.

He did. He needed her desperately. He didn't remember the last time his cock had been so hard for so long. Since she'd stood in her living room, hands on hips, trying to stare him down with the ferociousness of her scientific personality, he'd been done for.

Trace Romero adored women, all women. Tall. Short. Slender. Voluptuous. Dark-haired, blonde. Most particularly, he had a thing for strong, independent women. When they surrendered, there was nothing headier.

But he knew a couple of things about a woman's first exposure to submission—and Aimee's needs specifically—and he tried to put being a good Dom higher on the priority list than his own needs. She needed to think about the experience, process it, maybe talk about it. He was determined to give her what she needed before he satisfied himself deep inside her body.

She licked her lower lip as she looked at him. Well, not him but his dick.

Sometimes it took all his discipline not to put the incessant demands of his body first. There was nothing he wanted more at this moment than to be buried to the hilt inside her pussy. He'd move, and his balls would slap against her. The knowledge that she was still sore from his spanking would just make it better for both of them.

Before he could give in, he unzipped his duffel and pulled out a pair of shorts. On second thought, he reached for a pair of briefs buried at the bottom of the canvas bag.

He bent and grabbed her thong and shorts from where they'd been discarded on the floor, and he tossed them at her. “Get dressed.”

“I can't move.”

He adjusted himself inside the restrictive briefs. “Maybe another spanking will convince you?”

“You wouldn't!

“Try me.”

Clutching her clothes against her chest, she scrambled into a sitting position. “Anyone tell you you're diabolical?”

“The list is long and distinguished. Need help?”

“No,” she snapped.

He put on his socks and stuffed his feet into his shoes. He already had them tied when she pulled on her thong.

“Bend over.”

“Uh...”

“Bend over. I want to see how red your ass is.”

She did.

He questioned his sanity, not for the first time. Her skin was still pink, with one tiny welt. He couldn't resist kissing it. He squeezed her butt cheeks, then pulled her back against his cock. *It wouldn't take much to push aside that scrap of fabric...*

“Yes,” she whispered. “I want you, Trace. Take me. Please?”

She couldn't possibly want hard, raunchy sex as much as he did. And it would be so easy. He'd just need to push that tiny scrap of fabric out of the way and penetrate her while she was still bent over. She'd be wet for him; he knew it. He could smell her arousal. It ignited his male instincts, his baser urges. He'd slide in with a single dominant thrust and... Gritting his teeth, he asked, “Eight-minute miles?”

“I want you,” she repeated. “I want you to hold me.”

He heard a trace of vulnerability in her voice that nearly undid him. “I will,” he promised. “After our run.”

“In that case, seven-minute miles,” she said. “As a warm-up.”

“You are tough.”

She swayed from side to side. A lesser man would have been done for. He grabbed her around the hips, holding her steady. “Get dressed.” He swatted the upper part of her right thigh.

Disobeying him, she stayed in place.

He forced himself to move away. Christ. He needed to be made of steel to resist the temptation of the very desirable scientist. He tucked his gun in place, trying to ignore her.

She took a long time getting dressed, grabbing a fresh sports bra from her bottom drawer and strapping her slick little heart-rate monitor in place, and he was sure she was stalling. He met her gaze in the mirror that hung over her dresser. That tiny line between her brows was back. She was confused. Maybe feeling rejected. It took her several minutes, and she bent rather than crouched to tie her shoes. Finally she snagged a new hair tie and put her ponytail back in place.

“Ready?”

“I think I'll stretch first.”

And she did, with her back to him, so that her ass was presented beautifully. If he'd been instructing her, he couldn't have given her more precise directions on how to make herself look beautiful, or turn him on.

She spread her legs even farther apart, and then she turned her torso slightly, dropping her head down so it rested on her right knee. She wrapped her hands around her ankle.

Helpless, a red-blooded male programmed to think of sex every eight seconds or more, he appreciated the long length of her muscles. He couldn't focus past his own vivid images, that of having her tied up with silk restraints, keeping her spread wide for him as he took her from behind. Blood surged in his cock. Had he been particularly bad in a past life? There had to be a reason he was standing here, being tortured.

She might have thought he had the upper hand as Dom, but the reality was, he was putty in her hands. He wanted to please her, wanted to give her experiences she'd never forget. He was absurdly delighted to provide her introduction to submission.

He ignored the flash of irritation that told him he wanted to be her first, last, and only. Life didn't work that way. You had interactions with people, and reality took you in different directions. She had her work, liked her insulated, scientific life. He lived for new adventures, blowing stuff up, covertly entering places where even the military wouldn't venture. The divorce rate among his friends made the national average look optimistic. His own track record wasn't much better. He'd had subs, but even women accustomed to pleasing their men and waiting patiently couldn't tolerate his lifestyle for long.

Still, the sight of her ass did unholy things to his libido.



Distraction being the better part of valor, he went into the living room. There was only so much a man could take.

He heard her in the bedroom; then she was obviously in her office, judging by the tapping sound he heard. He assumed it was her computer keyboard. He admired that she was a bit like him. Even though she was physically and mentally aroused, there was still time for work.

A few minutes later, she joined him. She pulled the cover off the blasted loro's cage, and the bird blinked sleepily. Did they actually sleep during the day? "Good morning, Aimee," the parrot said.

"You can't keep it covered and quiet all the time?" He'd never been around anything except cats. That this thing seemed to have intelligence was a bit unnerving. "Does he need coffee now? Maybe the newspaper? Maybe a fried egg?"

Eureka lifted a leg and looked at him.

"Feeling's mutual," he told the fluffed-up feather ball.

"They can be very territorial, aggressive, ah, hormonal, for lack of a better word, at certain times of the year."

"And I suppose this is his time of year?"

"Be nice," she told him.

He wanted to point out that the bird started it.

"Going for a run," she told Eureka, offering him a piece of fruit from a bowl near his cage.

"Run! Run! Run!"

"Does he give you a curfew?"

"Seven-minute miles," she said with an evil smile. "And a lot of them."

He hated to run. He'd never admit that to her, but when he got cardio, he liked to be killing a ball. He didn't care what kind of ball—handball, racquetball, soccer, football—but he liked exercise with a purpose, particularly if contact was involved. *Especially* if contact was involved.

The sun was vanishing behind the Front Range, taking the day's heat with it. No matter where he traveled in the world, he liked to come home to the Rockies. They were tall, rugged, and badly behaved, much like him. Aimee locked the front door and tucked the key into a small pocket in her shorts. They started out, and he waved to the Hawkeye team in the sports utility

vehicle. At the end of the street, he acknowledged a second team. He was aware of Team One getting out of the car. One of the agents would head toward her home, check the perimeter. The other would tail them.

“How many people have been assigned to watch my house?”

“Assigned to watch you,” he corrected. “Four teams. Two teams, assigned to twelve-hour shifts.”

“Plus you.”

“Turns out I have a personal interest in keeping you safe.”

She'd strapped on a heart-rate monitor. She checked it from time to time, and damn if she wasn't setting better than a seven-minute-mile pace. If he told her it was pushing his max, he suspected he'd never live it down.

She headed for the local high school's track.

He was supposed to keep up this pace, be aware of danger, and have a discussion about BDSM? Right now he'd rather have a cold beer. “No ill effects?”

“None at all.” She had the nerve to smile at him. “But since you brought it up, why didn't you fuck me when you had the chance?”

He blinked at her words. He'd heard the F-bomb before, but not from erudite, scientific Aimee Inamorata. “Not because I didn't want to.”

More quietly, she said, “I asked you to take me. You refused. What do you want me to think?” Without waiting for his response, she checked her monitor and stepped up the pace. “Six-and-a-half-minute miles?”

At that rate, she'd leave him in the dust and lap him in no time. He wasn't sure his ego could take that.

He could run. Or they could talk. He snagged her wrist while he was still physically able to keep up with her. He pulled on her, slowing her down. “I wanted to talk first.”

“Talk?” She laughed. “You'd rather talk than have sex? Too much estrogen in your veins, Agent Romero?”

“Look, Aimee. You saw my cock. You know damn well I wanted you. Want you.”

She yanked her wrist free from his grip and continued her relentless pace.

Not for the first time with a woman, he wondered how the hell he'd gotten so far off track. He wanted her to feel respected, not used, and all he'd done was piss her off. He could live to be a hundred and five and not handle women any better.

He struggled to keep up with her. "It would have been wrong of me to, in your terms, fuck you, right after a scene. Especially your first scene."

"And better to leave me confused?"

"That's why we're here." Why the fuck couldn't she see that? She had an analytical mind, was more given to science than emotion. So why didn't she get it?

"Now I'm really confused." She turned up the dial on her running.

Christ, and she thought he had no compassion? He'd been away from elevation for several months, but even if he'd never left the Mile High City, she'd still be smoking him.

Part of him—the one ruled by intelligence and the demand to preserve his own life—was tempted to let her pull ahead, work off some of her energy and frustration. She would eventually lap him, and then he could rejoin her. But he could never forget that his real purpose in being here was to protect her delectable body. No matter what intuition said, he couldn't afford to let her get more than a few feet away from him. Of course, the bad guys would have to be in better shape than he was if they intended to catch her.

He kept up for a half mile, then three-quarters of a mile. By the time they'd logged a mile, his shirt was plastered to his back, and he was mopping his brow.

She was barely sweating.

She checked her monitor, never breaking her stride.

He wondered if the agent trailing them was enjoying the sight of him having his clock cleaned by a woman who weighed a hundred pounds less than him and stood barely five feet five.

Enough was enough.

He snagged her wrist, more forcefully this time. He pulled her to a stop. He knew the language she spoke, and if that's what she wanted, that's what she'd get.

He grabbed her shoulders, fingers biting into her soft flesh. “Goddamn it, Aimee, we're going to talk. And if you even attempt an estrogen crack, I'll turn your ass over my knee right here. Want to try me?”

“You're messing with my goal.”

“I'll mess with a whole lot more than just that, woman.” He yanked her against him. Tugging on her ponytail, he held her prisoner. “We will talk about your experience,” he said. “You'll tell me what you liked, what you want more of. You'll tell me what you didn't like. You'll tell me what frightened you and if you were tempted to use your safe word. You'll tell me what you want me to do to you when we get back to your house. And then, Ms. Inamorata, you'll be fucked thoroughly. Any questions?” Before she could do anything except gulp a drink of Denver's oxygen-starved air, he kissed her.

There was nothing sweet or seductive about his kiss. He wanted her to know of his own frustration, wanted her to understand how hot he was for her, how much he'd been holding back. She might not understand it was for her own good, but fucking A, she needed to get that it wasn't easy for him.

She held herself rigid, and her eyes were unblinking.

Goaded, he dragged her onto her tiptoes; then he moved one hand to the small of her back, pressing her against him.

Aimee Inamorata gave as well as she received. She didn't retreat from his dominance. Instead she leaned into him, kissing him back, meeting his tongue, accepting it.

At her surrender, his kiss changed.

This woman was perfect for him. Strong enough to stand up to him, feminine enough to respond to his demands, strong enough not to be frightened of him, feminine enough to fire all his protective instincts.

She'd be the death of him.

Despite the physical exertion, his cock began to respond.

Slowly he ended the kiss. It was either that or find a secluded place where he could strip her naked and thrust into her, satisfying them both.

Her soft lips were red and swollen. Her cheeks had flushed to a soft apple red. And a few wisps of hair escaped the confines of her ponytail. Even though he was no longer holding her as tightly, she leaned into him of her own volition. “That worked for me,” she said breathlessly.

The run might not have exerted her, but his kiss had. His ego took that piece of information and etched it in memory. “In case you were wondering, it worked for me too. You’re a perfect sub, Aimee.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes, no longer shooting fire at him, darkened the way they had earlier. There was a look about her when she capitulated. He wanted to keep her close, protected.

“If I promise to talk, can we run?” she asked.

“Eight-minute miles,” he countered.

“Do you always have to have your way?”

“Pretty well,” he said.

“Is that a male thing or a Dom thing?”

“It’s the—”

“Natural order of things,” she said.

“You’re learning. I like a woman who’s a quick study.”

She rolled her eyes.

He released his grip on her.

She set the pace, and he fell in next to her. Talking wasn’t comfortable, but at least it was achievable. “I want to know about your first experience,” he said.

“Confusing is a good word.”

He waited. After thirty seconds or so, he glanced over at her. That tiny line had appeared between her brows again. Forcing himself to be patient, a trait that had served him well in the military and as a Hawkeye operative, he remained silent. He didn’t remember self-discipline ever being quite this difficult before her.

“I liked it, but I didn’t think I should like it.”

“Go on.” He lengthened his stride slightly, matching hers.

“I’ll be honest,” she said. “Part of me, the strong, independent woman, thinks it’s wrong to enjoy giving her pleasure over to a man.”

“It's the—”

“If you say 'natural order' one more time, Agent Romero, I'll go for an Olympic speed record.”

Her ponytail swished as she looked at him. At this point, if he took her, it'd be over in less than a minute. “I'll behave,” he promised.

“It felt as if I was abdicating control.”

She was. She had. But that part didn't matter. She was such a natural, he could just take it.

“When you had me over your knee...”

She checked her monitor, and this time he recognized it for the stall tactic it was.

“I was totally exposed. At first I thought it was obscene. Well, actually, I still think that.”

“But?”

“When you held me so tight, and I knew you were watching me, it was... At first it was disconcerting. As if I can't hide and I can't keep secrets from you. And now, with you demanding to know what I was thinking, for me to describe my experience. It's a little unnerving to realize how much you know about me.”

“When BDSM is part of a relationship, honesty is even more important.”

“The unexpected thing for me was how liberating I found the whole thing.”

“Liberating?”

“I was able to give myself over to the experience totally. I let go. I stopped being self-conscious. And since you demand honesty, I'm not sure how I feel knowing that I got off from pain, but there it is.”

“Erotic pain,” he corrected. “Deliberately inflicted, deliberately placed, deliberately timed. I watched you every step of the way. I saw the way you responded, and I played on that. If something hadn't been working for you, I would have changed it up. I doubt you'd get off from random pain. What we did was very different.”

She nodded. “As far as what didn't work for me? Your having clothes on. I want you naked next time.”

“Deliberate as well. I wanted your introduction to be all about the act of your submission, not as a prelude to sex.”

“You better not be telling me that sex has nothing to do with this.”

He laughed. “No chance. I want my cock in your mouth.”

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

“In your sweet cunt.”

She momentarily closed her eyes. He couldn't have described how much he liked having the upper hand again. “And in your tight ass.”

“I told you that I've never successfully... I mean...”

“Tell me.”

“It was such a disaster. I am not sure I want to try it again.”

“But you use the plug you have.”

“Every once in a while.”

“I'm going to ask you to trust me. It will be uncomfortable at first. But I won't hurt you. I'll start with a finger, then two, prepare you.”

“I have to imagine having you doing that will feel differently than a plug.”

He loved pushing her boundaries. “Having me do what?” He wanted to hear her say it. “No secrets between us, Aimee.”

“I'm sure you fucking my ass will feel different than having a plug or a finger up there.”

From spitfire to submissive in five seconds. Man, he wanted this woman.

“Yeah,” he said. “It will. Especially since I'll have a finger on your clit, and you'll be fighting an orgasm all the way.”

“Like I said. Different.” Her words were brave, but her eyes were slightly shuttered.

“Were you tempted to use your safe word?”

“I was, the very first moment I was over your lap. For a few seconds, I thought I might be panicking when I realized how vulnerable I was. If my mouth would have worked—well, for anything other than gasping—I might have used it. But then you kept talking to me.”

“I've never seen anything quite as spectacular as the sight of you across my lap. When you turned your toes inward, spreading your cheeks, parting your labia to expose all of your pussy,

believe me, spanking you was about the last thing on my mind. I've never been with anyone like you, Aimee, and I want you to know that.”

“Yeah yeah yeah.” This time she stopped, dropping her hands to her knees.

When he stopped next to her, she looked up. Keeping himself from devouring her the way he wanted was one of the more difficult things he'd ever done.

“Now that we've got all that out of the way, now that you've opened up my brain and had a look inside and spanked my butt raw, *now* will you fucking fuck me?”

Through the years, Aimee had had a lot of guys try to get in her pants, especially when a party and alcohol were involved. But she'd never, ever asked a man to take her.

She'd literally begged Trace to have sex with her, several times, and he still refused. Agent Romero was annoying as hell, as frustrating as a failed hypothesis, and all the more sexy for keeping himself aloof. Wasn't that supposed to be a female trick? But here she was, wet, horny, and frustrated.

Now, back at home, he still hadn't taken her to bed. Instead he said they needed to eat. Food was the last thing on her mind.

Totally at home in her house, he'd gone outside to light the grill before coming back in to snag a few vegetables from the refrigerator to make a *pico de gallo* to go with a bag of corn chips he found in a cupboard. “Cilantro?” he asked.

“Men don't know what cilantro is,” she said, opening a crisper drawer.

“Some men,” he corrected. “As well as some women.”

Even though she'd rather be in her bedroom with him, she didn't mind abdicating control of her kitchen. In fact, she didn't mind abdicating control of other things to him either. She tried not to think too much about the implication of that realization. She was strong and independent, resourceful and self-reliant. She told herself the situation with Trace was temporary, but she ignored the pit in her stomach that the thought caused.

He chopped and diced, then tasted and folded his arms across his chest.

“Something wrong?”

He scowled, then took another scoopful of the *pico de gallo*. “More salt.”



He gave the salt mill a couple of more twists, then stirred it in.

She could get used to this, sitting back and watching while someone made food for her. “Better?”

“Nah. It's not just better, it's perfect.”

“Humility is your middle name?”

“Honesty is my middle name. When I know it's good, why should I pretend otherwise?”

She rolled her eyes but dipped in a chip of her own. She took a bite, then closed her eyes as the flavors exploded.

“Well?”

“Okay, okay. So when you're right, you're right.”

He grinned. He grabbed the barbecue tools from a drawer, kissed her quickly on the forehead, something she could really get used to, then headed outside. “My talents are needed.”

She shook her head.

He tended to the steaks while she made a salad and uncorked a bottle of merlot, allowing it to breathe.

