

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



*Rigger*

KELLY  
JAMIESON

## **Rigger**

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Alek likes to tie up women. As a rigger, he's into the aesthetics of bondage—the pattern of rope against skin, the marks left in tender flesh—but he also likes the high of being in control and, yeah, it turns him on. When Alek needs a model to complete the photographs for his book on rope bondage, he asks his friend Shaela.

Shaela has known Alek since high school, and while she disapproves of his kinky sexual habits, he's a friend and she agrees to help. She's not prepared for the experience of being tied up. Being bound and helpless releases her from her everyday problems—her slave-driver boss, her unsatisfying career and her derogatory father. She's also helplessly aroused.

So is Alek. He sees how Shaela loves being bound, even though she doesn't want to admit it, and proposes they explore it together. Intrigued but nervous, Shaela agrees. Neither of them expects to learn the things they do about each other—and about themselves. And neither of them expects to fall in love.

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Rigger

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## **Chapter One**

"I am not letting you tie me up."

"Come on, Shaela." Alek rubbed his forehead. "I'm in a bind here."

Shaela laughed and leaned back into the overstuffed cushions of her couch. "In a bind! That's so funny."

"Seriously. I have a deadline and if I don't get started on these photographs right away I'm going to be in trouble."

Damn. Alek was not only her neighbor, he was a good friend, and he was so excited about this big contract he'd gotten to publish a book of his erotic photographs, she hated to think of something screwing that up.

"What about Brigit?"

"We broke up."

"Oh dear. What happened? She decided being a slave to a man wasn't her thing after all?"

"She wasn't my slave. Jesus, Shaela."

"Whatever." She waved a hand. His unique relationships with his girlfriends were none of Shaela's business, even though if she thought much about it she got a funny, quivery feeling way down low inside her. Because she totally disapproved of a woman letting a man tie her up and do kinky things to her. Alek's lifestyle was something they had agreed to disagree on a few years back when they'd reconnected after college.

"It was just done," he said dismissively. Apparently he didn't want to talk about that. Which was fine, because Shaela didn't really want to talk about her recent breakup with Ashton, either, only the last in a long string of disappointing, unsatisfying relationships.

"You must be able to find someone else." She sat up and leaned forward.

"I tried." He shoved a hand through his longish caramel-colored hair. "It has to be the right person."

"And you think I'm the right person for that?" She fell back into the cushions, giggling. "That's hysterical!"

"Well, you look good," he said, eyeing her. He stood in front of her, legs apart, hands on his hips.

Warmth heated her skin beneath her T-shirt and she hoped it didn't wash its way up into her face. She cursed that blushing gene that went along with fair, slightly freckled skin and reddish hair.

"Thanks," she said dryly, sitting up again.

"You know I wouldn't ask you unless I was desperate."

"Well, that makes me feel really good."

"I just mean...oh shit." He rubbed his face. "I mean, I know how you feel about this stuff, that's why I wouldn't ask you...dammit, nothing's coming out right."

She softened inside. "Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean."

"Come on, Shaela. Don't make me beg. You know I hate that."

"You prefer it when someone else is begging you."

"Yeah." He grinned, that stunningly gorgeous grin that had women falling at his feet. Literally. Although his sexual practices had first shocked her when she'd learned about them, over the last few years she'd grown to accept them if not approve of them.

"I don't know, Alek." She studied him. Deep down inside he was a good guy. They'd known each other since high school. He might have some kinky sexual preferences but he was a decent, honest, talented man. "I don't know if I want my face all over the place in a book about bondage."

"You've seen my photographs," he said. "No one will even recognize you."

His images were in fact beautiful—she had to admit it, even though she protested the subject matter. His erotic photography had been a sort of hobby, a sideline to his commercial photography business, but he'd generated so much interest with his website, he'd gotten the idea of doing a book. And deep down inside, she also had to admit, she was flattered he actually wanted to photograph her. It was the bound-and-gagged part that bugged her.

"Come on, Shaela. I signed a contract. They gave me an advance. I have to get this done. It's my first book and you know how much I want this."

Yeah, she did. She sighed. She met his eyes. And she realized her comment about him begging had been wildly off the mark, because the look in his amber-colored eyes was so mesmerizing and so compelling she almost felt she had no choice in this matter. And to her deep surprise she heard herself agreeing to help him.

"Thank god," he said fervently, and he reached for her hands and hauled her up off her couch. He enveloped her in a tight squeeze up against his big, hard body, then released her. "Thank you. Can we start tomorrow night?"

"Uh...sure. Why not?" She didn't have much else going on. Since breaking up with Ashton, her evenings and weekends were wide open, besides the late hours she often worked and twice a week Pilates classes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shaela, I need those drawings. Now."

Shaela looked up at her boss from where she stood at the photocopier and pressed her lips together. She was in the middle of making ten copies of the project plan for their four o'clock meeting, only five minutes away.

"They're on my desk," she said, tapping her fingers on the lid of the photocopier. "I'll bring them to you as soon as I finish this."

Slave Driver Sam scowled but returned to his office.



Photocopying. Geez. What a waste of her time and talent. These days she seemed to do more and more of that, not to mention creating spreadsheets and timelines, typing up minutes of meetings and even, dammit, ordering office supplies. She was an interior designer, not a damn secretary.

She loved her interior design job but was starting to wonder if Cadence Design Inc. was a good fit for her. She'd wanted to work for a big corporate design company, but she felt as if the creativity was being sucked out of her by long hours and too much tedious administrative work. She glanced at her watch, rolled her eyes. The four o'clock meeting was scheduled for an hour, but there was no way they were going to get through everything on the agenda, especially with Sam, who got off on irrelevant tangents and wasted everyone's time. And then he wondered why they were behind schedule.

She gathered up the documents and hurried back to her cubicle. She'd have to staple them after she dropped off the drawings for the project Sam had asked for. One of several projects. At least business was good.

Sam didn't even say thanks, just snatched the drawings from her and started studying them. "I thought we were changing this alcove..." he said.

"We did."

His thick black brows drew together above his glasses. "Really? But this doesn't look right."

She swallowed a sigh. "That's what you said to do."

He gave her a squinty look. "I don't think so, Shaela. Someone must have screwed up. Change it back the way it was."

He had to be freakin' kidding! They were already under the gun on this project. Her stomach tightened into knots and she slowly sucked air into her lungs through her nose as she took the drawings back to her cubicle.

"I want to see it first thing in the morning," he called as she walked out of his office. She squeezed her face into a tight grimace with her back to him.

In her cubicle, she threw herself into her chair at her desk and started to open her CAD program, but stopped. She had no time to do anything before the meeting. Shit.

She grabbed the copies she'd made earlier, hastily stapled them together, piled them up and grabbed her notepad before hurrying down the long carpeted hall to the meeting room.

At least she had attractive surroundings to work in, even though she was starting to wonder if this job was really right for her. The offices of Cadence Design occupied the thirtieth floor of Sloane Tower in downtown L.A. Walls of windows with views of the downtown skyline, sleek furniture, lots of plants and blonde maple wood created a light and airy space conducive to creative thinking.

Except she hardly had any damn time to be creative. Dammit.

She rushed into the meeting room, the last one to arrive, and slid the pile of photocopies down the polished maple table so everyone could take one. She dropped into the last empty chair as the meeting began.

Two hours later—had she called that right, or what?—her neck muscles throbbed and she felt a pulsing in her temples as she left the meeting room. And now she had to fix the designs before she left so she could hand them back to Sam first thing in the morning.

She chewed on her bottom lip as she worked, hoping she could still make it to Alek's studio for seven. Luckily his studio wasn't far from the office, but she could probably forget about eating dinner. She could have growled with frustration.

Finally. Done. She grabbed her purse and ran down the hall to the elevator, the last one in the office. Even Slave Driver Sam had gone home.

At least her crazy day had kept her mind from going back to what she was about to do in Alek's studio. Her stomach did a small cartwheel as she rode down the elevator, and heat flooded her body.

At exactly seven o'clock, she arrived at the studio, unsure of what to expect, which created more than a few butterflies flipping around in her stomach. She paused outside

the door, hand on the knob, bent her head and took a few deep breaths. She'd been running all day. That's why she felt so breathless and on edge. She blew out one last breath, and opened the door.

She walked into the studio, a huge open space in a converted old warehouse. The outside wall was buff-colored brick, with thick black blinds covering the two windows. Exposed beams crisscrossed the high ceiling. Her flip-flops scuffed against the worn and scarred hardwood floor as she strolled toward Alek at the far end of the room.

She was surprised to see another man there. "This is Marco," Alek introduced them. "He's a photography student and he's been helping me out at my studio to get some experience."

She guessed Marco to be in his early twenties, dark-haired, deeply tanned, buff shoulders and arms, pretty damn good-looking for a young kid. She flashed Alek a look that said, "This is bad enough, does there have to be someone else here to witness my humiliation?" and she was pretty sure he got it, but he just grinned.

"He's going to take some shots of me while I'm doing the rope work," he explained. "But those aren't for the book."

"But..." *But still.* She'd be naked not only in front of one of her best friends, but also in front of a stranger. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" She jerked her head.

Alek shook his head but he walked with her to the far end of the studio where his "office" was—a desk with two computers, a futon for guests to sit on, and a change room.

"I don't want to take off my clothes in front of him!" she whispered.

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "He's a photographer. He's seen it all. You're just another subject to him."

"Seriously, Alek, do you have to do that?"

"I don't have to. The pictures aren't for the book, they're just for me. But I want them. I can't capture images of myself when I work. It's kind of cool—the artist at work creating his art." He lifted one brow.

She pressed her lips together. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

They turned to walk back to the area he had set up for the photographs. A black metal light stand held one light up high on the right, and a large black board about four feet by eight feet was propped up on the left. A dark fabric background hung from ceiling to floor and spread out there, with a black wooden stool sitting in the middle. Marco held a light meter and checked readings as he flashed the strobe with a pop.

"Tonight we'll start with something simple," Alek said, picking up a coil of red rope.

Those butterflies inside her started beating their wings frantically. She couldn't believe she was going to do this.

"Are we ready?" He looked at Marco who grinned.

"You bet." Marco held up the camera.

They both looked at Shaela.

Time to take her clothes off. Oh boy.

"Not quite," she said, forcing a smile. "I, uh...where should I change?"

Alek tipped his head, the corners of his mouth lifting. "You can use the change room, if you want. Did you bring anything? A robe?"

"Um. No." She'd done her makeup the way he'd directed her to, with lots of dark eyeliner and shadow and a pale mouth, and all she'd brought with her was a lip gloss and eye shadow for touch-ups.

"Come here." He led the way to the change room, and when he opened the door he indicated a bathrobe hanging on a hook on the back of it. "You can put that on, if you want."

"Okay."

Stripping in front of two men was a bit too much for her. Although taking off a robe was only marginally less disturbing. She quickly took off her jeans and T-shirt, bra and panties, and pushed her arms into the soft terry robe.

She tied the belt around her waist, and looked at herself in the mirror before she left the small room. She'd straightened her long hair into a perfect shiny curtain. Her eyes, rimmed with dark makeup, glittered, her bottom lip quivered just a bit. Oh for god's sake. This was no big deal. Just some stupid pictures.

She opened the door and stepped out.

## **Chapter Two**

She stood beside the cloth backdrop, her hands curled around the tie of the robe. Alek was adjusting the fabric folds, not even looking at her. Marco looked down at the camera, so she undid the tie and let the robe slide off her shoulders and fall to the floor. Then she moved to the center of the fabric.

She stood naked in front of two men, shaking and shivering on the inside, doing her utmost to try to look calm and casual on the outside. No big deal.

Marco looked up and caught her eye, gave her a reassuring smile warm with male admiration. She lifted her chin just fractionally, heating up a bit on the inside. Then Alek straightened and turned around and she felt the heat of his gaze sizzle over her. She resisted the urge to bite her lip as he studied her, resisted the urge to look down at herself. She could feel her nipples tightening and her thighs quivering. Luckily it was warm in the studio with all those lights glaring down on her, revealing every freckle and dimple of cellulite, because gooseflesh wasn't all that attractive either.

Alek had stopped, hadn't moved, just looked at her, tension snapping in the air around them and she thought he looked as though he liked what he saw. Not that it mattered, but...strangely...it mattered.

Not sure what was expected of her, she shifted from one foot to the other, the fabric of the background coarse and crisp beneath her bare feet. She swallowed, the dryness in her throat feeling as if she'd swallowed sand.

Alek picked up the rope where it lay on the counter and dragged it between his hands in long, sensuous pulls to find the middle of it and make a loop, then carefully laid the loop over her head. She tensed, the idea of rope around her neck causing a tiny flare of panic inside her. But the loop lay on her back, below the nape of her neck, and when he began the first knot it was just above her bare breasts, far below her throat.

"You have to tell me if anything is hurting in a bad way," he said. "Pinched skin, pulled muscles, something going numb. Okay?"

"Okay."

The smell of the rope drifted up to her nostrils as he worked, a rich, earthy smell she recognized as hemp. She tried to ignore the flash of the camera as Marco shot, closed her eyes against it. At first the rope dragged silkily across her skin. A soft, teasing sensation as Alek made loops and knots in a series down the front of her body, his hands brushing the curves of her breasts, her tummy, her pubic curls. Then he wrapped the rope around her body, more loops that grew tighter, harder, like a fierce, wicked hug. As she felt her ankles gripped by circles of hemp, heat slid through her veins.

Alek moved behind her and pushed her shoulders so she sat on the stool. "Put your hands behind your back." She obeyed him, and the rope caressed her wrists, also gentle at first but then tightening into a flesh-burning grip.

At that moment, awareness slid over her of how extremely vulnerable she was. She couldn't walk. Her hands were bound. Her heart stuttered in her chest and her breathing picked up a rapid, shallow pace. She almost screamed, "Stop!" and leaped to her feet—except she couldn't. She choked down the words, determined not to wimp out of this.

Alek moved around in front of her. His face wore a look of intense, focused concentration that was deeply, incredibly sexy, and her tummy did a little flip of excitement. Whoa. Just whoa. No wonder he wanted to capture images of himself doing this. The liquid heat seeping down through her and into her pussy was so unexpected, she clenched every little muscle inside her and closed her eyes again.

Her muscles began to warm, and an ache started in her shoulders and across her chest. Her breasts seemed to be thrust so far out because of the position she was in, framed by loops of rope, she was hyperaware of them and the tingling tightness of her nipples.

She could hardly get air into her lungs and started to feel a little lightheaded, a little like she was floating. She blinked and tried to focus, but the sensations wrapped around her were like hands tightening on her body.

"Alek." The word leaked out of her mouth.

He looked up at her, then stood, apparently finished. "Are you okay? Does something hurt?" His eyes moved quickly over her.

"N-no. I just feel...funny."

His eyes met hers and something sizzled between them, some kind of connection that made her heart pound even more than it already was, and an intense desire to please him surged inside her.

"Tell me if something is pinching, or going numb."

She took a mental inventory of her body but there was nothing like that—she just felt wrapped in heat.

