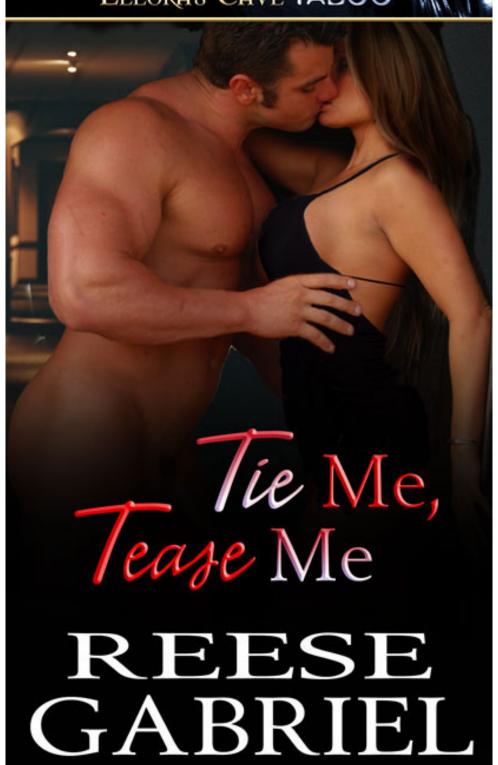
ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Tie Me, Tease Me

Reese Gabriel

Zoey is mortified when a handsome stranger catches her lustfully eying a pair of fuzzy handcuffs at an adult toy store. She insists she is there getting gag gifts for her sister's wedding but Trace knows instinctively that she dreams of a strong lover who will take control.

Zoey's passion puts her right where Trace wants her—naked and bound, aroused out of her mind, in his bed. He has discovered her secret fantasy. Zoey longs for the feel of silken ropes crisscrossing her fevered flesh, tied by the strong hand of her very own *shibari* man.

There is no trick Trace won't use to win her body and uncover the dark secrets she guards so well.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Tie Me, Tease Me

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TIE ME, TEASE ME

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Chapter One

"Why don't you try the pink ones? Pink is definitely your color."

Zoey Carmichael froze at the sound of the stranger's voice, deep and rich as sin, over her shoulder. *Damn, caught with the goods*. Zoey pivoted on her nine-to-five heels, hiding the package of fur-covered handcuffs behind her back.

"Um, do I know you?" she asked foolishly, her eyes travelling up the man's muscular chest to his handsome face and dark wavy hair. It has to be a law of nature. Hot guys only find me when I'm doing something really stupid and awkward like browsing the bondage section of the adult toy store when I'm supposed to be getting happy little door prizes for my sister's bachelorette party.

"No, you don't. Not yet," he replied, making her toes curl. There was definite mischief in those blue eyes and that smile, his full lips angled rakishly. He was tall and broad shouldered, wearing a leather jacket, fresh jeans and a black T-shirt that did little to disguise his rock-hard pectorals and washboard abs.

For heaven's sake, what was a man like him doing in a place like this? A guy like him could have any woman he wanted without resorting to gadgets or gimmicks.

Any woman but me, that is.

"Well, don't hold your breath," she told him, kicking herself mentally for straying from her purchase assignment in the love gel section to scratch a foolish itch about BDSM curiosity.

"Thanks for the heads-up," he replied smoothly. "So tell me, are you a top or a bottom?"

Zoey cocked her head. "Am I a what or a what?"

"Do you like to bind your lovers or do you like them to bind you instead?"

"Neither." She feigned indifference, though her breathing had instantly quickened at the mention of binding. Was he some kind of expert? She could only hope he didn't figure out how hard her nipples were getting, not to mention the dampness between her legs.

The stranger continued to smile, bemused, the cat about to eat the canary. Damn him all the way around. How was a woman supposed to feel at ease in his company? He was straight out of a magazine. He looked to be between thirty and thirty-five and could have been a male movie star—one of those arrogant but endearing, bad-boy-with-a-poet's-soul, born-with-the-perfect-five-o'clock-shadow types.

"Too bad," he replied, inclining his head toward another part of the display. "There is a really beautiful type of bondage called *shibari*. The Japanese have practiced it for centuries. You use ropes. Colored, silken ones are best."

Zoey couldn't resist a quick glance at the ropes dangling enticingly from their hangers. She shivered, imagining them caressing her skin, her partner drawing them taut over her naked flesh with her full consent, the most intimate act of trust between lovers.

Right above the ropes was a DVD, a how-to lesson from the look of it. The title was *Tie Me, Tease Me, Please Me*. The picture on the cover certainly promised to deliver. The woman depicted there was nude, her upper torso crisscrossed in delicate but firm blue rope, her arms bound to her sides. Her breasts were lovely and uplifted, almost as if she were wearing a rope bra.

To complete the effect, a bare-chested man stood behind her, strong and gentle as he tied the final knots. The woman had the most beatific smile on her face as she leaned back against him, helpless, trusting and blissful.

The lucky little bitch.

"I'm sorry," Zoey said, resorting to her habit of talking too much when she was nervous. "But you have clearly misunderstood my situation. I'm here getting some stuff for a bachelorette party. I'm not even in the right section. It's my sister's wedding. We

are getting gag items—regular stuff for regular people. Not that there is anything wrong with bondage. It's just not for everybody, is it? Me, I'm the girl next door, plain old Zoey. Ask anybody."

His dimples flashed and his eyes sparkled.

At least *he* was having a good time.

"Don't worry," he assured her with a quick nod. "I'll take your word. You have a wonderful day now."

Zoey frowned. "I intend to."

"No one's stopping you."

That was true but her feet weren't obliging. They seldom did when her mind was working on a problem. What was this guy's deal? He didn't look like the kinky type. Anything but. He wasn't coming on hot and heavy or asking for her number, though he obviously enjoyed flirting.

But it made no sense unless he was sizing her up for bondage purposes.

A shiver went down her spine.

Is he a top or a bottom? Zoey wondered. As if there was any doubt. He would have to be the one in control, putting his woman beneath him, binding her firmly, teasing her as she writhed in his leather...or even steel.

"I've got to go," she blurted, like the March Hare, late for a very important date. Unsure what else to do, she pushed the package of handcuffs into his chest. *Smooth move, dork*.

"Later, Next Door Zoey," he called after her.

Bastard, she thought. Just like every other good-looking guy, thinking he could get the best of a woman in any situation.

Thank goodness she had not given out any personal information beyond her first name. Good thing. After all, who would want a guy like that—tall, dark and handsome—calling her up and pestering her for a date?

No one, she thought, mentally kicking herself for the second time, except for every other woman on the planet.

Zoey didn't stop running until she had nearly bowled over Candace and Riley. They were in the vibrator section, getting the low-down from a salesman with the build of a linebacker. He wore his hair in a long ponytail.

"The Zoomer 1000 is our top model, ladies," he said in a voice better suited to a drill sergeant or a bouncer. "Guaranteed to satisfy or your money back. Just, um, wash it real good first if you return it, okay?"

Talk about a slow economy, you just never knew where people were going to end up working these days.

"Zoey, where have you been?" asked Candace, turning it into her usual accusation. It seemed that lately Candace constantly found fault with Zoey. Her big sister had always been bossy and critical but Zoey knew that came from Candace's role as "mom". Lately though...wow, Candace had become a real pill. It had to be wedding jitters.

"I was-"

"Never mind, we're going to be late for the dress fittings. I hope to god you've been laying off the choco-bunnies. No way will I let my day be ruined with any cellulite. Riley, let's go over the list."

In typical Candace style, she made everything sound totally clinical and unsexy. "Dual-head flexible dildo, soft-core, pornographic videos, non-toxic edible undergarments," she droned.

"Check, check, check," said Riley.

Zoey shivered at the mention of soft-core porn. She would not mind starring in one alongside *shibari* man right about now. Or maybe a nice documentary like *Tie Me, Tease Me, Please Me.* That would do just fine.

Was the guy spoken for? He hadn't been wearing a ring. Not that she should have been looking.

She shouldn't have looked at his crotch either. One look had been enough to verify that any woman who wouldn't give her right arm for a night with the man, or even a quickie in the backseat of his car, should have her head examined.

And judging by the leather boots and jacket, it would be a very nice car too. But what if he wanted more than just sex? What if he demanded surrender, subjecting her to his will, naked and bound, her limbs pulling helplessly, her body writhing under the teasing of his lips and fingers, begging him to take and own her? His stiff cock sliding deep into her sex, her legs bound wide apart and—

"Zoey Marie," Candace snapped. "What planet are you on?"

"None. I...I mean I'm here." For once it wasn't Candace who had her so rattled. She blamed *shibari* man for making her feel like some kind of pervert. Okay, maybe she had had a few fantasies of her own before now and maybe she did like to pretend that she was a prisoner when she was having sex, her body at the mercy of her deliciously demonic, demanding lover. But that meant nothing.

"Oh, you're here, are you?" Candace challenged. "Then I suppose you got the lubrication oil, which is the next item on our list, the one and only thing you were responsible for."

Zoey sighed. What was the point? Candace wanted her to fail and so she always did.

What a joke. As maid of honor, Zoey should have been planning all this, but Candace couldn't let go of a single thing. She probably had a script all set for Austin on their honeymoon too—*Now you kiss me here, touch me there. No, not like that, more spontaneously.*

Talk about being a top.

"Never mind," dismissed Candace. "We can get it at the pharmacy for half the cost."

Something in Zoey snapped. "Well maybe you should have thought of that in the first place instead of riding my ass."

No one was more shocked by her words than Zoey herself. Sure, she *thought* stuff like this all the time. She just never said it out loud.

Candace blinked a few times and then acted as if nothing had happened. "Let's get checked out and get to the bridal store. You know how traffic is this time of day."

Riley grabbed Zoey's arm as they brought up the rear, two chicks following the mother hen. The two of them had been friends since second grade. Candace was a seventh grader at the time, a full-fledged junior-high goddess, complete with her own makeup supply and about a million hours worth of big-hair rock ballads to listen to, each one matching some imagined story of Candace's own heartbreaks.

"Zoe, what's gotten into you?" Riley asked once they were out of earshot. "Why are you letting her get under your skin?"

Candace wasn't the one under her skin. It was *shibari* man, casting his quietly devastating spell. Without ever quite crossing the line, he had sure managed to get inside her head.

Did he want her? Was he out to seduce her?

She imagined it going differently—her standing there looking at the bondage display, him finding her, only this time he wouldn't just talk. The fantasy washed over Zoey now, as real as the air she breathed...

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"You can fight this, baby," he whispered in her ear, his cock pressed hard and throbbing between her ass cheeks as he locked a fur-covered cuff onto her wrist. "But it's going to happen. It's what you need. It's what we both need."

With that he took her other wrist and locked her hands in front of her, trapping her. She wanted to resist, but something urged her to let him keep going, just to see what would happen.

"You have no right," she said, her breath catching in her throat.

He bent to nuzzle her neck – possessive, intense beyond words. "I have every right. The minute you walked up to this display, you served notice of who and what you are. You're fair game, baby, and I'm claiming you."

She pulled at the cuffs, making the chain taut. It was unbreakable. She would not be free until he let her go. Clenching her fists, absolutely powerless to stop him, she begged, "Please..." She could not even finish the sentence.

"Please what, baby? Let you alone or keep going?"

"I...don't know." She dissolved into a moan as he slid his hands up her thighs, under her skirt. "It's too much," she cried.

"We're only getting started, girl. When I am done with you, all your dreams will have come true. You want that, don't you?"

The "Yes" came from deep in her throat. She was terrified to utter the word because it represented all her secrets spilled out for the world to see. She didn't want to be hurt again, didn't want to be tied down just for sex...

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Zoey shook herself back to reality, just in time to keep from going completely off the deep end. "It's nothing," she said aloud. "I'm just tired from work, all that corporate transition stuff, you know."

Riley arched a brow as though she didn't believe it for a second.

Zoey knew she would end up telling her best friend everything, but not right now. She had to get through the rest of the day first, holding on long enough so she could get somewhere alone—her own bed preferably—and sort through her feelings.

Whom was she kidding? She was not going to be doing any sorting in bed tonight. She was going to be masturbating, fast and furious, and when she came she had a funny feeling it was going to be unlike anything she had ever felt before.

All in all, she would make it through the day, just barely. The one thing that consoled her was the fact that she would never see *shibari* man again. The odds were just too highly stacked against it in a city this size.

Weren't they?

* * * * *

Trace Raines III stared into the glass of scotch he had ordered at the hotel bar. He'd been doing this for a while now, as if the amber liquid were going to have some magic answer.

It had started at the sex-toy store, that's where everything had begun unraveling, like a bondage rope that had passed its prime.

Trace sure as hell had not been looking for anything when he saw the woman looking at the handcuffs. If he had known he was going to end up getting mentally stuck like this he would never have said a word to her.

Hell, it hadn't even been a month since Vanessa had run out on him, this time for good. She had not exactly broken his heart—maybe dented it a bit—but she had taken his best set of handcuffs and his favorite shirt. It wouldn't have been so bad if she planned to actually wear the damn thing but he knew full well that she had taken it out of spite. It was probably rotting away in some dumpster right now.

Not that he held the entire female gender responsible for the crazy actions of one of its members, but there was such a thing as regrouping, giving oneself a little time to heal before jumping back in the ring.

Life didn't operate that way though. Nothing ever came along when you expected it to and when it did you had to go along for the ride or let it flatten you like a steamroller.

Who would have thought he could actually find someone he was attracted to in the BDSM section of an adult store? It was too perfect, too unreal, like the plot of one of the cheesier DVDs in that very store.

Next Door Zoey. On the surface, she was hardly his type. Oh, she was a knockout all right—big brown eyes, an adorable button nose and about a million miles of leg under that skirt. And she was classy too, a serious beauty, and probably the kind of woman who wouldn't make a big deal of anything, who had more important things to do with her time than bring men to their knees.

That one was all business, button-down commerce during the day, maybe a drink now and again after hours and a romp in the hay, but certainly nothing kinky. So what was she doing at Adult World looking at bondage gear?

He knew the first part. She was at the store on a hunting expedition, looking for items to giggle over at a bachelorette party. She had admitted it and he had confirmed the matter when he had surreptitiously followed her back to her two companions.

One of them was about the same age as Zoey. She was a quiet, sweet-looking blonde named Riley. The other was older. There was a strong resemblance. She was either Next Door Zoey's sister or cousin.

Were he a betting man, Trace would go with the former.

Oh yeah, he had gotten a real kick out of listening to them, especially when Next Door Zoey had told off the domineering one. Trace had gotten the impression that she didn't do that sort of thing often.

Good for her.

And fuck me for not getting her phone number, he thought now, tinkling the ice cubes in his glass.

Oh well, he did have one extra piece of information thanks to the big sister.

Zoey's middle name was Marie.

Zoey Marie.

Pretty. Unusual, but it suited her.

Trace took a swallow of his drink, thoughts echoing in the silent, empty space—oak and velvet, chandeliers and an empty pool table, no one there to enjoy it all but him and the bartender, just the way Trace liked it.

Honestly, it was probably a good thing he hadn't gotten Zoey's number. That chick was like a volcano waiting to erupt. One look into her eyes had said it all. She had practically dared him to push the issue, goading him into making the first move. Unconsciously, of course.

In her conscious mind there had to be one hell of a war going on. She had nearly bolted when he had caught her with the DVD, as if looking at a picture on a box was going to brand her as some kind of deviant.

As for her subsequent agitation, this too was a predicator of boiling heat underneath. Next Door Zoey had fantasies, you could bank on it. She hadn't worked up the nerve to ask any of her banker boyfriends to help her live them out and so she had suffered in silence, lying there during sex, imagining them doing ever so much more interesting things to her.

Precisely the kind of things that turned on Trace the most.

Some people called him a pervert for liking his females tied up tightly, others thought he was insecure. Personally, he didn't give a damn about them or their theories.

To hell with where his desires came from or why. Some people liked to tie and others liked to be tied, end of story. For some, it was a variation to spice things up. Then there were those like him who had to have it or they would die inside.

Who was gonna argue with that kind of biology...psychology?

It was a fact. He would be good with Zoey. Good *for* her too. She would put up a fight, all in good fun, but in the end he would wind up bringing her home where he would tie her spread-eagle to the four-poster bed. He would have her blindfolded, naked and play with her all night. He'd brush her skin with feathers, trace lines with ice

cubes, kissing everywhere, making her moan in surrender, but no climax until she made it clear it was for him, with him, only him.

Wow. He was getting pretty worked up, his cock straining against the fabric of his jeans, pulsing, aching to get out. Clearly, Zoey was not the only volcano waiting to erupt.