She had no interest in food, but he definitely did. As she was rapidly learning, what Trace wanted, Trace got.

She peeled a couple of mandarin oranges, and Eureka walked across the floor with his adorable waddle to collect his share of their dinner. “Hungry,” he said. “Eat, eat, eat.”

When Trace returned to the kitchen, the bird didn't get out of his way. Trace was forced to stay on the far side of the room, and she didn't even try to hide her smirk.

“Tell me why you think your house was broken into.” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the counter closest to the door. He'd changed from his drenched shirt into another T-shirt, this time black. The top button of his fly was open, and he hadn't bothered with shoes or socks. The intimacy of the scene struck her. He was comfortable here; she was comfortable having him here. And in her contradictory mind, that very comfort made her uncomfortable.

“I've got your sister's ideas,” he said. “I want to hear yours.”

She didn't need a reminder as to why he was really here or that he'd soon be gone. Now that she'd had a taste of him, of BDSM, she wanted more. For crying out loud, she wanted sex. Sex, sex, sex, sex, sex. But she knew from experience that he wouldn't be dissuaded. When he wanted an answer, he got it. "How much do you know about what I'm working on?"

"It involves communications. Other than that, not much."

"We're working on a microchip that's so small, it can hardly be detected. Essentially, I'm working on a new application. We attach the chip to a bug, literally something that resembles a mosquito. The mosquito is controlled remotely."

"Like the drones being used by the military?"

"Precisely. In this case, though, the mosquito can inject a chip into a person, or an animal for that matter. For example, take me. I'm a bit reluctant to be a client of Hawkeye. Many Hawkeye clients are like me, at least according to my sister. Most people don't want to have a protection detail, because it reminds them they're in an unsafe situation. Some will even try to shed their detail. But say that person has a pet."

He glanced at the bird.

"We could, hypothetically, send a mosquito into a room and insert a chip into the pet."

"That'd maybe make Eureka good for something other than roasting."

The bird flicked a piece of mandarin orange in Trace's direction.

"Knock it off," she said.

"Me or the bird?"

"You. There's nothing wrong with Eureka's behavior."

"I was just pointing out that pets should be good for something. Take your neighbor's dog for example. It barks to warn you of impending danger. A good dog earns his food and an occasional chew toy."

She rolled her eyes. "Do you want to hear about the project, or would you rather point out Eureka's failings?"

"We don't have that much time."

He grinned, and she was like a giddy schoolgirl with a first crush. In fact, when Billy Johnson offered to carry her books in the fifth grade, she hadn't been this smitten.

“Really. I do want to know. This is a huge deal, and I’m curious.”

“So once we’ve inserted the chip, either into a pet or a person, we could listen in to conversations. We could track a person’s actions.” She dumped the washed spinach from the colander into a bowl. “Obviously there are a lot of concerns about the chip and its technology.”

“Privacy.”

She nodded, glad to have the opportunity to really talk about this. She loved her work, but she rarely had the chance talk to someone who could be trusted. Her social circle was somewhat limited, and she spent most of her time communicating through e-mail or on chat with other teammates. If she didn’t go out for her daily latte, her voice would probably dry up from disuse. “Let’s say we’re hired to protect the daughter of a company president, but she doesn’t want a detail. Should we be allowed to chip her without her knowledge? Or her pet, or what about her pillow? And if we’re trying to infiltrate an organization, say we’re trying to rescue a kidnapped businessman in Colombia, we need intel, and this is a way to get it. Most people would say that’s a good use of the technology.”

“Agreed.”

“But what if a man suspects his wife is cheating on him? Should it be okay for him to chip her, or the Chihuahua she puts in her purse before she goes out? Do the ends justify the means? And worse, what if it gets into the wrong hands? I’m working on the programming, but even I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“When you work on something with the potential for good and evil in the same package, it has to keep you awake at night.”

“I think that’s mainly why I run. To try and sort it out. If something I work on saves a life, especially that of a child, isn’t that worth it?” Just as easily, someone else could end up dead. Both results could potentially be a result of her code.

Aimee wasn’t a black-and-white person. She saw shades of gray. She liked to think it made her a better scientist; the truth was, it probably got in her way more than anything.

“You have the chip here?”

She shook her head. “I’m not a hardware person. So there’s nothing here that anyone would be interested in. Well, except my computer. I am working with several others across the world on the programming code to operate the bugs and get the chip injected. But how could anyone have

found out about the project, and if they did, what would have led them to me? That's the only thing puzzling me. All my neighbors, almost everyone I know, thinks I'm working on a new book about ethical implications of technology. People who know me either think I'm a writer or they know me to be an adjunct professor for the University of Colorado. That's why I think it's potentially a random break-in. I'm not as convinced that it's related to the project as..." She trailed off. "That's why I'm not as concerned as my sister seems to be," she said instead.

"You almost said her name."

"Did not." Not under penalty of death.

"Donna?"

She shook her head.

"Ruth?"

She laughed.

"Julie?"

Her sister's first and middle names were top secret at Hawkeye. Aimee had been sworn to secrecy, and it generally wasn't difficult to avoid mentioning them since she worked remotely and few people knew they were related. "You should check on the steaks."

"Do you know how much money is in the office pool?"

"Last I heard, there was a comma in it."

"Now there are two figures before the comma. I could take a trip to the Bahamas if I found out your sister's name." He leaned toward her. "And I could take you with me."

Eureka squawked in protest.

"Steaks," she reminded him.

"You're a cruel woman, Professor."

"Smart," she countered.

He went outside, and she added the tiny orange segments to the salad, then liberally sprinkled some pine nuts on top. She used tongs to move a small portion into a bowl for Eureka before tossing in feta cheese and drowning the salad with homemade dressing.

"How far along is the project?" he asked, putting the platter of sizzling steaks on the dining-room table. "Wineglasses?"

"In the cupboard above Eureka's cage."

He looked at the bird. Eureka glared back.

"Water's good," Trace said. "We can skip the wine. Really."

She laughed. "Get the wineglasses, you big chicken. He's just a bird. You outweigh him by about two hundred or more pounds."

He moved, and Eureka hopped up on top of the microwave. He walked across it so that he was only inches from Trace.

Her parrot had never behaved so badly before. It had to be the hormonal thing, didn't it? She'd had male guests before, and she occasionally had parties. He was usually entertaining and charming, amusing people with his tricks. He seemed to be antagonizing Trace on purpose.

"Does he bite?"

"Not often."

"That beak looks wicked."

"Bill. Birds have bills, not beaks. And it can be. Wicked, that is. He could take a chunk out of your earlobe. Not that he will."

He reached over the parrot, and Eureka started coughing, or rather, playacting a cough. "Return to base," she told him.

If birds could scowl, he scowled at her.

She stood there resolutely. "Return to base," she said again, more sternly.

"Return to base," he finally mimicked, but he still didn't look happy about it as he resumed his perch.

It wasn't bad enough that she'd had a break-in or that Trace Romero was taking up her life, but it was all compounded by the hostilities between her protector and her feathered friend.

Trace got out the wineglasses, all the while keeping a close watch on the bird. She might have laughed, if she were certain Eureka would actually listen to her, but since Trace's arrival in her life, she hadn't been sure of much.

He poured the wine, giving her more than she would normally have while working. If she finished the glass, she'd have no resistance at all toward him, not that she seemed to have any to

begin with, and heaven knew what she'd tell him about her and what she hoped he'd do to her. Wine tended to loosen her mouth more than any other drink.

Feeling bad for the bird, she added a couple of more nuts to his salad before putting the dish in his cage.

“He gets to have part of our dinner?”

“He doesn't eat much.”

“We could still roast him.”

The bird squawked as if he understood Trace perfectly.

“He was kidding,” she said.

“Not really. He probably tastes like chicken,” Trace said under his breath. Before she could scold him, he repeated his earlier question. “How much longer will you be working on the project?”

“Hard to say. We have so many people working on it, in so many countries, that we're making advances twenty-four hours a day. We have occasional conference calls, sometimes via video.”

“You can be naked on your next chat.”

She blinked.

“At least from the waist down.”

He offered her the glass. Without a thanks, she took it.

“Maybe with a plug in your ass,” he added.

She took a drink, not surprised when the rich red liquid nearly sloshed over the edge.

“How would you like me to fuck you?” he asked, pulling out a chair for her.

Her mind swam, again, at his contradictions. He was asking outrageous questions, while at the same time exhibiting old-world manners.

She put down her glass while he slid her chair in.

“I could have you up against a wall,” he said against her ear. “With your arms over your head, keeping you helpless.”

Aimee was coming unraveled from the inside out. His breath was warm on her ear, and she smelled the wine he had sipped, soft spice layered beneath a bite of tannin, and him, all male and musk after their run.

“Or bent over, with you grabbing your ankles so that I can admire your cunt while I put a finger in your ass.”

Had she known what she was asking for, demanding, when she kept asking him to fuck her?

“Maybe on your back, spread-eagle, tied to the bed while I flog your pussy until your clit is swollen?” With reserved restraint, he sank his teeth into that tender spot where her neck and shoulder merged.

If she hadn't been sitting, her knees would have buckled and her legs would have never supported her.

“Maybe on your stomach, spread-eagle, with a pillow underneath you, so your ass is begging for the spanking I'll give it?”

Were they really discussing her project only five minutes ago?

“Are your nipples hard?”

Her entire body was on fire.

He bit her again, then laved away the hurt with his tongue. “Are they, Aimee?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And your pussy. Is it wet?”

“Very.”

He took a seat across from her, then offered his glass in a toast. She clinked her glass against his, then took a big drink, meeting his gaze above the rim of the crystal. They made it all the way through dinner, albeit with her having too much wine and not enough food, before he made her stomach take a dive.

“Did you decide?”

“Decide?”

“Which is it going to be? Tied to the bed? Up against a wall? Or bent over? And if the decision is being tied to the bed, face up or facedown?”

## Chapter Five

He watched the play of emotion across her face. A frown, that sexy scowl, the parted lips, as she thought through the implications. She would have liked all his choices, he knew, but not necessarily the twist he put on them. He knew what she wanted to say. None of the above. She wanted his cock. She'd made that more than clear. And this time, she could bet her sweet, sweet ass that she'd get it. But it would be on his terms, always on his terms.

"I need a shower first," she said.

"I'll clear the dinner dishes," he told her. "You go get in the shower. But cover up that damn bird first."

"His name is Eureka."

Flying fucktard was more like it.

She petted the bird before putting him in his cage.

"Night, night," he said.

Was it possible for birds to be psychotic, split personalities, maybe? The bird opened his beak—bill—and looked at Trace, then cocked his head to the side for her to stroke his back. The bird was enraptured by her. Well, at least that was one thing they had in common.

"I'll hurry," she said after covering the bird's cage.

"Take your time. I plan to wash your back." Trace topped off her wineglass. He liked this somewhat mellow side to her. She definitely wasn't tipsy, but there was something less self-conscious about her motions, more feminine, less reserved. "Oh, and Aimee..."

She stopped at the entryway and turned back to face him.

"You didn't answer my question. And I'm not letting you off the hook."

Her hand trembled, just slightly, and he grinned.



Five minutes later, he shut the dishwasher, refilled his own glass before corking the meager contents left in the bottle, then turned off the overhead light. A growling sound came from the direction of the birdcage. "You'll taste like chicken," Trace said aloud as he passed the cage.

After putting his wineglass on the nightstand near hers, he put his gun in the drawer and then joined her in the bathroom. The room was steamy and smelled of lavender, or what he thought might be lavender. Could have been any flower, he supposed, even rose or lilac. Regardless, it smelled fresh, feminine, and appealing, just the way a sub of his should smell.

His cock was hard, and he hadn't even looked at her yet. He stripped and dropped his clothes in the hamper with hers. He didn't think too long or too hard about what that meant; it just seemed more respectful than dumping them on the floor. Or that's what he told himself.

He slid back the shower door, and she looked up at him. Water dripped from her hair, and several drops clung to her long eyelashes. She held on to a round nylon-looking thing that was oozing lather.

"I can't say that a man has ever been in the shower with me before."

"I like being your first." He entered the shower and then reached to cup her breasts. He loved the dark, dusky pink of her small nipples and how quickly they hardened when he gently pinched them. She moaned, her knees going forward a bit. "Tell me how much pressure you like. How much feels like too much? How much pushes you past that point and makes your pussy throb?"

"Even your words do that to me," she admitted.

He tightened his grip a little.

Her mouth opened.

"You like that?"

"Oh. Yes. Yes."

He applied a bit more pressure, and her eyes closed. Even more and she gasped, panting. "That?"

"Hurts," she whispered.

"And this?"

She cried out.

“You didn't just come, did you?”

She blinked. Then she laughed nervously. “I guess that's the point where my pussy throbs.”

“Did you come without permission, *querida*?”

“I guess I need to be punished.”

Dios. Save him.

“Will you punish me, Trace?”

This time, she took an assertive role, and he was about done for.

She raised onto her tiptoes, dropped the poufy thing, then wrapped her arms around his neck. She leaned into him, pulling his head downward so she could kiss him.

Where he was demanding, she was a bit more tentative, but when he opened his mouth for her, she took a bit more of an aggressive role, finding his tongue, then retreating.

He liked the way she tasted. It was more than just the unique taste of her, more than the lingering sweet tartness of the wine. It was about her willingness to please him, her desire to make him want her in return. He'd kissed women before. There was either a connection, combustion, or there wasn't. Being a scientist, she probably knew a name for it. All he knew was it worked or it didn't.

His cock throbbed against the softness of her belly.

She pulled away a little, long enough to look him in the eyes, and against his mouth, quietly said, “I love the sight of your cock.”

Where the hell was his sweet, innocent submissive?

She folded a soapy hand around his cock and began to stroke him. As hard as he was for her, it would take her less than a dozen strokes to jerk him off. Half a dozen if... “Aimee!” He grabbed her hand.

She increased her pressure and made the strokes faster and shorter. The vixen. He tightened his grip, forcing her to stop.

“Do you like that, Trace? *Master*?”

Dios! How did he go from being in charge to being bewitched? “I didn't give you permission to touch me.”

"I didn't ask for it." She bit his lower lip. Hard. "I wanted to touch you. And I want to suck you as well."

Had she used one of her mosquitoes when he was outside, planting something inside him that told her exactly what he wanted and how he wanted it? Something had definitely gotten under his skin. "I made the decision for you," he said.

"Decision?"

"But we'll practice in here first. Face the wall, Aimee." He liked her shower. It was big enough for both of them, with room to maneuver. She'd obviously spared no expense here. The showerhead was oversize, and it was adjustable, heightwise. The interior was tiled, with a built-in bench, something he was certain they would take advantage of when he got around to letting her suck him, something that, if he thought about it too long, would make him come at the first skin-to-skin contact.

She turned while he picked up the bottle of body soap from a shelf. "Hands on the wall," he instructed. "Above your head." Her sweetheart of an ass was temptation manifested. If he weren't careful, he'd forget he was supposed to be the Dom here.

He squirted some of the soap into his palm as he looked at the bottle. Lilac, not lavender. He'd been close. At least they were both purple flowers. He lathered both hands and smoothed them over her shoulders, then down her back. She gave a small moan that made his cock stretch and strain even harder.

Then he bent behind her. "Feet at shoulder width, Aimee."

She slowly moved into position.

Water ran over both of them, and this close to her, he inhaled the smell of her. It was all he could do not to bury himself there, all he could do not to lick her until she came all over his mouth.

He soaped her legs one at a time and adjusted the showerhead to rinse her completely. He cleaned the soap from his hands before stroking between her legs. Her pussy was slick from her own juices, and she needed no lubrication.

He moved his forefinger back and forth across her clit; then he brought in his other hand to spread her labia and pull back the hood of her clit. It amazed him how much he liked to touch

her. The sound of her pleasure spiked his own. He wasn't generally into self-denial, but this woman made him want her pleasure more than he wanted his own.

She jerked and gave that tiny moan that he recognized as a precursor to her orgasm. She was so responsive, so easy to please. He gave her clit a tiny pinch. She gasped, her forehead falling forward to hit the tile.

The tiny pinch had interrupted her orgasm, and he easily slid a finger inside her.

Her breaths were shortened, little bursts of air, and he slipped in a second finger beside the first. "More?" he asked.

He saw her fingers splay above her head. "Yes," she whispered.

"Tell me."

"I want another finger inside me."

He finger fucked her until she rocked back and forth. It was hard not to get caught up in her reactions. In his less experienced years, he would have taken her while she was in a heated frenzy. But he wanted her over and over again, wanted her satisfaction, wanted her to enjoy all the experiences he could give her. More than ever, this was about her, testing her limits, taking her places she hadn't known existed. That he got to go there with her was just pleasure on top of pleasure.

"Trace," she whispered. "Trace. I want... I'm going to come."

He had guessed that a fraction of a second before she said anything. He stopped his motions, gently pulling out of her. She gave a halfhearted cry of protest but didn't say anything else. Trace adjusted the water, making sure it fell warmly on her body. He waited until her body quit shaking from the second denied orgasm. "I'm proud of you," he said.

"I didn't want you to stop."

"Yeah. I gathered that."

"You really are a sadist."

"A happy one, since I found an avowed masochist to play with."

"Beast," she said, stamping her right foot.

"Just think how spectacular your first anal orgasm will be."

She froze.

“Relax.” He drew some of the moisture from her pussy back toward her anal whorl.

“Nervous,” she said with a little laugh.

“I want you to trust me. I won't do anything you're uncomfortable with. We'll start with one finger, like we just did. And only when you're ready for a second will I attempt it.”

“No sex?”

“Not until you're ready.” He leaned in very close as he touched a finger to her most private area.

She nodded.

“When I push in, bear down, push your anal muscles back against me.”

“You're serious?”

He took her earlobe in his mouth and gently bit. Then he trailed kisses down the column of her throat to distract her.

He felt her relax slightly, and he stroked her pussy with featherlight motions even as he put a small amount of pressure on her anus. “You're doing great,” he said.

“You haven't done anything yet.”

He brought his left hand up to cup her breast, and then he pinched a nipple. She yelped and arched her back as she tried to evade him. He took the opportunity to effortlessly enter her rear.

“Damn!”

He kissed the top of her head. “You're there,” he told her.