He still stared at her, then muttered something. It sounded far away, and she said, "What? What did you say?" She thought he'd said "subspace" but didn't know what that meant.

"Nothing." He moved closer, made some minute adjustments to the ropes, then walked over to Marco and took the camera from him. "Thanks, man," he said. "I think I'm ready now."

She decided to just let go and drift for a few minutes, barely aware of Alek moving away until the flash of a camera startled her eyes open.

Control. Focus.

This wasn't going quite like he'd expected. He'd intended to create a rope design using Shaela's body as a canvas of sorts, a background to display the art that became a part of the art, but he was acutely aware of her naked, gorgeous body at his hands.



Christ, it had been a long time since he'd had thoughts of Shaela like this. If she'd only known in high school how many times she'd driven him crazy with her bossiness, her smart mouth, her need to control everything, how he'd wanted to grab her, tie her up, gag her and fuck her senseless. He'd thought he was long over that craziness, but those forgotten feelings all came rushing back as he studied her pretty body.

She was tiny—fine-boned, only an inch or two over five feet, a little on the thin side, but she had nice breasts and small firm buttocks that always seemed to snag his attention despite the fact that they were just friends.

Alek took air slowly in and out of his lungs as he worked with the rope. He tried to pretend she was someone he didn't know, a model, a photographic subject. It wasn't as if he'd never seen her naked before. The tiny bikinis she wore to the beach didn't exactly cover much, but now he was making all kinds of interesting discoveries.

Like the fact that below a small fluff of auburn curls, her pussy was completely bare, the pretty lips pink and soft-looking between her legs. And her breasts were fuller than he'd realized and shaped so perfectly round he just knew they would fill his palm with a yielding softness. Her coral-pink nipples had tightened into perfectly suckable little peaks.

And the luminosity and texture of her skin—velvet and silk, warm and glowing. She was going to look amazing in the photographs. He could try not to touch her, but there was no way to wrap and tie and cinch without brushing over her flesh. The anticipation of seeing the marks of the ropes on her soft skin when he removed them sizzled through him.

The aching hardness of his cock made moving around her difficult. Hell, it made breathing difficult. And when he knelt in front of her and inhaled, he could have sworn he smelled feminine arousal mixed with the earthy smell of hemp. With her thighs closed together, he contemplated what he would discover if he parted them, causing another spear of arousal to his balls.

When his design was finally complete, he stood and surveyed her, walking around her. Her cheeks wore a peachy flush and her bottom lip was a little red and swollen as if she'd been biting it. He wanted to lick it. Her eyes had closed. She was hiding from him.

She was more affected by this than she wanted him to know, more than she probably wanted herself to know. He'd sensed the spark of panic in her when he'd immobilized her, but she'd let him continue, although she was either ready to freak out and scream to be released, or was having a small submissive sexual meltdown. Christ.

He moved to take the camera from Marco, and at the first explosion of light, her eyes flew open, dazed and blurry. He couldn't believe what was happening here. The expression on her face was exactly what he wanted to capture—the vulnerability, the fear, the nervous anticipation. Although still aroused himself, the excitement of creativity sizzled inside him and he continued firing shots, moving around to capture her from different angles.

"Tip your head back, Shaela. So your hair hangs down your back."

She followed his direction without a word, surprising the hell out of him.

Finally satisfied that he'd gotten enough, he set the camera down and walked to stand in front of her.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared up at him, helpless, bound, completely at his mercy. Power surged in him along with a visceral, ferocious need for more.

"What do you do?" she whispered.

After a short pause, he replied, "What do you mean, sweetheart?"

She blinked at the name, licked her lips and tried again. "When you have a girl tied up? What do you do with her then?"

He smiled down at her. "Anything I want."

## Chapter Three

The way her green eyes darkened told him a lot about what she was experiencing. Did she even realize what was happening? She'd be horrified when she came down from the high she was clearly riding.

He ached to touch her, the swell of flesh between loops of rope, the tight little nipples. He longed to lay her over his lap and spank those pretty buttocks, to fist his hand in her long fiery-gold hair and tug her head back, exposing her throat, to...

*Stop.*

"I'm going to untie you now," he said, moving behind her.

She moaned as if in protest.

Like the time in high school when she'd gotten drunk on some spiked juice at a party and had started to tell him about the porn websites she'd discovered, she'd be so embarrassed when this was over if he let her say any more. So for her sake he began to loosen the knots and unwind the rope from her body.

When he stood in front of her, fingers working at knots, he looked at her face and what he saw sent a jolt like two hundred twenty volts right through him. As their eyes met again, the exchange, the connection, confused the hell out of him. What the fuck was going on here? He'd done this so many times, with so many women, but doing this with Shaela was sending stabs of lust and power straight to his core.

He finished untying her. She rubbed her wrists, swiped her hands across her face, then sat quietly as he released her ankles. She was free. But still she sat there, taking deep breaths.

"Show me your wrists."

She obediently held her arms out in front, hands together, sending a hot rush through him, and he inspected them. Just a bit pink, no circulation had been cut off, and he lifted one arm to examine the marks, the impressions of the braided rope imprinted into her tender skin. It was so beautiful.

Unable to stop himself, he bent his head and kissed the marks, his chest tight.

When he lifted his head, Shaela was watching him.

"Don't move," he said, voice hoarse. "I want to get pictures of the marks."

He grabbed his camera again, focused in close on the imprints of the braided rope in her luminous skin, fired off shot after shot of different parts of her body.

When he was done, he reached for the robe lying in a crumpled pile of terrycloth on the floor and handed it to Shaela. She wrapped herself up in it, still looking a little dazed.

"Where's Marco?"

"He left a while ago. When I started shooting."

"Oh." She blinked. "I didn't even realize."

"I know."

Their eyes met and held for a long moment. She broke the connection first. "Well. I'd better get dressed. I mean...if we're done for tonight?"

"Yeah. For tonight. Tomorrow night okay for you?"

"After seven thirty," she said as she walked away. "I have Pilates class."

"Sure."

He twisted the battery compartment on the camera and removed the battery, then connected it to the recharger on the counter. He tucked the camera away in a camera bag, unplugged lights, lowered the light on its stand and put it away in its case as he waited for her to return. When she did, she seemed a little more composed.

"What's your plan for tomorrow night?" she asked.

"I thought I'd shoot against the brick wall, rather than a background. Different rope. Different design. Wear your hair up."

"I suppose the designs are endless."

"Yeah."

"It's kind of interesting," she said, the words sounding as if they were being dragged out of her.

He smiled. "Yeah."

She swallowed, then said, "I guess I'll go."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow night."

They lived in the same building, right across the hall from each other, but didn't usually cross paths during the day.

"Okay. 'Bye, Alek."

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaela managed to walk out of the studio on spongy legs, was able to stagger to her car and collapse into the driver's seat. But then she just sat there, staring out the windshield.

She felt as if she'd just been hit by a truck. What had happened in there?

Some kind of weird shit. She'd almost think the rope had contained some kind of drug that had permeated into her system like from a transdermal patch. But that was crazy.

She started her car. Maybe she'd tell Alek she couldn't do that again. She had this vague sense of uneasiness deep inside her that this might not be such a good idea, that she might have gotten herself into something she didn't want to.

Oh, for god's sake. It was some photographs. A little rope. No big deal. She shook her head. She'd said she'd help him and she would. She was no wimpy-assed female who got all flustered and fluttered at a little male attention. And it was Alek. Phhht.

They'd been friends for years. He wasn't going to try anything stupid with her when she was so helpless.

And why did that feeling inside her seem strangely like...disappointment?

\* \* \* \* \*

For once Shaela finished work at a decent hour, so instead of hanging around waiting for her Pilates class, she zipped over to her parents' place, hoping she might get there at dinnertime and score some food.

She walked into the house without knocking, the house she'd grown up in, so familiar to her, and called, "Anyone home? It's me."

"Shaela!" Her mom appeared around the corner from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel, her auburn hair pulled back into a youthful ponytail, dressed in cropped black pants and a short-sleeved, button-up white shirt. "Hi, sweetheart! What are you doing here?"

"Just stopped for a quick visit. I have to meet Alek at seven thirty, but thought I'd pop by. Haven't seen you for a while." She hugged her mom.

"That's so nice. Can you stay for dinner?"

Shaela grinned. "Sure."

"I roasted a chicken," Mom said, turning to go back into the kitchen.

"I could smell it when I walked in. Smells delish."

Her mom laughed. "Thanks." She busied herself checking a pot of something boiling on the stove—potatoes?—then stirred another pot of gravy. A nice, basic, unexciting meal. Like everything she'd grown up with.

"Is Dad home?"

"Should be any minute."

"How's work going for him?"

Mom gave her a twisted little smile. “Oh. You know. He complains a lot. Vents about his boss.” Her eyes shadowed. “They’re talking about layoffs.”

“Oh no.” Shaela frowned. “Dad would be okay, though, wouldn’t he? He’s been there forever.”

His career had never taken off the way he’d hoped. He’d started at the bank years ago, anticipating one day he’d be an executive at head office. He’d never gotten past managing a small branch, had watched younger men—and women, and had that ever pissed him off!—get promoted over him. Over the years, the bitterness had grown inside him and now Shaela had to wonder how much of an impact that rancor had on his career.

“I’m sure his job is safe,” Mom replied, opening the oven door. The rich smell of roast chicken wafted out on a cloud of steam. She lifted the roasting pan out and set it on a trivet on the counter.

“Maybe it would be good for him to find something new.”

Her mom’s eyes flew open wide. “That’s crazy! He’d never find another job at his age.”

“He’s not that old. What...fifty-six?”

“Yes.” Mom’s lips thinned. “It’s not easy to start all over when you’re fifty-six. And you know he doesn’t deal well with change.”

“Yeah.” Shaela’s mouth twisted. “I know.”

She knew. She knew how hard it had been every time she’d made one of those milestone changes—first job, first boyfriend, drivers license. As the older of two girls, she’d been the one to ease the way for her sister Bryn. And had taken the brunt of her father’s displeasure at every step.

The sound of the automatic door in the attached garage told them he was home. The door into the kitchen opened and her dad stepped in, dressed in a dark suit and

carrying a black leather briefcase. He brought that case home every night, always had, never touched a thing in it. Why did he bother?

"Shaela. Hi."

She smiled at him and moved toward him for a hug. He was still her dad, despite the hills and valleys of their relationship.

"What are you doing here?" His high forehead creased. Had his hair receded a little more since she'd last seen him? Turned a little more gray?

Something unplanned and spontaneous always disturbed him. Maybe she should have called. "Just dropped by to see you and Mom."

"She's staying for dinner," Mom added.

Shaela glanced at her watch. "As long as we eat right away. Remember..."

"Oh yes, Alek. You're seeing him." Her mother eyed her. "Are you and he..."

"No! We're friends. That's all. You know, we were friends in high school."

"It seems you see him a lot lately."

"We live across the hall from each other. I told him about the empty apartment and it was perfect for him, so he moved in there." She shrugged and grabbed knives and forks to set the table. "It's nice having a friend so close. I'm..." She started to say she was helping Alek with a project, but snapped her mouth shut. That would be kind of hard to explain.

Her dad frowned. "There's something about that boy..."

"He's not a boy! We're both twenty-nine."

"Whatever." Dad took his seat at the head of the dining table, where they ate every night, even if it was just the two of them, Shaela knew.

"I like him," Mom said, taking a seat. Shaela sat across from her. "He's very talented."

Dad made a rude noise. "Talent. What kind of living can you make taking pictures?"



“He does pretty well,” Shaela said, picking up the platter of chicken and forking some onto her plate. “In fact, I think he’s making a lot of money. And he...he has a book deal he’s working on.”

“Oh!” Mom’s eyes widened with delight. “That’s wonderful!”

Then her smile faded into wistfulness as she took the plate from Shaela, and Shaela knew she was thinking about her own art.

Shaela had seen that regret so many times, in wistful trips to art galleries and in how her mom had found outlets for her creativity in different places—doing art and crafts with her children, designing and sewing clothes for her daughters, decorating their home. Somehow her mother had never pursued the art career Shaela knew she’d wanted. She’d thrown her whole self into being the best wife and mother she could be, rarely showing her disappointment and lack of fulfillment in her own life, focusing instead on supporting her husband and nurturing her two daughters, but there’d been times when she couldn’t hide her dissatisfaction.

Now her dad rolled his eyes at the talk of Alek’s book. “How’s that job of yours going?”

She’d die before she’d admit to him some of the problems she was having at work. She smiled. “Great. Loving it.”

He shook his head. “Well, don’t get too settled. In this economy, businesses are laying people off left and right. You could be next.”

Shaela met her mother’s eyes and they exchanged a concerned glance. Was her dad really worried about his job? Anxiety gnawed at her stomach. Despite his chauvinistic, rigid ways, she loved her dad and it made her heart hurt to think of his careful life being so disrupted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alek waited for Shaela at the studio. Much as he’d wanted to ask Marco to take more photos, just so someone else was there and he was less likely to jump Shaela’s

pretty bones when she was tied up and helpless, he really didn't need that many photos of himself tying her up.

He'd studied the images on his computer at length earlier that day as he worked on them in Photoshop, the ones of the two of them, and the ones he'd taken of just her.

Stunning.

It excited him on so many levels. Professionally, his book would be awesome. He already had some images for it, which had sold his editor on the proposal he'd submitted, but he needed more, and he wanted them to be exceptional. And the ones of Shaela were definitely exceptional.

It also excited him on a personal level. But that had to be completely separate. Unmentionable. Inadmissible even to himself. Because Shaela was his friend. She disapproved of him. Well, not him, but she didn't like the whole liking-to-tie-women-up thing.

She didn't understand it.

But she'd loved it. He'd seen it last night. She just didn't want to admit it, even to herself.

Alek fired the strobe, checked the light meter. Made an adjustment to the f-stop. Fired it again. And then Shaela walked in.

It was hard not to see her differently after he'd studied all the emotions his photographs had clearly captured, and he struggled to maintain their usual easy banter and teasing insults.

"Hey," he said. "Nice hairdo. You look like a ballerina."

She'd swept her bright hair sleekly back off her face and she lifted a hand and touched the knot on the back of her head.

"You told me to wear it up." She sighed with exasperation.

"I'm kidding. It's perfect."

She looked around. "No Marco?"

"Not tonight."

"Oh. Okay. Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Go change if you want."

This time she'd brought a big leather tote bag, and when she emerged from the change room she wore her own robe, a silky flutter of peach and yellow butterflies.

"This rope design may take a little longer," he murmured as she dropped the robe.

"How did you learn how to do this?"

Talking was a good idea, so as he wrapped and knotted and tightened, he told her how he'd learned, first from books and the internet, then finally getting brave enough to venture to a club where they gave lessons. "What I do is inspired by Shibari," he said, tugging on the rope.

"Japanese bondage."

"Yes. Shibari means 'to tie' in Japanese. Kinbaku is the Japanese word for bondage, but people use Shibari now when describing bondage art. I mix my own techniques with Shibari techniques. My friend Evan is a rope master and I learned a lot from him. He's amazing. But mostly it's just lots of practice, trying new things."