God only knew what would happen if the two of them ever did wind up behind closed doors. It didn't matter though. Trace was only in town for Austin's wedding.

Hell, he wouldn't even be on the same continent otherwise. But this was his brother, his only sibling. How could he turn down the offer to be best man, even if it did seem a little out of the blue, given their lack of contact the past ten years?

Blame it on their mother and her manipulative antics—ever the chess master. Trace had found the only way out, which was not to play. Austin had been running in circles for the woman, trying to please her for his whole adult life. Now, just a year after her death, he was getting married, ready to start a family. Was the tide turning? Was he ready to show his own personality? It would be interesting to find out.

Picking out a DVD for Austin had been a joke, a private gag between the two of them. Charles, the family chauffer, had started bringing them movies when the brothers were in high school, just old enough to know what sex was, but still too timid to get girls on their own.

Austin was the first one to hit on the idea of impressing girls with the movies. He would invite them to the mansion for a night of popcorn, pizza and whatever booze he could smuggle from Mother's liquor cabinet.

The running joke was that Austin could never get into a girl's pants without a video to get her worked up. Unlike his brother though, Austin had never shown any interest in tying and dominating. Austin liked breasts, nice firm ones. No doubt this Candace he was marrying must have them in spades, though she couldn't possibly compare to Julie Juggs, star of *Night in the Booby Hatch IV*.

Austin had refused to send Trace a picture of his fiancée, which was weird, but pretty much everything about the Raines family was weird. Because they were rich, it was chalked up to eccentricity. If they'd been poor, they would probably have ended up on some reality TV show, screaming on the front lawn of a dilapidated trailer or somewhere under the constant glow of police lights.

Back to Zoey. She had definitely responded to his good-natured provocation, hadn't she? Such an exciting moment it was when you got a woman to reveal herself, especially when she would rather not let you know that, deep down, she wasn't looking for Mr. Nice Guy but for someone just bad enough to hog tie her and play with her until she whimpered for satisfaction.

No dancing around, being intimidated by her stunning beauty, just flat out taking the reins, making her his.

He licked his lips. Shit, maybe he should have gotten her number after all. Of course it was never too late, not with all the lovely technology available.

Zoey...

Was that short for something? It was not an overly common name. How many Zoeys could there be in the phone book?

None as it turned out.

Uttering a mild curse, he slid the borrowed phone book across the hotel bar, trading it for another scotch. Best to concentrate on the thing at hand, getting through this wedding, pretending that he was cool with his family and that he didn't give a fuck that his brother wasn't going to have to be alone anymore and he still would.

Fuck.

Self-pity didn't look good on a grown man, least of all one who thrived so much on taking his destiny into his own hands.

Was Zoey his for the taking too?

Leave it up to fate, he decided, raising a toast to that invisible lady, the one sweet creature he would never be able to tie down.

Nor would he ever want to. Controlling life would be boring.

Hey, for all he knew he might meet someone else at the wedding or at the rehearsal for that matter. Stranger things had happened.

Especially to him.

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"Zoey, for heaven's sake," Candace called into the dressing room where Zoey had been hiding out for the better part of ten minutes. "What are you doing in there?"

Candace sounded fit to be tied...and so was Zoey.

Not a second passed now without her thinking of *him*.

She wished she had gotten his real name.

No, scratch that. Once you know a guy's name you are sunk, she thought. Just like back in school, stuck writing it over and over in a notebook, filling page after page.

"Is the dress too tight?" Candace asked. "It's those stupid choco-bunnies, isn't it?"

Zoey hugged herself, not wanting to leave the confines of the protective enclosure. The dress was hardly the issue.

It looked fine, a veritable peach revelry in silk and satin, hardly Zoey's style, but passable. The trouble was that she kept imagining *shibari* man in here with her.

He was wreaking havor the whole time, like a shadow made of electricity, kissing her from behind, caressing her shoulders, running his hands through her hair. She could have sworn that she could even feel him touching her breasts. Hence the tight, hard nipples, which she was terrified might show through the bodice of the dress.

She tried to stop fantasizing but then noticed the hook on the back of the door. A woman could be bound to it with rope, hands over her head, helpless, on tiptoe, powerless to stop him from caressing, taking, nibbling and kissing at her tingling flesh.

Was that elegant and devious enough for *shibari* man or would he want something more sophisticated?

Then again, maybe he would like it a little rough, his hand over her mouth, pushing her back against the wall, his breath hot in her ear, telling her what he was going to do, his hands holding her wrists as firmly as steel, his thigh pushing her legs apart, making her moan, the sounds of her pleasure belying any protest she might have mounted...

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"My cock is going in you," he said. "Tell me it is."

She whimpered and shook her head, unable to speak the words.

"Tell me," he commanded as he unzipped his pants and pulled his rock-hard cock free.

Her mouth was hot and dry but her pussy was dripping wet, ready to receive him.

"Tell me," he repeated.

She had no choice but to go along. "Your cock...is going in me."

"I'm going to fuck you," he growled. "I'm going to come inside you."

She panted, her breath like knife stabs, punctuating her words, the timeless confession. "You're going to...fuck me...you're going to...come inside me."

"Damn right," he said as his cock head breached her swollen lips, pushing its way past her meager defenses. "I've wanted this from the moment I saw you, my girl."

She melted at the intimacy of being called his girl. He slammed his cock home to the hilt, groaning.

"Yes," she cried. "Oh...yes."

He wasn't slow. There was no time for niceties. They were both on the edge. They knew too much of each other's secrets. She needed conquering as much as he needed to conquer. She wrapped her legs around him and shuddered. There would be no holding back.

They cried out as they come...

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Zoey caught herself just in time. She had been about to push her hand up under the dress, between her thighs. *Good heavens, what has gotten into me? Nothing...yet*.

"I swear," said Candace as Zoey emerged for inspection. "If I didn't know better, I would say you're trying to sabotage my wedding. Are you that jealous of my marrying Austin?"

Zoey couldn't resist rolling her eyes at the thought of perfect, rich Austin. "No, Candace, I'm not, but I'm sure you don't believe me. In fact, you are probably marrying him just because you think it *does* make me jealous."

Riley's jaw dropped.

Candace pursed her lips, holding her temper. "I know you're overwrought. So I will just chalk it up to that. Riley, go put your dress on. You're next."

Riley practically leaped out of her chair. "Sure, Candace."

What a messed-up situation. Zoey sighed. Mom should be here doing the orchestrating, instead everyone was trying too hard, filling roles they weren't meant to have. Riley was a good friend, but no matter how hard Zoey tried, she could not make Riley into the sister she wished she'd had. As for Candace, she *was* Zoey's sister and was supposed to be a guide and a mentor, not a dictator.

Zoey could certainly use guidance now.

"Candace?" Zoey spoke barely above a whisper.

"What?"

"I like the dresses."

Candace took a turn rolling her eyes. "You're a bad liar."

For the first time, Zoey wondered who Candace had for a guide. Had she *ever* had one?

Not Mom or Dad, that was for sure.

Zoey reached out, Candace did not rebuff her. They held hands, not saying a word until Riley came out and then it was all business again.

Zoey's mind floated away, another old habit. No man had ever been strong enough to hold her down. Not Chris, not even Jeremy with his intense, daunting timelines, everything mapped out to the end of time. He had loved her, doted on her, but in the end he had left her cold.

Shibari man would prove no exception.

Not that she would ever let him close enough to find out.

Sometime later, Candace dropped Zoey off in front of her apartment building.

"Rehearsal's at six Friday," she said as if the date weren't burned into Zoey's brain.

"Dinner afterward at Finnegan's. You aren't going to bring anyone, right? Because I have the places all arranged."

"You never know, sis," Zoey snapped at her yet again. "I might pick somebody up on the way. You know how reckless I am."

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to." Zoey slammed the car door, just wishing the whole damn weekend was over.

Still in a foul mood, she tore her microwave Gourmet Solo entrée out of the cardboard and watched it cook. As if she didn't feel like enough of an emotional fuck-up without her food rubbing it in.

Why not call it Entrée for Women Whose Biological Clocks Are Set to Expire Any Minute? Then she could follow up with a pint of Spinster Swirl ice cream.

A half hour later Zoey was on the computer looking up *shibari*. She was stunned by what she found. She had expected bondage might look awkward at points but the models made it seem the most natural thing in the world, their lithe young bodies

pressing against the most exquisite designs of rope, which left them tantalizingly free and completely imprisoned at the same time.

It was as if each girl's resistance was destined only to arouse. The eyes were the key. All that power and intimacy, yin and yang. Wow, was it ever hot. She looked up other types of bondage too, her finger clicking the mouse again and again. Beauty after beauty, tied up and tied down, moaning in ecstasy, gasping in pleasure, waiting in anticipation and in some cases succumbing in the moment to subjected pleasure, no option but to surrender and submit. It was the ultimate excuse to be wanton, a bad girl, coming and coming and coming.

Everything Candace and her kind looked down on.

Zoey wished she'd had the guts to buy that pair of fuzzy handcuffs. She had been afraid *shibari* man might still be hovering, watching. Was there something she could use instead?

Scarves might work. Pulse racing, Zoey pulled some from her drawer. What to wear? Should she tie herself while nude or maybe wear something provocative?

What would *shibari* man like? Zoey blushed, feeling his invisible eyes upon her. Naked, he would want her naked. Sucking on her lower lip, she began to undress, imagining it was for him, under his command. What would he do as he watched her? Would he stand impervious, eyes burning holes in her flesh, or would he give way to his desires, stroking his cock—long slow motions over his thick, engorged flesh, taking his pleasure in her surrender, anticipating all the things he was going to do to her?

Zoey's bare feet tingled as they touched the rug. Her nipples ached, chafing against her bra. Out of her mind with excitement, she took off her blouse.

Closing her eyes, pretending he was telling her to do it, she touched each breast through the silken cups. Her breath was ragged. Belly tight with need, she undid the straps, shrugging off the scant protection. The bra fell to the floor, leaving her bosom prey to the cool air of her bedroom. As if against her will, she thrust out her chest, letting him know, wherever he was, that she was his.

Powerless to resist.

But terrified nonetheless.

Zoey unzipped her skirt and let it slide down over her thighs. She stepped from it, leaving herself bare except for her panties. Closing her eyes, she knew what she must do next, sliding her palms over her taut belly, across to her rib cage and down to her silk-covered ass cheeks.

It was her ass that *shibari* man had seen first and last. Did he like her curves? Most men did though Zoey did not encourage it. She was more than a body. She had a mind and a heart.

At the moment, all three were focused. It was as if her fingers belonged to him and not to her. Wickedly she slid them under the waistband of the panties, exploring her bare ass, her smooth skin red hot to the touch.

She needed to be nude. She needed to be ravished.

Zoey pulled down her panties. Resisting the urge to touch herself, she slipped them off. Her pussy throbbed, craving attention, but she was determined to wait and build the suspense.

Licking her dry lips, she thought out the next steps. She did so as best she could, trying to guess how he might arrange things.

He would want her on the bed. Taking a handful of scarves, she crawled on top of her comforter. She would give anything for a four-poster bed right about now or a brass headboard.

Another set of hands would be nice too.

How about a blindfold? That would add to the helplessness.

Reaching behind her, kneeling in the center of the bed, she wrapped one of the scarves over her eyes and tied it behind her. It wasn't perfect but it would have to do.

She used another scarf to tie her hands in front of her. It was tricky tying the knot. She had to use her teeth. Zoey was almost ready to lie down now. But first she needed her vibrator.

Peeking out from under the improvised blindfold, she fumbled through her nightstand drawer for her trusty friend. Many a lonely night she had turned to it in lieu of a real cock and a real man to go with it. Finally she was able to lie on her back in bed, nude.

The way her hands were bound in front of her put pressure on her breasts, squeezing them from the sides, pushing them up and out like an X-rated offering. Oh god, she wished someone were nibbling at them right at this moment. *Shibari* man, taunting her to his heart's content, paying her back for her deceptive behavior in the store.

How dare she pretend to not be interested in bondage? Not when it made her so wet, her pussy dripping, thighs slick, her sex lips swollen, her clit begging attention.

Biting her lip, she whimpered and then sighed.

Turning on the vibrator, she touched it to her inner thighs. She spread her legs wide for better access. Would *shibari* man tie her like this, her ankles wide apart?

"Yes," she whispered as she reached her puffy pink pussy lips. Her sex quivered in reply, a silent encouragement to penetration. Just the lightest touch now on her clitoris and she was ready.

She imagined *shibari* man hovering over her, his hands playing over her body, his cock in position to plunge to the hilt. Gritting her teeth, she tried to make it feel more real.

It wasn't working.

Damn it. Zoey wanted to put her hands over her head but then she wouldn't be able to touch herself anymore. Self-bondage is for the birds, she concluded. Kind of like eating a picture of a steak and expecting it to taste like the real thing.

No choice but to end it. Opening her eyes wide under the blindfold, arching her back, she ditched the vibrator and placed her fingertips where they needed to be—strategically positioned over her clitoris and her left nipple. A tiny bit of friction was all it took in her present state. The orgasm came quickly, seizing her like a bolt of lightning.

I won't think of him, she vowed, but of course it was too late.

He was right there, watching, enjoying.

"No," she cried out, sounding like a silly romance heroine. "You won't get to me. I'll never be yours."

The last word broke into a moan. Her mind wanted freedom but her body had some very different ideas. Almost as soon as the waves of the first orgasm had finished washing over her, she felt the rumbling of a second.

She usually enjoyed multiple orgasms very much but tonight she was a little afraid of where the added stimulation might take her. Still, she couldn't refuse her desires. Hands trembling, she continued to play over her fevered flesh, allowing her fingertips free rein. Her clit pulsed and throbbed, her nipples were swollen and almost painful to the touch.

Masturbation had never been this intense.

What was so different?

It was him!

He was here, just like in the dressing room, filling her imagination, owning her mind, working her arms and legs, controlling her body.

Desperately, she tried to resist.

Sweetheart, you know it's going to happen between us. Don't fight it, he whispered in her mind.

It was true, she needed him, doing to her exactly what his eyes had hinted at in the store. Wanton, scandalous things.

Correction, what they'd threatened.

Or was it a promise?

There weren't words for it. She couldn't even cry out. Her whole body went stiff and then turned to jelly, the sensations washing her away, dissolving her, sweat pouring off her, chills over her superheated skin, possessed.

At last the spasms quieted and she collapsed back onto the mattress, exhausted, utterly drained.

Zoey drifted off almost immediately to sleep. Her last thought was of him. She hoped like hell she would never see him again because if he could do this to her long distance, who knew what would happen if he could actually touch her.

Chapter Two

"I'm telling you, dude," Brad Kolowski greeted Trace at the door to the church. "There are some fine single girls here, smoking hot and you know they are going to be revved up. All sentimental and crap because of the wedding tomorrow. If you don't get laid out of this, it's your own damn fault."

Trace winced inwardly at his old friend's lack of respect for holy ground. He might not be religious himself but he respected people who were. "Thanks for the heads-up, old buddy, but I'm not in the market."

Brad, who was also Austin's friend as well as a groomsman in the wedding, snorted dramatically. "You're a guy, aren't you? You're always in the market. Personally, I am scoping this brunette, Zoey, I think is her name. But there is this cute blonde who's perfect for you."

Trace cocked his head. "What did you say her name was?"

"The blonde? No clue."

"No, the brunette. Did you say she was Zoey?"

"Zoey, Zefarella, Zanzibar – who gives a crap as long as she puts out?"

It couldn't be the same Zoey. The odds would be astronomical. Then again, his Zoey had been getting ready for a bachelorette party when they'd met.

Trace felt a little chill down his spine. He had just called Zoey his.

"These girls are inside now?" Trace asked.

Brad winked at him. "Damn straight. I knew you'd be game. Tell you what, I'll be your wingman and then you can be mine."

"Actually," Trace declared dryly, "this time it's every man for himself."

Trace found her down front near the communion table. She was facing away but there was no mistaking that smooth, round backside. He had memorized it along with the rest of her—the classic curves, the trim waist, that wave of raven hair and the way she had her hip out to one side just a little, totally sexy and endearing.

Zoey was wearing a royal blue dress, cut just above the knee. Her patent heels were a perfect match. Nice.

Trace instantly recognized the other two women from the adult store. There was the domineering one, who was busy at the moment directing everyone, including the minister. Right next to her was the sweet, quiet blonde, Riley, the one Brad had picked for him.

Naturally Brad had reserved the stunning Zoey for himself.

Think again, Brad. If anyone got to Zoey tonight it would be Trace.

"Trace, you made it!" Austin cried from down front, his voice echoing up to the rafters.