“I've been making all that fuss about *that*?”

“Fraid so.”

She sighed exaggeratedly. “Much ado about nothing.”

He moved his finger, stretching her slightly.

“I... Er...” She wiggled her hips experimentally. “I think I like that.”

He couldn't wait to take her this way, filling her ass with his cock, driving it home, making her scream as she came. “I figured any woman who liked a butt plug really wouldn't object.”

“Can you...? Will you try a second?”

“I'd prefer to use lube for that.”

“There's some in the cabinet under the sink.”

“Was that a please?”

“I want a second finger up my ass. Please.”

He laughed. Quick study. She exceeded all his hopes, and he had had very high hopes. “Greedy little sub.”

“I said please.”

He left her for a moment, dripping water all over the tile floor. The lube was conveniently at the front of the extra toiletries and her lotion. He grabbed the bottle, flipping open the lid and squirting a dollop onto his fingertips before he even returned to the shower.

She was in the same position where he'd left her, even with her legs spread, waiting. At this point, she could lead him around by his cock and he'd follow her anywhere.

He backed up a bit instead of starting from where they'd left off. Even without his telling her, she arched her back for him. He wrapped one arm around her.

“Stroke my pussy,” she told him.

“Happy to.” He did. Simultaneously he pressed a finger against her rear entrance.

She pushed back against him.

“Old pro,” he said. He kissed the side of her neck. He couldn't help himself, not because he thought it would please her, but because he wanted to. He wanted her to be his, and he wanted to mark her. He wouldn't actually do it, but damn it, he wanted to.

This surge of possessiveness was odd. In the past, he'd sometimes shared his subs, but the idea of sharing her pissed him off.

He moved his finger in and out; then, when he thought she was ready, he brought a second finger up beside the first and eased both inside her.

She gasped. “That's a little more challenging,” she said. “You've got big fingers.”

Her breaths were a little close together, as if she might be close to freaking out. He stroked her clit just a little faster.

“That... Yes. Right. There...”

“You like it?”

“Feeling overwhelmed,” she admitted. “Feeling... It hurts... But I...” Then she screamed.

Her orgasm surprised him, and if he didn't guess wrong, it surprised her as well. He caught her as she collapsed backward into him.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"That one's a freebie. I think you earned it."

"No punishment?"

He wiped the water from her eyes as she tipped back her head.

"That's fair," she said when he didn't respond. "It was your fault, anyway."

"My fault?"

"Well, if you weren't such a skillful lover, I could have held on longer."

"Do we need to have a discussion about personal responsibility?" he asked teasingly. How long, if ever, since he'd teased a woman?

"I'd rather you finally fuck me."

"Can't you think of anything else?"

"Not really. No."

"I created a monster."

"There you go. A textbook example of personal responsibility. We both recognize it's all your fault."

"Where's your butt plug?" Keeping her supported, he pulled first one, then the other finger from her rear.

She wiggled around until she faced him. She pushed runaway strands of hair back from her face. "It's in the top drawer of my nightstand."

He turned off the faucet and reached for one of the towels she'd thrown over the shower door. After drying her hair and her face and trailing the towel down her neck and across her chest, he said, "Turn around."

Obediently, she did.

He ran the soft material across her shoulders, then down her back, before rubbing the towel across her buttocks. He crouched to dry her legs, before finally moving to her intimate parts. Her labia were swollen and reddened. If he'd ever seen anything more appealing, he didn't remember

the sight. "Now the front." His voice was husky. If he didn't get her into the bedroom immediately, he'd take her right here in the shower.

After she was dry, he tossed the damp towel back on top of the door and snagged the other for himself. "Grab your plug."

She went to brush past him but stopped. She reached up and stroked his chin with the back of her hand. "You turn me on."

"Yeah?"

"Just in case you missed it." She squeezed his cock.

He bit out a curse. "Your plug," he told her.

"Aye, aye, sir."

That earned her a swat as she exited the shower stall.

He gave his body a cursory pass with the cotton towel, then grabbed the bottle of lube and followed his delightful sub into the bedroom. She was lying on top of the bed on her side, her head propped on her upturned arm. The stainless steel plug with its blue crystals at the hilt was on top of the dresser. "On your stomach, with a pillow beneath it."

He saw her breath catch and her eyes widen. "You're going to put it in?"

"Another time I'll watch you do it. But yes, I plan to put it in you."

She followed his instructions, her knees digging into the mattress. He put one knee on the mattress, near her, and then he liberally covered the stainless steel with lube. "Keep your legs apart." He placed the narrow, teardrop-shaped tip against her opening. She was lovely in her submission, and the sight of her completely exposed made his cock throb. "This won't hurt a bit."

She laughed, enough to loosen the tension, and he seized the moment. With a swift, sure motion, he sank it all the way in.

She gasped, and her hips jerked, but she settled almost instantly. "It's cold," she said.

"Dios. That looks beautiful. I may just always keep your ass full."

She squirmed.

"And maybe we'll get you a bigger plug, one that stretches you even wider."

She turned her head to look at him. "You're serious?"

"Maybe a glass one."



"You're scaring me," she said. "Again."

Her voice was breathless. He loved that about her. There was a quality to her voice when fear and trepidation melded into trust. It did strange things to him, appealed to his masculinity, made him want to protect her. He smoothed blonde strands of hair back from her face. "Haven't you learned I don't do anything until you beg for it?"

"A glass plug?" she asked skeptically. "I'm going to beg for that?"

"You will," he promised. He wiggled the stainless plug he'd just inserted, tugging on it, then sinking it back in. "Do you like that?"

"I do. A lot. I'm enjoying playing with you that way a lot more than I thought I would."

"I told you the choice was yours," he said. "Up against the wall, bent over, or restrained. But I changed my mind. When I fuck you for the first time, I want to look at you. I want to see your expression. And I won't restrain you because I want your legs around my waist as you draw me in deeper."

"Yes," she said, turning over and tossing aside the pillow. "Fuck me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Rat fink."

He laughed. He left her long enough to grab a condom from his duffel. It seemed to take longer than ever to rip open the packet and roll the latex down the length of his shaft.

"I like to look at your cock," she said.

"I like to have you look at it." He moved between her legs, poised at the entrance to her pussy. "And touch it."

"Do you enjoy this?" She showed him what she meant, closing her hand around him tightly.

"Yeah."

She stroked him, slowly at first, then more vigorously.

His head fell forward. Control threatened to splinter. "I thought you wanted me to fuck you. If you keep that up, I'll tell you right now, lady, it ain't going to happen."

She actually stuck out her lower lip in a pout, but she didn't stop the back-and-forth motion on him.

Propping his weight on one arm, he curled his other hand around hers, stopping her motions. "I want you to jerk me off," he said. "Later. Now I want to be inside you while your ass is full of that plug."

"Take me."

He needed no second invitation.

She was already wet, and he slid in the first inch effortlessly.

"I can feel the plug," she said. "It..."

"You okay?"

She inhaled sharply. "Yes." Then again, she said, "Yes."

He entered her slowly, feeling the plug himself. She was tight to begin with, and the size of the plug made the fit feel even more snug. He forced himself to grit his teeth and pace his strokes, not giving in to her whimpered urgings or his own body's demands.

He grabbed her wrists and imprisoned them above her head. He loved the way they looked together, his darker skin contrasting with her much lighter tone, his strength complementing her toned, long muscles, his dominance made more complete by her sweet submission.

About to go over the edge way too fast, he withdrew for a moment to pace himself and to drive her mad, just a bit more. He pulled one of her nipples into his mouth, biting it with more pressure than he'd used before.

"Trace! That's..."

"Too much?"

"Fantastic."

He moved to her other nipple, giving it the same intense attention.

Her head thrashed back and forth, and the sight of her capitulation drove him to the edge. He sank into her, thrusting, riding her hard, wanting her to experience the madness that consumed him.

"I want to come."

"Beg," he told her. "Beg."

She whimpered. "Please? Please, Trace. I can't...I can't take any more."

He felt her body convulse beneath him. "A few more seconds."

"You're making me crazy."

She started to pant.

"Now," he told her, sinking his teeth into her shoulder.

She screamed. Her body bucked and trembled. Not for the first time, he thought of how perfect she was for him, strong enough to offer everything he demanded, soft enough to delight him.

After she came, he rode out his own orgasm. He bit out a curse in Spanish. The wait had seemed interminable, but it had been worthwhile. He hadn't had an orgasm this wrenching in months. Dios. There was something about this woman...

When she finally opened her eyes, she was looking up at him. She grinned and said cheekily, "Okay, so maybe you did want me."

"That'll earn you a spanking."

She stuck out her tongue. "You'll have to find the stamina first, Agent Romero."

"Woman, I always have the energy to spank your sassy ass." He released his grip on her wrists, and after disposing of the condom, he maneuvered them both around so that he held her against his chest. She wiggled her rear against him. He gave her a gentle swat. Then she turned to face him. The color of her eyes was lighter than he had ever seen before. Her mouth was open slightly. Her blonde hair was mussed all over her face. And he was ensnared, as surely as if she'd slapped a pair of unyielding metal handcuffs on him.

She drifted off to sleep, and he held her.

He didn't question the rightness of having her body pressed against his so trustingly. Nor did he question his own determination to keep her safe. It wasn't just about his job or the fact Ms. Inamorata herself would skin him alive if anything happened to her little sister. This was about what Aimee's innocence and responsiveness did to him. He'd keep her safe, no matter what.

When he was sure she was asleep deeply, he climbed from the bed and dug out a pair of shorts and a fresh T-shirt from his duffel. He had a hard time concentrating on what he was doing. It hadn't been thirty minutes since he'd drained his balls, but he was already getting hard again. Even in sleep, she was alluring, her hair in disarray, the dim light reflecting off the crystals in her plug when she moved. His body suddenly thought it was ten years younger.

He skipped socks and stuffed his feet into his running shoes.

After grabbing his gun, he walked through the house, then went into the kitchen. That damn bird growled again. "Tastes like chicken," Trace said.

After grabbing a flashlight from the countertop, he headed outside. The neighbor's dog growled softly, but it didn't bark like crazy. Certain everything was fine, he double-checked all the window locks, then went outside to talk to the crew. They'd be on until seven a.m.

"All's quiet, Romero," Daniel Riley said, rolling down the window.

The team, one man and a woman, were sipping coffee. Sara Stein and Daniel Riley. He knew them both. Hawkeye had so many operatives, everywhere on the face of the planet, but he knew these two, and he was glad to see them assigned to the job. Stein was steady, good with women, great with kids. Riley was young and ambitious. He volunteered for a lot of high-risk assignments, and he'd already received a big promotion.

"I hear it could have been a random thing," Riley added.

"I don't believe it," Trace said.

"Regardless, none of us are going to let anything happen to Inamorata's kid sister," Stein added. "No way in hell."

"You got an inside track?" Riley asked.

"Inside track?" Trace leaned forward. "On?"

"Her name. Ms. Inamorata's," Riley said.

"We've been talking about it, and we've decided we'd be willing to split the money with you," she said.

"The woman is closemouthed. But we can safely cross off Ruth, Donna, and Julie."

"I'll check them against the list," Stein promised. "She seems more like a Prudence or Catherine or Christine. Something more formal, uptight, you know?"

"But her sister is Aimee. Informal," her partner said. "So maybe it's a top-ten name, like Jennifer or Jessica. Maybe Emily."

"But look how Aimee is spelled."

"Yeah, I keep forgetting you're the genius."

Trace started to move away, then turned and came back. "Don't let anything happen to her."

"No chance," Stein said, leaning over Riley. "I'm more frightened of Inamorata than I am of Hawkeye himself."

"See, you keep proving that Mensa IQ," Riley said. "Hey, Romero. There's a nasty rumor going around that she kicked your ass when you went for a run."

"You keep proving your non-Mensa IQ," Stein said, smacking her partner on the arm. "Keep your mouth shut."

"What? Why did you hit me? I was just repeating what I heard."

"Rumor's true," Trace said. "If she hadn't slowed down, she'd have lapped me a second time."

Sara Stein whistled sympathetically. "She lapped you once?"

He didn't answer that. Technically she hadn't, but she would have. "You can go running with her tomorrow afternoon. We'll take turns."

"Sorry, dude. I get off at seven," Riley said. "Happy to help, otherwise, you know? Anything for the team."

Trace rapped his knuckles on the vehicle's roof.

"Sweet dreams," Riley said, smothering a yawn.

Trace grinned, checking out the area as he jogged back across the street. There wouldn't be much time for sleep. He had more than a few things he planned to do with her, to her, and very few of them could be considered *sweet*.

\* \* \* \*

Aimee sat up in bed and wrapped her arms around her upturned knees, very much aware of the plug still deep inside her.

Dozens of emotions crashed over her.

She hated waking up and finding the bed empty.

She was used to sleeping alone, and she liked her sleep, eight hours at a minimum, preferably nine, and on rare occasions, a full ten. This was the first time she ever remembered waking up and feeling lonely.

She told herself he wouldn't have gone far. But she listened intently and didn't hear him moving about the house. The bedside lamp was still on from earlier, but there were no other lights turned on.

As silence became more familiar, she became aware of the sound of voices outside. Not just his but others, likely one of the security teams. It reminded her why he was really here, of the danger he and her sister believed she might be in.

He wasn't here because he was a man who found her sexy and attractive. He was here on assignment, and when the assignment was over, he'd be gone.

They could play and have fun, he could push her to the edge of her sexual submission and fulfill all her fantasies—and a few she didn't know she had—but he'd move on soon. He'd be in a jungle somewhere, perhaps supported by the technology she was working on. He'd be rescuing some businessman, maybe a kidnapped child, or he'd be protecting civilians in a Middle East war zone, and she'd still be in Denver, Colorado, continuing on with her research, teaching classes downtown, running every afternoon...stagnant in her boring, rigid life, thinking about him, wondering what he was doing, who he was doing... “Damn. Damn, damn, damn. Damn.”

She was not the kind of woman who felt sorry for herself. Her older sister made sure of that. Life threw events at you, but it was how you responded that helped you grow and change. Events didn't define who you were. You defined who you were.

Still, sex with him was incredible. Powerful. She reached for her wine. Who was she fooling? It was the best sex she'd ever had, and the reactions he'd wrung from her left her feeling emotionally vulnerable.

She liked falling asleep in his arms, enjoyed his strength, swooned over the way he touched her.

So now what?

Exhaling shakily, she took a fortifying sip from her wine.

She was scared. If she fell for him, she wasn't sure she'd survive it. So that meant there was only one practical solution. She couldn't fall for him.

She could enjoy the sex and the interchange, but that was it. Swooning was okay. Fretting was not.

Aimee heard the front door close. He returned to the bedroom smelling of the cool Colorado evening.

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” he said.

“You didn’t. Not really. I wasn’t aware of your leaving the bed, but when I turned and you weren’t there...”

“How does the plug feel?”

She slid her wineglass onto the nightstand. “Full.”

“Uncomfortable?”

“Surprisingly not.”

He crossed the room and toed off his shoes. He smoothed her still-damp hair back from her face. It amazed her how tender he could be. The contrast with his dominant personality thrilled her. She never knew what to expect, and that heightened the experience with him.

“Since you’re awake, I’ll give you two choices of what we can do to fill the time.”

Her heart picked up a few extra beats. She looked up at him. A small, devilish smile played at the corners of his mouth. Whatever he came up with, he was going to enjoy it.

“I can take you bent over. Of course, with that plug in your ass, I won’t be able to put my finger up there. But I can play with it.” He paused a beat. “Or I can introduce you to bondage and tie your hot body to the bed, keeping you helpless while I fuck you.”

He held her head between his hands and leaned forward to kiss her. She surrendered instantly. She loved the taste of him, the way the wine mingled with the bite of the pico de gallo he’d made for dinner. And she loved the way he started by drawing her lower lip between his teeth, then using his tongue to coax her into opening her mouth. This time his kiss was gentle as he silently asked for her invitation. She rocked forward, giving it.

Then he deepened the kiss, demanding more from her, forcing her to open her mouth wider as he simulated their earlier sex act. He probed. He sought. She could have no secrets from this man. Her pussy moistened, and her nipples hardened. Her whole body seemed to open in response to him.

When he ended the kiss, her mouth felt bruised, and she ridiculously had never been happier. She was nearly giddy with it.

“Well?”

“I want to be bent over.” She could hardly believe her words had sounded so calm. But her earlier decision had liberated her. She wanted to enjoy sex with him. Why not wring every drop of excitement from their time together as she could? She'd already decided she wasn't going to allow herself to get hurt emotionally. So why not have fun?

“Nice.” He released her and pulled off his shirt.

She loved the sight of his chest, the way the dark hair arched downward, the way she could see his muscles ripple as he stretched, and the sight of his brown masculine nipples... Her mouth watered, and she wanted to play with him the way he played with her.

He put the gun away, then shucked his shorts. As usual he was commando, and as usual his cock was already engorged.

“I can't get enough of you,” he said.

“The feeling's mutual. I like the feel of your cock inside me. You should share more often.”

He laughed, then offered her his hand. “Stand there,” he told her as he helped her from the bed.

“Facing you?”

“For now. Spread your legs...as wide as you can.”

She did, and he knelt in front of her. She shuddered. Big, strong, powerful Trace Romero was on his knees, with his mouth at her crotch level.

“Just making sure you're ready.”

“I'm ready!”

He looked up at her, capturing her gaze. Then he leaned in and licked her pussy.

“I'm ready,” she whispered.

“Gotta be sure you're really, really ready for me to fuck you as hard as I want to.”

Within seconds, she'd be over the edge. That was probably his master plan. Push her over the edge and then punish her for it.

She placed her hands on his shoulders, trying to keep her balance. When he did...*that*...she could hardly hold herself up.



He spread her labia with one hand. With the other, he toyed with her plug.

“Ready,” she said again, this time through gritted teeth. “Really, really wet,” she said.

He kept at it, licking her pussy, changing the amount of pressure on her clit. His tongue was magic. He slipped his tongue inside her while he gave a particularly firm tug on her plug. Her whole body felt like it was on fire.

She moved her hands, digging her fingers into his hair.

“You were up to 'barium,' I believe.”