"Lots of practice."

He smiled and adjusted strands so they were perfectly lined up around her body.

"How did you know?" Her voice had thickened a little. "I mean, how did you know you liked this?"

He grinned. "I was a Boy Scout. But I don't think Mr. Johnson would have approved of the ideas I had in my head when I was learning to do a square knot or a half hitch."

"Alek! You were a kid!"

He shrugged, still smiling. "I may have thought about it, but it's not like I was running around tying up the girls in the neighborhood."

"You waited 'til you were older."

"Yeah." He tugged the rope through a loop in long drags, pulled firmly on it and felt it cinch tighter around her body. She let out a tiny gasp. "Okay?"

She nodded. "Yes."

She'd closed her eyes again, but then opened them, her mouth firm with determination. He could see she was working hard at not being as affected by this as she was last night. It tickled him, that strong will to not get pulled into it. How successful would she be? She was one stubborn female, he knew that only too well.

"So it's the aesthetics of it that you like?" she asked. "The art?"

"Partly. I do love the look of it, the aesthetics, the patterns I create with the rope, the way it tightens on skin. It's partly an art, for me, but...it's more."

"Oh."

He left it there. This wasn't the time to be talking about the feelings he got from tying someone up. He was fighting those enough at the moment, and he wanted to follow her lead and keep their conversation on a different level.

"What happened with you and Ashton?" he asked. Pretty boy Ashton. Nice enough guy, but Alek had known all along how it would end. Ashton let Shaela walk all over him and Alek knew that would never satisfy Shaela in the long run.

She made a face. "The usual."

"Sucked in bed, huh?"

She choked on a laugh. "Alek!"

"Isn't that what it usually is?" He drew the rope through a loop, careful not to let the ends smack her in the face.

"I guess." She sighed. "I don't really know what it is. Something's wrong with me. I get bored after a while."

"It's not you. You're just going out with the wrong guys."

"They're all nice guys. I don't date asshole jerks."

No, she didn't, she dated nice, safe, boring dudes who let her call the shots on everything. Bah. He didn't want to continue this conversation either, a conversation about the kind of guy she should be dating. Hell.

When at last he'd finished and he'd adjusted everything to his own standards of perfection, he picked up his Nikon D3X.

"Kneel down on the floor." The hardwood floor was probably cold, but she did as he told her. "Hands over your head, palms flat on the floor." He'd bound her arms and torso separately, her legs unbound this time.

He moved closer to adjust her feet, her small toes tucked up against cold soles. There.

"You look incredible, Shaela." He moved around to shoot from different angles, even climbed the stepladder he'd set up so he could shoot down at her.

"You should shoot from the floor too," she said, sounding a little strangled, and it wasn't from any real constriction around her throat.

He paused. "Excuse me? You're trying to tell me how to take my pictures?"

A smile fluttered over her mouth. "It was just a suggestion."

He wanted to grin. Trust her to try to give orders while she was bound and helpless. Warm amusement and admiration swelled inside him so fiercely he had to shake his head.

"I'm in charge here," he said. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

He shot her a glance, expecting her to say more, but she crouched silently.

He continued shooting, and yeah, he lay down on the floor and shot up. He'd been planning to do that anyway.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'm done." He set down the camera and moved toward her to start unraveling.

"Do I get to see the ones you did last night?"

His hands went still as he considered that. "Do you want to?"

"I'm not sure."

"They turned out great." His fingers worked at a knot. "Really great. Thank you, Shaela."

"You're welcome. I guess I'd like to see them."

When he'd dragged the last inch of rope away, he had to fight the urge to reach for her and rub his hands over the marks left in her skin. It was a part of the experience he also loved – the aftercare, the treatment of the marks, massaging of aching muscles. But this situation was a little different.

She pulled the robe around her and tied it, then stood there absently rubbing her own wrists.

"Come on," he said, starting toward his desk. "I'll show you the images from last night."

He leaned over, one hand on the desk, one hand on the mouse and clicked into the folder where he'd saved them. First he brought up the ones Marco had done.

"Have a seat."

She lowered herself into the leather chair and rolled up in front of the monitor, and he shifted aside, still leaning forward to use the mouse. Her hair was level with his face and he caught that scent, that soft floral scent he knew as hers. Lily of the valley. Sweet and pure.

She stared raptly as he brought up image after image, the two of them as he'd tied her, then finally the ones he'd taken just of her. The low-key lighting created strong shadows with little detail, just dramatic, striking images. He'd shot in color, converted most of them to black and white in Photoshop. In some, the red rope was the only color in the image. Her face wasn't even visible in some images, in others it was, her submissive expressions fascinating. Arousing.

She didn't say a word and he wasn't sure what she was thinking or feeling as she watched the show.

"There. That's it."

She still didn't say anything. He watched her slight shoulders move as she breathed in and out. He straightened. Then she pushed back the chair and stood.

"Those look good," she said. She cleared her throat. "I'll go get dressed."

And she scurried into the change room, shutting the door firmly behind her.

He sat on the edge of the desk for a moment. Okay, good. He'd made it through another night with his control—and their friendship—intact. But he wasn't sure how many more times he could do this.

Why was he doing this again? His eyes fell on the monitor and the amazing erotic image there. Oh yeah. Yeah, that made it all worthwhile.

## **Chapter Four**

She didn't like it. Did. Not.

The ropes digging into her skin, embracing her with a dark delicious pressure, the vulnerability of being bound, the exposure she felt at being naked and helpless, at the mercy of a man. She did not like it.

The only reason she was going back again was because she'd made a commitment to a friend and she was going to do it. Last night she'd proved she could do it and maintain her composure. On the outside anyway. Inside she'd been at trembling mass of confusion.

And she was running late. Her boss had decided to call a two-hour team meeting at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon. What kind of sadist slave driver called a meeting at five o'clock on Friday? But it wasn't the first time, and it wasn't the worst thing he'd done either.

She walked into the studio, curious to know what would happen. A dark background was back in place, this time a huge roll of seamless black paper on a dowel suspended from the ceiling, rolled down to the floor and across it. The single light and the black board were in place.

And hanging from the ceiling, dangling right in the center of the black paper on the floor, right where she would stand, was a rope. She eyed it and rolled her lips in.

"Hey, you're here." Alek was seated at his desk working on his computer.

She turned to him. "Sorry I'm late. My boss is an asshole."

"Get naked."

His blunt order should have annoyed her but instead made her pussy clench hard, and she said nothing, just went into the small change room and...well, got naked. She



pulled on her robe and lifted her long hair from beneath it, shook it out. He'd said to leave it down again tonight.

Back out in the studio, she asked, "What's that for?" She indicated the rope hanging.

"Suspension."

She blinked. "You're going to hang me up?"

"Well, yeah. Don't worry, it'll be good."

Oh dear lord. Her tummy quivered.

"We're going to do a few different things tonight," he said enthusiastically. "Some of them are really simple. I've got this..." He held up a wooden pole.

She licked her lips and swallowed. "Okay."

He picked up a rope, tonight natural colored. "This isn't going to bind you so much as dress you up," he murmured as he began. He started as usual at her breasts and wound it around her body, but tonight, he did something he hadn't done before. "Open your legs."

She moved her feet to part her thighs.

"Wider."

Oh god. Oh god. He took the rope and slid it between her legs, on each side of her pussy where she was already wet and aching. He would know. There was no way he couldn't know.

She ended up wearing a rope corset of sorts.

He stood back. "Beautiful."

Her heart picked up its pace at the admiration on his face. But he had to be admiring his work—not her.

"Down on your knees. Right here."

His words sent a sizzle through her and the paper-covered floor met her knees in a hard kiss.

With another length of rope he bound her wrists and then he attached that rope to the one hanging from the ceiling, gave it a tug to ensure security, and began pulling, shortening the rope and lifting her arms higher and higher.

Oh dear lord. The pulling sensation on her arms and shoulders had her muscles tight and straining, and heat built. When her butt started to lift off her heels, he stopped pulling. He stepped back, checked her position.

She bit her lip, stretched up, breasts thrust forward.

“Perfect.”

He grabbed his camera. “Let your head fall back.” She did so and her long hair tickled the top curve of her butt.

“Let yourself go,” he said, his voice a rough croon.

The ropes were so secure around her wrists, multiple layers and twists, it didn’t dig in or hurt as she let her body sink down. She felt the weight of her body disappear, hanging by her wrists from the rope as Alek began shooting.

She fought it. She fought the warmth that flooded her body, radiating from arms and shoulders, the way her body went liquid, the flame that twisted inside her, the way her head wanted to empty.

She had to stay in the present, be aware, not let herself give in to the wicked, helpless sensations.

Last night she’d talked as he’d tied her and it had only been partially successful at keeping her head on straight. Tonight, though, she couldn’t form words, and after all the pressure and stress of her day, it felt so good to just let go, to let her head empty. But as she gave herself over to sensation, she began to drift on a dark, erotic cloud.

When Alek’s hands touched hers she blinked her eyes open. “Okay?”

She nodded as he lowered the rope and she could sink right to the floor.

"That was great," he said. He lifted the pole. "Now this." He attached the pole to the rope hanging from the ceiling with tight, firm knots. And then he had her sit cross-legged on the floor.

Her cheeks burned with her pussy exposed completely, outlined with thin ropes, as Alek lifted one arm, then the other, and bound them to the pole above her head, spread wide. He made adjustments to the height so it wouldn't be excruciating for her, but stretched her arms to their comfort limit.

Heat shimmered over her skin. Once again she was so exposed—breasts, pussy, everything—and once again she had to close her eyes at the shameful pleasure that swept over her body. Hot, liquid sensation flowed through her veins, and she let her head fall forward, hair sliding over her shoulders and breasts.

"Hmm. Don't want the hair in this one," Alek muttered. "Hold on."

Seconds later he was at her back, his hands sliding through her hair as he pulled it behind her. She loved having her hair touched and sparks sizzled from her scalp down her back as he stroked it, tugged it and then tied it with something, she didn't know what.

"There."

Her neck felt rubbery, as if she couldn't hold her head up, and again it dipped forward as she hung by her wrists, and though she tried not to, she started drifting again. Floating. Barely aware of Alek taking his pictures.

The heat in her muscles grew and intensified into a burning pain that was near agony. The thought vaguely entered her head to ask Alek to take her down. But she didn't. Because even though it burned, it burned so good.

She didn't even know what she was thinking anymore.

Then he was releasing her, so she could lower her arms, her wrists still cuffed with ropes.

"Let me rub your shoulders," Alek said. Her vision dark and blurry, she let him massage her shoulders, his strong fingers digging into tight muscles across the top, then down to her deltoids, so wickedly sweet as her aching muscles relaxed under his touch. He continued that for a few moments as she slowly breathed in, breathed out, breathed in, her head lolling helplessly. "Now, lay down."

He helped her as she lowered herself to the paper, the floor hard beneath her shoulder blades. He lifted her arms above her head, parted her legs. Nearly unable to move of her own volition, she let him touch her legs and arms, only vaguely aware of how revealed she was. He took more photos while she lay there, eyes closed, the flash creating a red haze behind her eyelids.

"Okay," he finally said, sounding very far away. "Done."

She still couldn't move. Her wrists still bound, she lay there, and when she dragged her eyes open she saw Alek standing there staring at her, eyes hot, so hot sensations sizzled across her flesh. A spear of need stabbed into her, so intense it hurt, and she made a small noise.

Their eyes met and held.

Alek held her fragile, bound wrists in his hands, his mouth against the pulse fluttering wildly in one wrist, and lust sliced through him. Drawn to her as if invisible ropes snaked around them and tightened between them, he moved closer. And then with identical groans, beautiful naked little Shaela was in his arms, his mouth on hers, devouring her, her bound hands pressed between them as she strained toward him, both of them sitting on the paper-covered floor.

One hand swept down the satiny skin of her back as their tongues slid together, his other hand slid up, cupped the nape of her neck, then speared into her hair to hold her head. A ravenous hunger swept through him, to consume her, to dominate her, to own her – so intense it was shocking.

Her hands tugged at his T-shirt, unable to do much with it in their bindings, and he released her long enough to wrestle the shirt over his head, then returned to her for more kisses, hot, wet kisses.

He groaned and rose to his feet, pulling her with him, and then scooped her up in to his arms. He strode across the studio, out of the bright light and into shadows, over to the futon where he lay her down.

He stared down at her, her bright hair a halo around her head on the black cover of the futon, as he undid his jeans. Low riding and loose, they dropped easily to the floor, his cock throbbing painfully beneath the black boxer briefs he wore.

She still wore his rope, hot as hell. He wanted to fuck her with that rope wrapped around her little body.

A flash of sanity had him hesitating. This was Shaela. His friend. She was bound and helpless.

"Don't stop," she whispered, watching him with beseeching eyes that there was no fucking way he could resist.

"Shaela. What are we doing? This is crazy."

"I know. I know." Her head rolled against the cushion. "We shouldn't do this, but god, Alek, I'm so hot, I'm burning up."

He stripped off his underwear and half fell on her. He was so much bigger than she, a feeling of power slid through him, twisted up with a peculiar tenderness and protectiveness. A desire to dominate her and yet to look after her.

He reached for her hands and lifted them above her head. Her chest rose and fell, those pretty breasts outlined with rope quivering, nipples pebbled and tight.

He was losing control. He knew it, but it was like a tidal wave washing over him, he couldn't stop it. He'd never lost control like this. What was she doing to him?

He held her wrists with one hand, stroked the other over her collarbone, over the top curves of her breasts, let her nipples brush his palm, then swept his hand down her

side, over her waist, hips, thigh. He straddled her, pinning her legs, and recognized the look of helplessness on her face. And yet, her eyes sparkled. Her cheeks flushed. And when he shifted and shoved her thighs apart, he found a well of liquid honey, hot and melting. Jesus.

The warm scent of her rose to his nostrils, kicking up the burn inside him to a wildfire. His mouth watered to taste her but he'd have to release her wrists. He leaned over her and traced his tongue along the rope, above her breasts, below her breasts.

She made a low noise deep in her throat as he let go of her wrists, but kept her arms above her head. He licked his way down her torso to the puff of curls and pressed a kiss there, inhaled the sweet scent of her. He urged her thighs farther apart and studied her pussy, probably the prettiest pussy he'd ever seen, as he'd observed when he'd just photographed it. Oh man, he was in such deep trouble here.

He leaned in for a taste, lapped at her sweetness, felt her juices spilling onto his tongue. She quivered and twitched at his touch and he smiled as he kissed her pussy again. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her to his mouth, closed his mouth over her clit and sucked. Her hips jolted in his hands and she cried out.

"Taste so good, sweetheart. So sweet."

Her harsh breathing and pulsing pussy told him she was about to come and he pulled back. Another soft cry, this time dismay.

He rolled off the futon and dug into a desk drawer for a condom—another thing he'd learned from Scouts, "be prepared"—then rolled it onto his cock, rigid and engorged. He knelt between her thighs and met her eyes.