Austin met him halfway down the aisle. Trace was genuinely touched by his brother's embrace. He felt a little guilty now for not calling when he had arrived in town earlier in the week.

"Where else would I be, little brother?"

"I don't know...some brothel, the morgue?" Austin teased. "Come on. I want you to meet my bride and her family."

Candace stuck out her hand, not waiting for an introduction. "Candace Carmichael. I've heard a lot about you. I don't believe you have a guest tonight for the rehearsal dinner. We will seat you next to my sister, the maid of honor. Trace, this is Zoey."

Zoey did not appear to be breathing at the moment.

"Next Door Zoey," Trace drawled. "What a surprise."

Her face was pale as any ghost. She certainly didn't hide shock well, did she?

"You two have met?" Candace asked, her brow creasing as seriously as a police detective's.

"Not formally," Trace said, noting Candace's alarm at having a potential monkey wrench thrown into her carefully laid plans. *Good grief. Is Candace ever a match for Austin, or what?*

This woman looked to be everything Austin had ever wanted from their mother and never gotten.

"He means not at all," Zoey corrected hastily, her tone sure to raise even more suspicion.

"That's technically true," Trace said, rescuing her. "We ran into each other in the store the other night and talked for a minute or so, having no idea we would ever see each other again."

There, that wasn't hard.

She frowned slightly at him.

Apparently she hadn't wanted to be rescued.

Awkwardness hung in the air as Austin gave Trace a strange look. He looked at Zoey the same way. This was a bad sign because Austin had always had a knack for spying Trace's relationship train wrecks before the damn things ever left the station.

Not this time. Trace was more than happy to tease Zoey a little just for fun but that was where it would end. Correction, that's where it *had* to end.

"This is Riley," Candace said, with absolutely no finesse. "She's been like a part of the family ever since her mother ran off and left her when she was ten. And over there is our Aunt Susan. Come and meet her too."

Trace forced his feet to move. Saved by the bell, he thought. For now.

Unfuckingbelievable, Zoey swore to herself at the very same moment. What were the odds? Had Zoey been born in some astrological black hole? Did she have a big old cosmic "kick me" sign on her back?

It had to be, otherwise how the heck could *shibari* man turn out to be Austin's brother and best man? He wasn't best at anything. He was worst. Annoyingly worst. Okay, so he hadn't actually done anything, but he had made assumptions, taken liberties, and now he wanted more. It was written all over his smug face.

The bottom line was that Trace knew too much.

And therefore she was going to have to kill him.

Or at least put the fear of god into him.

No time for that now though. Candace was running the show and after a quick introduction to Aunt Susan she called everyone to their places to begin the rehearsal.

Luckily Zoey was not required to stand anywhere near Trace for the opening sequence. Not that he didn't take full advantage of the situation, looking at her with that bemused smile and that wicked I-know-what-you-did look on his face.

The rehearsal was a blur. Zoey was so out of it that Candace kept having to physically move her from place to place. The whole time Zoey dreaded the ending, because that was the part where she would have to walk down the aisle with Trace to the back of the church.

He was sure to pull something sneaky unless she beat him to the punch. Sure enough, he was on her before she could open her mouth.

"Done any more browsing for exotic bracelets?" Trace asked, extending his arm for her to hold.

Zoey clenched her fists. Why did he have to smell so good, so exotic? He was solid too, and strong. His muscular physique practically begged a woman to lean in close and hang on for dear life.

"I would so step on your foot right now if I could," she informed him.

He chuckled insufferably. "At least I have your attention. The question is, what shall I do with it? Got any suggestions?"

"You get this through your thick head," she seethed as they proceeded back up the aisle, following exactly the same pattern they would for the real deal tomorrow. "It was all a gag, I already told you. I am not now, nor will I ever be into bondage. And if I were, it wouldn't be with you."

"You're pretty hot when you're angry, you know."

"And you're a jerk all the way around," she retorted.

Zoey attempted to make her break as soon as she reached the church narthex. He held onto her for a moment, just long enough to whisper in her ear. Her body went instantly weak from his warm breath and the rasping sound of his voice.

"Just a heads-up, Next Door Zoey. If you're really not interested, stop sending me signals."

Ooh, how she wanted to slap him. "The only signals are in your head, you egotistical, deluded, pompous, arrogant prick."

Zoey had run out of words, breath too. Her breasts rose and fell. Like it or not, the next move was his.

"We're going for a drink after dinner," he decided. "We need to sort some things out."

"You mean you need to sort things out. I don't have any problems."

He snorted. "Sweetheart, you can't kid a kidder and you don't top a top. We both know what's going on in that pretty head of yours and it's not G-rated."

Zoey's heart thumped like a rabbit's. Never had a man been so insolent with her. She ought to be outraged. So why was it making her belly do hot little flips instead?

"My head is like Las Vegas," she defied. "What goes on in there stays there."

"Really? So tell me I'm wrong. Right after we talked the other night I bet you ran straight home, hopped into bed and looked up *shibari* on your cute little pink laptop."

Zoey narrowed her gaze. "For your information, I didn't go right home, nor do I have a pink laptop."

Trace regarded her, implacable. "You and me, after dinner," he repeated.

With that he turned and walked away, leaving her mouth to water over his tight, muscular buttocks. If only he didn't look so good in that suit, the lines so clean and powerful.

Trace. His name is Trace. Give me a million notebooks right now and I will fill every page with that name.

Cornering Riley in the narthex, she sounded the alarm. "Ride with me to the restaurant. Code One."

That meant serious guy trouble, no questions asked.

"What gives, Zo? You're not even dating anyone," Riley asked as soon as they were in the car.

"It's Austin's brother. I've met him before. We had a run-in."

"Oh?"

"At the adult sex store, remember when I was gone all that time?"

"Yeah, Candace was pissed."

"She is pissed at everything but that's not the point. I happened, totally by accident mind you, to be looking at these handcuffs—furry ones—and he came right up behind me and saw me with them and I made a fool of myself, not knowing who he was going to turn out to be, of course, and now he thinks I'm some kind of kinky girl."

Riley blinked. "Why were you looking at handcuffs?"

"I told you, no reason."

"You're lying. I can tell. Your nose is twitching."

"Why does no one listen to me?" she fumed. "I'm not a pervert! Good grief!"

"You're awfully defensive though. And come to think of it, you always wanted to be tied up when we played cowboys and Indians with the neighborhood boys. And there was the time we played spin the bottle drunk, remember, and you asked Jimmy Lyons to kiss you with your hands tied behind your back?"

Zoey slapped her palm on the steering wheel of her fuel-efficient coupe. "Whose side are you on?"

"I didn't realize we had to choose. So this Trace guy, he's into bondage?"

"He hasn't said...exactly."

"What has he said, exactly?"

Zoey frowned, turning left on Maple. "He said I shouldn't resist so hard because it turns on guys like him. And he knows about *shibari*."

"Shi...whaty?"

"Shibari. It's Japanese bondage. Really old, really pretty. The woman is made into this total work of art. She's totally helpless but she still has this incredible raw sexual power."

Riley's brow peaked. "But you're not interested, right?"

Zoey sighed. "Forget I asked. I might as well have talked to Candace."

"Ouch," said Riley. "Okay, so maybe I had that coming. The point is, why get yourself all worked up when he hasn't even asked you out?"

"I'll say no if he does," Zoey vowed.

"Whatever. Maybe he's just flirting. He could be in a relationship for all we know."

Zoey felt a strange deflation. "I'm pretty sure he's not. I mean he doesn't have anyone with him, besides..."

She trailed off, not wanting to share the rest.

"Besides what?" Riley prompted.

Zoey bit her lower lip. "He invited me for a drink after dinner tonight. Not that I will ever go. Did you see how unrefined he is, coming to a wedding rehearsal with a five o'clock shadow? Gross."

"Definitely gross," Riley concurred, knowing better than to say anything further. It was one of the secrets of their long friendship. Zoey was allowed to be as self-contradictory and illogical as she wanted.

As for Riley, she got to be along for the ride.

"Thanks for being my friend," said Zoey softly as they pulled up to the front entrance of the restaurant.

"Well, it's certainly never boring, is it?" Riley mused.

They had a good laugh over that one.

* * * * *

Trace was playing with fire and he knew it. He was going to burn them both at this rate. The trouble was he was having so much fun. Zoey was so damn adorable, all the more so for her laughable effrontery toward his advances.

She wanted it worse than any woman he'd ever run across and he was pretty sure she would prove to be a natural at bondage. It was all he could do to keep from seeing how it would be in his mind, the two of them in perfect detail, the images overwhelming his every thought.

Next Door Zoey writhing, moaning, begging and coming, gorgeous flesh straining against silken ropes, her entire being convulsing, the volcano unleashed.

Like bungee sex, brought back from the very brink of total mind-blowing obliteration.

Okay, so maybe the bungee analogy was pushing it, but it would have to do.

Quite simply, the words didn't exist to explain it all. The way he had guessed that she had looked up *shibari*, for example. That was sheer intuition but right on the money.

Damn, but that beautiful body of hers would look stunning wrapped in the ancient rope work, wouldn't it? Three years he had studied under a master in Kyoto and here was a chance to work with a truly worthy subject.

Trace couldn't let it happen though, for a whole host of reasons.

Still, he was curious to know Zoey better, to understand where and how her desires had formed, hence his plan to take her out for a drink where they could be alone.

He knew better than to expect any one-on-one time at dinner. Indeed, just as he'd anticipated, Candace made a last-minute adjustment in the seating chart, putting Zoey across the table instead of next to him.

Interesting. So Candace had a jealous streak. She wanted a man for herself, none for her sister. He could only guess at the family dynamics behind that little gem.

Dinner proved to be an exercise in weirdness. Zoey chattered away the whole time, doing her level best to keep him out of the conversation. Candace and Austin kept bringing him back in, at which point Zoey would stare at her plate, cutting and recutting her prime rib until it threatened to scream out from all the abuse.

Zoey had yet to take a bite of it. He had been watching. Her cheeks were as pink as the meat—the effect of the wine she was drinking mixed with her obvious discomfort at being in his presence.

Did she think he was going to make a general announcement?

Ladies and gentleman, if I could have your attention. A toast to the bride and groom and to the maid of honor as well, who would also like to tie the knot, but not in matrimony.

Not that he wasn't above making her squirm a little.

"So, Zoey, you never told me," Trace said at a certain point. "How was the bachelorette party?"

Candace, whom he knew had been dying all night to figure out the deeper connection between him and Zoey, promptly pounced. "How did he know about the party, Zoey? Is that what you told him when you supposedly *didn't* meet him? How many other total strangers do your share our business with?"

"It was when we were all at Adult World," Zoey said, quickly turning the tables. "I told Trace I was there to get things for the party. Trace, you never did say why *you* were there."

"Actually, I was there picking up a little something for the groom." He made a point of winking at Candace. "I could tell you but it would spoil the surprise."

"Don't worry, we won't make you divulge your secrets," said Candace. "You know, it's funny though, you two running in to each other twice. What are the odds? It would never have happened if Zoey weren't such a space cadet, because wherever you met her, it wasn't in the section she was supposed to be in, I promise you."

"It's a pretty big store." Trace came to her rescue for the second time in one evening. "I was a bit lost myself."

Candace narrowed her gaze, her thunder stolen. "Austin," she said, turning away from Trace. "Why don't you tell everyone about the new trade deal you're working on with the Russians?"

"Romanians, actually, but there's not much to tell, just grain futures..."

Trace tuned out the rest, something he was programmed to do where his brother was concerned. The only thing he cared about at the moment was the person sitting across from him, about five-four, auburn hair, wearing a very, very flattering dress.

Yes, indeed, Zoey Marie Carmichael might think she was out of the woods, spearing her asparagus and avoiding eye contact like the plague, but he had only just begun toying with her.

All in good fun.

So long as he knew where to draw the line.

For the rest of dinner, he alternated between making her squirm and fume with his little glances and half smiles. He had her on the run and as a result his cock was rockhard. He liked the power, loved the chase.

Breathe it, just don't inhale, he thought.

* * * * *

After dinner, Trace cornered Zoey in the lobby and reminded her of their date.

"I'm not going anywhere alone with you," she insisted.

"We could bring a chaperone," he suggested.

She rolled her eyes, heading out the door. "Good night, Trace."

He went after her. "Zoey, wait. Have drinks with me," he said, outflanking her.

"Drinks? You told me it would only be one."

"So you'll go out with me then?"

"I didn't say that."

"Fine, we'll stop at one."

She shook her head. "You don't strike me as the sort who knows how to quit when he's ahead."

"Maybe I know how to make an offer you can't refuse."

"What offer?"

"You go out with me or we kiss, right here and now."

Her eyes flashed. "You can't, not without my permission."

Trace moved in close. "But you've already given it," he whispered fiercely. "You just haven't admitted it to yourself."

Zoey shivered as his finger brushed over her lips. "I can't, Trace. I'm sorry."

Her mind was saying no but her body had other ideas. So did his. Zoey felt his cock hard against her. Her knees went weak as he pulled her close.

"Your choice," he rasped.

"Trace...no..." Her objections dissolved as he pressed his mouth against hers. She could tell he had been thinking about this kiss. Had he planned it from the moment he had laid eyes on her?

Certainly she had thought of kissing him...and a whole lot more.

Damn it, someone is going to see us.

A fine time for her to go limp in his arms. Trace took full advantage, moving his hand to the small of her back, exploring her mouth with his tongue. The world

disappeared. Somewhere in the back of her head she thought of Candace and the lecture she would deliver if she ever found out.

Unfortunately she was also thinking of Trace naked, on top of her, having his way with her, preferably after he had given her the full *shibari* treatment, decadent ropes digging teasingly into her flesh, rendering her up as a sexual offering to his deepest lusts.

"We'll take my car," he said, releasing her.

Had it been only a few seconds or a lifetime? For a total stranger, he sure felt right, like he had been born to love her lips and maybe the rest of her too.

Zoey blinked, reality slowly coming back to her. "But you said I was making a choice. You kissed me so I don't have to go out with you."

Trace laughed. The sound cut through her like the growl of a wolf. "If you think I'm letting you go now, you're crazy, Zoey Marie."

Zoey's heart slammed in her chest.

He took her arm and steered her toward the parking area. "One drink. We'll take my car."

"Slow down, will you?"

Trace's car was an expensive roadster. Figured.

"I can take my own car," she said.

"You would run off," he said, swinging open the passenger door. "Besides you're in no condition to drive."

"Why? Because of your kiss? What an egotistical jerk you are."

The leather seat was smooth as butter and black as night. The material felt decadent on her legs. Every fiber of her being was so alive, so completely in tune...so completely sexual.

Okay, so maybe she wasn't in a condition to drive.

But she wouldn't let him know that.

Reese Gabriel

"Where are we going?" she asked as he settled behind the wheel, masterful and in control.

"My hotel," he said, pressing the ignition button on the carved wood dash. The car came to life at once, the motor purring, the instrument panel lit up like a Christmas tree.

He revved the engine.

She glared at him. "You said we were going for a drink."

He shrugged. "It's the only place I know in this city anymore."

"You could ask."

"Don't worry, I've gotten to know the bartender, we get along."

Zoey laughed without humor. "There's a reason not to like him already."

She knew she was making a huge mistake. If Candace got wind, she would be toast. Seeing the best man after hours, sharing a drink with him alone at his hotel was a recipe for disaster.

So was riding with him in this tiny car. Every time he shifted or turned the wheel she was painfully aware of his muscles, his graceful power, his masculine beauty.

"Only one drink," she reiterated upon arrival, as much for her benefit as for his.

His hand pressed her back, making her shiver as he moved her gently forward toward a booth at the rear of the quiet, empty hotel bar. "Don't worry. We won't have more unless you want."

The subtle change in plans did not escape her notice. "I mean it," she said. "One drink. You promised."

"You should have been a lawyer," he teased, settling her into the plush burgundy seat. "So what can I get you?"

"How about a shrink to see just how crazy I am for doing this?"

"Sorry, they are fresh out."

"Make it a white wine then."

"My pleasure."

Zoey pondered his use of the word pleasure, the pregnant huskiness of his voice. Was he going to make a move on her? More importantly, how was she going to handle him if he did?

Her pulse quickened as he returned with the drinks. "Thank you," she said, managing to sound as platonic as possible.

The wine was good, maybe a little too good.

"So tell me," she said, endeavoring to steer the conversation along a nice, safe route.

"What do you do for a living?"

Trace had a liquor glass, amber-colored contents, scotch most likely. Whatever it was, it suited him well. He took a deep swallow before replying.

"I waste the inheritance I received from my grandfather," he said dryly. "But you don't really care about that. Lord knows I don't."