“Thanks.” She might have laughed if she weren't fighting so hard to hang on. “Berkelium, beryllium, bismuth...” Then thought became almost impossible, despite the fact she could recite the table backward. “Boron.”

“You've got the most delicious cunt,” he said. “I could eat you all day.”

The graphicness of what he said just made her hotter.

He pulled out the plug even farther, then shoved it in. She was done for.

She screamed as she shattered.

He kept up his maddening motions, dragging a second orgasm from her.

“Now,” he said, looking up at her and grinning, “you're ready.”

## Chapter Six

"I'm glad you're so fit," he said. "It'll make it easier for you to stay in position."

She turned her back to him, and he trailed his fingers down her spine, then into the crack of her rear. Every nerve ending felt as if it were being singed. This man knew how to touch her, where to touch her, and for how long to touch her. "How long are you planning to keep me bent over?"

"Until sometime tomorrow. Retribution for that run."

"You've got a mean streak."

"A mile wide," he agreed. "And a memory that doesn't quit either."

He exerted some pressure against the small of her back, and she spread her legs apart as she bent over.

He grabbed a condom, then moved in behind her. She wiggled her butt.

"You're a vixen."

She felt his cockhead against her pussy. Her breaths came closer and closer together, even though he'd barely started to touch her.

"So tight," he murmured. "Hot." He put his hands on her hips and held her tight as he pushed inexorably forward.

"It feels...different than anything else has." It had to be the combination of the position and the fact she was a little out of control. The blood rush to her head only enhanced the intensity.

She heard him grunt, and she took silent pleasure from the fact he was turned on. She loved that she had the same power over him that he had over her. Intoxicating stuff.

"Play with your pussy," he told her.

She nodded, or the best she could manage hanging upside down, and tried to do as he asked. It wasn't easy, being bent over with him impaling her, filling her, stretching her, making her feel even fuller since the plug was still in place.

She touched herself, and her clit felt sensitive. "It's swollen," she said.

"Good."

"Beast."

He dragged her backward and managed to snake his arm around her middle so he could hold her completely imprisoned while he fucked her. Having him so totally in charge gave her that now-familiar feeling of being able to let go, and she relished it.

She felt his orgasm building before she heard his deep groan of appreciation.

He held her, and he pounded into her.

His cock was hard, pulsing.

She wanted his orgasm as much as he demanded hers.

She remained in place as he shuddered.

"I'm not finished with you yet," he said.

"But..."

He jostled their positions a bit. "Your orgasms need to be a three-to-one ratio."

"I think I'm past that."

"You will be." He reached around and fingered her while he still had her pussy filled. The intensity of the angle combined with his unyielding and relentless pressure on her clit made her tremble.

"Don't fight it," he said.

He still held her, and he made his movements shorter and more intense. She called out his name, and the climax overtook her. "I think I'll sleep well this time."

He slowly withdrew. She couldn't quite manage to stand.

"A little help from your friends?"

"Please."

She wasn't sure how he managed to have so much strength and energy left as he drew her up. Her muscles were spent, and she'd forced him to keep up with her during the run, so she knew he had to be as tired as she was. He pulled back the bedcovers before lifting her onto the mattress.

"Stay there," he said.

She wasn't going anywhere for a very long time, even if he were to order it. But luckily he was giving her an order she could effortlessly follow.

She rolled onto her side, and a few minutes later, she felt him there with something warm and wet. Her eyes opened.

"Washcloth," he said. "Relax."

She followed his instructions, taking a breath and luxuriating in the way he cared for her. After soothing her clit and gently wiping her pussy, he used the small cotton towel to remove the plug. She exhaled. "Thank you."

He crawled in behind her and pulled her close, settling his cock between her ass cheeks before pulling blankets over them both.

"I think I might like this submissive stuff."

"You think?"

"Maybe," she said teasingly. "I may need a little more experience to know for sure."

He reached around and tweaked one of her nipples.

She yelped.

"Then tomorrow, I'll give you another lesson, and we'll see how that goes. You can let me know then how it's working for you."

"Three-to-one, huh?"

"At least," he said.

"Cumulative or daily?"

"Does your brain ever shut off, Professor?"

"Just asking. I like daily better. Easier to track that way. I won't be as tempted to start a spreadsheet."

"You don't want me to catch up. Admit it."

“You set the rules, Agent Romero. I’m just trying to understand them properly, well, so I don’t have to be punished or anything. I wouldn’t like that.”

“Uh-huh.”

Effortlessly he flipped her over and pinned her beneath him. “Hey!”

“I want you to shut up. I only know three ways to do that. One involves a gag.”

“Uh...”

“The other two involve my anatomy.”

He lowered his head toward her.

He captured her mouth in a kiss, and she tasted herself on him. Kinky, sensational stuff. And another experience to save for later, when they were no longer together.

“This working for you?” he asked, drawing away momentarily.

He didn’t wait for an answer.

\* \* \* \*

Coffee. Coffee would be good. Her usual fix of an extra-large vanilla soy latte would be even better.

Aimee dragged a pillow over her head to block out the bright Rocky Mountain sunshine.

Slowly reality returned.

She became aware of the tenderness between her legs and the fact her nipples were slightly sore.

She rolled over and pushed up onto one elbow. She saw the indentation on the pillow Trace had used. Even without that, she would know it hadn’t been a dream. The scent of him lingered in the room. His duffel was on top of the dresser. His stainless steel watch took center stage on the nightstand. A discarded T-shirt hung from one of the bedposts. His presence dominated the space, even though he wasn’t in it.

She heard him banging around in the kitchen.

Then Eureka chimed in. “Get up. Get up!”

“Tastes like chicken,” Trace said, his voice carrying back to the bedroom.

She laughed. But she'd definitely have some damage control to do there. Trace had obviously left the bird covered up, and that would just annoy Eureka all over again.

“Get up! Get up!”

Aimee slowly realized that coffee wasn't just a dream or a need. The richness of its brewing scent had awakened her. She could get used to someone more ambitious than she was getting out of bed and turning on the coffee.

She'd always considered the idea of having someone around to be more than a bit obtrusive, and her ex had certainly proven that. He was useless; well, useless and annoying. Factor in that he hadn't turned her on in bed, and that was the trifecta of relationship doom.

Unlike her, she hadn't ever put together an official pros-and-cons list on the idea of living with someone. Until last night, there had been no point. Being put to bed and awakened by the scent of coffee could potentially outrank ten negatives, like doing someone else's laundry. She'd do two lifetimes' worth of laundry, without complaint, to have coffee waiting in the morning.

She debated what to wear into the kitchen. Obviously Trace had preferred her naked last night, but what were his expectations during the day? And how was she supposed to act?

This was more complicated than she had imagined.

With a groan, she collapsed back onto the mattress and pulled the blankets over her shoulders.

“Morning.”

Trace stood at the doorway, his shoulder propped against the jamb. He held a steaming cup of coffee in hand. Her mouth watered, and not just from anticipation of her own cup of coffee, but from the sight of him.

He smelled fresh, of spicy soap, citrusy shampoo, and first-of-the-morning air.

Black T-shirts were made for him, and he could have walked out of a magazine ad for those blue jeans. Just open the top button and...

“I was hoping you'd join me in the shower,” he said.

“I would have...” *Might have*, she silently amended. She was known to be cool, calm, and logical, but in this situation, she had no idea how to act.

“If you were awake.”

"I seem to have burned up a lot of energy yesterday. From the run. From the break-in."

"Uh-huh."

Did he see through everything?

She sat up, dragging the sheet with her. She felt unaccountably shy with him standing there, looking at her as if he knew all her secrets, which at this point, he practically did. She smoothed her hair back from her face, but with the smile on Trace's face, he didn't seem to mind her dishabille.

"Since I'm such a smart man," he said. "I brought you coffee."

"You brought me coffee? That's for me?"

"I was afraid to come near without bringing a gift."

She scowled at it, but now she couldn't take her gaze off the steaming mug. "I don't suppose it has cream in it?"

"It does. Organic half-and-half."

"How...?"

"I figured there wouldn't be half-and-half in your refrigerator for any other reason than coffee. How'd I do?"

"I think I'll call you Sherlock."

He entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She accepted the mug with a grateful smile. Yeah, doing laundry for this man would be no biggie, as long as he got up before her every day and brought coffee in bed. That was an indulgence she'd never even considered before. "Perfect," she said, taking a long drink. "Thank you."

"Drop the sheet."

Instead of waiting for her to comply, he captured the high-thread-count cotton and pulled it away from her body. Her nipples hardened instantly, in response to the room's chill and the heat of his gaze.

"I'd keep you naked all day if it were up to me."

He cupped her left breast gently, and dampness flooded between her legs.

"Careful with the coffee."

He was a master. He had her exactly where he wanted her, as usual.

She noticed, with a thrill, the differences in their skin tones, the white creaminess of her breast and the pink of her nipple, contrasted with his richer, darker color. Everything about this man gave her chills.

He tightened his grip slightly. She gasped. Watching her intently, he pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "You like that?"

"Yes," she said, gasping for breath.

"And this?" He tightened his grip.

She'd experimented with nipple clamps and never experienced anything so intense. Aimee could no longer speak. Her eyes closed.

"You are so amazing to play with," he said. He tweaked her nipple one final time. "Get dressed. Breakfast awaits."

She blinked the world back into focus. "Breakfast?"

"The meal between dinner and lunch."

If her brain weren't foggy from sexual arousal, and if he hadn't been smart enough to hand her a cup of coffee, she would have brained him with a pillow.

He laughed. With only a glance over his shoulder, he left the bedroom.

She took a few appreciative sips of coffee before getting out of bed. It was kind of strange to wake up naked. She had a few favorite nightshirts, several with pictures of Einstein along with some of his more-famous quotes, and even one with a picture of Richard Feynman. That, she realized, should have told her a lot about her life.

She hit the shower, and she stayed in there longer than she should have. It was totally decadent to have half a cup of coffee still waiting when she wrapped a towel around her. As long as she didn't focus on why he was here and how short the duration would be, life was good.

Since she had a lot of work to do today, and she was bound and determined not to let him interfere with it, she dressed in jeans and a soft T-shirt. And since she wasn't above being somewhat of a tease, she skipped wearing a bra.

She powered up her computer and checked e-mail. There was one from a twentysomething colleague from the East Coast. He was a mad-scientist hardware guy who wore in-your-face T-shirts and knew more stuff than 90 percent of the planet's population.



He'd been experimenting with a mosquito last night, and one of his neighbors had sprayed it with insect repellent. The spray had worked; evidently the stickiness clogged up the mechanics of the bug. That was something they hadn't spent a lot of time considering. The wonder kid had been up all night trying new things.

Shaking her head, Aimee opened up her integrated development environment to work on debugging her piece of the software. Ideally the IDE would find the flaw in her programming that sometimes made the mosquito's injector jam.

She'd spent days looking at it, to no avail, and time was ticking.

While the software chewed on her work, she headed back down the hallway.

The scene in the kitchen shocked her. Trace stood in front of the stove, his back to her as he sang in Spanish. She could get used to that, she decided. Any man who could operate a paring knife, a frying pan, a toaster, and a coffeemaker, all in the same morning, was her hero.

But it wasn't only that.

Eureka's cage was uncovered, and her feathered friend was on top of his cage, his foot wrapped around a slice of apple. Eureka still glared suspiciously at the human, but Trace had gotten her bird up and fed him—now that was above and beyond.

Giving in to impulse, not something she generally did, she crossed the room and slid her arms around his waist and held him tight for a few seconds. “Thank you.”

“All this over coffee?”

“Mainly the bird,” she said.

“I figured I should plump him up, put some meat on his bones, before we roast him for dinner.”

“Bombs away!”

She looked over her shoulder and pointed at the bird. “Eureka, no.”

He picked up the piece of apple that he'd discarded.

“You really should stop antagonizing him,” she said to Trace, pinching him.

“I should stop antagonizing *him*? Hello, he's the one who dropped a bomb on me. On the food chain, humans rank slightly higher than birds, and if he were smarter, he'd figure that out.”

“Tastes like chicken,” Eureka repeated. “Tastes like chicken. Bombs away!”

She glared at the bird again, but he was eating, obviously having made his point. “He's smarter than you give him credit for. What's for breakfast?”

This time he looked over his shoulder at the bird. “Eggs,” he said. “Lots of them.”

She pinched his rear.

“Omelets,” he said, reaching for a spatula. “With avocados and cream cheese.”

“Can I hire you out after all this is over?”

“For sexual favors?”

“That too. Mostly, though, for your culinary skills.”

“And here I thought you only wanted me for my body,” he said.

“It's great that you've actually turned out to be somewhat useful. Up until now, I've always thought having a man around would be as helpful as having an extra toe.”

“I think I'm insulted.”

“You shouldn't be. I'm revising my opinion.”

“Ah. You have evidence to support a new hypothesis.”

“Precisely.” She could stay like this for a very long time, with her cheek pressed against his back, inhaling his unique scent. And Trace didn't seem to be objecting either. “How can I help?”

“Set the table, and grab the pico we made last night.”

Saying *we* was generous, since all she'd done was watch and eat.

He turned toward her then, seizing control like he always did. Before she could react, he had dropped the spatula and had her against the counter. His right leg was between hers, her crotch against his thigh. He dug his hand into her hair, holding her captive for his kiss.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and responded completely; she had no resistance where this man was concerned. As he'd obviously intended, she moved her pussy against his leg while he devoured her mouth in a demanding kiss.

Even though she'd had half a dozen orgasms last night, another was right there, gnawing at her.

He moved his free hand to her lower back, and the pressure he exerted changed her position a bit, bringing her in more firm contact with his leg. He had to know what he was doing, had to know its effect on her...

She came, hard, and with a whimper that was muffled against his mouth.

"Now," he said, "it's a good morning."

When her head stopped spinning, she grinned up at him. "I'm up one to nothing. And it's not even seven o'clock."

"I'll even the score later."

While she put colorful place mats on the table, her gaze kept straying to him. He was more than competent in the kitchen; he was at home. It frightened her, more than just a little bit, to realize how comfortable she was with him here. "More coffee?" She offered the drink as if having a man in her kitchen at this time of the morning were the most natural thing in the world.

"Black," he said. "Although after tasting the cream on your kiss, I'm tempted to have you put some in mine."

She refilled his mug, then grabbed herself a new one from the cupboard, adding a huge dollop of half-and-half.

He brought two plates to the table, and after she took the first bite, she sighed. The flavors melded on her tongue, complemented by the bite from the jalapeños in the pico de gallo.

"It'll do?" he asked.

"I may be up two to one after this."

"Guess you like my cooking." He grinned.

"Maybe you should be the scientist with those kinds of deductive-reasoning skills."

After breakfast, he said, "Go to work; I'll take care of this."

"Really? You don't want help cleaning the kitchen? What kind of male chauvinist are you?"

"Not a good one. But the idea of having you always ready for sex has a certain appeal."

She laughed and tossed her napkin at him.

"Work," he reminded her. "Unless you don't want to get anything done today. In that case, I'll have you tied to the bed in less than five minutes."

The image he evoked made her tremble. What they'd already done pushed at her boundaries, but it hadn't been frightening. In fact, it had been liberating. But could she trust enough to be completely vulnerable?

"You'd be the perfect man if you agreed to let me go get my soy latte in about an hour."

"Happy to take you anywhere you want," he said. "But you're not going alone."

No matter what, yesterday's break-in loomed insidiously in her mind.

Her landline rang, and she went to answer it while Trace cleared the dishes. When she heard her sister's voice, she said, "I've been offered half the money in the pot if I just cough up your name. I hear there's enough for a nice trip to the Bahamas."

"Won't matter if I kill you. You have to be alive to enjoy the trip."

"That's what I was afraid of." Aimee laughed, but her sister didn't. Her body chilled. "Something's wrong."

"Agent Romero is still there?"

"Of course he is. I don't want to be moved to a safe house," she said.

"Let me talk to him."

"I'm a big girl."

"Get me Romero, Aimee."

He was already walking over to take the phone from her. With a shrug, she gave him the handset and headed for her office and shut the door. Work could always be counted on to restore her equilibrium.

Aware of the deep rumble of his voice down the hall, she opened a spreadsheet and then logged into the program the Hawkeye team had been using and scanned the notes various teammates had made since her last log-in.

There'd been no breakthroughs, but one programmer in Buenos Aires had found another sequence that made the mosquito crash, literally, into a tree. He had attached a video clip, and she laughed and replayed it.

She sent a message that learning what didn't work moved them one step closer to knowing what did. That comment was met by a very quick "yeah, right," from someone in Baton Rouge.

Since her part of the puzzle involved injecting a nanochip into an unsuspecting person, she focused on her piece. She'd learned early on that if she focused on other peoples' work, she never get her own finished.

A message flashed across the bottom of her screen just as she became aware of being surrounded by silence.

Her sister knew. Trace knew. And now she did.

Jason Knoll, a Hawkeye programmer who lived near the small Colorado mountain town of Conifer, had been found dead in his office, and he could have been dead for as long as thirty-six hours. His computer was missing, and he had code written on his hand. She remembered her sister talking about Jason. As a fourteen-year-old, he'd written a game that had been purchased by one of the world's largest producers of video games.

She sat back, stunned.

Trace knocked on her door. Without waiting for an answer, he strode in.

"The break-in wasn't random," she said, still staring at the message.

"No."

He came up behind her; then he gently spun her chair so that she faced him. He caught her by the shoulders and pulled her to her feet.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight, letting her lean on him. He didn't say anything, nothing meaningless or trite. He simply offered his strength. Gratefully, for the first time in her life, she accepted a man's support.

"He was a kid," she said. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat, and she valiantly blinked back the tears swimming in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

Emotions crashed into her, swamping her. "He was funny. Would have never harmed anyone."

Trace stroked her hair, cradling her as if she were precious.

For long moments, he said nothing. Memories of the team teasing and brainstorming with Jason flashed through her mind in a random, senseless order. She continued to lean on Trace, to

inhale his scent and draw from his strength. How had he become so important to her, so fast?  
“Did they get any of his work?”

“Yeah.”

She looked up at him, appreciating that he didn't try to lie to her or soften the news. “Then the rest of us will have to work doubly hard to get the project finished.”