"Shaela."

"Don't! Don't ask me! Just do it!"

Fuck, yeah. He got it. He got her, knew exactly what she meant.

He pushed into her in one thrust, making her gasp. Her soft breasts shifted on her chest in a most appealing way with each lunge. He lifted her legs, hooked his arms

under her knees and bent them back, drove into her in fierce, fast strokes, electricity sparking up and down his spine from his balls to his brain. Her pussy gripped him with a hot velvet clasp, rippling around him. Every nerve ending tightened, every muscle clenched and sweat beaded on his forehead. Jaw tight, teeth gritted, he surged in and out of her, tension spiraling inside him, his balls drawn up and throbbing.

He released one leg, slid a hand between them to find her clit, hoping she was as close as he was. He used his thumb on the straining little bud, and a series of soft panting cries came from her parted lips, her head turning from side to side on the futon. So damn beautiful. He drank in the sight of her, tiny and perfect, bound by his rope, filled with his cock.

“Yes. Yes...oh.” She arched and trembled and tightened as she came, and he went over the edge too, reckless, out of control, in long pulsing jerks inside her.

When his mind stopped spinning and his heart thudded slower, he realized he held Shaela close to him, wrapped in his arms, and he breathed in the soft floral scent of her hair.

Jesus fucking Christ, what had they done? He’d just fucked his best friend, a woman who thought he was a sick, perverted sadist.

## **Chapter Five**

She was going to die.

Shaela lay there in Alek's arms, damp and sweaty, her skin clinging to his, her hair spread all over both of them as she went into horrified shock.

Oh. My. God.

Her brain raced around in frantic circles trying to process what had just happened. She'd actually had sex with him. Alek. Her good friend. A man whose sexual habits made her cringe with disapproval, whose beliefs were the antithesis of everything she believed a relationship between a man and woman should be.

Shame at being so aroused by being helpless and bound by him burned inside her. She could not be feeling this way. It had to be because she was naked and he'd been taking provocative erotic photographs of her that she'd felt so desperate and needy.

She tried to ease away from his warm embrace, temptingly comforting, seductively caring. His hands tightened on her and he lifted his head to look down at her. Their eyes met in a long, tortuous exchange.

"Oh Christ," he groaned.

"Yeah. Exactly."

"I'm not going to apologize. You wanted that too."

"No, I didn't." She felt compelled to disagree with him but her voice came out so small her protest was laughable.

And he did laugh. But it was full of warm affection. "Bullshit."

"We both just got carried away. It was bound to happen, shooting sexy pictures like that."



He rolled off her, taking his big warm weight away and leaving her free. Cold. She studied him as he walked to the wastebasket and dropped the condom into it, eyeing his body, which she'd always known was hot—wide, heavily muscled shoulders and chest, tapering to flat, defined abs and narrow hips. But seeing him naked after having just had him inside her was way different than seeing him at the beach in a pair of board shorts. Way different.

He returned to her and carefully untied her wrists, lifting each arm to press a gentle kiss to the marks there. A deep yearning blossomed low inside her. For what? She pressed her fingers to her eyes, filled with confusion.

He sat down on the futon near her hip and touched his fingertips to her face. "Don't you see what's going on, Shaela? Haven't you figured it out? After these nights here?"

What was he talking about? She stared back at him, his fingers on her face seductively sweet.

"I could see it," he said, rubbing his thumb across her bottom lip. "I could see it in your face as I arranged the rope around you. I felt your fear—when you realized how vulnerable you were. I could see that you wanted what I was doing to you."

No. She wanted to argue with him, to deny what he said, but the words wouldn't come out. His gaze pinned her to the mattress of the futon. His fingers moved to the rope that still circled her body, and began to remove it. He lifted and shifted her body, and the rope's velvet roughness scraped her sensitive flesh as he pulled it off.

He looked down at the marks on her body and traced his fingers over them, rubbing gently. "You look so beautiful with my marks on you," he murmured, and when his fingers dipped between her legs where the rope had been, she twitched. Her body hummed.

"Don't you recognize what's inside yourself, Shaela?"

Her mind was starting to drift away again at the touch of his hands on her, rubbing and massaging tender places.

"Shaela?"

She tried to focus on his face, tried to remind herself they shouldn't be doing this, but pleasure was licking over every nerve ending, heating her up yet again.

His face. His burnt-sugar-colored hair hanging over his forehead, his topaz eyes rimmed with dark lashes, his perfect mouth with its full bottom lip and sharply carved upper lip. She lifted a hand to touch, rasped her fingers over a scruff of whiskers on his jaw, traced a high cheekbone, then one silky eyebrow. He watched her intently.

"You don't want to answer me, do you?"

"Answer what?"

His mouth curved into a smile.

"Do you want me to show you?"

A frown tugged at her eyebrows. "Show me what?"

"What's inside you."

She moved her head back and forth. She had no idea what he was talking about, she'd lost her ability to focus her thoughts much earlier in the evening.

He leaned over her and kissed her, and once again even though she knew she shouldn't, she kissed him back. Because he tasted so good. Because his mouth felt so good on her, warm and firm. Because she loved the slide of his tongue into her mouth.

"You like being tied up, don't you, Shaela?" He licked her mouth. "Admit it."

Her eyes flew open wide. What the hell was he saying?

She jerked her head to the side to avoid his mouth. She put her hands on his chest and shoved. Hard.

He jerked back. His brows snapped together.

"What are you saying?" she demanded. "Get off me."

"No."

Her eyebrows shot up. Her mouth opened. His weight pinned her to the mattress but she began to struggle anyway, although how she thought she was going to get a

man who probably weighed eighty pounds more than her off, she had no idea. And a thrill of excitement shivered over her.

Oh dear god, he could not be right about this. It was insane. It was what she hated, what she'd fought against every day of her life.

"You're crazy!" she said through gritted teeth, still pushing at him. "That is not who I am! You know that!"

"I used to know it," he said, voice low and husky near her ear. "But since we started doing these photos, I've seen inside you, Shaela. I've seen things you don't want me to see. Things you don't want anyone to see." He kissed the side of her neck then licked it. She shivered. "Things you don't want yourself to see."

"No." She closed her eyes. "No."

She could admit to getting carried away by being photographed in erotic poses by an attractive man. She could even consider the possibility that she was attracted to Alek as more than just a friend, although that was a terrifying thought. But the idea that she wanted him to do wicked things to her...

A shiver ran over her. No. No, no, no.

"Alek, truly. I'm serious. I'm not like that. Please. Let me up."

He went very still, then sat up straight. She looked into his face. She expected to see anger. Annoyance. Frustration.

Instead she saw understanding. Affection. Patience.

"Okay. But first, we have to settle something."

"Wh-what?"

Her breath came in shallow sips of air.

"You think you're not into being restrained."

"That would be right. Yes."

"But I think..." He stroked a hand down her arm, exquisitely gentle and warm, to her wrist where he let his fingers lay against her pulse. "I think you don't actually know much about it, and what you do know is based on myth and stereotype and...fear."

She blinked at him, her bottom lip quivering.

"And I also think that what just happened between us has been brewing for a long time. I know I've had thoughts about you in the past... Will you admit the same?"

Her breathing had stalled altogether now, her chest tight. "Alek..."

"Can you honestly say you've never thought about us...together?"

No. She couldn't honestly say that. Especially since they'd met up again after college, and she'd seen how he'd changed, how much bigger, stronger, more masterful he was...a man. How she'd felt a shameful, prurient interest in his unconventional sex life. But those thoughts had always been kicked out and the door slammed shut behind them, because there was no point in going there.

"I'm afraid, Alek."

"I know. It's okay. I am too."

"You're never afraid. Of anything. You're fearless."

His eyes shadowed and flickered, but he smiled and circled her wrist tenderly with his fingers. "That's not true. Some things scare the shit out of me."

"Like what?"

"Like bats."

She gasped out a laugh. "Bats!"

"Yeah. I hate bats. That's why I never go into caves."

He was talking crazy but it was strangely softening her anger.

"And bad photographs. Of course. And liver."

"You're afraid of liver. Well, that I can understand."

"So, can you say that?"

It took her a couple of seconds to remember what he'd asked her and she turned her head from side to side. "No. I can't say that. I have thought about it. About...us."

"It could be good. You and me. I like to tie women up. You like to be tied up."

No, she didn't.

Oh hell.

It was exciting. Exhilarating. Terrifying.

"But Alek...we're so different."

His thumb pressed into her wrist and then he drifted his hand back up her arm, lingering in the tender bend of her elbow. "I'd say we're not really so different. If you're willing to take a chance and find out."

Was she? His eyes drew her in, captivated her, made her feel as if anything was possible and this wasn't really so crazy.

"Do it, Shaela." His voice was a black velvet rasp. "Do it. Come with me and let's see where we end up."

"I won't be controlled," she whispered, holding his gaze. "I won't be a slave to a man. I won't be humiliated. I don't want to be whipped or chained up or forced to wear a collar."

"That's not what I'm into," he assured her. "I would never force you to do something you didn't want. I promise you that. But you have to promise me something in return."

"What?"

"Promise me you'll be open-minded to trying new things together. That you won't close your mind to the possibility that there are things you might like."

His words hung between them, important and crucial. How could she say no to that reasonably worded request? How could she not want to be open-minded? And he'd already promised he wouldn't do anything she didn't want.

"All right. I promise."

He leaned in to kiss her, a gentle, lingering kiss, a meeting of their mouths that felt like it sealed a promise.

“Perfect. Let’s go home.”

## **Chapter Six**

His control balanced on a knife-edge, need surging through his bloodstream, lust kicking him in the balls and pulsing inside him. He wanted her. He had to have her.

But this was about trust – gaining her trust, taking things slow.

It was going to kill him.

Inside her apartment, he closed the door behind them and twirled her around, crowded her up against it and kissed her. He crushed her between the hard wood of the door and the hard wood in his jeans, reached for her hands and pressed them to the door above her head as he took her mouth, licked along her bottom lip and then inside. She tasted sweet, like cotton candy, like warm, delicious woman, and an insatiable, rapacious hunger rocketed through him.

Her supplicating moans inflamed him, the fire inside licking higher and hotter, and need exploded in his brain. He almost lost it. Gritting his teeth, he pulled back a little and rested his forehead on the wall above her, panting.

“Bed,” he gasped hoarsely.

“Yes.”

He stepped away and she moved away from the wall, her mouth swollen, eyes glittery. She took his hand in her small one and led him to the wall of bookshelves that divided her bedroom from living space in the open loft apartment.

Her bed was a low platform bed with a solid headboard, he noted disapprovingly. Not many options for ropes or cuffs. They’d have to use his bed, with the slatted headboard and footboard. But not tonight. Tonight there would be no restraints.

None.

She'd already taken off her T-shirt. "Wait," he said in a low voice. "I want to undress you. I want to unwrap you slowly. Like a special gift."

Her eyes darkened and she let the T-shirt fall to the rug at her feet. He swept a hand over the curve of her shoulder, so slight and tiny, bent his head to kiss the tender spot where neck met shoulder. He inhaled her scent, soft and floral, and licked her flesh to taste her sweetness. Nectar. He nibbled his way up the sensitive skin of her neck, took her earlobe between his lips and gently sucked. Then nuzzled her hair, her cheek.

His hands explored her arms, the smooth sweep of her back, the quivering muscles of her belly. He found the button of her jeans, low on her hips, and slowly lowered the zipper. Parting the denim, he pushed it down over her hips and thighs inch by inch. The scent of her arousal rose to his nostrils and made him dizzy.

He dropped to his knees in front of her and carefully helped her step out of the jeans, leaving her in her peach lace bra and panties. "Very pretty," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the fragrant triangle covering her curls.

He rose to his feet, amused at how much taller than her he was. He could pick her up and fuck her with no problem at all. He stripped out of his own clothes, right down to nothing, his throbbing cock bobbing and jerking in front of him. Then he did pick up Shaela, but he gently laid her down on the bed, after yanking back the pouffy duvet that covered it. She watched him with big eyes, focused on him, holding his gaze steadily as he trailed a finger down her chest between her breasts, then lower to the subtle groove bisecting her abdominal muscles to the dip of her navel.

Patience. Control. Breathe.

"Wanna take things slow this time," he murmured, studying the elegant stretch of her legs. She wasn't tall but her legs were long in proportion to her body, long and curved just right. He measured them with his hands, found sensitive places inside her knees, behind her knees, then lifted each small foot and kissed the instep.

And still she watched him.

"Beautiful, Shaela. So beautiful."



She blinked and her mouth quivered into a tiny smile.

He kissed her ankles. Licked up her thighs. Dipped his tongue into her bellybutton and she jerked in response.

This time he wanted to spend more time on her breasts, those luscious soft mounds of perfection. He cupped them through the lace, felt them swell against his palms, then pulled the cups down beneath them. Oh yeah.

“This is what I wanted to do all night,” he muttered, staring down at her, his mouth watering with the need to taste. He bent his head and kissed one tight nipple, licked it, teased it with his teeth. He looked up at her face. Her eyes had drifted closed and mewling noises came from her throat. He moved to the other nipple and let his fingers play with the damp tip he left behind. “Your nipples are sensitive, aren’t they?”

She moaned and he sucked harder, plucked harder, and her hips started lifting and seeking. She was getting hotter.

He slid a hand under her back to unfasten the bra, dragged it away, down her arms. Soft flesh filled his hand, her puckered nipple rubbed his tongue and he groaned too.

“Alek.”

“Mmm.” He licked.

“I need you. Inside me.”

“Mmm. Soon, baby.” He tugged on her nipple again, squeezed a breast then slid down her body.

Once her panties were gone, he continued to explore with fingers and tongue, slowly, leisurely—except for the throbbing in his balls that threatened to rip apart his careful control. He focused on her, on the warm scent of her passion, the sweet taste of her nectar as he coaxed more and more from her with his mouth and his hands. Her thighs shifted restlessly. This time she’d come in his mouth.

He kissed her folds, soft kisses, tiny licks and flicks of his tongue, her flesh so smooth and feather-soft. He parted her with his thumbs to taste deeper, to plunge his tongue inside her.

"Tell me how it feels, Shaela."

"Oh god." Her head tossed on the pillow.

"Tell me. Tell me you like it."

"I love it! God, Alek, it feels so good. More..."

"More?" He licked up the sides of her again. "More where?"

"My...my clit. Please lick me. Lick my clit."

Her begging turned him so hot, like wildfire raging through his veins. He lifted his head to look one more time before he gave her what she wanted, drawing the anticipation out, building her need to a fever. Her pink tissues had flushed to crimson, swollen and gleaming, creamy liquid leaking from inside her. Her clit protruded, swollen and quivering. Now.

He leaned in and kissed it, a gentle puckered-up kiss. Then another. She groaned and her hands reached for him.

"Please."

He licked. A long slow swipe of his tongue over the straining bud, and then another, and then he pressed the flat of his tongue against it and rubbed. Her body convulsed, her fingers tightened in his hair and she cried out.