Zoey frowned. "Your manners leave something to be desired."

"We're here to talk about our mutual sexual attraction. Why pretend it's about anything else?"

Her cheeks flushed. She quickly darted her gaze left and then right to see who might be listening. "Don't talk like that, Trace."

"Why not? It was there the moment we met. I've been fantasizing ever since, even during the rehearsal. You and me and all the kinky things we could do. Kissing you tonight was just the icing on the cake."

"Well you need to de-ice it. What kind of individual thinks about ropes and handcuffs in a church, anyway?"

"An individual who has very natural desires, ones he was born with, that's who."

"Speak for yourself."

"I'm happy to, if you'll do the same."

Zoey's wineglass was already half empty. She was drinking too fast. "I have nothing to say."

He arched a brow. "You're guzzling that stuff. You really want out of here that bad?"

"One drink," she reminded, "and this nightmare is over."

Trace arched a brow. "Is it really? What if I threaten to kiss you again? Will that convince you to stay for another round?"

"Great," she snapped. "Another person to manipulate me. Isn't it bad enough that I have to deal with my sister?"

"I'm not Candace and you know it."

"You sure act like her, bossing me around."

"You had a choice in coming here."

"Oh sure, either do this or start a scene at Finnegan's in front of my family." *Oh shit, Riley.* She knew Riley would easily get a ride but she really should text her.

"Fine, you want out of here, I get that. But you owe me. I answered a question for you, now you answer one for me."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm an investment banker but I thought you didn't care what I do for a living."

Trace grinned. "I don't. What I really want to know is what you're wearing underneath that dress. Conventional wisdom says something practical but I'm betting it's something more feminine, frilly, maybe even a little risqué."

Quite against her will, Zoey's nipples tightened into throbbing buds that chaffed against the satin cups of her bra. It was true. She did like to play a little carefree with her undergarments. And why not? It wasn't as though anyone would see them. And she was starting to get the hang of this kinky, thrust and parry situation. He would advance, she would resist. It turned him on. Her too.

"Give me a good reason not to throw this wine in your face," she demanded.

"Because then I would have to tie your hands, strictly in self-defense, of course."

Her breathing went shallow. "This is just wrong. As of tomorrow we will be family for all intents and purposes."

"That leaves us tonight," he said, his dimples flashing.

"The hell it does." As if she could ever manage a night with Trace Raines and then be expected to turn around and fulfill her obligations in the morning.

"I've been thinking about this all the way over here," he said. "No one will ever have to know, just you and me. It's the only way to get this out of our systems."

The way he said it made her swoon, so sweetly intimate and devilish at the same time. "Candace will know. She knows everything."

Trace ran his tongue over his full lips—a quick brush to soak up the residue of scotch. Was he trying to drive her crazy or did it just come naturally?

"I thought you were trying to free yourself from her influence? You're an adult, free to make your own choices."

"You're a fine one to talk about freedom."

"What do you mean?"

"You're pushing bondage and that's the very opposite."

He shook his head. "You're misinformed, Zoey, and I must say, ignorance is not becoming in such a beautiful and intelligent woman."

She narrowed her gaze. "It's a little late for flattery."

Trace reached out and took her hand before she had a chance to pull it away. "I am not a flatterer, Zoey Marie Carmichael."

Slowly he traced lines in her palm.

"How long, Zoey?"

Instinctively she knew what he meant, just as she knew she would answer him. Zoey swallowed hard as she thought back to those sleepless nights in her teenage years when she would dream of a handsome prince coming to get her. Only he wouldn't be there to rescue her.

"I've had bondage fantasies ever since I knew what sex was," she confessed.

"It is natural," he said, calming and arousing her at the same time. "Who knows where it comes from, a longing to return to the restriction of the womb, the coiling and twisting of DNA strands. For some it's a game. For others it's sacred, the act of tying and being tied. You think I don't worship my lovers, Zoey, when I have them helpless and utterly vulnerable?"

Zoey sighed softly, trembling.

With a slanted smile, Trace captured her wrist with his thumb and forefinger. "You've heard of a safe word, Zoey?"

She nodded. She had run across the concept on the internet when she had been doing her research.

"Tell me what it means to you. I have to be sure you understand before we proceed."

But we aren't proceeding, she wanted to scream.

"It's like a code word between the top and the bottom. The bottom uses it when she's reached her limit. It tells the top to end the activity."

"No questions asked?"

"Yes."

It was his turn to nod. "Good. Your word is shibari."

"Trace, this has gone far enough." She was close to begging him to stop, hardly the position of strength called for under the circumstances.

"I don't have my usual gear with me. We'll have to improvise once we get to my room."

"I am not going to your room."

"Well, you can't expect me to play with you here, although it might be interesting to see how far we could get before the bartender notices."

Zoey flushed red. "Let go of my hand."

"Just say the word."

"Very funny."

"I already know your nipples are hard, Zoey. Are you wet for me too?"

"You're a real bastard, you know that?"

"We could have you take your panties off so we can find out," he offered.

"Sorry, you've got the wrong woman for that," she said, though it was intriguing to imagine herself in his power, like a moth drawn to fire.

Trace released her. "There's no question you and I are going to make incredible fucking love."

Her toes curled. Her hand was limp on the table right where he'd left it. "I wouldn't have sex with you if you were the last man on earth."

His smile was downright evil, his voice nearly a growl. "Have you any idea how beautiful you will look, tied down to my bed? Can you even imagine how absolutely wild you will drive me and how crazy I will make you? Trust me, you'll beg, sweetheart. You'll promise me anything I want."

She tried to breathe. Her eyes slid shut. Clearly, whatever game he had in mind he had already begun to play and the rules were entirely his.

"What are you thinking, Zoey Marie?"

"That I'm headed straight down."

Next stop, hell.

"You can go as low as you want. I'll catch you if you fall. Do you believe that?"

There was no real reason she should, nevertheless, Zoey answered, "I do."

I do. The same words her sister would be speaking tomorrow at the ceremony. She couldn't help laughing.

"Something amuses you?"

"Life."

"Indeed. Now finish your wine, Zoey Marie. We need to get up to my room and get into some mischief."

"We are going to be in such trouble over this," she predicted.

"Fuck them if they can't take a joke," he said, his dimples lightening his face in a way that made her attracted to him ten times over.

That should have been the danger signal, definite Code One material. But Zoey had never been particularly good with boundaries. What could she expect, given the less-than-awesome example of her parents?

Trouble, that's what she could expect. A lot of it, about to come at her like a freight train.

And the name of that train was Trace Raines.

* * * * *

Trace felt it is as soon as the elevator doors closed behind them. That familiar, delicious feeling of control, the power to ravish, devour and lavish loving sexual heat upon his partner.

"Trace..." she gasped as he took her in his arms.

Fueled on by her halfhearted objections, Trace moved to pin her against the gleaming metal wall, shiny as a mirror. The cold smoothness of its surface contrasted perfectly with the warm, curvy softness that was Zoey. His cock responded instantly, hardening into steel.

She moaned, feeling it too—the heat, the connection.

It was true. She was his for the taking in the elevator, and they both knew it.

Trace was determined not to end things so quickly, however. He had barely begun to play out the scene between them.

Time for her first taste of constriction, he decided, interlacing his fingers with hers. The gesture was romantic, but the intent proved more devious as he pinned her arms on either side of her head against the elevator wall.

Her eyes went wide. Her mouth opened as if to say something. Good, let her see that bondage could take many forms, the most basic of which required no props at all.

It was time to kiss her again.

She sought to turn her head away but not before he captured her mouth with his. Drinking from her lips, he tasted traces of the wine. She seemed determined to keep her reserve but after a few moments she kissed him back.

Her breathing became labored. She began to move unconsciously.

Good girl.

He let her explore his mouth a little and then denied her further access. Zoey rewarded him with a tiny whimper that was full of frustration and wonder.

Trace felt his heart swell, completely unprecedented given how new they were to each other. Thoughts swirled in his mind along with emotions that were strangely deep and powerful, surreal almost.

But there was no denying the reality.

He had it bad for Zoey. Indeed, if by some circumstance she should prove to be the last woman he ever touched, he would die a satisfied man.

"Remember the safe word," he told her as he captured her wrists in the grip of one hand so he would have the other free to explore. "It will put an end to whatever we are doing. Otherwise..."

She moaned as he gave her a good taste of what he meant, running his fingertips down her quivering belly.

"But...but we could get caught," she protested.

Trace waited to answer, taking time to kiss her neck, savor the sweetness of her skin. He nibbled just hard enough to bring her up on tiptoe.

"It's a possibility," he admitted. "But you'll have to let me worry about that, won't you?"

She offered no reply.

"Won't you?" he said again, his hand moving up her inner thigh and under the hem of her dress. He didn't pause until he reached her panty-covered pussy lips, swollen and sopping wet.

"Oh god," she moaned as he caressed her through the damp material. "Yes, y-yes."

"It's a long way to the top floor. How far do you think we can get before we arrive?"

"Trace Raines, you wouldn't dare!"

He laughed. "Do you really think it's a good idea to dare me?"

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I know *what* you're doing, what I mean is..." She trailed off as he slid his palm under the waistband of her panties.

"You shave your pussy," he observed.

"Don't...do...that."

"Do what?" he taunted, hooking his fingertips along the ridge of her labia and flicking his thumb across her clitoris.

"You know what you're fucking doing!"

"I like to hear you say it." He bit her lower lip, making her groan.

"You're pawing me like some kind of teenager," she fumed.

Trace chuckled. "This is what men do to gorgeous women when they get them backed into a corner."

"I'm not in a corner. I'm free to stop this any time."

"But you haven't."

She swore at him through gritted teeth. He was good at what he did, in this case teasing Zoey and keeping her on the razor's edge. He let the tension build awhile, manipulating her swollen clitoris.

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Abruptly he stopped.

"What the fuck!"

"I thought you weren't into it."

If looks could kill. "You know I am."

"Tell me."

"I like it, okay?"

"Like what?"

"When you...play with me."

He shook his head. "More graphic, sweetheart."

"When you play with my clit. Are you satisfied?"

"No. And neither are you."
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"I've got a million of them." Trace cupped her breast through the fabric of her dress, making her moan. "You like that, baby?"

"I'm not your baby."

"You are tonight."

"Very funny."

Her eyes shone with the fire of the battle raging within. She obviously wanted it and needed it but she was afraid. "Can't we just go a little slower?"

"No." He released her, backing away. "I want you to turn around and put your palms on the wall. Don't take them off until I tell you."

She assumed the position, far too aroused to resist.

"What are you going to do?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Anything I want," he said, administering a slight admonishing pat to her lush ass.

"Hey," she protested. "I didn't say you could spank me."

"You think that is spanking? You really don't get around much, do you, Next Door Zoey?"

Reese Gabriel

Trace left her against the wall for the moment.

She watched him warily, her pretty eyes tracing his reflection in the shiny metal of the wall.

"Are you crazy?" she exclaimed as he hit the hazard button, stopping the elevator between floors. "What the hell are you doing?"

Miraculously, the alarm did not sound.

"You ask a lot of questions for a bottom," he observed.

"I'm not a bottom. I'm me."

"Indeed you are." Trace liked that about her, a lot.

He moved behind her, his hands aching to touch her again. Greedily, he slid his hands up her thighs, pulling her dress up to her waist. Allowing himself a bit of pleasure, he pushed his crotch into her, his throbbing erection fitting perfectly against her panty-clad behind.

It was only a matter of time until her body responded to the pressure. Amused, he waited for her to rock against him—needy, unable to help herself.

"I think I'll blindfold you later," he decided. "Then I can play with you all I want and you'll never know what's coming next. You like that?"

She panted, desire mixed with frustration. "You expect me to answer? Haven't you put me through enough already?"

"Actually, no."

Time for a look at those sweet little panties.

"Black silk." He gave a low whistle. "Were you thinking about me when you put these on, baby?"

"In your dreams," she shot back. "And don't you dare try to get them off me until we're in private, do you hear?"

"We're in private now."

"Don't," she squealed. "No, wait."

He tugged at the waistband of the skimpy little garment.

"Oh..."

"Don't move," he reminded as he pulled them down past her hips.

Her breath quickened. He leaned in, his lips practically touching her ear, and whispered, "Spread your legs, baby."

"Bastard," she hissed yet again.

"Another word to the wise," said Trace, reaching around to mold her breasts in his hands. "Tops get turned on when you call them names."

"In that case, fuck me," she moaned.

"Definitely," he concurred. "The question is, how soon, sweetheart? Would you like my cock now? Would you like me to take you right here in the elevator?"

"I hate you," she declared. "I frigging hate you."

"Your pussy doesn't hate me." Trace's fingertips slid between her swollen sex lips completely unimpeded, the sweet juices dripping onto his hand.

"It doesn't get a vote," she said stubbornly.

"This isn't going to wait," he decided, reaching for his zipper.

"I'll scream," she warned.

"I'm counting on it."

"We can't do this now," she blurted, desperate. "It's not....it's not proper bondage."

"Sure it is. I'm controlling you. You don't move a muscle without permission. That's way better than steel."

"I'm not your slave," she defied.

"No, but your hands are still on the wall, aren't they? Exactly where I told you to put them and that's where they are staying."

"Think again," she said, but she didn't move.

Trace quickly fumbled for a condom then pulled his cock free from the confines of his pants and boxers. He was so damn hard. He hadn't been this aroused since high school.

"It's called mental bondage," he explained, pushing his cock against her, letting the tip rest at the entrance to her pussy, poised to invade her hot, sweet sex. "You are chained by my will."

"Frigging egomaniac," she groaned.

He laughed, feeling more alive than he had in years. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You would."

"You know it."

With that he plunged deep inside, breaching the puffy lips of her sex. He was making good on his threat to possess her, not that she appeared to mind. Not by a long shot.

Zoey was so tight and hot and wet, a perfect fit. He nearly lost it right off the bat. It took every bit of willpower to hold back, to make it last, at least for a few thrusts.

Her breathing was ragged. She fought the inevitable surrender but with every spasm it became more and more inevitable. She was his to claim.

He liked the sound of those words, though he didn't dare think out the implications. Zoey was right, they would be family soon and he would never do anything to hurt his brother.

Not consciously, at least. He had a screwed-up family, what could he say? "Yeah, baby, that's it," he crooned. "Show me what you feel."

She moaned and he instantly pictured her tied down tight, twisting in the ropes of pleasure, the magic of *shibari*.

"Come," he commanded. "I want you to come...now."

She shoved her ass back against him, a woman possessed. Her entire body quaked. He couldn't tell where her orgasm left off and his began. Trace pushed hard, his release white-hot as he came, and sank into the turbulent sea of her orgasm.

Damn it, how could two virtual strangers be this good together with this little preparation, mentally or physically? Then again, their siblings were headed to the altar. Could there be some kind of genetic destiny linking the two families?

She came for him twice, the first orgasm melting into a second, sweatier one. He clung to her tightly, kissing the back of her neck, his hands at her waist, breathing her scent, absorbing her heat and energy, not wanting to let go. Not yet, not quite yet.

At last their breathing slowed. She fell backward against him. He held her up and she started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"We're on an elevator," she replied between breaths. "On a frigging elevator...and I just had the best orgasm of my life."

The declaration caught him off guard. It had been phenomenal for him too. Maybe they ought to quit while they were ahead. There was nowhere good to go from here. After the best sex ever, only one stop remained and it was called "relationshipville", otherwise known as the plunge off the cliff.

Needless to say, Trace had endured more than his share. Still, he couldn't leave Zoey in the lurch like this. He had to take her upstairs to his room to give her a chance to collect herself.

Better still, he should let her sleep a few hours...in his bed as she embraced him, laying her head against his chest. He could almost feel her soft heartbeat, her tender, trusting nature. She seemed utterly exhausted by her inauguration into the world of kinky sex.

Trace stroked her hair, breathing in her essence. Unbidden, his nostrils flared. He was getting hard all over again, fresh blood pumping into his cock. Impossible. Back-to-back erections like he'd had in high school.

At this rate the only way for her to get any sleep would be for him to lock himself in the next room. He would do it too, if that's what it took to make her happy.

Trace had no clue what that happiness would look like, though he was pretty sure it wasn't likely to come in any universe he was a part of.

A good night's rest, that was what Zoey needed. Come morning she would be a little embarrassed but she would get over it. She would thank him for not carrying things further than they had already gone in the elevator and she would forgive him.

But would he forgive himself?

Chapter Three

Zoey did not feel much like walking when they got off the elevator. Fortunately, Trace was right there to sweep her up into his arms and carry her down the corridor to his room. She ought to have objected, fighting to recapture her independence, but in her current predicament she found that a little difficult, what with her body still quivering from the results of the stormy lovemaking they had shared somewhere between the fourteenth and fifteenth floors.