“Is your work backed up?”

“I back up remotely every night at midnight.”

“Good. So you can access your work from anywhere?”

“Theoretically.” Grief collided with reality.

“We're moving you.”

She pushed away from him, out of his arms. “Moving me?”

“Wolf Stone, Hawkeye's right-hand man, has a remote place, a ranch really, fully state-of-the-art, in the mountains. Or we can go to my place.”

Annoyance warred with the fact she should have seen this coming. “You're moving every person who works for Hawkeye? There are dozens of us working on this project. You can't keep everyone safe. Think about it.”

“No one but you matters to me.”

She didn't want to leave her home.

“We can do this—”

“Your way,” she interrupted. “Your way or your way, right?”

He folded his arms in that implacable way she recognized and hated. Her lover was gone; the man who'd prepared breakfast and offered to wash the dishes had vanished as if he'd never existed. In his place was the hardened operative, a man who would give her no choice about anything once he'd made a decision.

“You've got ten minutes,” he said. “I'd prefer you get ready in five.”

“What about Eureka?”

“Can one of your neighbors—”

“Don't even go there, Agent. If I go, so does he.”

“It's not practical to haul a parrot—”

“Were you not listening?”

He sighed. “You've got nine minutes.” Without another word, he left the room.

She sank into her office chair. She resisted her immediate impulse to drop her head onto the desk. Aimee rarely allowed herself to feel self-pity. She learned early that crying didn't solve her problems; she just ended up with a headache on top of everything else.

With a resigned sigh, she pulled back her shoulders and forced herself to focus. He'd already had his gun in place, his watch strapped to his wrist. He was all business. If Trace said she had nine minutes, he meant it.

The front door slammed, and she checked her watch. Eight minutes.

She ignored the messages from her colleagues who were speculating about Jason's death. Instead she powered down her computer and gathered her notes, before hurrying into the master bathroom to throw toiletries into a travel bag.

The clothes Trace had worn yesterday were in the hamper alongside hers. It hadn't taken long for him to dominate almost every area of her life. As much as it chafed, she also realized she appreciated it. Dealing with Jason's death would be more difficult if she were alone.

She heard the sound of a truck being started, and she grabbed a suitcase from the closet. *Focus.*

She scooped a handful of lingerie from her bottom drawer, then tossed in socks. Packing workout clothes was probably ridiculous, but she needed the feeling of some control, and she decided she wasn't going anywhere without them. After tossing in jeans, T-shirts, and a couple of sweatshirts, she shoved down on the contents so that she could zip the piece of luggage.

She heard the front door close again, and the truck still sounded like it was running.

Trace joined her a few seconds later, grabbing his duffel from the floor and tossing it on the bed. “Close?”

“Yeah. Not sure I thought of everything.”

He looked at her pointedly. “Toys?”

She blinked. “You're serious?” When he didn't answer, she realized he was totally serious. She opened her nightstand drawer. She felt the heat of embarrassment crawl into her face, even

though she knew that was ridiculous. Surely she didn't have any secrets left from him. "There's no room in my suitcase."

He unzipped his bag again, and he had a wicked, toe-curling smile on his face. "I'd prefer to have them in my possession, anyway."

She tossed clamps and a plug, along with some lube, into his waiting duffel.

"Good girl."

His approval didn't matter. It shouldn't matter. She looked up, and he was studying her intently.

They were separated by only inches. She'd always been able to keep work and play separated, but with Trace, she was constantly aware and always hungry. The power of his presence intoxicated her, even as it frustrated her.

"I'll get your computer. You grab the bird. If the house isn't stocked with food, we can always eat him."

"Not funny."

"Who was joking?"

As she headed into the kitchen, she realized he'd done it again, kept her off balance, made her forget she was scared, made her forget she was angry with him.

"Want to go for a ride?" she asked Eureka.

"Ride."

She hadn't had him in a vehicle since the day she'd brought him home, and she really wasn't sure how well he'd do. "Say good night, Eureka," she said before covering his cage. She tossed some fresh fruit into a bag and then carried both into the living room. Trace had already put their luggage near the door.

She was reaching for the doorknob when he entered the room with her computer and said, "Wait for me."

"Aren't you being overly cautious?"

"This is your ass we're talking about," he said. "And I've become partial to it."

She noticed his GLOCK was in a shoulder holster. He put down her computer, then opened the door.



A woman wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt, what Aimee now thought of as the Hawkeye uniform, stood on her porch.

"Bree Mallory," he said by way of introduction. "Aimee Inamorata."

"A pleasure, ma'am," Mallory said. "I've met your sister."

"You can cross off Donna, Ruth, and Julie," Trace said.

"Oh, and I'll give you Jennifer, Susan, and let's see, Elizabeth," Aimee added.

"Thanks for that." Mallory grinned, and Aimee liked the chink in the formal armor. The operative then grabbed the luggage and headed to the vehicle with it.

Aimee noticed that the back door of the SUV was already standing open, and so was the passenger door. "Always thinking ahead,"

"Always." Trace reached for the birdcage. Eureka growled like a dog. "On second thought, you take the loro," Trace said to her. "Flying feathered..."

With Mallory standing guard, Aimee loaded Eureka into the vehicle, putting the cage on the floor behind the passenger seat. Mallory kept her body positioned so that Aimee was never left exposed. That anyone felt that step was necessary sent a cold chill down her spine.

In less than sixty seconds, everything had been loaded into the SUV, Mallory had slammed the doors shut and they were on the road, a truck in front of them, a massive white Suburban behind them.

"I'm freaking out a little," she admitted as he rolled through a four-way stop without slowing down.

He looked over at her. "A little I can deal with. A little will keep you sharp. Just don't make it a lot, *sí*?"

She laughed. "Are you always calm?"

"Not when I've got you bent over."

"How can you think of sex at a time like this?"

"*Pericita*, with you, I rarely think of anything else."

And besides, she was now thinking of something other than the danger. She was getting moist, just from his words and the way he glanced at her.

"Where are we going?"

“I promised you a soy latte, I believe.”

Her mouth fell open. Could he be any more complicated? “You're going to get me a latte?”

“Not at your usual shop, but yes. I always keep my promises, Aimee. I want you to know that.”

## Chapter Seven

Trace Romero, trusted army guy, loyal Hawkeye operative, mission commander, had lost his mind. First he allowed Aimee to bring the loco bird with them; now he was stopping at a coffee shop. Others might accuse him of thinking with his little head rather than the big one. And they'd be right.

No one went deep with a parrot in tow, and they sure as sunshine on a stick didn't stop at a coffee shop on the way underground.

When he'd told Mallory, Daniel Riley, and the rest of the team that they were making a stop en route, they'd looked at him like he was the one who'd suddenly gone crazy.

Mallory had opened her mouth to argue, but when he'd turned his gaze directly on her, she'd shut up and nodded. She'd turned to the rest of the guys, three other men, and said, "We'll make it work."

They'd formulated a plan, and the smile of thanks Aimee had given him made everything worthwhile.

The very fact she had stayed calm when she might have panicked after learning of Jason Knoll's death, the fact she hadn't resorted to tears to manipulate him to stay at her house made him want to give her the world. He'd said she had ten minutes to get her life packed up, and she'd done it.

This woman, with her responsive ways, her sexy submission, and her crackling intelligence, had gotten under his defenses. For the first time in his life, he didn't object. Last night, she had boldly asked for what she wanted sexually, and she shot every bit as straight as the world's most finely crafted weapon. She might be a bit shy, but that she pushed past her inhibitions was intoxicating, every bit as much as his favorite bottle of mescal.

He intended to keep her safe and by his side for a very long time. He didn't wonder when he'd made his decision. He didn't wonder about the personality change deep inside. He wanted

Aimee in his life, and he sure as fuck intended to be the only man she had sex with from now on. The rest, he'd figure out.

He parallel parked directly in front of the coffeehouse door, even though head-in parking was specified.

Mallory jumped out of the vehicle that parked behind him, and she was at Aimee's door in seconds.

"You want anything?" Aimee asked.

"Your ass back in that seat in under four minutes."

"Do you always have to be so bossy?" She sighed. "Wait, never mind. Don't answer that. Turns out it was a rhetorical question."

He grinned at her. The moment the door closed, Eureka growled. "I'll take care of her," he told the bird. "You, I'm not so sure about."

He took the break to adjust his cock in his pants. Having her so close kept him hard. He could fuck her three times a day and have energy to spare.

For a few seconds, he thought about the idea of having her all to himself, somewhere remote, somewhere out of danger, so he could focus purely on her and pushing her to the edge of her endurance.

The longer he thought about it, the more he liked it.

Danger had always been an aphrodisiac, but suddenly the thought of teaching her, disciplining her, at his leisure, held more appeal.

As he'd ordered, she was back in under four minutes. "Three minutes, fifty-seven seconds. You're getting better at this submissive gig," he said.

"You'll need some sustenance to keep up your dictatorial ways. Here."

"Nah. I can do that in my sleep. Using manners, that's what takes energy."

She offered him the small bag. "Lemon pound cake. Mallory said you have a weakness for it. She doesn't miss a trick."

"Just the icing," he said, sliding into traffic but nevertheless reaching into the bag to break off a piece of the pastry. "Thanks."

"Wouldn't have figured you for a sweet-tooth kind of guy."

“I’ll take a bite out of anything that appeals to me.”

“I’m wondering something.”

He accelerated, nosing the speedometer just past the speed limit as he headed for the interstate.

“What would you do if I took a bite out of you? Here. Now.”

“Want to find out?”

“I think I’m more of a scaredy-cat than I want to admit.” She sat back and took an appreciative sip from her coffee. “Thank you for stopping.”

“Thank you for not being a pain in the ass.”

“You are such a romantic, and you have such a way with words. I bet you make all the women swoon.” She stretched out her legs and crossed them at the ankle. “But I can forgive a lot with a cup of coffee in my hand.”

Despite what he said, when he was working, he took his job seriously. Sex came second to everything else. Nothing mattered more than keeping Aimee Inamorata safe. It had nothing to do with her sister at this point, and everything to do with Aimee herself. But with her legs stretched out like that, he couldn’t help the carnal thoughts. He wanted to see them spread as she was bent over, wanted them over his shoulders as he buried his face in her sweet cunt, wanted them wrapped around his waist, her heels in his back as she urged him to penetrate her deeper and deeper.

She made him want to be nasty.

“How does your ass feel this morning?”

She looked at him over the top of her cup. “My ass? Like my butt cheeks from that vicious spanking?”

“Vicious, was it?”

“Horrible.”

“And you’re hoping I do it again soon?”

“There is that.”

“But I was asking if you’re ready to have my cock up your ass.”

“Oh.” She choked on her coffee. “Yes.”

He'd tried to prepare her to accommodate him, but not in a way that left her too uncomfortable to enjoy what he was planning for later. "Not too sore?"

"Honestly?"

"I never want less than complete honesty from you, *novia*."

"This whole thing with Jason's death is bothering me."

There was something different in her voice, a combination of wistfulness, and forcefulness that blended together in a way that gave her tone a sexy, husky quality. He waited for her to sift through her thoughts. He had plenty of practice waiting. He dealt with all kinds of reactions to traumatic situations, and he'd been in more than his share. Some people went into shock. Others lost their nerve, walking away or asking for reassignment. Some men went gunning for revenge. Plenty cried, raging at injustice. But everyone dealt in their own way.

He admired the way she held herself together, but he wouldn't have blamed her if she hadn't.

"My work, the work we're all doing at Hawkeye, is important. That someone is willing to kill to get it stuns me, sickens me, pisses me off. But it shouldn't really be surprising." She paused, and drew in a shaky breath. More than anything, that betrayed what she was really feeling. "I'm sure there's a team trying to figure out how someone learned about the project, and I'm sure my sister isn't sleeping more than a few hours a night, if at all." Her fingers curled tightly into the paper cup; it was a wonder it didn't crumple. "I have no doubt everyone is being protected so we can get the work finished."

She stared straight out the windshield, apparently not seeming to notice they'd left the city behind and that the breathtaking vista of the Continental Divide loomed in front of them with its snow-dusted top.

While keeping a vigilant eye on his beautiful passenger, his submissive, the woman he intended to care for, he shifted to the left lane to pass a slow-moving semi. Mallory and her driver followed.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. Then, still in that unblinking trance, she kept gazing into the distance. "I've made a lot of choices in my life. I've never regretted them, never questioned them...until now."

"And now?"

“I want to explore more.”

He waited.

She looked over at him. Her mouth was set in a line. There were daggers of determination etched into her blue eyes. When she spoke, there was no room for argument in her tone. “So yes, I’m ready to have you tie me up, tie me down, and fuck me hard—including my ass.” She put her drink in the cup holder. Then she unfastened her seat belt and climbed onto the passenger seat backward. “And I want to know the answer to my question.”

He glanced over at her before forcing his gaze back to the road. This stretch of I-70 wasn’t as dicey as some, but it always demanded respect.

“What will you do if I take a big bite out of you, here, now?”

Bracing herself, one hand curved around the headrest, she shocked him by leaning across the distance.

She licked his earlobe.

He bit off a curse. Then Eureka added his own sounds effects.

Then she nibbled his earlobe.

“Woman.”

“Just curious,” she said, “about this...”

She sank her teeth into his shoulder. The pain rocketed through him, almost immediately replaced by white-hot heat. He kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel and fought for focus.

She then gave him a quick kiss on the side of the neck before getting herself situated and her safety belt refastened.

“You might not want to live quite so dangerously,” he warned.

“And if I do? What if I want to live dangerously?”

When had she gotten so bold? Dios. He needed strength.

“What if I want you to punish me?” she asked.

He shot her a glance. She was looking at him. Her mouth was slightly parted, and her eyes were a shade lighter than normal, dancing with devilment. But there was something else layered with the devilment, a desperation, a hunger to be taken. He knew what she wanted. She wanted

to feel alive. She might feel like she'd cheated the reaper, and she wanted to throw it in death's face. Surely she knew she was pushing him. Did she want to know it was safe to test him? Did she need to know she was safe with him? Did she need to explore the boundaries of how far she could go? "You will get what you are asking for, Aimee."

"And if I beg for it?"

Oh she knew all right; no doubt. She was pushing him harder, testing his limits. Once they got out of this situation, there'd be nothing he didn't show her. "Aimee..." His nostrils were flared from lack of air, and that wasn't because of the lack of oxygen at altitude. It was because his body had diverted blood from his brain to other parts.

"And if I beg for it, while I'm in front of you, on my knees...?"

"Woman..."

"If I do all that, will you take me over your knee and spank me? Will you make me scream your name?"

He lifted his hips to adjust his jeans.

She grinned. "I'll take that as a yes."

He'd give her everything she was asking for, everything she wanted, craved, hungered for. And then he'd give her more. "Take it as a yes."

\* \* \* \*

She meant what she said to Trace, and she meant every word.

Jason's death had galvanized her. It hit her in a completely different way than her parents' deaths had. That loss had taught her how to be self-sufficient and how to look out for herself.

Now this...

She'd never been much of a risk taker. A hard worker, someone who was willing to push herself to achieve more and more, definitely, but she never ventured too far from safety. Even the men she'd been with had been safe. Boring and safe. And what had it gotten her? Being alone, not fulfilling her deepest fantasies.

The lesson she'd learned today was, *carpe diem*.

And she wanted to *carpe* the hell out of Trace Romero's *diem*.



He kept asking her to trust him. So what if she did? If she didn't, she knew the end result. He'd walk away in a few days, as soon as this situation was resolved, and she'd never see him again. But if she seized the opportunity, at least she'd have memories to keep her warm during the long Colorado winter nights. And who knew? One risk might lead to another.

"You're quiet," he said.

"Thinking about having your cock up my ass." She grinned when she saw his fingers tighten on the steering wheel. "I bet it will hurt at first."

"I'm sure it will."

He wasn't unaffected. She knew that from the way a small muscle ticked in his temple. "But I bet I'll get used to it."

"I'm sure you will," he agreed again.

"In that case, I bet I'll beg you to fuck me even harder."

"Count on it."

"And then—"

"Hello? Sub? Dom?"

"I know you're the Dom," she said, reaching for her coffee again. "Wouldn't forget it, even for a minute. By the way, thanks again for stopping for the latte."

She could look at him all day long. He kept his hair military short and brushed back from his forehead. His nose was a bit off center, as if he'd had it broken once or twice. It didn't detract from his looks at all. In fact, it made him look stronger, more compelling. He was a man accustomed to being in the thick of things. If something bad happened, she knew she could count on him. "Did I mention that I didn't put on panties when I got dressed this morning?"

His curse was uniquely him, a mix of English and Spanish, rich with the accent of his native tongue, clipped by his frustration. "I'll pull off at the next exit," he said, "and spank your ass, with God and half of Hawkeye watching."

She blinked.

"Want to try me?"

Part of her did. That small, naughty part of her was shocking. Who was she?

"Aimee?"

“Honestly? I don't know.” But her heart was beating a little faster than it had been.

“You're an exhibitionist?”

“No! Well, not that I know of.”

“You'd want to try it?”

“I'm...”

“You're open to it?” he asked.

“I'm not sure.”

“We'll keep that on the maybe list,” he said. “The maybe list had an opening since anal sex and spanking moved to the definitely list.”

This time, she squirmed.

“Maybe Mallory would like to watch you get a bare-bottomed spanking?”

She tried to speak and couldn't form anything that didn't sound like a strangled cry. Despite her newfound “carpe diemness,” there were things he would mention that might still make her nervous. Then again, her first spanking had been terrifying but thrilling too. She'd masturbated after reading spanking stories, but the reality of having her naked body across his jean-clad lap had made her fantasies seem like an old, black-and-white, reel-to-reel movie. Having his callused hand on her bare, exposed body seemed like 3-D in contrast.

He turned off the highway, and in the wing mirror, she noticed two other vehicles follow them. “Where are we going?”

“You never answered when I asked if you preferred my place or a Hawkeye property, so I made the decision for you.”

“Shocking that you'd make a decision for me.” But she said it without hostility. He had asked for her input, and at the time she'd been incapable of processing information, never mind making a decision.

“I decided on my place.”

“Your place?”