And he sucked. Pulled the nub into his mouth and sucked hard, felt her body explode. He pushed a finger inside her and the tight muscle contracted hard around it in fast, rhythmic pulses as she came, her fingers so tight in his hair his scalp sizzled.

He almost came too, had to reach deep for every bit of control he possessed, her pleasure echoing through his body in deep pulsations.

He kept her on the edge as long as he could with his mouth, until the hands on his head started pushing instead of pulling. "Stop, stop," she hissed. "I can't take...any...more."

One last suck, a gentle lick and he lifted his head to look at her face. Cheeks pink, eyes closed, mouth parted, she was sexy as hell. He moved up over her body and kissed her, his mouth wet with her cream, plunged his tongue into her mouth to share her taste.

"Good girl," he murmured. "Gonna make you come again."

"No, no." Her head rolled on the pillow and her eyes fluttered. "I can't. Not yet."

"We'll see."

She might be sensitive but he thought he could judge it. But damn, he needed a condom. He had to roll off the bed and find his jeans to dig out the ones he'd stuffed in a pocket as he'd left his studio. He quickly gloved up and returned to the bed, fell over her, propping himself up with his arms. He gazed down at her.

She met his eyes. Smiled.

His heart contracted and faltered. This was Shaela. Sweet, beautiful little Shaela. His friend, the girl he'd lusted after unsuccessfully all through high school, the girl he'd never totally forgotten. And now she was lying beneath him, soft and wet and his.

With a groan, he found her entrance and pushed into her, as gentle as he could be, but he was losing it, and losing it fast, his restraint shattering. Flames licked over his body, sensation sizzled from his balls, ready to explode. He wanted to fill her, with his cock, with his semen, and he hated the damn latex between his flesh and hers. They'd have to talk and get rid of that necessity right away.

Small muscles tightened around him, rippled and pulled him in, her heat burning him. She was tiny and delicate—was he pushing too hard? Too fast? He studied her, gauged her reaction. He smoothed hair back from her damp face. She was okay.

He pushed in deep, stroked her inside. "I love how you feel," he groaned. "Tight and hot around my cock. Your pussy is so fucking sweet, Shaela."

He felt his dick push right to her womb, watched her face tighten and flush as he started to take her up again. "Oh yeah. Yeah, baby, come on. Come with me."

He let go, let it build, higher and hotter, burning, soaring. He slipped a hand to where they joined, found that sweet clit again and took her over with him in a blinding, deafening explosion of pleasure so intense the world went black around him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, Alek lay staring into the darkness of Shaela's bedroom. He'd deliberately gone easy with her, knowing he needed to build her trust and slowly bring her to accept the things he wanted to do to her. But man, his control had been severely tested, which shocked him. Holy shit.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe hooking up with a friend was a bad idea. But dammit, it felt right. It felt fucking incredible. He was overreacting. Probably just because it was Shaela, someone he knew and liked already. That must be what was making this so intense.

He could do this. She was perfection when it came to tying her up. She reacted just how he liked, she was beautiful and it would be a huge rush teaching her how to go deep inside herself and abandon herself to ultimate pleasure. He could do this without getting emotionally involved, like he always did, even though he felt strangely unsettled.

He tried to calm the swirl of emotions and thoughts, took several long deep breaths, and let himself drift into sleep with Shaela's small body curled up sweetly next to him.

## Chapter Seven

"So," Alek said the next morning, propped up against pillows in her bed beside her, arms behind his head revealing tufts of dark hair beneath his arms. Shaela admired the way his muscled chest spread wider in that pose and the paler underside of his arms emphasized the bulge of his biceps. "What should we do today?"

"I have to go to work."

"What?" His eyebrows pinched together. "On Saturday?"

"Yeah." She sighed and plucked at the duvet cover. Her body felt soft, luxuriously, voluptuously replete. She never wanted to leave this bed. "Remember last night I was late? My boss called a team meeting to tell us about some changes to the project I'm working on. I need to go in and do some work on the plans. It's a big new Hilton hotel."

"Well. Shit." The corners of his mouth tipped down. "I thought we could check out the new exhibition at Gallery 227."

"Oh." Disappointment sifted through her. "That would be nice. I've heard it's good."

"What time will you finish? Maybe we could still go later. Then get some dinner."

"I'll see." She bit her lip, thinking. She might be able to finish by three. "I could call you when I'm done."

"Yeah. Okay." He reached a hand out and stroked her shoulder. "You work long hours, Shaela."

"So do you."

"Yeah, but I'm my own boss and I do what I have to do."

"I love my job too."

"I know."

Even when they'd studied art together in high school, they'd each known what career path they were going to follow, Alek with his photography and Shaela with her interior design. But Alek was fully aware of her recent dissatisfaction with her job as well as her intense love of design.

She spent the afternoon in her cubicle, poring over blueprints and budgets and engineering reports. She wasn't the only one in working that Saturday afternoon, and when Pilar and Natalie invited her to go for coffee, she regretfully declined, anxious to get as much done as she could and get out of there.

To see Alek.

Her tummy softened and fluttered thinking about him and what they'd done last night. It had been incredible—no weirdness because they were friends first, just magic. Bewitching, sizzling magic.

And he wanted to take her out—like on a date. That was so...exciting. Confusing, but exciting.

She glanced at her watch. She could zip through some emails and be done in twenty minutes. So she picked up the phone and called Alek. "I'm pretty much done," she told him, phone tucked between shoulder and ear as she tapped at the keys of her keyboard.

"Be there in twenty," he said. He'd insisted on driving her to the office so he could pick her up and they could go straight to the gallery. She'd worn leggings, a flowered short baby doll dress and a gauzy scarf draped around her neck, knowing she wouldn't have time to go home and change after.

His Jeep was parked at the curb on the street when she emerged from the office tower. She slid into the passenger seat.

He leaned over and kissed her mouth, so naturally, so easily and yet so sexily it melted her. They shared a smile and then he put the car in gear.

The exhibit at the gallery wasn't quite what she'd been expecting, featuring original erotic paintings by an artist named Tanh Karstell.

"Can't get you away from the erotic images," she murmured as they studied the paintings on the wall.

Alek slanted her a grin. "Nope. Check this one out." He took a few steps, drawing her along with her hand enveloped in his. They both regarded the picture of a nude man in a crouched position, his body heavily muscled.

"Nice. You never photograph men."

He laughed. "Not yet anyway."

"Would you?"

"Sure. Men's bodies can be beautiful too."

They strolled on to the next. "Would you...tie them up?"

"Uh...no."

"Why not?"

He stopped and looked down at her, his mouth curved with amusement and affection. "Trust you to ask the tough questions."

"It's sexual for you, isn't it?"

"Yeah. That's part of it. It's beautiful and artistic. You know I'm a visual person." Obviously. A photographer would have to be. "I think women are beautiful and I like to create something aesthetically pleasing on the female body. But it's also...arousing. Like any good art, it touches me inside. And..." He shrugged. "It's fun. Challenging. I love the creative energy I get from it and the sensuality of it."

"Are there...lots of women who like...to be tied up?"

He moved her hair back off her face with a gentle hand. "Yes. There are. Don't think it's weird. There are a lot of women who like to be restrained. There's pleasure to be had from that, no doubt about it. When she's bound and helpless and motionless, a woman can abandon herself to sensation, and have a sexual freedom she's never had before. All she can do is surrender herself to the ropes, embrace the ropes and let the ropes take her almost into another dimension. But there's a difference between just

being restrained and Shibari. Shibari doesn't just restrain you. The pattern of the rope puts pressure on different places and gives you pleasure. And that's part of the fun and the challenge for me—designing it so it's not just beautiful, but it gives the most pleasure I possibly can."

Her stomach swooped in memory of just how much pleasure. She stared at him wordlessly for a long moment then managed to say, "I thought it was about control. And pain."

"Control is part of it, yeah. But it's not always about inflicting pain and suffering. It's about inflicting pleasure, about giving a woman something so intensely pleasurable it takes her on a high. So, even though it's an art, I'm not interested in doing it on men. Although, if a Femdomme wanted to tie up her subbie, I'd photograph it."

Lord, what had she gotten herself into here?

"There are women who do that?"

"Yeah." He drew her up closer to him, so their bodies touched. "Why? Are you interested in that?"

She considered his question, feeling as if she owed it to him to think about it and not just flip it off like she might have a few days ago. Because she'd promised to keep an open mind. "No," she said honestly, shaking her head. "That doesn't do anything for me."

"Good. Because I'm not letting you tie me up."

The steel in his tone amused her now. "Why not?"

"It doesn't do anything for me either."

She laughed and hurried after him as he walked on. "But wait! You told me to keep an open mind! You should have to do that too."

He stopped and faced her. "Okay. I'll keep an open mind about it."

"And that's as far as you're going with that," she predicted, laughter bubbling inside her.



"You got it, babe. Hey. I like this one." He indicated the next painting on the wall.

On their way out, they ran into Marco. Heat suffused her body as she recalled that this man had seen her naked.

Marco shook her hand and was gentleman enough not to leer, but she sensed again that warm male admiration she'd felt the night he'd taken pictures of them. And he was definitely a good-looking young man. Her cheeks flamed in that cursed blush.

"How's the book going?" Marco asked Alek. "Need any more help?"

"Not sure." Alek glanced at Shaela. "I may have enough images, but I'll definitely let you know if we need any more help."

Marco's eyes, the color of black coffee, glinted, and his sexy smile flashed. "Yeah, do that. That was fun."

They emerged from the gallery onto the sidewalk, the sun low in the sky and casting long shadows. "I think he's hot for you," Alek said, sliding an arm around her shoulders and pulling her against him as they walked.

"Oh please, don't tell me that! It's embarrassing enough that he's seen me naked."

"Yes, he has. And I get the feeling he'd like to again."

"Alek!"

"Just saying." He laughed and squeezed her shoulders. "You're gorgeous, Shaela. It's not surprising."

"Where are we going for dinner?" She desperately wanted to change that subject.

"Moori Sushi."

She stopped. "Sushi?"

"Yeah. What?"

"You didn't even ask me where I wanted to go. How do you know I like sushi?"

"I know you like sushi," he said calmly, keeping her moving along the sidewalk toward his car.

"I don't like raw fish."

"Maybe you'll have to try something new."

She shot him a suspicious glare but he met her gaze blandly as he flicked the remote lock button then opened the Jeep door for her. She slid in, still feeling she should protest but realizing she was kind of boxed in by her promise. She folded her arms across her chest once her seat belt was done up and stared straight ahead. She heard a soft chuckle from Alek.

Hmmph.

The restaurant was lovely – she had to admire whoever had designed it. She'd done several restaurants since working with Cadence Design, but never a Japanese restaurant, and she took in the sleek black-and-white décor with touches of chartreuse and nodded approvingly.

Alek ordered for them, which had her shooting annoyed glances at him, but he just smiled.

"Was your boss in today?" he asked when the server had left.

"No."

"So he makes you come in on Saturdays, but he doesn't."

"Sometimes he does."

"Have you talked to him about this, Shaela?"

"About what? About the long hours?" She laughed. "That's the nature of the job. I'm still a junior designer. Still working my way up. I don't want to make waves."

"Is it the nature of the job?"

"Well." She sighed. "It is. I was told in college that if you think it's all about picking out furniture and fabrics, think again. There is a lot of business and technical stuff involved, and I don't mind that. But I think my team does a lot more administrative work than we should. Other teams have admin support. They share it, so it's not like everyone has their own secretary. But it would help."

"Why don't you?"

She made a face. "I don't know for sure, but I suspect it's budget dollars. Slave Driver Sam's probably trying to save a few bucks."

"How much would it cost to hire one admin person to help your whole team?"

She shrugged. "Too much, I guess."

"How much does it cost you in lost productivity because you're all spending your time on administrative stuff instead of the professional stuff you're trained – and paid – to do?"

She nibbled her lip. "I never thought of it like that." She turned that over in her mind and examined it from all angles. She could cost that out...talk to the rest of the team and see what they thought. Hmmm.

"I'll think about that," she told him. He smiled at her and she suddenly felt like her energy-sapping job was all going to be fine. Fine, and good and perfect.

Their food arrived, the small plates like tiny works of art, perfectly arranged and garnished. "Which of this is raw?" she demanded, looking it over.

"It doesn't matter," Alek said. "You're going to try them all."

She clutched her chopsticks in her fist. "But..."

He gave her a look, square chin lifted, eyes intent, and she blinked. Loosened her hold on her chopsticks. And melted into her panties. She licked her lips and reached for a piece of sushi.

The spicy sauce warmed her mouth, the sesame seeds added a nutty taste to a delicious blend of shrimp, scallions and avocado.

"Do you like wasabi?" Alek asked, then popped a Dynamite roll into his mouth.

"I like a little. Too much clears my sinuses."

He laughed, and picked up a morsel in his chopsticks. He was pretty dexterous with those things. He leaned toward her, holding out the food. She opened her mouth with a little twinge of fear at what she was about to consume.

It was delicious. Cream cheese, scallions and sesame seeds and several kinds of fish from what she could tell, so perfectly fresh it was sweet.

"It's a Coral Reef," he told her.

She swallowed and looked at him through her eyelashes. "It was raw, wasn't it?"

He grinned. "Yup."

She pressed her lips together as she decided which of the dishes she wanted to sample next. He reached over and tipped her chin up. "You liked it, didn't you?"

She lifted her chin away from his hand and his smile widened. "Yes, all right, I liked it."

"See. Trying new things can be fun."

Her pussy clenched at the tone of his voice, rough and velvet like hemp rope rubbing over her skin.

Alek studied her intently, and she wanted to squirm, sure that he knew she was aroused, and from what? A few words from him. How could that be?

## **Chapter Eight**

Later, in her bedroom, he pushed her to her knees in front of him and her stomach did a little flip of excitement. Desire curled inside her as she studied his beautiful cock, rigid and engorged, heavy veins pulsing.

"Put your hands behind your back."

"But I want to touch you."

"Shaela."

She set her lips together and obeyed him, clasping her hands at the small of her back.

"Open your mouth."

She did, her gaze meeting and holding his. And his cock pressed in. She took him eagerly, hungry for him, her mouth craving the feel of him, the taste of him. The head of his cock was smooth against her tongue, and she sucked him in.

His hands gathered her hair in a messy tail and held it at the back of her head as his hips moved. "Take me deep," he groaned. She relaxed her throat and swallowed him, as deep as she could. He was big, too big for her to take all of him, her mouth stretched wide, his shaft nudging the back of her throat and she fought not to gag.

She looked up at him as he filled her mouth and he was watching. "So hot," he said. "Your mouth is like fire on my dick. Suck me, Shae."

She sucked greedily, using her tongue, her lips and even the very edges of her teeth to gently scrape him. "Oh yeah. So good." He let out a long groan. "I'm fucking your mouth, babe." In and out with short strokes, he fucked her mouth and she loved it. "Gonna come in your mouth. Take it all...ah, fuck!"

He thrust in and went still, pulsing in her mouth, the warm, sharp taste of him flowing over her tongue. She swallowed. And swallowed again, sucking him gently as he spurted into her.