Lovemaking. The term didn't quite fit, did it? They weren't in love and whatever it was they had done, it did not feel like something created between equals. Trace had conquered her body, cajoling, tormenting and teasing her limbs into passive surrender, all in the space of a few heartbeats.

Mental bondage, he had called it. Her body held frozen by his will, only her mouth left free to whimper and moan. Well, her ass had been free too but she'd pushed it against him as frequently as possible, encouraging him to do to her just what he wanted.

Trace's cock had proved to be as large and thick as she had imagined. It was more in his technique though, the way he had filled her, no holds barred. He had not been tentative when he'd plunged his cock to the hilt, burying it deep, as if there was no question that it belonged there.

He had actually told her when he wanted her to come.

Correction, he had commanded it and so she'd obeyed, his rigid cock slamming into her over and over, extracting from her the deepest reactions possible in a woman. Never once did she move her palms from the wall, sweat soaked as they were.

She had felt so hot and exposed, completely helpless.

Trace had taken over.

And he was still at it.

Instinctively now, Zoey cradled her head against his chest as he carried her down the corridor. She paid close attention to his heartbeat, steady and strong, lulling and soothing, putting Zoey into that twilight place, the boundary between sleeping and waking.

Trace's room turned out to be a suite. She barely noticed the surroundings inside, the crystal chandeliers, the geometric patterned carpet, the gold-framed art prints and the reproduction Louis the XIV furniture.

Trace took Zoey directly to the bedroom. One look at the huge four-poster bed with all its possibilities for bondage brought it all back, everything that had happened between them in the elevator. She closed her eyes, still feeling him inside her, pulsing and pushing, riddled with passion, building and building toward the inevitable climax.

Her pussy clenched as the sensory memory washed over her—the way he had taken her to the edge and pushed her over into the darkness only to restore her with his strength and enveloping energy.

The effect was almost spiritual.

How strange that she should achieve such a union with a man she barely knew. Usually it took her months of knowing a man and learning his ways.

She had had only two real relationships in her life. One with her boyfriend Brad, from college, and the other with a wild boy she had met the summer after graduation from high school—Zane. Zane had been her first lover and the first to break her heart too.

She would never have gone so far with Zane if Candace hadn't raised such a stink about him. The night Candace had called them both white trash, Zoey had let him drive her out to the lake.

She had been so full of butterflies, the motorcycle vibrating between her thighs as she imagined his cock there instead. Up to that point she had only seen it outlined through his jeans. But she had been determined to defy Candace and as she pressed her cheek to his T-shirt-clad back, she'd prayed it wouldn't hurt the way some girls had told her it did.

To her amazement, she had found Zane to be a generous lover, careful and slow, making sure she didn't get left behind as he achieved his climax. He had warned her ahead of time about the breaching feeling and the release of blood from the rupture of her hymen. When he was fully inside her she had started crying, not from pain, but from sheer joy and wonder.

She was in love.

Or so she had thought.

"I told you," her sister had said. Candace had let her have it the night Zane took off, leaving only the shortest of goodbye notes. "He is trash. You didn't let him do anything to you, did you?"

Zoey had lied and said no. She wouldn't have minded the lecture—she probably deserved one for practicing unsafe sex—but she was not about to tolerate it from self-righteous Candace.

Brad was Zoey's next lover. She had no complaints about him but he had to go once Candace started pestering them to set a marriage date. At that time, Candace didn't even have a serious boyfriend.

"Who has time to date," she had said when Zoey tried to point out the inconsistency. "Watching over you is a full-time job."

Mom had been in better shape back then, though she couldn't be counted on to provide any sort of rational guidance. As for their father, he was long gone, setting the stage for the relationship shift that slowly turned Candace into Zoey's unwanted parental figure.

When they reached Trace's bed he laid her down gently, as though she were a china doll.

"Where are you going?" she murmured as he started to walk out of the room.

"You should get some sleep."

"Don't leave me alone. Stay with me."

He stood there. She could hear his breathing. Shadows cast over his face in the semi-darkness. "Not a good idea."

"It is if I say so," she insisted.

"I'm afraid not, Next Door Zoey. This is the end of the line. Morning comes awfully early in these parts as I remember. You have a big, big day ahead of you."

"But..." She sat up, completely deflated. "I thought..."

"Go to sleep," he said, sounding more like a father than a lover.

"Fuck you," she snapped, "and the horse you rode in on."

"You're being childish."

"And you're a mind-fucking prick." She let him have it. "Did you get what you wanted? A quickie with the maid of honor? Gonna run off and tell the boys all about it?"

The lines of his face hardened. "Don't talk about things you don't understand."

"What's to understand? You had your fun in the elevator and now you're off to watch a ballgame or whatever. Or are you just lacking the balls to tell me you shot your wad and you've got nothing left to use for all the games you promised?"

His total calm and self-control pissed her off. It also made her hot.

"You are trying to provoke me, Zoey. It won't work."

She snorted. "Provoke you? Why would I want you any nastier than you've already been?"

His smile in reply curled her toes. It was the look of a man who thought he could run circles around women. "Do I really have to spell it out?"

"Yes, I guess so," she fumed. "Because it's not like you're making any fucking sense so far."

"It's simple, Zoey. You want to manipulate me into putting you into bondage. You want to be properly fucked, like the kind of woman you are."

"And what kind is that?" She was trembling all over, stunned, outraged and totally confused.

Had she done something wrong?

"You're overtired. It's all the wedding excitement," he said.

"And you're patronizing me and you need to knock it off. Now for the last time, what the fuck is going on? You're acting like a chick with PMS and I can't believe I'm betraying my own gender to say it."

"I am not patronizing you, Zoey. I'm respecting what you said originally. We are about to become family."

"Family doesn't do what we just did, sport."

"My mind is made up," he declared.

She swore at him under her breath. "Fine, would you at least get out of here so I can masturbate, maybe then I can at least imagine a real man."

Somewhere in the back of Zoey's brain was the voice of reason.

She was getting all worked up over a man she barely knew, a man she was beginning to think she didn't even like.

So why does it bother me so much?

"I'll leave the light on in the bathroom for you."

"How fucking nice of you," she shot back, doubly humiliated on account of how meaningless her insult had been, as if she were a common house fly, a nuisance, nothing more.

He closed the door, leaving her angry and completely confused.

You reasonable, civilized, fucking bastard. I'm not done yet.

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Reese Gabriel

Five or ten years ago Trace might have gone out and driven his car at some outrageous speed. Age changes things though, slowing reaction just enough to allow common sense to kick in.

He opted to down half a glass of scotch from the bar instead. The liquor did little to alter his mood and even less to change the reality.

Zoey was in the other room, angry and upset. Sweet Next Door Zoey Marie Carmichael who wouldn't hurt a fly and who didn't deserve a single bad thing in her world.

He could try to justify things, say it was for her own good that he'd shut her out but the truth was, something had spooked him in that elevator.

Ghosts from the past.

Vanessa, to be precise, still controlling him like a puppet on a string.

Fuck.

Some top he was.

He thought he heard a sniffling sound. Was she *crying*? There had to be a way to fix things. Gulping his drink, he headed back to the bedroom. He called her name.

"Go away," she said, voice ragged and weary. Another sniff?

The blood pounded in his head. He knew what had to be said but the words didn't come easily. It wasn't in his breeding. His father and grandfather had gone their entire lifetimes without saying it.

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"Zoey-"
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"I said go away."

"Just listen to me. I want to say I'm sorry, that's all." There, he was done with it. Let her ignore him, never speak to him again. What fucking difference did it make?

He stood there, feeling more and more like a jackass.

"You mean it?"

"Would I say it if I didn't?"

"How would I know? We only just met."

"So take my word on it. Look, I'm tired, you're tired. Did I take advantage of you? Probably. Should I have left you alone? Sure. But a man can only be so strong around a woman like you. You're smart and sexy and you don't take any guff. You're for real, Zoey Marie, and any man would be lucky to have you. Now I'm going out to the living room to pass out."

"No, don't. Stay with me."

"There won't be sex," he warned.

"I know, just lie down with me."

Trace frowned. This was going to be worse than sex. Ten times worse.

"Please?" she whispered.

The softness of her voice melted him. "All right."

She was lying on her side, facing away from him. He took off his shoes and climbed under the covers.

"Fuck," he exclaimed, making the discovery.

Zoey was naked.

She rolled onto her back and reached for him. And smiled. "I won't bite."

"No, but I might."

"Don't be a chicken." She grabbed him by the belt buckle.

He ended up astride her, his throbbing erection rubbing along her naked belly.

"You've got to be kidding me, Next Door Zoey."

Her nipples were rock-hard. He longed to touch them, to taste them. She had fantastic breasts, every bit as full and well shaped as he had imagined.

"What's the matter? I thought you had willpower?"

"I'm not a fucking monk," he growled, snatching her wrists in midair, just to keep her from ripping open his shirt.

Reese Gabriel

"So do something." She smiled impishly. "Help me keep my hands to myself."

"You're a little devil, missy."

She lifted her hips, pressing her naked pelvis against him. "So tame me."

"And give you the satisfaction of beating me at my own game? I don't think so. I have another idea."

She squealed, laughing as he turned her onto her stomach. She would not be so happy if she knew what was in store.

Trace jerked his belt off and used it to tie her wrists behind her back. He did it fast, before he could change his mind. Turning her on her side, he pulled up her ankles and secured them to her wrists.

"Night-night, dear," he teased, blowing her a kiss.

She glared, her cheek pressed to the mattress. "What the hell do you call this?"

"It's a standard hog tie. Pretty basic bondage."

Zoey strained, grunting. Not surprisingly, she was powerless to break free.

"This isn't what I had in mind," she said.

"No?" He collapsed onto his back next to her, hands behind his head. "I must have misunderstood."

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"Come on, Trace, untie me."
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"Nope."

"Trace, I'm serious."

"Me too."

She grunted, unable to free herself. "It's not funny anymore."

"I wasn't aware that it ever was."

"Not to me, you're right. So let me go before..."

"Before what?"

"Before I use my word. Or is that fake too?"

"Try it and find out."

She made another try at breaking free. He had half an eye on her, making sure she didn't hurt herself in her stubbornness.

"Why can't you just be nice?" she accused.

"Nice guys finish last."

"Oh, and you think you're a winner? Forget it. Untie me and I will go home."

"You know there's only one way to make me do that."

"Shibari," she snarled, the safe word hitting him like a blow to the solar plexus.

It had always been there, the possibility to use it, but now it was real.

"Shibari," she repeated.

Trace undid the belt, his fingers numb.

Zoey was climbing off the bed when he called her name, stopping her. "I really am sorry."

"You apologized once," she said. "And look where it got us."

"Fine. I'm not sorry this time."

He grabbed her, kissed her, completely sealing their lips, ending for the moment any debate about coming or going.

She sighed against him.

He pulled her back onto the bed. They rolled over again and again, exploring, letting their fingers touch all the places they hadn't been able to reach on the elevator.

Her fingers trailed along his back, sending shivers down her spine. He squeezed her taut buttocks, luxuriating in the feel of her silky flesh. They used their tongues as well, licking at each other's chests, applying biting, stinging, frantic kisses.

When Trace reached her nipple and sucked it into his mouth, she began to beg. "Hold me down. I need it, I do."

Trace took hold of her wrists, pinning them on either side of her head. Using his knee, he pushed her legs apart gently. She arched her back, inviting his lips, his teeth.

He didn't just take her nipple this time, he went for the whole of her breast, taking as much into his mouth as he could, pressing down just hard enough with his teeth.

Zoey interlaced her fingers with his, groaning. "I need you inside me...baby."

At this point, Trace seriously regretted not having taken off his clothes. How natural and right it would have been to simply slip inside Zoey, wet and ready as she was—fully aroused and receptive. Did Austin feel this way with Candace, minus the give and take of bondage?

"Give me a minute to take off my clothes," he said, breathless.

"Trace, I have an idea."

Trace had rolled to his side by now, determined to set a world record for the removal of shirt, pants and underwear. He tried to imagine what the little minx had in mind as he removed his shoes.

"Blindfold me," she said. "Like you talked about in the elevator. That's bondage, right?"

"Done the right way, absolutely."

Like there could be a wrong way to do it with this woman. Beautiful Zoey, nude, on her back, breasts rising and falling, torrents of dark hair framing her face, her long lashes lowered, almost hiding her lovely green eyes.

He could kiss her all over, every inch of her body, and maybe he would, given enough hours. "You know, I am supposed to be directing this show," he chided.

"So get to it then," she teased.

Trace chose a pillowcase to make a blindfold. He tore it into strips.

"That's going to be expensive," she predicted.

"It will be nothing compared to my room-service bill."

She cocked her head. "Are you that hungry?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Zoey licked her lips. "I don't know what you have in mind exactly, but I say hell yes."

Trace laughed. They were well matched all right. "You are a girl right up my alley, aren't you? Too bad we're going to be related."

Then again it was hardly as if they were blood kin. Stuff like this happened all the time, people hooking up with the siblings of their own brothers and sisters spouses.

"Lift your head." Trace applied the blindfold, wrapping the material over her eyes with infinite care. The very idea that she might be hurt by him or anyone else filled him with an indescribable fury.

It was yet another strange reaction on his part, given the supposed superficiality of their relationship. Or rather, their non-relationship.

"Perfect," she said when he was done.

"Yes," he whispered. "You are."

He saw the blood rise to her cheeks.

All this and she could blush too. The perfect kinky girl to take home to mother.

"I will be right back," he said.

There might not be any serious play equipment in the room but there was no end to the fun one could have improvising, provided one knew what one was doing.

Chapter Four

Zoey could feel the cool, conditioned air on her breasts. Her nipples were tiny vulnerable points, rising toward the ceiling, waiting for something, anything. The rest of her waited too—exposed, aroused, every inch of skin sensitized, pulsing, superheated in the artificial darkness.

What the hell had she been thinking, asking him to blindfold her?

Come to think of it, what was she doing here at all, the night before the wedding? She ought to be home sleeping or fielding calls from Candace.

Suppose her big sister were calling right now? How would she know, with her cell phone turned off? Talk about irresponsible. She would feel a little less guilty if she were actually tied down. As it was, she could—and should—be getting up at any point.

Trace had been gone forever. She was tempted to peek but she restrained herself. Pardon the pun. She heard him speaking in hushed tones on the phone in the next room. It sounded as though he was calling the front desk. Her heart beat more quickly. Seconds passed like hours and finally she heard the front door open.

For a split second she thought he might be leaving her. A foolish fear, held over from childhood. Such things were not easy to erase.

The front door closed again. Zoey held her breath. She could hear Trace's footsteps coming closer and closer. Or was she only imagining it?

She jolted. Her ears were so sensitive to every nuance of sound. And she could smell him too, the fresh, exotic scent of his cologne. Her heart leaped to her throat. She had missed him. She had felt alone without him. Suddenly the world was brighter, despite the blindfold.

"Trace?" Her voice sounded deafening in her ears, though she had barely whispered.

"Expecting someone else?" he teased.

Heaven forbid. This was between the two of them. The whole world could disappear for all she cared. "Brad Pitt, maybe?" she teased back.

"Sorry, he was going to come but he said you were too much for him to handle. Guess you're stuck with me."

"I'll make do." She sniffed the air now, catching the scent of coffee and some sort of pastry. "What is that? Are we having breakfast already?"

"This is for me, for energy."

Zoey heard a tearing sound. "Good grief, now what?"

"Enough with the questions, girl. Just lie there and look gorgeous."

She gasped a moment later when he touched her ankle. He had a strip of fabric. More from the pillowcase, perhaps?

Trace made a knot, securing the fabric. He drew it tight, pulling her ankle gently toward the side of the bed. He was binding her, after all.

He used a second strip on her other ankle. His fingers worked so quickly and with such a light touch, she scarcely realized what was happening. The next thing she knew he was giving her an instruction.

"Try to close your legs, baby."

She couldn't. Her pulse raced. Her pussy dripped. She could imagine him standing there, looking at her. What was in his mind, what would he do next?

"Put your arms over your head," he said.

Zoey obeyed. He was ready and waiting. She licked her dry-as-a-desert lips, heart slamming in her chest as he imprisoned her wrists, one by one, securing each to the appropriate bedpost.

She heard him sigh when he was done, a sound of true satisfaction at a job well done. *How many others have there been?* Zoey wondered.

For just a second she was jealous.

How silly.

"Perfect," he said. "Now we can begin."

"I thought we already had."