“Not mine, technically. My family's,” he corrected. “It's small, more of a cabin than a house. We use it for hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, getting away. It's not grand, no television, but it's remote and private, I know the area, and it has electricity along with running

water. It has two small bedrooms, one bathroom, and the kitchen, dining area, and living room are one open space. You should be able to work since we have cell service out there. If not, I imagine we'll find something to do so that you won't get bored."

"I do need to work on the project. And as long as you have cell service, my wireless card will get me into the network. I think all of Hawkeye plans ahead."

"We rented another cabin in the area, so the operatives can be close, and so that we can limit the number of people legitimately in the area. There's already food in the refrigerator, brought up from Denver so the locals in the nearby town won't be aware that we're there."

She shook her head.

"Along with an espresso maker."

"You're making me happy."

"And soy milk."

He really *was* the perfect man.

He turned off the pavement onto a dirt road. Eureka squawked.

"Sorry, guy," she told him. "Has to be a rough trip in a cage."

"We could always let him go. Lots of trees and friends around for him... I'm sure he'd be happy here."

"You really hold a grudge."

"Hey! That was my favorite T-shirt."

"I washed it," she said. "Good as new." Well, almost. With everything going on, she'd forgotten it in the washing machine.

"He can apologize anytime."

She shook her head. About twenty minutes later, the sun was blazing down in typical Colorado fashion. There were only a few high clouds in the sky, nothing to break up the shimmering heat. The highest of the distant mountain peaks were still dusted with snow, and if it weren't for the danger, she would be captivated by the scenery. He pulled off the bumpy road and slowed even more as he turned into what appeared to be a barely maintained driveway.

"Aimee! Aimee!"

"Almost there," she told the bird.

She was gritting her teeth by the time the small cabin came into view. It was rustic, as he'd warned, and it appeared to have been constructed from hand-hewn logs. What he hadn't said was how charming it was. Trees surrounded the small home, and a bright red hummingbird feeder hung from a pole. She noticed the numbers next to the front door were painted on colorful Mexican tiles. A small grotto accented with wildflowers, including columbines, stood to the right of the home. A statue of the Virgin Mary was on the rock, her hands spread as if in welcome.

He turned off the vehicle's engine but left the keys in the ignition. "Stay in the truck," he told her, "until one of us comes for you."

She nodded and released the latch to the safety belt. He reached into the back, and Eureka growled again.

"Who the hell taught him to do that?"

"His previous owners had a poodle that thought he owned the world. He terrorized their Rottweiler."

"No one could have taught it to say thanks? Maybe to purr? Or being wild here, to act like a bird?"

"Trace?" Turning to face him in the fading daylight, she ran a finger down his jawline. "Since you're the Dom, and I'm just a sub..."

"Why do I feel like I'm being set up?"

"Can you give me suggestions on how to shut you up? You know, respectfully...? I'm just asking because you can just shove your cock in my mouth to make me be quiet. And since you're the Dom, you can do it anytime you want." Boldly she grabbed his cock and gave it a squeeze, mindless of the other people around, maybe partially because the other people *were* around.

"For future reference, that'll work." He closed his hand over hers. "Stay here," he repeated before getting out of the car.

She would definitely do that again, she decided. She liked how responsive he was. The thought that she might have some power over him intoxicated her.

"Get up. Get up," Eureka said.

"Five minutes," she told him.

The three male Hawkeye agents went around the back of the cabin in opposite directions before heading into the woods. Trace went inside while Mallory stayed on the porch. That five people were charged with keeping her and her piece of the project safe was sobering.

Within thirty seconds, Aimee saw Mallory flash a thumbs-up. Thank goodness. Eureka wasn't the only one tired of the trip. She needed to stretch her legs, and food would be good too. The operative jogged over to the vehicle. Aimee opened her door while Mallory opened the back. "I'd like to get you inside as quickly as possible."

Mallory stayed close as Aimee grabbed the birdcage.

"I'll get everything else," the other woman said, staying behind Aimee, making sure she wasn't exposed.

She carried Eureka inside, aware of Mallory behind her every step. "Where do you want me to put him?" she asked Trace. "And don't even dare consider saying the first thing that came to mind."

Mallory laughed, then turned her laugh into a polite cough and headed back outside.

He grinned.

For a few brief seconds, he appeared younger, more carefree. She wondered how things might have turned out if they'd met under different circumstances. Would they have even been attracted to one another? Or would it have been just as incendiary? Would it have been as intense without the element of threat? Or would it have been even better because they had time to explore each other?

"The bookcase," he said, coming over to clear games and magazines from the top. "I'll be back in less than fifteen minutes, twenty, tops," he said.

Mallory brought in the rest of the luggage. "All of it in one bedroom?" she asked Trace.

He and Aimee exchanged a glance.

"One bedroom," he said.

So he didn't care who knew they were sleeping together. Absently she wondered if Hawkeye headquarters had posted a side bet about how long it would be before they were sleeping together.

"Please stay inside," he said.

She nodded.

Trace set up her notebook computer on the kitchen table and grabbed an extension cord from a drawer.

She uncovered the cage, and Eureka said, "Good morning, Aimee."

"I'm afraid your schedule is really off."

"His schedule isn't the only thing about him that's off," Trace said on his way out the door.

She refilled Eureka's water and cut up some fruit, but she left him in the cage, giving him time to adapt to the surroundings. As she powered up her computer, she was very much aware of the murmur of voices outside, with Trace's being the dominant one.

He was right about his family's cabin not being grand, but he hadn't mentioned that it was cozy. Even though there was a deer head mounted on one wall, and some sort of fur on the floor in front of the wood-burning fireplace, there were plenty of female touches, from the dried flowers in a brass water pitcher to the bright serape thrown over the arm of the couch. A colorful bowl sat on the kitchen counter, and a few family photos hung on one wall, between the door and a picture window. Some of the shots looked as if they'd hung from their places of honor for years, and the frames were mainly wooden, in bright primary colors, although a couple were constructed from hammered tin.

She wandered over for a closer look.

One appeared somewhat recent and had been taken outside the cabin. Trace stood next to an older couple. Maybe his parents? The man's arm was across the woman's shoulder, and they were both smiling. Trace had his arm around the shoulder of another woman, who was trying to juggle a small child on her hip.

"Three generations," Trace said, coming in. "My parents, my sister, and her oldest, Ricardo."

"Oldest?"

"She has another on the way, thanks be to God. Keeps Madre busy so she doesn't focus on my failure to provide her with a grandchild."

"You spend a lot of time with your parents?"

"As much as I can. Mi madre, I think she'd like you. She likes independent women."

She grinned. But before she could continue the conversation, he grabbed her. He slammed the front door shut, locked it, and had her arms above her head, his body pinning hers, before she could draw a breath.

He kept her imprisoned with one hand and with the power of his gaze. "You played with fire, baby girl, telling me you weren't wearing any panties..."

Now she couldn't breathe, didn't want to.

The man was masterful, and she wanted to be taken by him.

Keeping her gaze captive, he unfastened her jeans, working the zipper with impatience until its teeth surrendered the same way she did.

He dragged the material down past her thighs, and she wiggled until they fell to the floor. She did a little dance to toe her shoes off; then she kicked her pants aside.

He grabbed a condom from his pocket. "Hold this with your teeth," he told her.

She dutifully opened her mouth and held the package with her teeth.

As he lowered his jeans, she realized how turned on he was, how hard his cock was. His breathing was as shallow as hers. "You asked how to shut me up," he said. "Fucking you ragged always short-circuits my brain."

She continued to hold the condom steady with her teeth, and he used that as leverage to rip open the package.

"Do you feel how hard I am for your sweet cunt?"

Her knees weakened.

"I want my cock in your pussy."

Since she couldn't speak, she nodded.

Somehow he managed to unroll the condom on his shaft, and then he took the packet from her teeth and dropped the empty wrapper on the floor. "Are you wet?" But he didn't wait for an answer; instead he reached his free hand between her legs. "You are," he said approvingly. "Very wet."

He gently pinched her clit, and she could have exploded right there.

"Very wet," he repeated.

She was grateful that he was strong enough to support her entire weight.

He nudged her pussy with his cockhead.

“Where do you want me?”

“Inside me,” she managed, drowning in his eyes.

“Where? Where do you want me?”

“My pussy,” she said. “I want you in my pussy.”

He entered her about an inch, and then he pulled back again.

“Please,” she said.

“Where do you want me?” he asked a final time.

Softly she said, “My cunt.”

He smiled. “Open your mouth.”

She felt dizzy.

“I always want your mouth open,” he said.

She parted her lips slightly, and he slid his tongue inside her mouth at the same moment he bent his knees so he could thrust upward, entering her pussy with a single, powerful stroke.

Thoroughly dominated by him, she came instantly.

He continued to move his hips and simultaneously ravage her mouth.

This was so base. Both of them were still mostly dressed. Daylight radiated through the windows as they had raw sex spiced by danger with no promise of tomorrow.

She came a second time, her cry swallowed by his relentless kiss. She was still riding her own orgasm when she felt his cock harden even more.

He took two more long, powerful strokes, driving deep into her, burying himself before finally climaxing.

Her body shook and trembled. “Yes,” she whispered when he ended the kiss. “I liked that,” she confessed.

“Good.” He dug his hand into her hair, keeping her head imprisoned as they looked at each other.

She could get lost in the rich depths of his eyes. God help her, she had it for him, bad. She might be seizing the moment, but she didn't want the moment to end.



“Later,” he said, “I’m going to do it to your ass.”

## Chapter Eight

With other women, other subs, he'd had some restraint. With her...none. He wanted her. He wanted her again and again, from the front, from behind. He wanted to be in her mouth, wanted his tongue on her pussy. He wanted her bent over, tied up, outside, pinned to a tree. He couldn't get enough.

He had a job to do, and he wasn't besotted enough to ignore it or the danger. He'd keep her safe, no matter what.

But damn, thoughts of her were never far from his mind. And where his thoughts went, his libido followed.

He turned a knife on its side to smash a clove of garlic; then he glanced over his shoulder at her.

She hadn't left the kitchen table in a couple of hours. Daylight had faded, and he'd turned on a lamp; she hadn't acknowledged him or the fact it had been getting dark.

She sipped on a glass of water, and occasionally she shifted positions. Once he saw her with her bare feet pulled up onto the chair as she leaned forward. She was flexible, but he'd already found that out, and he definitely appreciated how limber she was.

Several times she'd muttered, and at first, he thought she might be talking to him, but she actually seemed to have no idea he was within a hundred miles. He caught her nibbling her lower lip, and a few times he'd seen her with a pencil behind her ear. She was focused on what she did, and even her damn loro was being quiet for a change.

He'd spent the majority of the afternoon outside with the other Hawkeye operatives, checking out the rented cabin, establishing a perimeter, assigning duties and responsibilities, making sure Riley got some rest. He'd been on duty all night. In typical Riley fashion, he'd volunteered for the extra duty, but Trace wanted the man fresh.

Chances were good nothing would happen. No one had harmed her when they had the opportunity yesterday. But Hawkeye, Inc. wasn't the best in the world by leaving anything to chance. Until the person who'd killed Jason was in custody—or dead, Trace's personal choice—Aimee Inamorata was his responsibility. He'd never lost a client, and he'd see someone in hell before losing her.

When he'd returned to the cabin, she hadn't even seemed to notice. He'd slipped his radio onto the counter and hung up his jacket before she even noticed he was there.

He growled protectively. The woman needed someone to watch over her, as oblivious as she was to the world.

He'd started cooking, and she'd only glanced over her shoulder once. She'd smiled, and the slight intimacy had caught him off guard. The fact she didn't comment on his gun was a step in the right direction as well.

Trace threw himself into slicing and dicing, needing to do something to burn off some energy. He sautéed onions and artichokes in some olive oil. As a finishing touch, he added in some garlic. Ingredients had to be tossed in the pan in the correct order, well, in his mind anyway. The truth was, it probably didn't matter. By the time he added enough cream and cheese, anything tasted pretty good. He turned on a burner beneath a pan of water and uncorked a bottle of Chianti. Getting closer.

“Bingo,” she said.

“Bingo?”

She blew out a breath and tipped back her head. That exposed her neck, and if he didn't have one hand wrapped around a skillet, he might have been tempted to cross the room and lick the column of her throat.

“That might have done it. Only one way to find out.”

“How's that?” He gently shook the pan, not only so the garlic didn't burn, but he needed the distraction. It had been what, two, maybe three hours since he'd had her against the door.

“I'm going to upload my code to the project coordinator so they can run it in the field.”

“What have you been working on?”

“Debugging... Remember I told you about the mosquito and the chip? My piece of the puzzle is the code that makes the actual stinger penetrate the skin, so the chip can be injected. Sometimes the stinger was jamming, and there didn't seem to be a reason for it.”

“But you might have solved the problem?”

“They'll probably run it all night to see if it fails. It's always possible, more than possible, that I solved one problem, but more may exist.”

“The scope of it seems unbelievable.”

“It is. Even I can't believe it. I really didn't think I had the skill set to work on this, and without other people to bounce ideas off, I probably wouldn't have. Jason, he was one of the best.”

He heard her voice choke up, but she continued. “He was a prodigy, hacking into computers before he was ten, and not always for altruistic purposes. By fourteen, he was writing games. He had one of those unique minds. He's a big loss to the world, not just to Hawkeye.” She pushed her chair back from the table, and her bird squawked.

“There are dozens of us working on various pieces of the project; not everyone works at the same time. Most of us have other things we're also developing. Like I mentioned last night, some are hardware people, since we had to fabricate the individual parts and make them all work together.”

She gave Eureka another piece of fruit. He ate more often than they did. “Something smells good”—she crossed the room, came up behind him, and slid her arms around his waist—“and I'm not talking about dinner.” She slipped her hand down the back of his pants and squeezed his butt cheek. “I'm a little sore, but I want you again.”

He could get used to this. She was good company, a quick study, and she matched his voracious sexual appetite.

“How hungry are you?” she asked.

“Wanted to make sure you kept up your energy.”

“Will dinner be ruined if you finish cooking it later?”

In way of answer, he switched off the burners. He turned the tables on her, capturing her by the waist and swinging her onto the countertop. She squealed and ended up laughing; the bird freaked out, calling, "Bombs away!"

Half-panicked, he glanced over, but the bird was still confined to his cage. Not a bad place for him to be all the time, in Trace's opinion. "Put your legs around my waist."

She did, and he jostled her from the counter and completely into his arms.

"You can't carry me!"

"Yeah?"

She grabbed his shoulders, still laughing as he walked toward the bedroom. He tipped her unceremoniously onto the mattress, and she scrambled to her knees, facing him. She crawled toward him, reaching for his fly. "Dom? Sub? New concept for you, I know."

His implied threat did nothing to frighten her or put her in her submissive place. She even had the nerve to look up at him as she unbuttoned him and slid down the zipper.

"Just doing what you want, Master," she said saucily, "anticipating your orders, your needs. Just trying to be a very good sub."

Any better, she'd be the death of him. "Get off the bed."

She froze. She'd heard the change in his tone, and she respected it. Impossibly, his cock got even harder.

She dropped her hands and moved about until she stood on the floor near him.

"Strip."

She glanced up at him before quickly looking away again. He noticed that her hands shook as she pulled her shirt over her head.

Next came her jeans. She hadn't put shoes after they'd had sex earlier. Saved him some time. "On your knees," he told her as he finished undressing. "Now suck my cock." Cum already leaked from the slit, and she licked it off.

She cupped his balls with one hand, and she closed the other around his shaft, squeezing firmly. Yeah, definitely a quick study. It'd take her about twenty seconds to send him from where he was into an orgasm. Shouldn't be possible, he told himself, not after all the ejaculations he'd had in the last two days. He put a hand in her hair and drew her back. "Bend over the bed."

He helped her up and moved her into the position he wanted her, with her body wide open, exposed to him, for him. He left her long enough to find the lube. He'd taken her toys at her house, and he grabbed the nipple clamps in his bag. He held them up in front of her.

“Uhm...”

He recognized her tone, and it excited him. Her voice betrayed anticipation wrapped in nerves. She might want to panic, but she was resolved to trust him instead. Intoxicating stuff, trust. Better than the abandoned Chianti. “Play with your nipples,” he said. “Make them hard.”

“I'm feeling a little embarrassed,” she admitted.

*And more than a little aroused*, he wanted to say in return. He could smell her from here. Every time he pushed her boundaries and she obeyed, he fell a little deeper for her.

He opened one of the clover clamps and tested its bite on his pinkie. Nasty little thing. He smiled.

He took his time getting the bottle of lube. He liked watching her squirm and writhe on the bed as she followed his orders. Her hips swayed enticingly. She might be embarrassed, but she put that aside to give him the show he wanted. “Keep it up,” he told her.

Her torso was pressed into the bedcovers, and he moved in beside her. He maneuvered his hand beneath her to squeeze her right breast.

She made a gentle mewling sound, but she didn't protest. In fact, she moved just a bit so he could have better access to her body. He pinched her nipple and kept tightening the grip until she gasped. Her breaths were ragged little bursts, and he imagined the pain ricocheted through her.

He released her pebble-hard nipple; then, when she inhaled sharply, he affixed the first clamp.

“Crap!”

“Does that hurt?”

“It's awful!”

He reached between her legs and found her wetter than before. “Uh-huh.”

“Trace, please...”

He slid a finger through her slick folds. She pushed back against him. “Please, what?”

“I'm turned on!”

“That was the idea,” he said. He reached beneath her to plump her other breast and torment her nipple mercilessly. She squirmed, but she never tried to escape. “You’re a perfect submissive, Aimee.” He clamped the other nipple, and she yelped.

“I’ve never been so turned on,” she said, dragging in air.

He tugged gently on the chain that connected the clamps.

“Damn it!”

“You may not come,” he told her.

“Trace! I... Please...”

He pulled on the chain again. “I want you to keep still.”

She inhaled sharply several times, obviously fighting for self-control. Educating her in his evil ways was its own reward.

She was completely hot for him, and she fought each of her own impulses in order to give him what he wanted. He could keep her like this forever.

He drew some of her moisture backward and pushed a finger against her rear entrance. She swayed, but she didn’t try to break out of position. In fact, she moaned in encouragement. “More?” he asked.