Her body burned, her pussy quivered with need. And she loved that she'd done that for him. He'd come so fast, it was as if he could barely control himself. Because of her. She longed to touch him, to feel the heat and strength of his body beneath her hands, but she kept her fingers tightly clasped behind her back until he withdrew from her mouth.

She sat back on her heels, blinking up at him, her eyes damp and her lips wet with his come. Again she wanted to lift a hand to wipe her mouth, but sat there gazing up at him, hands behind her back.

He cupped her face with one hand, rubbed his thumb over her slick bottom lip, his eyes blazing. "God," he said, voice hoarse. "Look at you, sitting like that..." His throat worked and he blinked rapidly. "God, Shaela."

She must have done okay and she gave him a shaky smile, a little surprised at how much she longed to please him. How much it thrilled her that she had pleased him. And she wanted to do more, so much more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tell me your fantasies."

Shaela still floated on the high of several orgasms, wrapped up in the warmth of Alek's arms and legs and the duvet of her bed later that night.

"Fantasies."

"Yeah." His hand stroked through her hair, catching in the tangles and tugging gently. Her scalp tingled. "You know. The things you fantasize about. The things that make you hot."

"Oh. Um..." What could she tell him? She cast about in her mind for something harmless to say. "You know. Uh..."

"Tell me." He twisted his fingers into her hair and used it to tug her head up, sending a cascade of sensation from her scalp to her womb. She met his eyes. "Everyone has fantasies."

"I guess so."

"Sex with Brad Pitt?"

"No!"

He grinned. "Then who?"

"Nobody."

He made a noise. "A threesome? Two girls? Two guys?"

She blinked and his smile widened. "That's it, isn't it? Two guys."

"No!"

"Shaela, come on." His voice deepened, warm and silky. "If you don't tell me your fantasies, how can I make them come true?"

She stared at him. She licked her lips. "I don't know if I want my fantasies to come true," she said slowly. "It's a fantasy...not something that's really supposed to happen."

"It could be fun. Exciting. Something new."

Oh hell. She laid her head back down on his chest. "Two men, but not having sex with me. One is just watching."

A low rumble came from his chest beneath her. "Ah. What else?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

She gave up. He could make her do anything, apparently. "Sex on a beach."

"Oh yeah. That's a good one." He waited. "Nothing else?"

"Mmm...no."

"How about this?" His hand slid down her back, over the hill of her butt to where it met her thighs, and tickled. She twitched against him. Then his fingers probed between

her cheeks. She parted her thighs for him, and he found her anus. She almost lifted off the bed at the unfamiliar touch.

"No," she said, her voice catching. "Not that."

"No?"

"I've never done that."

"Something new." His voice whispered over her and made her shudder. His finger teased, rubbed at the sensitive opening, dipped down to slick up moisture from where she was still wet from three orgasms, and probed.

She gasped. His finger pressed. "It could be good, Shaela."

She squeezed her eyes shut, her body taut and quivering.

"Just my finger," he crooned. "For now. How about while I fuck you?"

She moaned and lifted helplessly against his hand.

"Good girl."

Whenever he said that she felt such a rush of pleasure. He shifted her off him, turned her onto her stomach and moved behind her. His hand lifted her hips, his knees pushed her thighs apart, so far her hips ached.

He cupped her pussy and she pulsed into his palm. She pressed her face against the silky sheet, eyes closed, one finger in her mouth.

"That's so hot, Shaela. Sucking your finger. Suck it like it's my cock." Then he gave her pussy a tap and sensation shot through her body, a flood of heat. Another heavy caress there had her moaning. She felt the thick head of his cock probing, sliding over her anus first and she tensed, but he just teased her there, rubbing and sending sparkles of sensation through her body. But he entered her vagina, slick and tender, and the different angle made her cry out with delight. His hands tightened on her hips as he plunged in, her face smushed into the mattress, finger in her mouth, thighs protesting, pussy full of him. He slipped one hand around the front of her, to her belly, then lower to her clit, and combined with the stroking of his cock inside her, she started to tingle.



And then...he entered her other opening. Her eyes jerked open. His thumb? She thought so but wasn't sure.

Oh Jesus. Every nerve ending jumped, the onslaught of pleasure so acutely sharp she almost couldn't stand it. Her ass burned at the intrusion and her whole body shimmered with heat, unbearable tension tightening inside her, his fingers and his cock combining into a potent fiery caress that sent her up so high she almost felt out of her body, flying, so high it hurt.

When she finally went over the edge, it was violent, hard pleasure, consuming ecstasy. She saw silver sparkles in front of her eyes, heard noises from a distance and realized they were coming from her, ecstatic, erotic noises.

"Yeah, Shaela, that's it, baby, oh yeah..." And he held her hips tight against the crisp curls at the base of his cock as he pulsed inside in long hard beats.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday morning, Shaela had barely sat down at her desk when Sam immediately arrived in her cubicle.

"Get on the phone to Pallinder. The furniture they were supposed to deliver to the Martin house last week still hasn't arrived. I want to know what the fuck's up with that. Then I want you to go out and supervise the installation of the plumbing fixtures at the Venus Spa."

They'd been working on the spa project for months, which Shaela had loved doing because it was something different than the residential or hospitality design they so often did.

But the late furniture shipment was a big headache. She sighed. "I'll get right on that," she told her boss as she turned on her computer.

The entire morning disappeared in a series of frustrating telephone calls to the furniture supplier, eventually ending when they'd tracked down the shipment and promised it would be there tomorrow.

She dealt with other emails and voice mails that just kept accumulating while she was on the phone.

"We're going for lunch now." Pilar and Natalie appeared in the door of her cubicle, purses over their shoulders. "Come with us."

Shaela glanced at her watch. "Okay. Right after lunch though, I have to head over to the spa." She followed her coworkers out of the office and into the elevator where they rode down to the main floor.

"I spent the whole morning photocopying and faxing," Pilar said as they walked through the granite tiled lobby of the office tower.

"And I had to go out to buy toilet paper," Natalie said with disgust.

"Oh my god!" Shaela gaped at Natalie. "Isn't there someone else who could do that?"

"Apparently not. The cleaning staff will replace it but they don't actually buy it."

"Amanda used to do that," Pilar said. They emerged onto the sunny sidewalk.

"Where are we going?" Shaela asked.

"Let's go to Lucy's Grill."

"Sure." They walked the half a block down South Hope Street to the small restaurant.

"I don't understand why they didn't replace Amanda," Shaela said once they'd been seated. "I spent hours on the phone today with a supplier, tracking down furniture. Anyone could have done that, but meanwhile the design for that Hilton hotel is way behind. That's what we should be working on."

"I know. And I don't know why they didn't replace her either. God, we could use someone to attend to all those things."

"And to take minutes at meetings," Natalie added. "I'm tired of spending an hour after every meeting typing those up."

"Me too."

"Other teams have assistants. Why not ours?"

Shaela thought about her conversation with Alek. "There must be a way to convince Sam that we need an assistant."

"Good luck," Pilar said with a snort, studying her menu. "He's so cheap he named himself beneficiary in his own will." They all laughed at that, and started discussing some of the design details of the boutique hotel project.

When Shaela arrived at the spa a short time later, construction was well under way and she could visualize how the elegant day spa was going to look when it was finished. But there were a lot of fixtures to be installed and she surveyed the mess with a sigh, breathing in the smell of sawdust and paint. And of course nothing could go smoothly—one of the plumbers broke a pipe that had water flooding everywhere for several minutes while they scrambled to fix it. Luckily no damage was done, but valuable time was wasted in cleanup, and Shaela even found herself down on the plywood floor mopping up.

By the time she got home shortly after seven, she was tired and dirty and hungry. As she unlocked her door, Alek's door opened across the hall. He grinned at her.

"Hi."

She turned slowly to face him, a smile spreading across her face and some of the tension easing out of her body. "Hi."

"Working late again?" He lifted one eyebrow.

"Yes," she said on a sigh.

"I ordered pizza." He leaned one shoulder against his doorframe. "Angelo's. Vegetarian with black olives."

Her stomach rumbled.

"Come on over," he invited, straightening. "And you can see some of the images from last week."

Relief at not having to cook or scrounge through her fridge for food swept over her, and her mouth watered at the thought of her favorite pizza. "Okay. But let me go change first."

"Sure. Come on over when you're ready."

She washed up and changed into a pair of jeans and tank top, gave her hair a quick brush and hurried across the hall to Alek's place, her insides quivering with hunger but also an intense need to see him.

They ate first, sitting on his couch with plates on their laps, talking. Alek was shooting a huge job for Shanghai Express, a big chain of fast-food restaurants that was in every shopping mall food court. She loved hearing about the wacky things he did to food to make it look good when photographing it, like spraying the food with vegetable oil to make it look shiny and fresh.

Then she told him about her day. "I know it's not all about shopping and being creative all the time. I know it's a business, and truthfully there are lots of things about it that I like—making the sale, all the planning and organizing and making sure things are perfect, negotiating, problem solving. Making sure there's enough fabric to cover the extra chair the client didn't tell you about. But dammit, it shouldn't be about buying toilet paper and photocopying," she finished with a sigh.

"I guess you have to decide if the parts you love outweigh the parts you don't love."

"Yeah. I get to work with innovative, creative people, and I do get to let my creativity out to play sometimes."

"I learned that too," he said. "When I went out on my own. It was way different working for myself—being in charge of everything, getting the work, making the deal, doing the books. Not just taking pictures."

When they'd finished eating, Alek opened his laptop on the coffee table in front of them and she watched in fascination as he brought up the photographs of her. He'd been right. In many of the images, nobody would ever recognize as her, just parts of her

body—the curve of her butt, a bare breast crisscrossed with rope marks, her butt again, legs spread to reveal her shadowed pussy, rope marks tracking across the backs of her thighs. In fact, it was hard for her to believe it was her body, made so incredibly beautiful by Alek—pale luminous skin outlined in shadows and glowing against ropes and black velvet darkness.

Sitting there beside her on his couch, he reached for her neck and pulled her to him for a fast, hard kiss. “These are so incredible,” he said roughly. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this, Shaela.”

“You’re welcome.”

She gave him a shaky smile, that intense feeling of pleasure sweeping over her again at the knowledge that she’d pleased him. He leaned forward to kiss her.

“I want to tie you up here,” he murmured against her mouth. “Tonight.”

She shivered. Her insides tightened.

He brushed his mouth over hers again. “We’ve never talked about a safe word.”

Oh dear god. What was he planning to do to her? A sharp thrill ran through her at the possibilities.

“I don’t actually believe in them,” he continued, pressing a kiss to one corner of her mouth. “If you want me to stop, just say it. Stop. No. Those words both work for me.”

She drew back a little to gaze up into his eyes.

“Just make sure you mean it when you say it,” he said, his hot gaze holding hers. “Okay?”

She should say it right now. Stop. No. Being tied up as a piece of art and photographed was entirely different than being tied up and...and...oh hell, she was literally melting in her panties at the thought of being bound and helpless with Alek, at his mercy, him able to do anything he wanted to her. She remembered the feeling of floating, almost a feeling of being high, of letting go of all the other crap happening in

her life, and recognized a near craving inside her for more of that. For more of how she'd felt desired and desirable and yes, aroused.

She nodded slowly. "Okay."

## **Chapter Nine**

Alek took her hands in his and rose, drawing her to her feet with him. Tonight they were in his apartment, his bedroom with the slatted headboard and footboard. Sharp need slammed into his balls, his dick surging painfully. The fact that Shaela trusted him enough to do this sent heat spiraling through his body.

He tugged her along into his bedroom. He'd already turned on the lamp beside the bed, because he was a visual kind of guy and wanted—no, needed—to see what was happening in the bed.

He peeled her out of her clothes, so gently but wasting no time, until she stood before him naked, her skin glowing with that perfect luminescence. He opened a dresser drawer and stared down into the contents. Lots to choose from...he selected several ropes, nothing fancy or beautiful, just practical, functional rope. Although to him, all rope had beauty.

With a smile he turned back to Shaela. "On the bed," he ordered, voice gruff. She hopped onto the high mattress and knelt in the middle of the bed. Did she even know what a submissive pose she'd assumed? Probably not. She just seemed to move automatically into that role, and hot lust flared up inside him at the thought. Lust, mingled with satisfaction and triumph. Triumph that he'd been right. That he'd seen it inside her from the moment he'd placed rope to her skin.

He shifted the ropes in his hands as he approached the bed.

"Lie down." He lifted his chin and she obeyed, sliding her slender legs down the bed, eyes fastened on him. He reached for one hand, lifted it above her head and with a few twists of his wrist had her tied to the headboard. Her eyes darkened, her lips parted, but she said nothing.

He tied the other hand too, then rested his fingertips on her throat. He paused there, the urge to hold her in a firmer, controlling grip there swelling inside him, but he fought it back. For now. He trailed his hand down from her throat, between her breasts, over her soft tummy. His fingertips grazed through the tiny patch of auburn hair. "Spread your legs."

Her legs moved. Unable to resist the tactile sensations as well as the visual, he stroked her silky leg from thigh to calf, then curled his fingers around her ankle. Tightly. He lifted his gaze to her face, watched her blink as his hand gripped her. Hard. Her chest rose with an indrawn breath.

Awareness. But no fear. He searched her features, then resumed his tying, tugging one ankle toward the bottom corner of the bed, and looping rope around it and the footboard. Then the other, spreading her legs wide so her pussy was on display, so pretty and pink. Man. His chest quivered at the desire that tore through him at the sight.

She was his now, bound, helpless, and he could do anything he wanted. Just as he'd told her that night when she'd asked.

At this point the thrill of control always mingled with the satisfaction of knowing the skills he was about to use were honed to a superior level. But his hands shook as he regarded Shaela, and he had to pause and ask himself if his usual control had slipped.

Control. He always had control. It was who he was.

For some reason, demonstrating his skills to Shaela seemed especially important. Making sure she got what she wanted – making sure this was so good for her.

And at that moment, he realized the power was hers.

This was it. This was the power exchange he'd heard about and never fully appreciated. After all the women he'd tied up, all the scenes he'd participated in – why was he just being struck with this bolt of lightning now?

He stood there for a moment, still, trying to process this thought. Closed his mind to where it wanted to go. And he pushed his shoulders back and began unbuttoning his



shirt, eyes never leaving Shaela's face. He stripped out of his own clothes, and when he stood naked before her, he slid his hand down the length of his throbbing cock. Christ, his balls ached, the tightness in the small of his back a buzzing warning.

Slow. He had to go slow. She was still new to this, still hadn't fully realized and accepted that part of herself. The fact she'd allowed him to tie her up like this was a big step, an important step, but he had to show her what it could be like.

Tonight would be a sensory experience for her, a taste of what could come if she let herself go. From a dresser drawer he removed three candles, set them into holders on the dresser and lit them. Three flames burned with a steady glow.

He stroked a hand between Shaela's breasts, her eyes glittering in the candlelight. "I'll be right back," he promised, and he quickly went to his kitchen, opened the freezer and tossed a handful of ice into an ice bucket.