His laugh curled her toes. "You have no idea, Next Door Zoey."

Trace pressed her left nipple with his fingertip, making her moan. She was so hypersensitive that he might as well have shocked her with electricity.

"By the time we are done," he informed her, "you will have learned the meaning of helplessness. You will also know what it means to beg."

A surge of resistance flared inside her at the mention of begging. "What if I frustrate you right back?"

His fingertip was replaced by his lips, suckling, lightly licking and taunting her throbbing nipple. She arched her back, the signals racing to her brain, contradictory, fast as lightning. She wanted him to stop. She wanted more. It didn't add up.

Clenching her fists, she settled on a groan.

He left her panting, tossing her head.

"Does that answer your question, Next Door Zoey?"

She nodded, almost frantic. "Yes...yes."

"Any doubts about who is in control here?"

"You are," she said quickly.

"You learn fast," he approved, his lips grazing hers.

Zoey craned her neck, puckering, so very thirsty and needy. His mouth was light on hers, chaste and delicate. The experience was almost painful in her current state. She wanted his tongue. She wanted him to scrape his teeth against hers.

She wanted him wild, as anxious and determined and absolutely desperate to be inside her as she was to have him.

"So what do you think of bondage so far?" he asked.

She bit at her lower lip. "It's..."

He laughed. "Hard to put into words, eh? That's okay. When you are moaning and whimpering, that will be my answer."

Zoey pulled at her bonds. They showed no signs of giving way. "What if I change my mind?"

"Then use your word. Otherwise, feel free to scream, swear at me, anything you want to do to turn me on more."

"I used my word already and I'm still here."

"Can I help it if you're a glutton for punishment? Luckily I enjoy dishing it out."

"You're a pervert," she accused cheekily.

He chuckled. "You're just now figuring that out?" Trace moved his hand to her pussy, quite suddenly possessing it.

She writhed in response. "No," she cried, quite irrationally wanting him away from her. Meanwhile her body continued to absorb the hot sensations as he manipulated her clitoris.

"No?" He had that amused tone in his voice that she had come to know so well. "But how are you going to stop me when it seems to me I own you at the moment, Zoey girl?"

"You'll never own me," she said, though her pussy continued to pour forth the fragrant juices of her surrender.

"You don't really want me to leave you in the lurch, do you?" Abruptly his hand was withdrawn.

The pain of being played with was rapidly replaced with the greater pain of abandonment. "No, don't go," she said weakly.

"You would like me to stay?"

"Yes..." Zoey whimpered. She was not going to beg though, no matter what.

"If you are really sure..."

Zoey cried out as something cold touched her belly. "What the—"

Ice, it had to be ice.

Trace worked the ice cube silently, sliding it back and forth over the concave surface of her stomach. She groaned as he moved higher, circling her breasts. She gritted her teeth, knowing what was coming next.

Her nipples.

Her breathing came in short stabs. Heat mixed with cold, cascaded through her. She felt the cube dripping, tiny rivulets running down her side. "Trace, oh Trace."

He chuckled. "Yes, my dear?"

She had no clue what to ask for. Her teeth chattered. Fire raced up and down her spine.

Then he bit her earlobe, just a tiny nibble and she was off to outer space.

It truly was maddening, not being able to touch back, not having any say in the direction of things. On the other hand, there was this power that came from being at the center, the absolute object of his attention. It was as if they were both worshipping at an altar dedicated to pure pleasure.

An altar made up of the very flesh and blood of her being.

But what now? Something else was making contact, dripping onto her chest. Thicker, more viscous and sticky, right down the valley between her breasts.

Trace's tongue followed quickly in the wake of the slow, liquid assault. She gasped as he licked the fluid off. Syrup, maybe?

"That tickles," she complained.

"What about this?" He poured out more of the sweet, fragrant syrup on her belly, leading a trail of it down between her thighs.

Fuck no.

Zoey was powerless to keep it from running down the crease of her thigh, trailing along the outer edge of her shaved pussy.

Trace wasted no time applying his hungry mouth. She tensed instantly. He licked up the trail of syrup, then lightly kissed his way back almost to her pussy lips. He paused and pressed his lips low in the crease of her thigh.

She was not a fan of oral sex. Men usually resisted and when they did it they always made too big a deal. She would end up feeling tense and vaguely guilty at having inconvenienced them somehow. She would be thinking about all kinds of things instead of her own pleasure, including how she would need to pay them back for their largesse.

In her imagination, she had dreamed of a man enjoying this aspect of lovemaking. She was an unselfish woman and wanted it to feel equally thrilling for her and her partner.

Could Trace be that man? Could he give her that experience of oral pleasure while still making it feel like a part of his own plan for sexual conquest?

She wanted it, oh how she wanted it. To surrender to a man in that way, to give him that kind of access to her sexual being, that kind of power.

Still, the greater part of her held back.

"Trace." She spoke his name as a warning, which naturally went unheeded.

He moved his lips closer and opened his mouth to delicately capture her clit and roll it with his tongue. Very lightly he dabbed at it, creating pleasure mixed with a rush that was nearly painful in its intensity.

It felt so good, especially combined with the sensation of restriction. It was like this whole other layer of surrender, giving in to the roaring tide of imminent orgasm.

"Trace," she moaned, terrified to go any further. "You...you don't have to do this, I don't expect you to—"

Trace silenced her, his fingertip to her lips. "Do I seem like a man who lets himself be forced into things?"

She shook her head. "N-no."

"So if I am tasting you and enjoying you with my tongue," he concluded, "it must be that I want to be doing it."

She sighed, her breath ragged as he toyed with her nipple.

"Besides," he added, distinct mirth in his voice, "I don't see where you have a choice. Your body belongs to me right now, Zoey, and I will take what pleasure I wish and give it back. I will kiss and touch you, play with you, drive you crazy if I want and you can't do a damn thing...unless you want to use that safe word."

Zoey arched her back, the devious bastard, he had her right where he wanted her.

"Well, Zoey, do you want to use it?"

She shook her head fiercely.

"Say it."

"I don't...want to stop."

"Then you will remain my prisoner. You will take what I give."

She whimpered her reply, barely able to breathe. "I-I will...oh god, please, keep going."

But Trace had no intention of making things that easy on her.

Just as quickly as he had begun his attentions to her pussy, he stopped, leaving her hanging.

Zoey moaned, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

He stroked her cheek. Whimpering even more desperately, she turned her head, trying to kiss his fingertips. They were too far away, just out of reach, like everything else in her world right now.

How she hated what he was doing. But she loved it too. For the man himself, she tried not to feel anything.

Emotions were a dangerous thing. They cut deep. A woman could easily end up backed into a corner, like falling in love with the wrong man.

Trace's elusive fingers moved fast, already making their way over her ribs, cutting lines of invisible fire over her hips and thighs. Zoey's pussy was spasming as though he were inside her, thrusting and taking his pleasure. Just a little bit more friction, a tiny bit of pressure was all she needed to come.

But he knew that, didn't he?

And that's why he was going to stop again.

Clearly he intended for her to beg.

"I won't do it," she said. "I won't give you the satisfaction."

"Won't do what?"

"I won't beg, that's what."

"That will make for a long night for you," he mused. "Lucky for me, I have coffee and croissants."

"Bastard. I have a wedding to get ready for. Why can't you just fuck me and get it over with?"

"As I recall, it was you who started this latest session. I was content to let you sleep."

"Well we're in your room and you're responsible, so deal with it."

"I am."

"By not satisfying me?"

"Uh-huh."

She felt the displacement as he got off the bed. *Son of a bitch,* she thought, smelling the fresh brew, *he's stopping for a coffee break*.

"Trace, come back here now."

He chuckled. "You really expect me to respond to that tone of voice?"

"Sorry," she said, somewhat more meekly. "Please, will you come back?"

"You won't like it if I do."

"It can't be worse than this."

Good going, dare him why don't you?

"Very well."

A moment later she felt his hands again. This time firm at her waist.

Something brushed her hip. Hard and hot.

She tried to press against it. She wanted it—his cock inside her, pushing, demanding and finishing her off once and for all. "Please," she croaked.

Trace kissed her, his chest pressing hard on her breasts, searing the points of her nipples against his.

"You won't be able to come without permission," he whispered in her ear. "It will be rough on you."

"I know," she replied, though in truth she hadn't a clue. "I can handle it."

He laughed. "We'll see."

More kissing. This time it was deeper, his tongue exploring the confines of her mouth, fencing with hers, giving her a clue of what his cock would feel like penetrating her aching sex.

At last he touched her pussy, grazing it with the tips of his fingers, as before. Expertly he worked her to fever pitch, causing her body to writhe against him. Again he denied her.

He put his fingers to her lips, letting her taste.

"That's what your surrender tastes like, Zoey."

She suckled greedily, pretending each one was his cock.

"Are you ready for the real thing?" he asked.

A rhetorical question if ever there was one.

Trace rose above her, positioning his body. She gasped as she felt the tip of his cock against the swollen lips of her open, defenseless pussy. He remained that way a few moments, poised, as if letting her know she was his to conquer.

She did not dare speak, not now.

Whimpering was enough.

"You will not come," he reminded. "Without permission."

Damn it. She had hoped he'd been bluffing.

Slowly, very slowly, he lowered himself inch by inch, entering her aching, red-hot opening. Her pussy muscles clenched as did her thigh muscles, stretched as they were.

Trace exhaled, indicating pleasure. Her heart soared.

She longed to see his face but dared not ask.

The blindfold was his to remove. His choice.

Trace stopped again when he had impaled her fully—holding himself, his cock, completely still—adjusting to her heat and depth. She held her breath, wondering how long she would be able to hold out.

Not long.

Back up he went, withdrawing his cock agonizingly slowly.

"Lie still," he commanded as she lifted her ass off the bed, trying to keep them connected.

It scared her, how empty she felt without him.

Trace captured one full breast with his mouth, suddenly plunging back inside her all the way to the hilt. She thrashed her head from side to side as he moved to the other breast and then back to the first.

Then he stopped and pulled out his cock again. He made her wait, causing her to pant. She couldn't even speak. When he fell on top of her finally, she thought she would explode into a million pieces but she held on.

"Oh yeah, baby," he growled. "This is it."

Trace moved in earnest now, in and out, up and down using piston-like motions, driving her deeper and deeper into the mattress. He had to be close to orgasm.

She cried out his name.

Reese Gabriel

"Not yet," he told her, reading her mind.

"Fuccckkk..."

Trace grunted then reared back. He came down with more force than all the other thrusts combined. The sound coming from the back of his throat was more beast than human, like the roar of a lion.

Her inner muscles clutched at his cock and then surrendered to it—the hot, thick jets of semen erupting inside her conquered walls. She wanted to cry and scream and curse all at once.

She begged instead.

"Please...let me..."

"Yes...come, Zoey girl," he said, the words like a trigger to her deepest being. Her orgasm was like a tidal wave that washed over his roaring explosion, combining them in a single, universe-shattering event.

There was nothing any longer but them, just the two of them. Just their fused flesh—his free, hers imbounded to his, their sweat mingled, their scents combined, their beings, for this moment at least, sealed in a single fate.

Trace did not abandon her afterward. As her body wound down, he held her tighter and tighter, kissing her and murmuring encouraging words. She had the impression that it was entirely spontaneous and natural with him. Something he would do for any woman.

That last thought came with a little stab of pain.

The idea of another woman lying under him... After this it was more than disturbing, it was...unacceptable somehow.

"What's the matter, Zoey?"

Wow, so he can read my mind. "Just thinking of the wedding."

He kissed her forehead. "You're lying. Lucky for you that you're so damn cute when you fib. Did you know you do this little wrinkle thing with your nose?"

"So I've been told."

Great. If she didn't know better she'd think Trace and Candace had been comparing notes behind her back. Zoey shuddered to think what Trace would have to say about her.

"You're tensing up," he said, removing her blindfold. "I need to get you home."

"It's not you." Zoey blinked, adjusting to the dim light. She tried not to be excited seeing his face again, the laugh lines, the dimples, those depthless, infinitely curious eyes.

"I know," he said with a grin. "I'm far too good at what I do."

She snorted. "And don't forget your modesty."

His smile angled even more sharply, slaying her all over again. "I think I have been able to back up my words so far. As for modesty, trust me, there are plenty of things I am not good at."

"Such as?"

His gaze narrowed, became hard to read. She could see the pain in his eyes though, very deep, where most others would miss it.

"Relationships, commitment. Luckily, I've sworn off them."

Her heart sank, though she pretended to laugh it off. "Same here. We'll get along just fine."

"Yep, twice a year. Christmas and Thanksgiving. Pass the turkey and the eggnog." $\,$

"Not at once, I hope?"

"Makes no difference," he said, untying the first of the knots. "I don't like either one."

"Me either," she lied.

It was getting to be a habit with this guy. What was he trying to hide?

"So are they are going to charge you an arm and a leg for tearing up their bedding? Guess I should be flattered," she said, not particularly anxious to stare down any big questions at the moment.

"Actually, I am going to send you the bill."

"You're all heart."

Trace pulled her up to a sitting position, having freed both her wrists. "Most people think I'm just thick headed."

"You are determined, I will give you that."

"Not unlike a certain young lady in the room."

"I think I might resemble that remark."

Trace chuckled as he untied her ankles. Zoey rubbed her wrists, noting the lack of marks. "Nice work. But I suppose you've had practice."

He arched a brow. "Is that a coy way of asking if I've slept around?"

She smirked. "Me? Coy?"

"Come on," he said. "We'll keep talking in the shower."

Zoey didn't need to be asked twice. Any excuse to follow those taut buttocks, that lean waist and broad shoulders, was good enough.

Not to mention another shot at that delicious cock of his, which, to her chagrin, she had yet to taste.

Again came the voice of reason. *More sex is the last thing you need.* It would eat up time and make it even harder to cut the ties when she needed to in a few hours.

One look at him in the shower, however—the water sluicing down his chest, dripping from the end of his cock, already half hard again—was more than enough to banish reason.

She stepped in after him.

"I'm going to take charge and do something for you," she said. "No arguments."

"Who am I to argue with the maid of honor?" he said as she sank to her knees in front of him.

"That's right," she replied, taking the soap and running it over the sensitive underside of Trace's cock, right along the vein. "And who am I to resist a chance to get up close and personal with the best man?"

Trace answered with a grunt, the blood rushing straight to his cock, which was exactly where she wanted it.

She stroked him slowly, building his pleasure. When he was completely erect, throbbing and hot and ready, she rinsed off the soap. Now it was time for a little payback, a chance to show him that two could play the game of tease and beg.

With the water against his back she was free to work her magic. "So tell me, *shibari* man, what first attracted you to me?"

"You were so damn out of place, so totally cute, blushing over a pair of handcuffs.

Talk about a bondage enthusiast's fantasy."

"Good answer." She licked along the bottom of his shaft as a reward.

He grunted in appreciation.

"So when did you figure out it would work between us?"

"The moment I saw your ass."

"My ass? What about my intelligence, my imagination, or something like that?"

"What can I say? You have the kind of ass that makes a man want to own it."

"And you think you own mine? Think carefully before you answer. I am well within striking range."

"Thank you for the warning. The truth is, you lent me your ass and all the rest of you. And you would do it again."

"Sorry, no such luck." She leaned forward and formed an oval with her lips, large enough to fit the tip of his cock. She wished she could have tasted the drop of pre-come that surely had been there moments ago.

"Mmm," said Trace, letting her know she was off to a good start.

Zoey took more of his cock in, another couple inches. He tasted as a man should—slightly salty and pungent. Greedily, she sucked, encouraging him to use her mouth as he pleased.

Putting his hands on her shoulders, he slid his cock in farther. She was happy to accept Trace in that way. It was only right, after all he had done for her.

"That's it," he encouraged. "That's what I like."

"I can tell," she teased, temporarily releasing his cock. "So why didn't you have me do this earlier? You certainly had me right where you wanted me."

"Bondage isn't about getting your own needs met, it's about your partner."

"So you have a soft spot for women's feelings. All that and you can tie a sailor's knot in a heartbeat. Who could ask for more?"

She felt his cock swelling against the roof of her mouth. She applied her teeth, just a tiny bit, eliciting a moan from the back of his throat. He grunted, withdrawing and repositioning himself.

After a few more thrusts he said, "Baby, you know I will come this way, right?"

She stopped again.

"I want you to. Let me taste your hot come...please?"

He chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"You're begging again."

"Bite me," she said.

"Just don't bite me." Trace stiffened and groaned as she sucked him in again.

He pushed deeper but not to the back of her throat. She could tell he was very close to climax.