“More. Please.”

He inserted his finger the rest of the way, and she exhaled softly. He gently finger fucked her ass, stretching her with each small thrust.

“More,” she whispered again.

He withdrew his finger, then flipped open the top to the lubricant. He squirted a huge dollop into his left palm before discarding the bottle. “I want you to talk to me,” he said. “Tell me what you’re feeling, if it’s too much. I won’t stop, not unless you use your safe word. But like I told you, it’s my intention that you never have the need for it.”

“Trace...? Master...? Shut up and fuck me already.”

He slapped her ass, halfheartedly, but the action obviously caused her clamped tits to rub against the mattress, and she squirmed.

He sheathed his cock in a condom and lubed his finger. He wiped his hands on some nearby tissues. “I love seeing your entire cunt and ass exposed like this,” he said. “I love the fact

your pussy is already dripping.” He played with her clit before inserting his finger in her ass again.

When he drew it out, he added a second and slipped them in together. She pushed back against him the way he'd instructed her.

“It is harder,” she said.

He bent so he could lick her pussy. She moaned and shifted, opening herself more. “So beautiful,” he told her.

He stroked, licked, and finger fucked until she was on her tiptoes, with her fingers digging into the bedsheets. She was panting his name, or some blend of Trace and Master that made it one word.

He placed his cock against the entrance of her ass. “Keep breathing,” he told her. “Bear down like you're trying to push me out.”

“Ow!”

He kept moving forward slowly, but when she said, “Hurts!” he pulled back and then thrust forward slowly.

Eureka shrieked.

He wondered if they made miniature bird gags.

Trace worked it, and her, using all his restraint. He wanted to be buried deep, wanted to fuck her with all the intensity that clawed at him.

“Bromine,” she whispered. He recognized her technique to distract herself. That she was trying so hard to please him made his pulse pound.

She could use her safe word at any time, but she hadn't.

“Almost there,” he promised her, burying himself a bit deeper with each motion.

“Where? Hell? Have I been really, really bad?”

“Oh yeah,” he told her, leaning over to whisper in her ear. “Really, really, really bad. So bad you're good.” He reached beneath her and gave the chain a brutal tug, and at the same time she arched and cried out, he sank his cock home.

She clawed at the bedding. “Damn it! Damn you!”



“*Bueno*,” he muttered. He gritted his teeth momentarily. He could come in less than three seconds if he weren't careful. “Muy bueno.”

“For one of us!”

“So tight. So hot.” He released the chain he'd tugged on, and instead he stroked her clit, fingered her cunt.

“Trace...”

“*Mi amor?*”

“Please tell me your cock is all the way in.” Her words were shaky. “Please.”

“You're all the way there.” There was a sheen of sweat on her back that showed her struggle. Her pussy wasn't as wet as it had been, and he wanted this to be good for her, really, really good.

He moved inside her, a little at a time, but as he did, rocking back and forth, he kept up the pressure on her pussy, increasing it, decreasing it.

After a few seconds, she began to respond, no longer fighting, and not just cooperating but participating.

“Uhm...”

“Yeah...?”

Since she was facedown, her words were muffled, but he understood her perfectly. “I might like this.”

“You might?”

“I might.”

“How will you know for sure?” He stroked her clit with short, frantic motions. Her hips bucked beneath him; he rode her hard. He tucked an arm beneath her belly, giving her support, tilting her pelvis so he could go even deeper.

“I...”

She shuddered in a way that signaled that her orgasm was gathering. Trace knew he shouldn't feel pride, he should just be happy she was going to get off. But for fuck's sake, he was proud of her, of the way they fit together, of her trust in him. Maybe pride came before the fall, but so be it. He liked being the one to introduce her to BDSM, liked being the one to turn her

over his knee for her first spanking, and he sure as hell liked having his dick up her ass. And he'd better be the last.

"Can I come?" she asked.

She wouldn't be able to stop it if he kept up what he was doing...

"Trace! *I need...* Please!"

Without his permission, she climaxed. He felt the clench of her muscles, smelled her heat. This woman was hot...and *she was his*. He came deep inside her, showing her just how much she belonged to him.

\* \* \* \*

"Duty calls," he said.

Aimee yawned and stretched beside him. "Can't we just stay in bed for the next ten days or so?"

"Much as I'd like to..." He kissed her on the forehead and then climbed from the bed. Aimee gathered the sheet around her. After he'd sexed her up, he'd removed her clamps and held her tight against him while she dozed. But she'd already learned there was no such thing as Trace just drifting off to sleep. No matter how intense the session, he'd still leave her in bed to check things out.

"Besides, dinner awaits."

On cue, her stomach growled.

He laughed. "No, I'm not bringing you dinner in bed."

"Spoilsport."

He went into the bathroom and returned with a damp washcloth to clean her up. She rolled over onto her back and shamelessly spread her legs. He took his time, probably more time than he needed to. "You spoil me."

"Get used to it."

She'd like to, but they both knew this was fleeting. She had her work, he had his. Hawkeye kept him on the move. She was a job. Sexually, even though they connected well, she knew she was just another woman in the line of his subs. Still, she was glad for the experience. She looked at him and dug her hands into his hair, holding him close. This time she kissed him deeply and

demandingly, moving her tongue until he took charge. Then she opened for him, trying to communicate everything she couldn't say with words.

She watched him pull on his jeans and shirt and put socks and shoes back on. That damned gun was never far from sight either. "Do you ever go barefoot?"

"Never when I'm on duty, rarely when I'm off."

Things he took as matter-of-fact never even crossed her mind.

"Twenty minutes," he told her.

She didn't hurry, enjoying the sounds of him moving around the kitchen. Muted light spilled into the room, and the evening held the barest hint of an upcoming fall chill. If she closed her eyes and pretended, as long as he was with her, everything was right with the world.

Savory scents finally roused her. She pulled on her discarded clothes. "Good morning, Aimee!" Eureka said when she came out of the bedroom.

"Poor thing will never get it straight," she said, gathering her computer and books and moving them into the living room.

Trace might have repeated, "Poor thing," mockingly, but since she couldn't be sure, she ignored him.

"Point me in the direction of wineglasses and silverware."

"Wineglasses and plates are in that cupboard." He pointed the tip of a wicked-looking knife toward the corner.

"Do you have a license to use that thing?" she asked.

"What, this?" He tossed the knife in the air, then caught it.

"As much sex as you've had, you'd think your testosterone level wouldn't be quite so high."

"It's all about balance."

*Men.* She poured them each a glass of wine; he left his untouched beside him as he dumped pasta into the boiling water and added a pinch of salt.

She finished setting the table, and he brought over the food. He even generously put a fresh slice of orange in Eureka's cage.

"Tastes like chicken," the bird said, walking across his perch, away from the fruit.

She laughed, even though she tried hard not to. “You really are a talented man,” she said as the tastes of the artichokes and garlic combined with cheese and cream melded on her tongue. “This is the second best thing I’ve had in my mouth today.”

“Aimee,” he warned, his hand pausing midway to his mouth.

“Just sayin’,” she said. Trying to appear innocent, she took another bite of the pasta. “And just wondering when you’re going to tie me up.”

“Insatiable.”

“You’re kind of like Frankenstein’s creator. You thought you knew what you were doing.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing...keeping you wet and horny works well for me.”

No matter what she said, he always had the ability to take it one step further and make her even more turned on.

After dinner, she saw him glance repeatedly at the door. “I’ll do the dishes while you go play secret agent man.”

“That’s generous.”

“Not really. I want you in bed with me. If we work together, that’ll happen faster.”

He put on his holster and slid his GLOCK into it. It was hard to imagine any danger out here in the remoteness of the Rockies. But she knew that’s the kind of man he was, a protector, from a long line of protectors.

She let Eureka out of his cage to explore his new surroundings while she did the dishes. Since she’d had him, he’d never been out of her house, so she wasn’t sure exactly how he’d behave. He perched on top of the cage, not venturing far.

Trace was gone a long time, and she kept glancing at the door. She was contemplating a second glass of wine when he returned. “All quiet on the western front?”

“Everything checks out.”

“But...?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Something...”

“Intuition?”

“Gut,” he said. “Something doesn’t add up. But I don’t know what.”

She leaned her backside against the sink. She hadn't seen him like this before. A frown furrowed his brow, and he crossed through the cabin, straight for the phone. He didn't glance her way. "Trace?"

"Log on to your computer. See if there's anything new."

She grabbed the notebook from the coffee table in the living room and powered it up. Her heart was pounding, and she figured it was somewhere around 70 percent of her target heart rate, definitely aerobic. She kept glancing over at Trace. He was a study in restraint, from the economy of his motions to the way he held his body, the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder so his right hand was free. "You're making me nervous," she said.

"Romero," he said.

She eavesdropped, not making a pretense of ignoring his conversation, since it was presumably with her sister.

"Nothing," he said, just as cryptically as he had been with her when she asked him a question. He listened for a moment, then said, "Any leads?" He listened for a few more moments, then said good-bye.

"Talk to me, Trace," she said, crossing to him. "There's nothing online, except tributes to Jason and wild speculation—it was burglars, it was a random thing, it was suicide, it was one of his friends who wanted to get his hands on the technology, terrorists, everything except aliens from Area 51."

He leaned against the counter where she'd been only minutes before. He steepled his hands and drummed his forefingers together. "Do you mind making coffee? A full pot?"

"We going to be up all night?"

He looked at her. "*You're* not. I'm going to gather the team for a strategy session."

"Here?"

"Yeah. I'd rather keep you here than drag you with me to the other cabin, and I'm not leaving you alone."

Even after the break-in at her house, she hadn't been terribly concerned, but now, her heart rate wouldn't slow, even though she practiced some yoga breathing. She made the coffee while he headed back outside.

Five minutes later, he was back, smelling of the cool evening air and with a determined set to his jaw. Thirty seconds or so later, the rest of the team showed up.

“Where's Riley?”

“Finishing a perimeter sweep,” said Mallory. “Top of the hour.”

Trace nodded. “I'll perform the introductions. Aimee Inamorata,” he said. She smiled, and she wondered if it looked as stiff as it felt to her. “Agents Laurents and Barstow. You know Bree Mallory.”

Both of the men nodded, but she'd never keep them straight. They were dressed alike, much like Trace. They both had on long-sleeved black shirts, black pants, and boots, and they wore no personal items. They were both within an inch heightwise, with dark hair, brown eyes, and athletic builds.

“Is there an assignment sheet for overnight duty?” Trace asked, dragging a chair back across the scarred floor and taking a seat.

Everyone else relaxed at that, and everyone else sat. Aimee, though, carried the coffee carafe and stout mugs to the table. She'd seen him interact with her, but to watch him in command of a crew was an entirely different thing. She understood him better. There was no way he couldn't not lead, dominate, in a relationship. It was who he was. Command came effortlessly; giving it up would be what took work.

“We drew straws, three-hour shifts.”

“I'm first,” Mallory said. “Nine p.m. to midnight.”

“Midnight to three,” one of the other men said.

“I come on at six. But everyone will be getting up around that time.”

“Leaves Riley with three to six.”

“Short straw,” Mallory said.

“Give me the drill,” Trace said, pouring the first cup of coffee for himself.

“We all have radios,” Mallory said, “and beginning at nine, we're doing half-hour perimeter sweeps. We'll report anything suspicious.”

“No matter the time,” he clarified.

“Yes, sir.”

Feeling more than a little useless, Aimee carried creamer and sugar, along with a couple of spoons, to the table.

There was a knock on the front door, and all the agents exchanged glances. Trace nodded in Mallory's direction; the woman headed across the cabin. Trace and the other agents stood, and Trace moved closer to her. She wanted to scream with frustration. This was not happening. She was a nerd, a college professor, single woman who wrote books about ethics, not someone who needed the country's best and brightest protecting her.

She suddenly understood the application of her mosquito even better. She now had sympathy for the people who might have a chip shot under their skin. Being in protective custody sucked. She wanted to insist she didn't need a handful of operatives around. She just needed to be alone, at her own house. For the first time in her life, she wanted to crawl out of her own skin.

Trace held up three fingers, and he ticked them down one at a time. When all his fingers formed a fist, Mallory pulled the door wide.

The group exhaled in unison when the man at the door entered the room.

"Riley," one of the men said.

Mallory closed the door behind him. Eureka chose that moment to freak out. He squawked like a banshee, all feathers and fury as he flew at Riley. He issued no warning before unloading on the man's head.

She stood there for a moment, horrified. "I'm sorry," she said. "Eureka! Return to base!"

Trace looked at her. *I'm sorry*, she mouthed again. "I think the trip disturbed him."

"You think?" Mallory asked, laughing.

Riley glared at Mallory and at the bird.

Aimee headed across the room, trying to capture the frantic bird, but he had no interest in being subdued. Finally, in desperation, she asked Trace to toss her a dish towel. He did, and she threw the towel on top of Eureka, trapping him.

"Good thing you have time for a shower," Trace told Riley.

"Yes, sir."

Everyone seemed fixated on looking at his hair, staring, while at the same time pretending not to notice, until Mallory finally said something. “That's what you'll look like with gray hair, huh?”

“Comedy Channel is having open mic night,” he told her.

“Report?” Trace finally said.

“Nothing unusual. Perimeter checks clear.”

The meeting continued while she wrestled Eureka back into his cage and covered him up.

The group finished their coffee, then headed outside. Trace joined them on the porch while she cleaned the coffee cups.

A few minutes later, he came back inside. “I'm not sure what came over Eureka. He only acts that way when he feels threatened or if I'm being threatened. Not sure what that was about. He wasn't bothered by any of the other operatives. Maybe it was just too many people.”

“And maybe he just has no manners.”

“He is only a bird. Not real high on the IQ scale.”

“You keep trying to tell me how smart he is.” He headed for the phone again. After only ten seconds, he said, “I want full background checks on every member of the detail. And I want to speak with Sara Stein. Find her.” Then he hung up and looked at her. “Your loro could have bad manners. He could have a birdbrained IQ.”



## Chapter Nine

She was as stubborn as the mountains were high. She frustrated him on every level, and he wanted her more and more with every passing minute.

“You can make it an order,” she said, “and I’m still not going to bed.”

“I want to make it look like we are.” He admired her, even though she frustrated him. He saw the fear in her eyes, the uncertainty. He knew she hated this whole thing. Nerds didn’t get into trouble, she’d told him. Maybe not, but it had found her. Still, she didn’t complain.

Without any more arguments, she went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth. “I’m changing into running clothes,” she said.

Since he was not planning to sleep at all, he couldn’t argue.

He grabbed his flashlight and radio and then turned off all the overhead lights. He placed everything in the bedroom where he could reach it, waited a few minutes, then turned off the light.

On the bed, he held her tight against him.

“I hate this,” she said.

“Don’t blame you.”

“I like that about you.”

“What?”

“What’s the saying? You don’t try to blow sunshine up my ass.”

“Thank you. I think.” He kissed the top of head and waited for the change in his senses. His eyes would adjust to the night; he’d become more attuned to the outdoor sounds.

He was aware of her body against him, holding him but not clinging. And that was a perfect description for her personality; it made her a marvelous sub. She counted on him,

depended on him, trusted him, but she didn't need him to define who she was. He'd had a relationship or two fail because of that, but she was solid. Steady.

"You really think I could be in danger."

He thought about lying. But he only thought about it for a moment. If he demanded honesty from her, he owed it in return. "Yeah, I do. Not likely. Possibly. But I won't leave anything to chance where your safety is concerned."

"Riley."

"He shouldn't be here. He was supposed to get off at seven a.m. His partner wasn't there when we rolled...but he was. Doesn't necessarily mean anything." It gnawed at him that Aimee's computer hadn't been taken. Jason's had. Why break in and leave her computer behind? Unless having the woman herself was the goal?

"Eureka might have bad manners," she said.

"Like you said, he didn't attack anyone else. I want you to stay here."

"I'd prefer to go with you."

"I can move through the woods better alone."

"I don't like this," she said.

"You've got your cell phone?"

She nodded against him.

"You've made sure it works?"

She softly said, "Yes."

"Call your sister and update her. All goes well, I'll be back in twenty minutes, after having a chat with our young man."

\* \* \* \*

Aimee hoped his instincts were just on hyperalert, seeing trouble where none existed. As he went to slide from the bed, she grabbed him. "One kiss?"

"Oh yeah."

He kissed her. Hungrily. Demandingly. Insistently. He bruised her mouth, leaving no doubt how intense his feelings were for her. She drank it as sustenance, needing his reassurance.

She hardly heard him cross the living room, and she doubted she would have known he was gone except for the soft *snick* of the lock being slid home.

Obedying his last order, she called her sister. Following his lead, or maybe his paranoia, she dialed the phone from beneath the blankets so the glow wouldn't be seen.

\* \* \* \*

Part of him thought he was all kinds of loco. Hawkeye subjected their operatives to the most stringent background checks. They ferreted information every bit as thoroughly as the bureau did. Not surprising, with as many former Feds as they had working for them.

Riley had several commendations. And it wouldn't be at all unusual for the man to volunteer for overtime; in fact, it would be expected. He was an ambitious young man, and Trace had worked with him before, finding his conduct exemplary.

So he was headed for the agents' cabin wearing night-vision goggles, moving counterclockwise, *all because of a feathered freak he considered a fucktard?*

\* \* \* \*

"Nothing?" Aimee repeated.

"Nothing at all," her sister affirmed.

"That's good news, isn't it?"

"Most likely. You're telling me he went out into the woods because Eureka dropped a bomb on Agent Riley? Seriously?"

"Seriously," Aimee said, laughing a little.

"Keep me posted. And when Trace comes back, tell him we have a call in to Sara Stein. We're sending someone to her house as well. Tell him we're also checking why the relief guy didn't show up this morning."

\* \* \* \*

He'd spent too many years as a hunter not to recognize that faintly metallic smell on the night air. He froze, backed up, got his bearings, and moved cautiously.

The scent got stronger and stronger as he moved farther away from the cabin.

Then he saw her. Bree Mallory was lying on the fucking ground in a pool of blood; it was a miracle she hadn't already bled out.

*Shit.*

He fell to his knees.