When he returned, she lay calmly on the bed, eyes closed, though they opened at hearing him. He smiled at her and checked the candles. Wax was pooling nicely at the base of the flame.

"What are you going to do?"

He looked back at her, saw the hint of apprehension in those pretty eyes. Her top teeth sank into her bottom lip and he felt his breath tighten in his chest.

"You're tied up and completely at my mercy, Shaela."

"I know." She blinked rapidly, unable to move in her ropes.

He glanced at the candles. They needed more time and he needed to kiss her. Everywhere. He stretched out on the bed beside her, kissed her mouth, softly, with a brush of tongue, then again. He kissed each corner of her mouth, her cheek, her jaw. He brushed her hair back and pressed his face to the side of her neck, inhaling her warm scent, mingling now with the smell of beeswax. Heat shot straight to his groin.

His hands touched her everywhere, soft skin, sleek muscle, downy hair, wanted to absorb her into him with his touch, memorize her curves and lines, the rise of hip and dip of waist, the soft fullness of her breasts, the tender curve of her jaw.

He nibbled at her breasts, sucked gently at the sensitive flesh, took a nipple between his teeth and tugged. His mind went foggy at the sweet perfection of her body, laid out for him, helpless for him. He savored the control, her complete vulnerability, a rush of adrenaline surging hotly in his veins.

And though she couldn't touch him, when he leaned in for another kiss, her teeth captured his bottom lip and nipped, send a sharp jolt of heat through him to his core. He drew back a bit and she gave him a slow witchy smile.

Ah, fuck, he felt like that smile had struck him straight in the heart. How dare she try to do something like that when she was supposed to be helpless?

Once again, sharp realization stabbed through him, that she was not so helpless, and though he might think he had her at his mercy, he was also at hers. At the mercy of that sexy mouth, the saucy smile, the playful sparkle in her eyes, the bewitching wonder of her body.

He needed to take control again and with a last drag of his tongue over her lip, he rolled off the bed and to his feet. He reached for a candle. Perfect.

Moving back to the bed he watched her eyes track the flame of the candle, the yellow flicker reflected back to him in her eyes, which widened as he approached.

"Alek..."

"Let yourself go, Shaela. Like those other times. Just give in to it, just let yourself feel." And he tipped the candle and let wax drizzle to her chest.

Shaela watched the mesmerizing waver of the orange flame, the way it stayed straight even as the candle itself slowly tipped, and the hot liquid wax fell to her skin. A sharp gasp escaped her lips at the sensation of the wax landing on her chest—heat. It

didn't burn but was very close to it, an exquisite warmth. When more molten wax landed between her breasts, she arched into it, absorbed the sensation into her body.

"So beautiful, Shaela." Alek's murmur pleased her. "Your gorgeous breasts thrust up like that, begging for it."

She licked her lips, closed her eyes, waited for it, breath suspended. When the heat again landed on her, she let the air out of her lungs, gave a small moan. First one breast, then the other, then lower to the sensitive skin between her legs.

Astonishingly, she found herself craving it, aching for it there, because she needed a touch there so badly even the heat of wax was better than nothing.

And then ice.

Floating, unaware of anything but her own body and the sensations assaulting it, heat and cold, light and dark, the sharp contrasts between them making her muscles contract and her skin quiver, she did what Alek had told her to do and turned herself over to just feeling. Nothing else existed, just that moment, just those feelings and the knowledge that Alek knew how to take her flying.

"So good, baby," he murmured against her lips, and she realized it had been several moments since she'd felt wax or ice. "So beautiful. I love doing that for you."

Her body was a trembling mass of sensation but yet she ached for more. "Alek, please."

"Please what, baby?" He dragged his tongue over her shoulder, over hardened wax on her breasts. More unbearable sensation.

"I need more."

"Maybe this is what you need." He loosened the ropes at her ankles and as her legs moved, heat flooded into them. And then he pushed inside her, a luscious filling of her. She lifted into him, able to move now, legs warm and aching after being held apart, and she bent her knees and closed her legs around his hips, tipping her pelvis into him for the pressure she needed there against her pussy, oh yes, yes, yes...

She fought against the ropes at her wrists, wanting to hold him, to touch him. "Sssh." He kissed her again as his body moved inside her. "Sssh. Careful. Don't hurt yourself. Just take it, Shaela, just take me....like that. Ah god."

"Feels so good," she gasped, moving into him, letting go again. She was so sensitized, aware of every slide of his skin on hers, every drag of his cock pulling out of her, slipping back in, every brush of his mouth, his hands, his silky hair as he kissed the side of her neck.

"Is this what you need?"

"Oh yes. So good..." He filled her not just with his body, but with incredible pleasure and overwhelming sensation. His heat poured into her, as they moved together, joined, as one, and his hand slid up between her breasts to rest at the base of her throat. He held her there, his palm warm and firm against her, pressing her down, and her eyes opened to stare into his. His face tight with desire, eyes glittering, mouth carnal. Heat streaked through her body, burning her up along with him, they were burning up together in an exquisite twisting flame.

She tightened her legs around him, lifted harder into him as he fucked her, reaching for it, that fiery bliss, felt him tighten against her, felt the molten heat inside her as he fell over her and groaned long and low in her ear, and her own pleasure exploded too, full of him, full of sensation, drowning in it.

He reached up and released her wrists, fumbling with the rope, and frantically she hugged him, let her fingers dig into the muscles of his back and shoulder as they pulsed together in delicious, consuming connection.

"I need one more photo shoot," Alek said, long, languid moments later, dragging his hand through her hair.

She pulled herself back to the moment. Another photo shoot.

This time, she wasn't reluctant or apprehensive or disapproving. No, this time, the idea of Alek tying her up again sent a rush of liquid heat through her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following week Shaela dropped by her parents' place on Thursday evening before going to Alek's studio.

"Come see what I've been working on," Mom said.

"Oh for god's sake, don't waste her time with that crap," her dad said as he sat down on the couch with the remote control in hand.

Her mom bit her lip and her lashes lowered. "Never mind."

"No, show me." Curiosity buzzed inside Shaela. She followed her mother into a spare bedroom.

A small artist's studio had been created there, with an easel and a half-finished canvas leaning on it. Paints and brushes covered the desk against one wall. Shaela took in some of the paintings sitting on the floor, propped against the wall.

She tipped her head to one side. The paintings were all flowers, but intensely vibrant colors and unique angles and shapes, intriguing and beautiful.

"Wow, Mom, did you do these?" She walked closer to one canvas to study it.

"Yes. I've been taking some art classes during the day. You know. To fill my time."

Shaela's heart squeezed.

"My teacher thinks I could sell them," her mom said softly.

"Oh, Viv."

Shaela turned to see her father standing in the doorway.

"No one's going to pay good money for those," he said, smiling. "Don't get your hopes up."

Shaela frowned. "Dad. They're beautiful. I think she could sell them if she wanted."

A memory flashed through her mind, of the time she'd won first prize in the art contest in high school. Mom had been so proud of her unique watercolor painting but Dad had just rolled his eyes at what he considered a waste of time. And when her mom had suggested hanging the painting in the front hall, he'd snorted and said something

like, “You have to be kidding. If we’re going to put something on the walls, it’s going to be real art.” The memory was accompanied by an echoing stab of the hurt she’d felt at his reaction to her creation.

“Well, never mind that,” her mom said softly, walking past Dad, still in the doorway. “Shaela, didn’t you say you were meeting Alek again? Before you go, I have some brownies you can take. Give some to Alek.”

Hurt and frustration simmered inside her even as she smiled and accepted the sweet treat from her mom, hoping her mom would continue with her painting. She knew how it would feel to have your creative energy drained and wasted.

Much like she was feeling at work these days.

Confusion swirled in her as she drove to Alek’s studio. She had to do something at work. She wasn’t going to give up like her mom had years ago, and she wasn’t going to let someone stomp all the creativity out of her. She chewed on her bottom lip as she drove. Did she have the nerve to talk to her boss about it? He wasn’t exactly a warm and fuzzy guy. And she didn’t want to come across as a whiner. She was still relatively new in the business and didn’t want to blow this incredible opportunity. On the other hand, she was getting more and more stressed and unhappy. With a sigh, she tried to push those thoughts aside and instead think about what she was about to do with Alek. Anticipation built inside her. Pleasure rippled over her at the thought of being tied up again.

Jesus. What was happening to her? How could she be so excited, so aroused, by the thought of being tied up? She was turning into one of those kinky people she’d turned her nose up at when Alek had reappeared in her life. She could not be becoming one of them. Could she?

No. She was a perfectly normal woman. Not some kind of pervert. If she got pleasure from it, how could it be wrong?

She walked into the studio, hair long and loose, dressed in her white strapless cotton sundress, still fighting with herself over how crazy this was, that she wanted to

do this so much, not to mention still aggravated by the visit to her parents, annoyed at her father's stubbornness and her mother's passivity and her boss's stupidity. Her skin felt itchy and twitchy and she felt ready to snap anyone's head off who looked at her the wrong way. She slammed the door shut behind her and tossed her purse and leather tote bag onto the counter edging one wall.

Marco was there.

She paused, gave him a halting smile, then looked at Alek.

"Nice dress," Alek said, eying her up and down. "You know what? Leave it on for now."

"Sure." She strolled toward the set in her white flip-flops, her stomach tightening, her gaze sliding to Marco and back.

Alek had gone back to black paper, a seamless stretch of darkness from floor to ceiling, the single modeling light shining down on it.

She stopped in front of him and he slid a hand around the nape of her neck and held her while he kissed her. Right there in front of Marco. A sharp thrill jolted through her.

They stepped apart, and Alek went to pick up the rope from the counter, tonight a black rope. He ran it through his hands and the sight of the rope sliding against his fingers sent another spasm of electricity rocketing through her. Like a learned response to a stimulus. Oh Jesus. Her pussy dampened and heated.

"Let's have you sitting on the floor," he said, nodding his head.

She kicked off her flip-flops, walked to the center of the paper and sank to the floor, the full skirt of her dress a white puddle around her, a sharp contrast to the black background. He dropped to his knees beside her.

"First," he said, sliding his hands up her bare legs and under the skirt of the dress, "these have to come off." And he hooked his fingers into the sides of her thong underwear and dragged them down her bare legs. He stuffed them into the back pocket

of his jeans and began his work, his face intent and focused as he arranged the ropes over the dress. A little taken aback that he'd removed her panties but left her covered by the skirt of the dress, she sat quietly as he worked, Marco wordlessly taking photos with a whirr of the camera and a pop of the flash mounted above them.

And then Alek reached for the top edge of her dress, the snug elastic that held the strapless dress up, and tugged it down, revealing one breast. She swallowed her gasp. It was so wickedly erotic, sitting there fully clothed, one breast revealed, strangely almost more arousing than being fully naked. Her nipples tightened into aching points and she looked down at the bare breast swelling above the white cotton. And Alek's large hands stroking the rope and wrapping it around her chest.

"Good girl," he murmured. "No bra."

Once again she felt wrapped in heat, embraced by the rope, seduced by the absorbed expression on Alek's face as he slowly wrapped and knotted and cinched. And everything crappy that had filled her day fell away from her, the entire outside world, as she let herself be taken away.

When she was bound, he sat back and again studied every strand of rope, made a minute adjustment, examined every knot. Then he gave a short nod of satisfaction. She expected him to stand and take over the camera from Marco, but he didn't.

"Keep going, Marco," he said.

And he kissed her. And kissed her again, long, drugging, open-mouthed kisses. When he drew back slowly, his tongue dragged along her bottom lip. Their eyes met and Shaella felt like she was on fire, flames licking over her skin.

The rope crossed her chest just above her exposed nipple, knotted at her armpits, binding her arms to her body. Alek shifted so he sat behind her, his legs on either side of her, and pulled her to lean back against his chest. Her head fell back to his shoulder, his arms slid around her, one hand cupping her breast, swelling between black hemp and white cotton.

And Marco stood there, taking pictures of them.



It was so wickedly erotic her womb contracted and creamy liquid leaked onto her inner thighs. Her gaze went hazy and pleasure vibrated through her as his hands touched her.

"That's beautiful," Marco said hoarsely, still shooting. "Alek, lay her down."

Gentle hands, firm pressure, and she floated down until the floor met her back. Alek moved her legs and feet to make her comfortable, as comfortable as she could be with the bite of rope on ankles and arms and chest. Alek's hands went to her ankles and the pressure loosened, released...and he spread her legs. With both hands he pushed the skirt up her thighs, higher, another inch, another...until she felt the cool kiss of air on her pussy.

What was he doing? She couldn't form words, excruciatingly aware of another pair of eyes watching them as Alek bared her.

"Put down the camera, Marco," Alek said, voice heavy with arousal. He cupped her face with one hand. "Shaela." She dragged her eyelids open to meet his steady gaze. "I'm going to fuck you. And Marco's going to watch."

## **Chapter Ten**

Her eyes might have rolled back in her head at the flood of excitement his words created, and her entire body went liquid.

She couldn't move. She was helpless to escape. He was going to fuck her right in front of another man.

Every nerve ending jumped with anticipation, her pussy throbbing with the need to be touched, the desperate need to come. She lay there and watched Alek climb to his feet, rip his black T-shirt over his head and then step out of his jeans. Naked, he towered above her, powerful and solid, his cock a thick dark spear jutting below his flat belly, aggressive and virile. She followed the heavy muscles of his thighs down to knees, sinewy calves and his beautiful long feet planted on the black paper beside hers. She loved his feet.

Her breathing constricted and not because of the ropes binding her chest. She glanced at Marco, who'd grabbed a stool and sat watching them with avid, hot eyes, one foot on the floor, the other leg bent and resting on a rung of the stool. He met her eyes and smiled.

Alek lowered himself over her, bunched her dress at her waist, and parted her thighs with both hands. "Christ, look at you," he whispered, dragging a fingertip through her wetness. "You're dripping. Right down to the crack of your ass." And he traced a wicked finger along that crevice, following the trail of slick liquid, right to the tight pucker of her anus. And he rubbed there.

Sparklers of sensation shot through her, hot and bright, and exploded behind her eyes. She couldn't hold back the cry that ripped out of her.

"You like that." He stated it as a fact. She kept her eyes closed, gave herself up to sensation, his fingers slicking over her folds, slipping inside her. Her body jerked when his thumb found her clit and she whimpered.

"Do you see, Marco? Do you see how beautiful she is?"

"Yeah. I can see. Fucking gorgeous."

"You'd like to touch her, wouldn't you?"

Shaela moaned.

"Hell yeah."

"Well, you're not going to." Amusement and satisfaction laced Alek's voice. "Because she's mine. So tonight – you're just going to watch."

He knelt between her legs and she dragged her eyes open once again to look at him, broad and strong, taking his cock in his hand to find her entrance. The blunt head probed at her, stretched her, filled her with exquisite pressure, so deep, so deep.