He bent forward a little, gave a final push and then came, pumping his hot semen into the chasm of her mouth, splashing against the back of her throat. She sucked at him, encouraging him.

Her head swimming, she gulped down his seed, every last drop. She was giddy. Swallowing a man's come was something she had never done before, never even wanted to do. With Trace, though, it had felt right.

He leaned against the shower wall. "Baby," he sighed, grateful, "that was incredible."

A moment later he helped her to her feet. They embraced and kissed until Trace's cock began to stir yet again. After shutting off the water, he carried her back to bed, the two of them still sopping wet.

It wasn't just the water making her wet. One look into his eyes told her he wasn't done with her for the night, not by a long shot.

"Do I dare ask what is going on in that mind of yours?" she asked as he laid her down on the mattress.

His smile slanted. "I'm thinking it's time I find some more props. Ropes specifically."

Her belly tightened with anticipation. "Shibari?" she whispered, her voice an equal measure of eagerness and wonder.

At last...

"The thought had crossed my mind," he admitted. "If you feel up for it."

Zoey was more than ready but at that very second her radar went off—big, loud alarm bells ringing in her head. It was a sister thing, something she'd had since they were children. Just a weird feeling that Candace was in trouble.

"What is it?" Trace asked, baffled as she sat up and dug out her cell phone from her purse.

"I have to check my messages."

There was a call from Candace, but no message.

That was followed by a half dozen messages from Riley, starting a half hour ago. With each one she sounded steadily more alarmed. As of the time of the last message, Candace had locked herself in her bathroom and was refusing to come out. Riley had not offered a clear explanation as to why.

Oh fuck, Zoey thought, I knew something was wrong and now it will turn out to be my fault, like always. Trembling, she got dressed.

"I have to go, no time to explain."

"Go where? You're soaking wet."

"I will dry in the taxi. Can you call one for me?"

"No taxi, I'm driving you," he said, throwing on his clothes. He was giving her that look, the one that told her no arguments, not here, not now.

Zoey sighed, secretly pleased to have some support.

Not that she would give him the satisfaction.

"Fine, if you insist on being meddlesome," she said.

"Meddlesome is my middle name," he deadpanned. "Among other things."

Chapter Five

"Oh Zo, thank goodness you are here!" Riley exclaimed, opening the door of Candace's apartment to greet them. "And Trace too."

She arched a brow in Zoey's direction, indicating that she was going to be asking all about her night with Trace once the crisis was over.

"Is she still in the bathroom?" Zoey asked, trying to put her damp hair in some semblance of order.

"Yes. It all started about an hour ago," said Riley, barely pausing to breathe. "She couldn't sleep so she decided to clean out her purse. That's where she found the chocobunny. She wolfed it down because she hasn't eaten or slept in like two days and then she freaked afterward, saying her dress wouldn't fit anymore."

"That's crazy," said Zoey. Not to mention completely out of character for her totally stable and rational sister.

"I know. It sounds like something you would do, not her," Riley agreed. "No offense."

Trace frowned. "How is that *not* offensive?"

Riley flashed Zoey a glance. Zoey flushed in reply. It was instant best friend communication.

OMG, he likes you, he's sticking up for you. It's so cute. You slept together, didn't you? Yes, it was off the charts. I promise all the details when this is done.

"It's okay," said Zoey to Trace. "We can talk like that to each other. We are BFFs."

Trace shook his head. "Whatever you say. So where is Austin? Why isn't he here?"

"Candace made me promise not to call him," said Riley. "She didn't want me calling you either, Zo, but I have my limits."

"Of course," said Zoey. "Trace, will you stay out here while I try to talk some sense into my sister? Wow, how crazy does that sound, me talking sense into her for a change?"

"Just do it," said Riley, aiming her toward the bathroom and giving her a healthy push from behind. "Time is wasting."

The last thing she heard as she reached the bathroom door was Riley offering Trace coffee.

That's all she had better offer, Zoey thought, remembering the time in college when Riley had ended up going home drunk with one of her dates.

She had to laugh at that one. She was sounding like Trace's girlfriend.

As if.

"Candace? Are you in there?" Zoey rapped on the door for emphasis.

"No. I've left the building. Me and Elvis."

Amazing. First Candace acts loopy, then she's making jokes.

"Fine, now would you or Elvis like to let me in so we could talk about this?"

Zoey heard the click of the lock from the other side. Quickly, before Candace could change her mind, she opened the door and closed it behind her. She found Candace sitting on the edge of the tub, her eyes swollen from crying. She was wearing a torn sweatshirt—one of Austin's—along with running shorts and a pair of sneakers.

"Good heavens, sis, have you been jogging?"

Candace pointed to the scale in the corner—state of the art, LED display, three levels of memory functions. It could tell you what you weighed, what you should weigh and probably could tell you what you were going to weigh no matter how hard you tried—the "why bother" function.

"Had to...one pound...over." Candace couldn't even get it out in a complete sentence. Her perfect world had just collapsed. She had failed to achieve target weight.

Zoey could tell her a pound was nothing, of course, but that would be like telling NASA that one second more or less on a countdown was no biggie.

"Well, have you even tried the dress on again?" Zoey asked gently. "As I recall there was a little wiggle room."

Candace stared blankly. "I don't want to get married," she said at last.

Zoey bit her lip. Talk about coming from left field. "But...I thought you loved Austin and—"

"Love?" Candace cut her off sharper than a road rage commuter entering the interstate. "Grow up, Zoey. You think a bunch of hormones will carry Austin and me through dirty diapers and his annoying in-laws, not to mention either of our folks, if they ever show up again?"

So that was it. Zoey sat down beside Candace. "We're not like our parents. We won't turn into them."

"You won't, you mean. I look in the mirror every day and see Mom more and more."

"You don't act like her though. If anything, you are the opposite."

"That's the problem. I'm running from everything. Oh what's the use? Look at me, I'm a wreck. Austin doesn't deserve to be stuck with me."

Zoey couldn't help but laugh. "Why, because you're imperfect? I got news for you, big sister, it's unavoidable, so welcome to the human race."

Candace sniffed. "Tell me the truth, Zo. Am I a total bitch to you?"

"Sometimes, but I can be a brat, so we're even."

Candace's tears mixed with her laughter. They turned to embrace each other.

"So, you ready to do this?" asked Zoey after they had rocked in each other's arms for a bit.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"There will be more stuff to go wrong," Zoey warned.

"A lot more will go right. So tell me about Trace."

Zoey frowned. "He knows his part in the wedding. He won't be a problem."

"I meant the two of you. And don't deny it. I saw the looks you were giving each other at dinner. You were with him tonight, weren't you?"

Zoey nodded.

Candace patted her shoulder. "Good. He's a good guy."

"That's a lot of goodness," said Zoey. "Are you sure you're my sister?"

Candace sighed. "Zoey, I want to tell you something I've never said. When you were little I was jealous of you because you got to have some semblance of a childhood and I had to pretty much be your mom and dad. You were so adorable. Everyone loved you while I had to fight. But there was another reason I was jealous. You have guts, Zo, and way more courage than I do. I chalked it up to being irresponsible or whatever but the truth is, you have never been afraid to look for happiness."

"I sure got burned plenty of times though."

"That's life," said Candace. "Remember the time you decided to make the world's largest cupcake?"

Zoey winced slightly but couldn't hold back the laughter. "What was I, six? I put all that batter in the dryer because I knew it got hot in there."

"Three boxes worth, yep. And you would have used a flare for a candle except the dryer had a meltdown."

"How did you ever keep your temper?" Zoey marveled.

"It was that lovable way of explaining things that you've always had. You made everything seem so reasonable."

"But I was usually wrong, and I still am."

"Are you talking about Trace? Is that what you mean? But how?"

"I hardly know him, for one thing. Okay, we had a good time but we've never even dated."

"So ask him out. Who knows, it might work, given that I am marrying his brother. What if Trace is your soul mate?"

Zoey shivered, imagining a life with Trace, his strong body next to hers, his presence, his hands on her flesh...his ropes. "It was just a fling, trust me."

Candace studied her. "It was bondage, right?"

Zoey's jaw dropped.

"You think I didn't know, what with the way you wanted the boys to tie you up all the time when you were young? It makes perfect sense, such a free spirit needing to have a sense of restriction and binding in the bedroom. And I am not at all surprised at Trace being the one."

"Austin told you about Trace's...interests?"

"Not in so many words but I can read between the lines. Look, you owe yourself a chance to make this work out. What have you got to lose?"

"It's not possible," Zoey dismissed. "Last night worked because it was a one-time thing. Besides, we are going to be family."

Candace narrowed her gaze. "Be serious. You honestly think this sort of thing doesn't happen all the time?"

"Not to people like me."

"And what sort of person are you, exactly?"

An unworthy one, Zoey wanted to say, but she opted to keep the thought to herself. "It's late and you need to get some rest," she said instead. "Time is going to go faster than you realize."

Candace arched a big sister brow. "Yes, Zoey, it is, for all of us, so don't miss out."

Zoey rolled her eyes. "Just hours until the biggest moment of your life and you still manage to squeeze in a lecture."

Candace grinned. "Would you have me any other way?"

Zoey hugged her for all she was worth. "No, I would not."

* * * * *

The bride was stunning and the service was spectacular but Trace was having a devil of a time focusing, not to mention breathing. From the moment he had seen Zoey in her maid of honor dress, wearing those sexy heels, her hair all done up, her beautiful green eyes shining brighter than an emerald sun, he had been in over his head.

A lesser man would have been brought to his knees. As it was, he had to fight to keep from grabbing her and planting a kiss, burning her lips with his, letting her know he didn't give a damn who knew what they had shared together.

And what they were capable of sharing in the future.

He was going to need to talk to her. It would be a serious conversation about serious things, though where and when he had no idea.

Trace was also dealing with fantasies, a series of damn near obsessive visions of Zoey naked, tied in *shibari* cord, her curvaceous body shown to perfection. There was so much he could show her, like how to wear a rope dress, for example, as well as how to achieve orgasm with a cord sliding back and forth between her legs, grazing her pussy, inflaming her to the point of total combustion.

Somehow in the midst of all this distraction, Trace managed to perform his official duties, presenting the rings and supporting his brother as Austin committed himself to his new wife. Bound together by love.

Love bonds. There was a concept.

Damn, he really needed to talk to Zoey.

He broached the subject as they recessed down the aisle, arm in arm, per tradition. "We left things hanging," he said, eyes straight ahead, a smile pasted on his face for the wedding guests.

Zoey had the same smile. "The only thing left hanging was your cock."

So that's how she wanted to play it. Fine by him.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he said, his voice suddenly husky. "So tell me, what are you wearing under that dress, baby? Or do I need to find out for myself?"

"I would love to see you try, baby."

"Oh I will," he rasped. "Trust me, I will."

She had nothing to say after that, though he was distinctly aware of her attempts to avoid him at the reception. Finally, he cornered her on the dance floor.

"You can't avoid me forever, Zoey."

"It's only been an hour."

"Feels like forever." Trace pulled her close, tensing her up immediately.

"This won't work," she said.

"What won't work?"

"Whatever you're doing. Trying to use the forced closeness of the occasion to...to have your way with me."

"Is that what's on your mind? Me using that gorgeous body of yours for my pleasure again?"

Her nipples swelled against his chest. He could feel her heart pounding. "Don't be so egotistical. I'm talking about you imposing on me. That's all."

"Forced closeness, imposition. You keep using metaphors for bondage."

"Screw you, okay? And when this dance is over, don't even talk to me again until next Thanksgiving."

He tightened his grip on her waist. "You think I'll let you go?"

Her breathing was quick and shallow. "I still have the safe word."

"So you are thinking about bondage?"

"How am I supposed to *not* think about it, the way you look at me and twist everything all up?"

He laughed lightly. "Trust me. You have quite a lot to do with it. It's a two-way street."

"I don't want to go to bed with you again," she said flatly.

"How about here at the reception?"

He could feel her body going weak. He was holding her up now.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't do anything until we're alone. The point is I could, couldn't I?"

She didn't answer.

Trace needed to hear the words. "Tell me," he growled in her ear, nibbling the lobe. "Tell me what I do to you."

Zoey's head was against his chest, seeking his protection, his power. "You...you drive me wild. I can't...I can't resist you."

"You make it sound like a problem."

"It frightens me."

"Feel how hard my cock is?"

She shivered as he pressed it against her. Did anyone else know what they were up to? Trace did not care and neither should she.

"That is for you, baby. Just you. I don't know how it happened, why I'm so obsessed, but I need to feel it, just like you do. I want you, Zoey."

"Oh god," she sighed. "I want you too."

He held her so close that neither of them could breathe.

"We'll go back to my hotel room," he said. "After we make a little pit stop."

"Mmm," she moaned softly. "And when can we go? How about now?"

He laughed lightly. "After the cake cutting. Darling, trust me, we won't waste a second."

She stayed with him for the next dance...and the next dance after that.

Chapter Six

Zoey's head was swimming. At the same time she had never felt safer and more fulfilled in her life. Trace looked so handsome in his tuxedo, so tall and strong as he handed her the glass of wine he had poured for her after they got to his suite.

"Thank you," she whispered, barely able to make eye contact.

Was it the anticipation of events to come, the knowledge that she was here of her own volition to be bound in rope and seduced?

She hadn't been the least bit surprised, of course, at the "pit stop" they had made just prior. No sooner had they left the reception than he had snatched her away, taking her by cab to the adult store where they had first met. Such a romantic thing to do. And he had remembered the DVD also, *Tie Me, Tease Me, Please Me*. Not to mention the fuzzy handcuffs she had almost bought.

And rope, plenty of rope. How tightly she had clung to his hand as he made the purchases at the store. Had she been there alone or with anyone else she would have been mortified. With Trace, however, it had been so right. This man was unlike any other she'd ever met or even imagined. He was so sure of himself and his desires and that couldn't help but rub off.

"I think Austin and Candace are going to have a great honeymoon in Hawaii, don't you?" Trace said now, taking a sip of his scotch.

"Yes," she said, staring down at her high heels, suddenly shy. She'd had enough of these shoes pinching and twisting her feet with every step.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He raised her chin with his fingertip, compelling eye contact. "Are you afraid? It's nothing new between us, really. Just a little bit more elaborate rope work. You were ready back at the hotel."

"That was different," she said. "It was spur-of-the-moment. This is so...planned."

She couldn't put it into words. It just felt more powerful now, born out of a deeper commitment between them, an intentional act that scared her a little.

"Don't tell me my Zoey girl is getting shy on me," he teased.

"I've always been this way," she said, a little defensively.

"I know," he replied throatily. "And you have no idea how big a turn-on that is."

Easy for him to say, he wasn't dealing with all the emotions that were running through her—the keen anticipation, the thrill of knowing what he was going to do, how helpless he was going to make her. Yes, they were adults, reaching out sexually to each other, but she was the one standing here, casually chatting with a man who, in short order, would be taking her clothes as well as her total freedom of movement.

Shibari was way more than handcuffs or even casual ropes knotted about a woman's wrists or ankles. It was intense, elaborate, deeply meaningful, almost mystical.

And she was so eager to have him do it.

"It's just a little overwhelming," she said as neutrally as possible. "Quite a day, you know? Thanks, by the way, for all the things you got at the store."

Trace narrowed his gaze. It was as if he could read her mind. "If you're stalling, don't bother. We don't have to do a damn thing you don't want to do. I want you to be happy about everything. That's all I care about."

She had a lump in her throat. Yeah, there was a lot at stake here. Was this going fast? Hell yes, but that was life. She could picture Candace, giving her the thumbs up.

"Trace...just hold me."

He took her wineglass, no questions asked, and put it on the bar with his own drink. A moment later she was enveloped in his strong arms. She concentrated on his heartbeat, ticking away, just like a metronome.

It would be so easy to be carried away, to let everything just...happen. A part of her wanted that more than anything, but the greater part of her held on, uncertain and more than a little afraid.

"Why?" she whispered, her own voice sounding tinny and foreign to her ears.
"Why do you want to do this so badly?"

Trace took her face in his hands, cradling her cheeks. "Look at me," he commanded. She let her eyes melt into his, her toes curling.

"Do you want to know why I love bondage so much? Why I see a beautiful girl—a beautiful woman—and want to wind her body with soft, silken ropes, making her moan with pleasure, turning her into a work of art, driving her wild with desire? The answer, Zoey girl, is that I don't know what makes me tick. None of us do. Bondage, especially *shibari*, makes me hard. It makes me keen, it makes me feel alive. But that's not the question you really wanted to ask, is it?"

Zoey's eyes were moist. She felt trapped, exposed. Would he push her too hard?