The bastard had slit her throat.

“Tried,” she whispered. “Tried... Stop him.”

“Riley?”

She whispered, “Yes.”

He calculated his options. He didn't want to leave her, didn't want to leave Aimee alone. If he keyed his radio, he would alert Riley. If he didn't, no one else would know, and there'd be no backup.

“Go,” she whispered.

He would never, as long as he lived, forget the gurgling sound when she tried to speak. “Fucking hang in there, Mallory.” He grabbed a kerchief from his back pocket to help stanch the blood flow, and he propped her up. He keyed the radio once. If the other guys were paying attention, it would be enough. Regardless, it was a good guess Riley knew the jig was up.

Goddamn bastard was going to pay.

\* \* \* \*

She heard a faint sound outside. It could be anything, she knew. From the wind, to an animal, to Trace returning. But when Eureka growled, she knew it was none of those. She moved into the kitchen, keeping her back to the counter. Silently she moved toward the dish drain and grabbed the vicious-looking knife she'd seen Trace use earlier. Then, as silently as she could, she moved to the closet in the back bedroom.

It took half a dozen tries, but the front door finally gave way in a barrage of splinters.

Frantically she pushed redial on her phone, trying to connect with her sister.

“I don't want you dead,” Riley said.

Good thing, because she had no intention of ending up dead.

“Let's do this peaceably. No one will get hurt.”

“Aimee?”

She prayed her sister was smart enough to figure out what was going on when she didn't say anything. It was her big sister's job to be smart, thinking things through where others didn't.

The landline rang, and Aimee stayed where she was. *Keep thinking, Sis.*

Her hands felt slick and inept curved around the hilt of the knife. She glanced at the phone on the floor. The line was still open, which meant her sister hadn't hung up.

The unmistakable sound of boots on the wooden floor made her mouth dry.

The phone rang a second, then third time.

Her breath was strangling her. Way past aerobic zone and into anaerobic. She tried to suck in a breath and steady her nerves.

She hoped he saw her computer on the coffee table. Since she'd downloaded her work, Hawkeye, Inc., already had her revisions. Her computer wouldn't be much use to him now.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Was he certifiable?

Eureka growled.

"You shut the fuck up!"

She clamped a hand over her mouth. If he hurt her stupid bird...

The phone rang a fourth time, then settled into interminable silence.

Why didn't he just take the computer and go?

"I want you, Aimee. Only you. You're more valuable than anything, don't you get it? Just come out, and no one else will get hurt. You can save them all. I promise I won't slit your throat like I did that other little bitch's. But it's up to you. If you don't want to come out and play, I'll just wait here for big, bad Romero. I'll shoot his ass while you watch. It'll be on your head. You want to save him, don't you?"

Trace had only ever asked for one thing from her: trust. At the time, she'd had no idea what that would entail. But he was assigned to cover her ass, and she knew he'd do it, and she had to believe that—oh yeah, and keep herself alive long enough for that to happen. If she gave herself up, he'd be beyond pissed. She almost laughed. Who'd have thought she'd be more concerned with Trace being pissed than facing a madman with a gun.

The longer this dragged on, the better. Between her sister and Trace, the cavalry was on its way. She had to believe that.

Light flooded the master bedroom.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She'd had no idea that panic could so completely consume her brain, shutting down the circuits. She wasn't operating from her higher brain any longer, but from the animalistic part that demanded she survive.

She heard his every move, the scrape of his shoes on the floor, crashes as he upended things and threw them.

Then there was silence, followed by the chill of his laughter as he ripped down what had to be the shower curtain and rod.

"You're running out of places, Aimee, and I'm getting a little mad at you. You don't want me to be mad, do you?"

Cadmium, she told herself. Surely, somewhere in her brain, she remembered something she could focus on. *Cesium*. Something to keep the blinding panic from consuming her. *Californium*...

There was a squawk of his radio, and he said, "Oops. They're on to us. We don't have much time. Let's go see your sister."

Then she understood. It wasn't about her. She was a means to an end. If he could get that far, he could get to Hawkeye himself.

He was telling the truth when he said he wanted her alive. He wanted her as a hostage.

Her breaths were shallow, hollow, when he flipped the switch for the back bedroom. Every instinct urged her to run.

"Are you under the bed, Aimee?"

She hated the way he used her name, implying there was an intimacy between them. Her skin suddenly felt like spiders crawled over her.

He was moving closer, she heard him, the sound dragging down her spine. She saw him; as hidden as she was, he couldn't see her, yet...

She swallowed convulsively when the barrel of his gun entered the closet; then, with the gun pointing in, he ripped back the door.

Scared senseless by the suddenness of the motion, she screamed and lashed out, stabbing him, focusing on his arm. She stabbed him, over and over, slashing and gouging, not caring about anything except getting that gun out of his hand.

“Bitch!” he screamed, reaching in, grabbing her hair, and slamming her head into the wall.

\* \* \* \*

A scream tore across the night.

Not just a scream. A scream from *his woman*.

Consumed with fury, Trace shoved the door of the cabin.

He bit off a curse. All bets were off. Daniel Riley was a dead man.

Then he smelled it. Sulfur. The goddamn son of a bitch was going to try to burn them all to hell.

Gun drawn, he moved quickly through the cabin to the back bedroom.

The sight astounded him.

Riley was on his knees, trying to light the oil from a smashed kerosene lamp. Aimee had her body wrapped around his ankle, pulling on him for all she was worth. Blood pulsed from his arm, and blood streamed from her temple.

“Freeze,” Trace said.

Riley looked up and smiled, and he dropped the lit match.

Trace reacted. He grabbed Aimee from the floor. Instinctively she turned herself into his body. It was then that he realized the fucking traitor had doused her with the oil as well.

Fighting his fury, Trace headed for the living room and grabbed the stupid bird's cage on the way out the door.

Laurents and Barstow were thrashing through the woods, ripping off their night-vision goggles when they got closer.

“What the fuck?” Laurents asked.

“Riley's in there.”

“Goddamn. It's your cabin, sir.”

"I've got the only two things that matter. He cut up Mallory, left her in the woods. Counterclockwise on the perimeter." He nodded at Barstow. "Go."

Laurents moved the vehicles, and after he popped open the back of the Suburban, Trace said, "Go after Mallory." Trace placed Aimee in the back of the Suburban, and he grabbed a blanket to wrap her in. Her eyes were wide, and she stared at him, her eyes unfocused. "Got your damn bird," he told her, struggling to suppress his own emotion.

"Aimee! Aimee!"

He pulled the cover off the birdcage so the loro could see her. For once he sympathized with the flying freak.

"I'm good," she told them both. "Really. I just keep seeing his blood. I...I stabbed him."

He had no words. She'd done the only thing she could, and he was proud of her. But she needed to sort this out in her own mind, make sense of it any way she could. It could take time, he knew, and lots of it.

He smoothed back her hair, and his hand came away covered in her blood.

No matter how long it took her to recover emotionally, it would probably take him longer.

Within minutes, the sound of sirens pierced the night.

"You know," she said, attempting a smile, "this time, I'm glad the cavalry is here."

\* \* \* \*

Trace had no idea how Ms. Inamorata arrived so quickly, but even from the company jet, she'd been solving problems. Mallory was still alive, and she might make it, thanks to the helicopter Inamorata procured.

Inamorata crossed over to him first, and she looked as perfect as ever, not a single hair out of place, makeup perfectly blended, and she was in her own uniform, a pencil-slim skirt, feminine blouse, and heels. She carried a briefcase, and there was a smaller bag slung over her shoulder. Rue the man who didn't think she kicked ass and took names.

As she moved closer, he saw the betrayal of emotion in her eyes, so like her sister's. Unshakable Inamorata, Hawkeye's right-hand woman, was walking in her own nightmare. She had to know Aimee would have never been dragged into this if it hadn't been for her. Despite



that horror, she'd been making things happen, arranging the cleanup, making sure everyone was taken care of.

"Concussion, most likely, according to the doctor you pulled out of bed," he said without being asked. "Nothing more."

She nodded. "Thank you." She looked over her shoulder at the still-smoldering structure, or what remained of it. "You'll get a new cabin."

"My parents will appreciate it. Anything on Sara Stein?"

"We found her."

"And?"

"She's in the hospital. He was a bastard."

"Not mourning the loss," Trace said. He'd been keeping an eye on the cabin to make sure the pissant didn't crawl from the flames. It gave him satisfaction to know Riley would continue to burn in hell.

"Where is my sister?"

"Back of the Suburban...talking to a shrink."

"I'll get you back by her side in less than ten minutes."

"Five, or I make a scene."

"You really care."

"Five minutes, Inamorata."

"Romero..."

"Five minutes."

\* \* \* \*

"How bad's the headache?"

Aimee grabbed hold of her sister's voice like the lifeline it had always been. She looked up and smiled.

"Family," Inamorata told the counselor, one of their own. "You can have her back tomorrow; tonight, she's ours."

The counselor nodded and left.

“You'll need to be debriefed, all sorts of formalities.”

“I kind of figured.”

“You'll have as many people to talk to for as long as you want. There's going to be no pressure to return to Hawkeye, I promise you that. And I'm afraid Trace has only given me five minutes with you...something about a scene otherwise.”

“He would too.”

“This is about you, Little Sis. If you don't want him, he'll be gone.”

“I think I like him.”

“He's a pervert.”

“Turns out, so am I.”

The sisters exchanged smiles; then tears swam in Inamorata's eyes. “Jesus, Aimee... I'm sorry.”

“You couldn't have known.” This was the first time in their lives that she'd been the one to soothe her big sister. They held hands, and Aimee repeated, “You couldn't have known.”

“I'm supposed to keep you safe.”

“I'm glad I got to be part of stopping him.”

Still, she accepted the comfort when her sibling wrapped an arm around her shoulder. They were still like that when Trace rejoined them.

“Scram,” he told Inamorata.

“Silver-tongued devil,” she said.

“I want the nicest hotel room in Winter Park.”

“It's yours. You'll have cell phone service when you hit the town limits. You'll have a text message with directions.”

Aimee was stunned, and not just from the blow to the head. Her sister was taking orders from Trace, and she seemed happy to be doing it.

The dynamic astounded her. Her sister had always looked out for her, now she was not so voluntarily abdicating the position.

“Here's a bag of stuff you might need, extra clothes, toiletries. They're my clothes, so they're probably too big, but Trace will take you shopping tomorrow.”

“And Hawkeye will pay the bill,” he added.

“Of course.” She started to walk away; then she stopped and looked back. “Take care of her.”

By the time she'd finished the sentence, he'd scooped Aimee into his arms. Aimee laid her head on his shoulder. “I could stay here all night.”

“I have other ideas for you, if you're interested in them.”

“Do they include us being skin to skin?”

“In the shower, then in the bed. I'm supposed to wake you up a number of times through the night to check on you. Any ideas how I should do that?”

“Maybe one or two.”

## Epilogue

“Tie me up?”

“Aimee...” The woman had him exactly where she wanted him. When she was naked on her knees in front of him, he could deny her nothing. When she did *that* with her tongue to the tip of his bare cock...

She'd been asking for it for weeks, and he'd been heroic enough to resist her. Until now. That scar on the side of her head still bothered him, and she'd told him, more than once, to get over himself.

“I've been thinking—”

“I hate when you do that.” She gave his balls a squeeze that made him catch his breath.

“I want you to bend me over the bed and tie me that way.”

The image alone was enough to nearly make him come.

“I want you to fuck me hard.”

The rest of her sentence went unfinished. *Like you used to*. They'd argued every day for the first two weeks. She accused him of treating her like porcelain. He hadn't argued back. She was right. And so what of it? He was going to keep her safe and protected, even from him.

She gave his shaft a long, loving lick. “Bend me over, Trace.”

“Aimee, I'm warning you.”

She looked up at him earnestly. “This isn't working for me.”

His heart stopped. Those were the words he lived in dread of hearing. They'd spent the last three weeks on the Southern California coast in a beach house provided by their employer. Trace had wanted to take her out of the country, but she wouldn't leave Eureka behind.

Except for having the bird with them, the first two weeks had been perfect, with long walks on the beach, hitting all the tourist traps, feeding her at all the restaurants. But the last one

had been more volatile. As her strength returned and the nightmares stopped, she wanted their sex life to return to what she called normal.

"I've tried it your way." She sat back on her heels, dropping her hands to her thighs. "I want it to be like it was."

"I nearly fucking lost you." He reached for her, willing her to understand his pain.

"Do it! Do it," she shouted. "Grab my hair."

He sighed and dropped his hand.

"Except for that, everything's perfect."

"So leave it alone, damn it."

"No! Because without that, it's not real. We're not real. You kept asking me to trust you enough to tie me up. Trust yourself. Trust me. Trust me to set the limits, trust me to let you know if I can't do it, trust me to let you know if it hurts. And it won't."

"You were at the hands of a madman."

"And I kicked his ass."

He laughed.

"Well, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. And I'll kick yours too, if you treat me badly. Don't you get it? That freak wins if he steals what we had."

"You've been seeing a shrink."

"It's not just psychobabble. It's the truth. He had delusions of grandeur. It was only a fluke that I was related to the very important Inamorata and he was assigned to that particular project. But if he steals our relationship..."

"I'm afraid of hurting you."

"If you do, I'll tell you."

"We'll do this my way."

She sighed. "This feels familiar."

"When we return to Denver, it will be with my ring on your finger."

"Wait—"

"My way, Aimee."

“My sister's right. You are a silver-tongued devil. Was that a proposal?”

“No. It was a statement of fact.”

“I'm marrying you?”

“Within six months.”

“What if I don't want to get married?”

“My way. And to be sure you don't forget it, you'll wear my collar as well.”

She was so wet for him, because of him. He'd made her life complete. She couldn't imagine a future without him in it. “Can I, er, pick and choose this dominance stuff?”

“Take it or leave it.” He dug his fingers into her hair gently.

She surrendered instantly, turning her head into the cradle of his palm.

“You're the one who doesn't get it, querida. I'm never letting you go. I'm applying for a job at headquarters. I should be home more than I'm gone.”

“I want us to live at my house.”

“Or something bigger, eventually. For now that's fine.”

“And I want to keep Bella.”

“I thought we discussed that. I'm the Dom.”

“Bella! Bella!”

He glanced over at the two annoying-as-hell parrots. They'd been at the beach a couple of days ago, and there'd been an animal-adoption booth set up as part of a city festival. She'd fallen in love with a parrot that needed a home. The rescue people weren't sure how Bella would do with another parrot, but Aimee had begged all of them to let her give it a try, and what Aimee wanted, she got. He was putty in her hands, and he was afraid she knew it.

They were closing in on the end of the trial period. Now it seemed he'd end up with two of the flying idiots. It confounded him how two parrots could make five times the noise of one.

“Uhm, theoretically Eureka won't be as possessive of me if he has a mate.”

“Everything with that loco is theoretical. Idiot that he is, he'll probably think he's in a ménage.”

“Isn't the Spanish word for parrot *loro*, not *loco*?”

“Whatever.”

“Your cock is hard.”

“You're on your knees in front of me.” Nothing like pointing out the obvious. All he needed was her within a one-mile radius to get hard.

“Tie me. Fuck me.”

He tightened his grip in her hair, and she closed her eyes on a soft sigh.

“Take me...” She looked up at him and licked her lower lips seductively. “Bend me over, *Master*.”

“Over that chair, sub. Legs spread, your cunt exposed, your hands gripping the chair legs.”

He'd thrown her off balance, he saw. She'd pictured what she wanted, but how badly did she really want what they'd had?

“Yes, Trace,” she whispered.

“You may crawl.”

She blinked. “Yes, Trace.”

His cock hardened even more. She draped herself over the chair as he'd instructed. And now, for both of them, there was one last test. “Point your toes in.” She was experienced enough to realize that would just make her presentation that much more erotic. He left her there for long minutes, enjoying the view. She moved her position slightly a couple of times, but she didn't protest or try to stand. He gave her every opportunity to call a halt to this, and all she did was sway her hips seductively.

He moved around her deliberately, using Velcro cuffs to secure her in place.

He dipped a hand between her legs and found her wet for him, wetter than she'd ever been for him.

In the distance, he was aware of the surf; in here, he was aware of the roar of the blood in his ears.

He sheathed his cock with a condom and took her. Hard. Fast. Digging one hand into her hair, supporting her with another, he pounded, pistoning, penetrating deeper and deeper.

“Yes! I want you. Fuck me. Fuck me *harder*. Now.”

She was a demanding little sub, and she was all his.

She came without permission, something he'd definitely have to correct, and it was with a scream.

For once, the parrot didn't seem to care.

Within seconds, way ahead of his planned schedule, he groaned loudly as he ejaculated. Satisfied, he slapped her rear as he pulled out. "You made me come too quickly."

"The sub is sorry, Master."

She'd be the death of him.

"Perhaps the Dom would like the sub over his lap for a spanking later?"

He spanked her flank again, and she stunned him by whispering, "Thank you."

He released the cuffs and carried her to the bed. "Your punishment, mi amor."

She curled up next to him, in the protection of his arms. Together, they looked out at the ocean. "Yes?"

She turned back to him; he focused on the tiny scar, but this time, he saw it was healing, maybe like they were. "You'll get me hard, by whatever means you can think of..."

"Yes, Master."

"So I can fuck you again, up the rear."

"I thought Master would never ask..."

 THE END 



## Other Loose Id(R) Titles by Sierra Cartwright

*Silent Partner: I Heart That City*

**The HAWKEYE Series**

*Danger Zone*

## Sierra Cartwright

Born in Northern England and raised in the Wild West, Sierra Cartwright pens book that are as wild and untamed as the Rockies she calls home.

She's an award-winning, multi-published writer who wrote her first book at age nine and hasn't stopped since. Sierra invites you to share the complex journey of love and desire, of surrender, submission, and commitment.

Her own journey has taught her that trusting takes guts and courage, and her work is a celebration for everyone who is willing to take that risk.

If you'd like to encourage Sierra Cartwright to tell us more, she would love to hear from you. Feel free to email her at [sierracartwright@hotmail.com](mailto:sierracartwright@hotmail.com), or check out her website at <http://www.sierracartwright.com>.