"You want to know why I want to do this to you in particular," he said, sparing her the need to say the words herself. "You want to know if I'd be okay if it were any other woman I were doing this to right now. You want to know how special this is."

"You've had many women," she said softly. "At least, I assume so."

"I've had my share," he said, neither bragging nor shying away from the fact. "But I don't give a damn about that and neither should you. I wouldn't have brought you here if I weren't serious about you. I want to tie *you*, Zoey. I want to make love to *you*."

Zoey swallowed hard. "I...want you too."

"We will go slowly," he promised. "I won't do anything to you that you don't already feel and anticipate. You are going to give me the most precious gift. You think I

don't know that? *Shibari* takes the greatest trust, it is an absolute surrender of a woman to her lover. I won't misuse that gift, Zoey. I won't hurt you. I would die first."

Her knees buckled. No man had ever spoken to her like that. It sounded like...wedding vows.

"We barely know each other," she said, her voice quaking.

His lips moved to hers. He kissed her with such absolute, gentle masculine confidence that there was no holding back. Zoey gave him her mouth, her delicate sighs, the press of her breasts against his chest.

Oh god, yes, take me, take me wherever you want to go...

His cock was hard and rigid against her. She swooned at the feel of it.

"I can't wait any longer," he told her, the slightest crack in his invincible armor. "I have to have you. This is killing me."

His admission of raw need only made him that much sexier to Zoey. She was in agreement now. The delay was killing her too.

"I'm yours, Trace, please, do what you will..."

Trace's eyes flashed like lightning. His focus was so intense it melted her loins. Without blinking, without taking his eyes off hers he lifted her, cradling her in his arms.

He took her to the bedroom and laid her down on the bed, on top of the covers. "I'm going to take off your clothes," he said, kissing her softly on the forehead. "It's time we had that gorgeous body of yours naked again."

Zoey was grateful for the bed to hold her up. There was no way she could have stood upright. Weak as a kitten, but feeling the explosions all over her skin, she waited for his hands, his fingers, his will.

He began with her shoes. Oh it felt good to have them off. One by one he slipped her feet free. He kissed each instep, making her moan softly.

"Every part of you is so incredible," he marveled, caressing her left calf.

"You're...incredible too," she managed to say, her breath coming in short stabs.

"Are you aroused, baby?" he crooned, running his hand up her thigh.

She arched her back, her breasts hearkening to him of their own accord. "You have no idea," she said.

"I have a pretty good idea," he teased, caressing her nipple through the silk of her dress.

"Oh god," she moaned. Zoey needed her clothes off. She needed his hands on her, all over her, all that male energy and desire.

She needed his cock too. How on earth was she supposed to wait while he tied her up?

Almost magically, he removed her dress. She lay before him in her bra and panties.

He placed his palm on her belly.

"Do you need to come, sweetheart, before we begin?"

"Yes, yes," she said, vaguely shamed at her own fierce need.

Zoey half expected him to deny her. Instead he slid his palm over the silken panel of her panties. She felt the pressure of his hand, the moisture of her own juices soaking through the material.

"Open your legs, baby."

Zoey spread her legs for him, desperate and eager.

He pushed his palm down, finding her clitoris.

She groaned, electricity zapping her body, short hot sparks arcing up and down her flesh.

"Come," he commanded. "Come on my hand, beautiful."

Zoey responded, releasing instantly, wanton and submissive all at once.

"That's it, baby," he approved. "That's my Zoey girl."

Zoey sobbed in pleasure as he moved the material of her panties aside, attending to her with his fingers, expertly parting her swollen sex lips, one finger on her clit, the others working in and out of her. She shuddered, one melting, cataclysmic orgasm blending into the next.

Zoey slid down the mountain, crashing into the final orgasm. She was ready for sleep, but Trace provided a quick reminder, letting her know that the shots were not hers to call.

Bending to kiss her, he went to work, working her up again, bringing her back to the brink. She took in his tongue. She let him reach behind her and undo her bra. She went limp as he slid the straps down, pulling the cups free.

Finally she moaned in approval as he suckled her.

He did not stop until she was hot and heavy again, whining for him to penetrate her.

"It's time," he said throatily.

Zoey bit her lip.

He took off her bra and then told her to lift up her bottom for him so he could slide off her panties. He did so very delicately, working the scrap of material down her shapely legs and over her ankles, one at a time.

She clenched her pussy muscles as he inhaled deeply, putting the panties to his nose.

She was ready. Oh god, she wanted him inside her.

So much for the orgasms taking the edge off. She was worse off than before.

"Where are you going?" she said, unable to keep the panic from her voice as he rose to his feet.

He towered over her. "Not far," he assured her, the deep desire in his voice reaching out to touch her with all the palpability of a cock between her legs.

She held her breath as he began to strip—shameless, unhurried but with a single-minded focus that made her bite down hard on her lower lip.

Was it real? Was the whole thing just a dream?

Trace bared his chest—magnificent, smooth, solid as a statue, a god brought down to Earth.

Mesmerized, she watched as he undid his pants, sliding down the zipper. His boxers were unable to contain his erection. Fully swollen and hard as steel, his cock sprang free as he finished undressing.

Naked now, he came to her and extended one hand. In the other, he held a rope.

She felt a lump in her throat, afraid of how her body might react if he touched her.

His eyes were deep and steely blue. His expression was sharp and unyielding. He stood, hand extended—confident, waiting.

She would come to him and he knew it.

Trace gripped her fingertips, smiled.

The smile made her belly churn. He helped her to her feet. She was not sure she would be able to stand. He leant her his strength, walking with her to the center of the bedroom.

There was a full-length mirror on the wall. She flushed at the sight of her own body, nude and so deeply aroused.

Trace moved to stand behind her. He held the rope, a coil of dark blue silk, the color of his eyes.

His cock pressed unabashedly between her ass cheeks. Wantonly, she pushed against it.

"Hold still," he said.

It was an order.

Zoey complied, her own easy obedience making her pussy drip. Trace's broad, muscular arms circled her stomach. He was looking in the mirror, looking at her reflection.

"You're mine," he said simply.

She lowered her eyes, shy again.

He raised her chin with the fingers of his left hand.

"Mine," he repeated, gauging her reaction.

Her lips were dry as cotton.

"Say it."

"Yours," she rasped.

He kissed her neck, still holding her body prisoner in his arms, the rope in one hand, the free end of it trailing down between her legs.

Soon the rope would be on her, holding her as he was holding her.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" he said.

She listened to the sound of her thrumming heart. "You're going to...tie me."

He inhaled her scent, breathing against her neck. The sheer possessiveness of the action made her want to collapse, right there, onto her back on the floor, open for him, conquered, his.

But Trace was not a man to conquer slowly...or easily.

"That's right," he said. "I'm going to tie you, Zoey girl. I'm going to tie you for pleasure...with this rope."

He rubbed it across her belly, caressing, teasing, insolent. She gasped half in shock and half in need as he ran the rope over her nipples, one after the other.

"I'm going to tie you here," he said, pressing the rope to her belly. "And here."

Oh god, he was sliding his hand between her legs.

"No," he said as she tried to clamp her legs shut.

She stood frozen, her world spinning about her.

"Open," he told her, his fingers gentle but insistent.

Zoey closed her eyes and slid her ankles apart.

Trace pressed the coil of rope against her mons. She tried not to move, tried not to breathe.

"Is this what you imagined when you saw the cover of that DVD?" he asked.

She remembered the picture of the woman with the man behind her, the way he held her, touched her, the way she leaned against him, her torso so exquisitely and helplessly bound.

But really, between her legs?

Trace found her clitoris, very slowly touching the rope to her super-excited pleasure button.

"Oh god." She leaped back.

There was nowhere to go but against his body—a wall of sculpted flesh, powerful and male and insistent.

"Is it?" he asked again.

"I...yes," she said. "No...I don't know."

He chuckled and kissed her neck. She arched backward, hungry.

"Arms at your sides," he said.

Zoey's limbs felt like they were made of lead. Disobeying him was simply not on the grid of possibilities.

"Good girl," he murmured, making her nipples pucker.

"Oh Trace..."

Trace was intent on the rope. Holding an equal part in each hand, he laid it across her shoulders, letting the free ends dangle between her breasts. Slowly, he moved his fingertips across her torso, touching her shoulders and upper arms.

Zoey shivered in reply. She was all expectation at this point, everything emptied out of her but the hot need to be wrapped, bound, cocooned.

The rope was longer than she had realized. The ends hung to the floor. So many possibilities. What would he do next?

Fascinated, she watched as he crossed the rope over her chest then drew each end behind her back. He did so slowly, letting the rope caress her nipples, gently rubbing over them. Agonizing.

Again he looped the rope around her, this time pulling her arms tight against her sides. She sucked in her lower lip as he crisscrossed the rope down her spine, braiding it and then tying it off in a knot.

Trace produced a second rope. He stood in front of her, gauging her again, checking her response, her state of mind.

She tried to hold back her excitement, her complete and total surrender to the moment. He arched a brow, indicating that she did not have much of a poker face.

He pressed the new rope to her lips. She kissed it, trembling. Satisfied, Trace circled the rope around her waist and pulled one end through the other, producing a simple tie. He took both ends in his hand.

"Open," he ordered.

Zoey shuddered, knowing what he was going to do. Her breasts ached, encircled now above and below, deviously compacted and thrust outward—bound offerings.

"Trace," she said, intending an argument.

"Open," he repeated and this time she gave him access, letting him tuck the rope between her thighs.

He knelt before her to complete the next step.

He drew the rope taut, pressing it along the ridge of her pussy lips. She sighed as he parted them. The pressure of the rope tugged at her pleasure center, making her feel captive and wildly free at the same time.

He had to steady her on her feet.

"Almost done," he whispered.

There were more ropes, each connecting cunningly to the whole design. He wound them down her thighs, over her wrists and across her belly, crisscrossing over and over. "It's called a rope dress," he said. "Though you'd hardly wear it in public."

He stood behind her again, his hands on her shoulders. She had to agree with him, there was nothing at all G-rated about the look though it did have some of the qualities of a dress. It hugged her curves, emphasizing the flare of her hips, the narrowness of her waist, the fullness of her breasts.

"It's...beautiful." She marveled at the webbed design, the pattern as intricate as anything that could ever be designed on a loom.

He nibbled at her earlobe. "You're beautiful, Zoey. This is just rope."

"You're an artist," she said. "Don't deny it."

Trace turned her about, sliding his hands down her constrained arms. She ached to touch him. "I can't take credit," he said, "for what nature made."

He meant her. He let her know that, his lips insistent against hers. She clenched her fists, allowing him free rein as he explored her mouth. Her pussy thrummed as the rope pulled at her, creating just enough pressure to make her want to cry out in pleasure.

"You taste pretty damn good," he mused. "You feel pretty good too, for a work of art."

His hands strayed to her bottom, cupping her ass cheeks, the flesh hot between the web work of the rope.

"Too bad you can't fuck me," she teased. "I guess shibari has its downside."

He bent to capture her nipple with his teeth. "Oh, I'll get to the fucking," he promised. "But there's so much fun to be had along the way."

She shuddered as he mouthed her nipple. Her flesh ached and screamed, straining against her bonds. She stood on tiptoe.

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"Oh...god..."

"You would like to come, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"So who's stopping you?"
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She tried to push her body against him. He stepped to the side, denying her even the most incidental contact with his cock.

"Sorry, you'll have to do it on your own."

Her clitoris screamed, engorged with blood. The rope was driving her insane, but it wasn't quite enough pressure.

"Please..."

He bit her other nipple.

"You'll come," he insisted. "If you want it bad enough."

Zoey whimpered, digging her toes into the carpet.

Trace stopped biting and started licking, his tongue maddeningly light and wet over her breasts.

He paused to bite at the rope here and there.

"Bastard," she hissed.

"Come for me," he said. "Come in bondage, baby. Writhe for me. Helpless."

She groaned, pushing against the ropes, trying to gain some leverage with her hands. "If you'll just...help me," she begged. "I'll...do anything you want."

"Yes you will do anything," he mused. "And right now I want you to come."

She stamped her foot.

Trace stepped back. "Temper, temper."

Zoey lunged at him, desperate for his flesh, his attentions no matter how small or exasperating.

He held her back, his hand gentle but firm against her belly. "That's close enough."

Zoey moaned. "Fuck..."

He pressed his finger to her lips. She parted them and sucked at his finger.

"You will come for me," he told her. "And then you will kneel for me."

"Yes, Trace..."

"You will use that beautiful mouth well, won't you?"

The implications, the image of herself sucking on Trace's cock was all the erotic stimulus she needed. "Oh god, I will," she groaned. "I'll suck your gorgeous cock...yes, yes."

Trace took hold of her hair, pulling it backward. He knew what he was doing. The sudden sensation seemed to rip the orgasm from her, all the way from her toes. The rope was on fire, burning her skin—hot sexual fire—branding and marking her with the endless crisscrosses, the sweet little knots, the pulling and tugging of the silk.

Trace let her rest her head against his shoulder as the shuddering overcame her. Hot waves of explosive surrender rippled through her nipples and her pussy, every bit of her alive with desire, totally on overload.

He held her tightly until she came down, descending back to Earth, her body covered in sweat.

"Let me..."

He helped her down to her knees then fed his cock between her lips. She kissed him passionately, tasting the head of his shaft and the delicious, salty sweetness of the tiny drop of pre-come at the very tip.

Groaning, he drew her down the full length of his cock, letting her bathe his shaft in her warmth. She felt him throb and grow. He made a single thrust, deep to the back of her throat and then exploded, his pent-up passion releasing in the form of warm stickiness, which she eagerly swallowed.

His orgasm seemed to last forever. She relished his sighs, which sounded replete and deeply satisfied.

Afterward he lifted her to her feet and brought her back to the bed. She licked her lips, watching him work, his muscles so lean and powerful as he undid the rope between her thighs, freeing the lower part of her body.

He left her upper body bound, much to her delight. There was no mistaking his intent, given the state of his cock, which was already half hard again, despite Trace's recent climax.

Quickly, she surveyed his body, trying to memorize the moment. What an incredible specimen he was, from his intense azure eyes to the firm jawline. How she loved his broad shoulders and narrow waist, his rock-hard abdomen and dreamy pectorals.

The last thing she noted was that cock of his, the one that had so completely filled her mouth, not to mention her thoughts all through the wedding. So much so that she had nearly flubbed her speech at the reception.

As it was, the little talk with Candace that morning was just what Zoey had needed to put her in a warm, light frame of mind. She really did love her big sister. Candace had admitted her many missteps, but she'd had a lot of responsibility at a young age. Their talk had also given Zoey some confidence in herself. Something she had badly needed.

What she needed now though, no one but Trace could give her. Unabashedly she spread her legs for him, waiting, anticipating.

"Are you going to tie my ankles?" she asked eagerly as he approached the bed.

"Why?" he growled, eyes on fire, his chest rising and falling with obvious desire.

"You planning on trying to escape?"

She giggled. "I might."

"Just try it," he said, climbing onto the bed.

Zoey squealed as he grabbed hold of her ankles, raising them playfully into the air.

"That work for you, Next Door Zoey?"

"It will do for now."

He flashed a fierce glance in her direction and next thing she knew, he was on top of her, pressing his body to hers, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. He positioned his cock directly between her inner thighs. Her pussy was more than ready. She offered no resistance as he lowered himself, pushing his cock into her, claiming his territory, sliding to the hilt as if it had always been there, as if it belonged there...forever.

He began to thrust in and out of her in earnest, her upper body still utterly constrained in the ancient way of *shibari*, the very thing that had brought them together and also her code word for escape. Who said life wasn't ironic?

"I'm going to come," she moaned, caught off guard at her body's readiness.

It was Trace's doing, the way he was managing to stimulate her clit, driving her wild, right to the edge and holding her there, firm and snug and safe.

Yes, there might be something here worth hanging onto, out of bed as well as in it, she concluded as the waves of pleasure overcame her, the rhythm matched to his thrusting release, his semen spurting deep inside her spasming pussy.

Zoey made a mental note to ask him out on a date. When they were done making love a couple hundred more times, that is.

"So I guess my nickname for you was right, after all," she mused. "You are *shibari* man...my *shibari* man."

His eyes twinkled. "You're getting a little possessive, aren't you?"

"Oh no," she said, twinkling back. "I'm getting a lot possessive and you better get used to it."

He smiled slantedly. "I could imagine worse fates."

She narrowed her gaze. "You really are incorrigible."

His dimples flashed as he gave her that sideways smile. "Would you have me any other way?"

"No," she admitted. "Not in a million years."

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities—barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading as in the writing.

Reese welcomes comments from readers. You can find Reese's website and email address on the <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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