She couldn't reach for him, couldn't stroke his satiny back as he thrust into her, couldn't grab his ass to bring him closer, deeper. She could only let herself go as Alek fucked her, hard and deep, the awareness of someone watching them adding an extra dimension of heat.

Alek leaned over to her to take her nipple in his mouth and tug on it, sending streamers of sensation to her womb where his cock rubbed sensitive places inside her. Everything twisted up, drew up tight, to a sharp point of exquisite sensation.

"He's watching us, Shaela." Alek's voice rumbled in her ear. He licked her neck.

She could only whimper.

"Is it making you hot?"

"You make me hot."

He breathed a soft laugh.

"You love it, don't you?"

"No."

His teeth dug into the flesh of her shoulder in a sizzling nip.

"Yes!" she cried, turning her head. "Yes, I like it." She lifted her hips into Alek's, fucked him back as the spiraling sensation inside her built higher. When he slid a hand down to find her clit and rubbed, she couldn't be quiet. "Yes," she urged him. "Yes, please, yes..." And she came on a long soft wail as he sent her hurtling into oblivion.

He'd made her deepest, darkest fantasy come true, had taken away her ability to say no because it was wrong, sinful, depraved.

He'd taken control away from her and set her free.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Long day, huh?"

Shaela covered her yawn with her hand. They'd just finished dinner Thursday night at a small Indian restaurant where Alek had introduced her to butter chicken, dhal and naan bread. More new things. Alek signed the credit card slip and tucked his card back into his wallet.

"Long week. We're really behind on the Hilton project."

"Have you thought more about talking to your boss?"

Her eyes lowered. "I've thought about it. I just can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I told you. I'm junior. It's not up to me to tell my boss what he's doing wrong."

"I don't see why not. You have a good sense of the big picture."

"Uh. Thanks. But..."

"It's more than that, isn't it?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid of getting fired."

"Shaela. You're a talented designer. They're not going to fire you."

Her mouth twisted, all those old memories rising to the surface, her father's constant put-downs and disparagement. It hadn't exactly built a reservoir of confidence in her.

"You said you had something to talk to me about tonight," she said, totally changing the subject.

"Oh. I have another big favor to ask of you."

"Um...okay. What is it?"

"There's a Shibari convention this weekend, at the Hyatt. I'm scheduled to do a demo."

She blinked at him. "Tying someone up."

"Yeah. I want you to come with me. I want to do the demo with you."

Unsure what that meant, with no freakin' idea what a Shibari convention was, she just gazed back at him, a frown tightening her forehead.

"You'd have clothes on," he reassured her.

"Oh."

"I can do it with someone else," he said.

Her forehead tightened even more. She didn't really like the idea of Alek tying someone else up, even if she did have her clothes on. And when she looked at him, and at the expectant look on his face, she found herself once again wanting to make him happy. She took a deep breath. "No. I'll do it."

He smiled and they both rose from the table. He set his hand on the small of her back as they walked out of the restaurant into the dark city evening.

"Tell me about this convention," she said as they drove through dark streets toward the freeway.

"It's a huge Shibari convention," he said. "Last year it was in Chicago, this year it's here in L.A. There are all kinds of things going on—workshops on all kinds of topics,

Shibari lessons with experienced Nawashi—rope masters—and places to practice and try out new things.

“Oh.”

Her mind raced with images.

“It starts Friday night, but I’m scheduled for Saturday at noon.”

All righty then. She’d be going to a convention with a whole lot of kinky rope lovers and the idea scared the spit of her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alek was coming with her to dinner at her parents’ place. It was Friday evening and Shaela had dared to invite him to come with her. Bringing a boy home to meet the parents was one of those iffy things for a girl to do, and her stomach had clenched up with nerves when she’d issued the casual invitation. But he’d agreed.

Now, as they walked into the house she’d grown up in, her stomach fluttered again at the thought of telling her parents she and Alek were in fact a couple. Even though she’d denied it only weeks ago. She shot him a glance and he smiled at her.

“It’s been a long time since I was here,” he commented. “Hasn’t changed that much since high school.”

She smiled back at him. “Nope.”

Her mom hurried to greet them. “Hello!”

“You remember Alek, don’t you, Mom.”

“Of course! How are you, Alek? I hear your photography is going well. I always knew how talented you were.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Oh, don’t call me that, for heaven’s sake, call me Viv.”

He smiled down at her and Shaela watched her mom’s cheeks pinken. “Okay, Viv. Here, we brought a bottle of wine.”

"Oh, thank you! That's so nice. Come on in, your dad's watching the football game."

"I love football." Alek slanted Shaela a wicked smile and followed her mom into the great room where Dad sat on the couch watching the game.

Dad stood and shook Alek's hand, scrutinizing him as he did so, then gestured to the couch. Alek reclined at one end. "Who's winning?" he asked, and the two men got into an intense discussion about the Cowboys versus the Buccaneers.

Shaela wandered across the room to the island separating the kitchen from the television room while her mom put the wine into the fridge. Mom gave her a speculative glance as she did so and Shaela couldn't help the smile that lifted her lips. In fact it was hard not to laugh out loud, so much joy fizzed inside her.

"Are you still going to tell me you two are just friends?" Mom whispered, smiling too.

Shaela shook her head. "No." She peered up through her lashes, still grinning foolishly. "We're...seeing each other now."

Mom nodded knowingly, and Shaela's cheeks warmed. "I see. You look very happy."

"Yeah." She sighed and plucked an olive from a bowl sitting there. "I am, Mom. He's so...so...everything."

Mom lifted an eyebrow but her smile widened as she turned to the oven and opened the door. "Well. That sounds pretty serious."

"I...I don't know. I'm still getting used to the idea but..." Shaela shrugged. "I really like him."

Geez, what a pathetic understatement that was. Last night when they'd made love, face-to-face, slow and lovely, she'd thought her heart was going to burst out of her chest. She was so in love with Alek.

Shaela sank down onto a stool at the island and stared across the room at Alek, leaning forward as the game apparently got exciting, eyes glued to the television, sitting there with her dad. She lifted a hand to her chest and pressed it between her breasts. Breathless, heart thudding, she watched him, so handsome, so smart, so...everything.

"Shaela?"

She blinked and turned to her mom. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah, fine."

"Would you slice the bread while I make the salad?"

"Oh. Sure." She picked up the salad tongs, then frowned at them. "What did you say?"

Mom laughed and pushed the loaf of crusty bread on a cutting board across the granite counter. "Slice up this bread for garlic bread."

Shaela shook her head, laid down the tongs and picked up a bread knife.

The game had just ended when dinner was ready, a huge, cheesy lasagna, fragrant garlic bread and a big salad. The two men dissected the game as they ate, and Shaela shared an amused glance with her mom. At least they had something in common.

When they'd exhausted that topic, Shaela asked her mom, "How's your painting going? Have you done anything new?"

Mom slid a sideways glance at Dad, then nodded. "Yes, I have. I can show you after dinner if you like."

"Oh, here we go again," Dad said, rolling his eyes. "Shaela doesn't want to see your pictures, Viv."

"Yes, I do." Shaela straightened in her chair. "I'd love to see them."

"I'd like to see them, too," Alek added, and Shaela's heart tumbled a tiny bit more into love. She swallowed and looked down at her plate. "Shaela said you might be selling them."



Mom sent another uneasy glance at Dad. "Yes. Actually, I...I did sell one."

"What!" Dad's eyes popped open. "You didn't tell me that!"

He dropped his cutlery onto his plate with a clatter.

"It just happened," Mom said. "A couple of days ago."

"Oh, Mom! That's awesome! You must be so excited."

Her cheeks flushed and she blinked rapidly. "Well. Yes." She pressed her lips together for a moment, looking young and adorably embarrassed. "I'm a little in shock about it actually. But it feels good knowing that someone else liked my work enough to actually pay for it." Her eyes met Shaela's with a sparkle.

"I know what you mean," Alek agreed. "Congratulations, Viv."

"Thank you."

Dad sat there. "Wow," he finally said. "I can't believe you took someone's hard-earned money for something like that."

Shaela cast an uncomfortable glance at Alek.

"We'll look at them after dinner," Mom said. "Now Shaela, tell us what you're working on at work."

She talked about the projects they had going on, how much she'd enjoyed designing the spa, with her mom asking questions about some of the design elements.

"It sounds like it will be beautiful," Mom said. "I can't wait until it's open and I can go check out it. Maybe have a manicure or something there."

"It's a spa," her dad said. "Why don't you work on some serious projects?"

Shaela licked her lips. "Well, I'm also working on a new hotel for the Hilton chain. That's a really big project, though, so I haven't been as directly involved in the design aspects."

"Huh." Her dad nodded. "I would guess not."

"And we're working on a residential project too," she continued.

"You're decorating a house." The corners of Dad's mouth dipped.

"It's not just a house. It's a five-thousand-square-foot mansion. It's going to be incredible... I had to research and import the carpets from Iraq."

"Wow." Her mom's eyes widened. "I'm sure that must have been a lot of work."

"It was crazy, with all the government regulations right now. But they are so beautiful, you should see them—they almost glow, the quality of the yarns is so amazing."

"And now people are going to walk all over them," Dad said.

Shaela inhaled long and slow, her father's words as usual stabbing into her like small knives. She tried not to let it get to her, but as usual his feelings about her career came across loud and clear. Actually, his feelings about her and how he'd never valued her talents at all.

Maybe her dad was still worried about his own job. "Dad. How are things at the bank?"

His gaze lifted sharply to Shaela's face. "Fine. Why?"

"Uh, Mom said there might be layoffs."

"Well. Yes. There may be."

"Are you worried about your job?"

"Of course not. But don't do anything to screw up your job in this economy. Things are tough everywhere. You'll be lucky if that company survives this recession."

She sighed. Maybe if she opened up to him, shared some of her problems, he'd talk about his. Maybe he'd realize he didn't have to put everyone else down to make himself feel better.

"Actually, I've been really stressed lately," she said. "My boss is putting a lot of pressure on us. He didn't replace our administrative assistant and we all seem to spend a lot of time doing paperwork instead of designing."

"I told you," he said when she paused. "If they won't hire an admin assistant, they must be in trouble."

"I don't think they're in financial trouble." Frustration mounted in her.

"If you're so stressed, maybe you should quit. Maybe working for that big downtown design company is beyond you, Shaela. Remember that time when you were in college?"

She shifted in her chair and shot him a glare. "Yes, but —"

"You called, crying over the big project you had to work on, so stressed because you'd seen the senior students' projects and you were having a breakdown over your junior project. You were ready to quit."

"Yes." She whispered the word and set her hands in her lap. "I was. And you wanted me to."

"Well, if you can't even cut it during your junior year, how are you going to make it in the real world?"

"I did cut it," she said, her jaw tight. "I made it through college with honors." No thanks to him.

"You could've done that interior decorator course in a year, and been working at some decorating place with a lot less stress."

"There's a difference between an interior designer and an interior decorator," she told him tightly, although she'd told him that many times before. "I like the challenge of it."

"Maybe you set your sights a bit too high."

"I can't believe you're saying that," she whispered. "I might have problems at work, but who doesn't? And I..." She paused. She'd been questioning her work a lot lately. "I love my job."

"You should quit," he said. "If it's too much for you and you can't handle it. Do something easier."

She cast another despairing glance at Alek, who sat there with a black frown on his face.

"Shaela is very talented," Alek said, his voice hard, drawing both Shaela's and her mom's gazes. "She's an amazing designer and she has good business sense too. If she quits her job, it won't be because she can't cut it as a designer."

Shaela's heart swelled at his fierce defense of her. He looked ready to punch someone. She inhaled a shaky breath.

"Let's go look at Mom's paintings now," she said, her heart thudding painfully, her throat aching. Her dad's words had hurt, but Alek's support eased that pain. She looked at her father. "And it would be good if you came too and said something nice about them."

She saw the look of surprise on Dad's face as she rose from the table and turned to leave.

Mom's forehead was creased with worry, her mouth tight, and Shaela forced a smile for her, even though she was shaking on the inside, so pissed off at her dad she could have smacked him, and so in love with Alek she wanted to throw herself into his arms.

In the room her mom had turned into a studio, they studied her paintings. "Love that one," Alek said, indicating a peach-and-apricot-colored blossom, a slender bud opening amidst delicate greenery to reveal a scarlet center. "It reminds me of Shaela."

Mom's eyes widened. "I...how did you...I was thinking about Shaela when I painted that." She blinked. "That's amazing."

Shaela shook her head. "Me?"

Her mom smiled. "Yes."

"It's the color of your hair," Alek said, running his hand over her hair. "And it's blossoming. Into something wild and...exotic, I think."

Shaela's cheeks burned. He shouldn't be talking like that in front of her mom, his voice heated and deep, talking about being wild and exotic. Blossoming. Geez.

But her mom just smiled, looking almost enchanted, touched Alek on the arm then stepped away to another canvas.

"And this one is for your sister," Mom said, showing them the delicate watercolor in shades of pink and mauve.

Shaela nodded. "Yes."

Her mom turned to her, hesitated. "Would you like that painting? The orchid blooming?"

Shaela's heart squeezed and her throat tightened. "I'd love it, Mom."

"No." Alek's firm voice spoke up. She looked up at him in surprise. "I want it," he said.

She couldn't fall any farther down that long, sweet slide into love. She drew in a shaky breath. "Is that okay, Mom?"

"Of course." Mom smiled. "I have a feeling you'll be seeing a lot of it anyway."

Alek's eyes met hers, warm and powerful, and their gazes locked for a long moment. Finally he turned back to Mom. "Thank you," he said quietly. "I really love this painting."

"I guess we should go," Shaela said. "I'm too mad to talk to Dad."

Mom sighed. "Don't listen to him, Shaela." She hugged Shaela, and Shaela breathed in the familiar rose scent of her perfume. "You are talented. You know you are."

Yeah. Sure. She rode home with Alek, glum and silent, replaying her father's hurtful words over and over.

## **Chapter Eleven**

In her apartment she threw herself down onto her couch.

Alek sat beside her, took her hand, played with her fingers. She gave him a crooked smile. He'd been so sweet, defending her like that. She sighed. She needed to forget about her father and focus on Alek. On showing him how she felt about him. She leaned in and kissed him.

"Mmm." His mouth moved against hers, warm and firm. His hand slid to the back of her head, and fisted in her hair, holding her there. A groan rumbled deep inside him.

"Oh, Alek." She sighed into his mouth.

"What?"

"I want to...to..."

"What, sweetheart?" He licked her mouth again. Her heart thundered in her chest, her womb contracted hard around the flare of desire.

"I want to do things for you. Whatever you want."

"Oh man." A groan rumbled from his chest and he leaned his forehead against hers, his nose resting beside hers, his breathing heavy. "Oh, Shaela."

"Please. Please, let me suck you."

Another ragged groan tore from his throat. He released her hands and the two of them both tried to open his jeans, fumbling with buttons until finally she held him in her hands, soft skin over throbbing veins and rigid hardness.

"Yes," she whispered, studying him. He shifted, shoving his jeans down, throwing one leg across her so he straddled her where she sat on the couch, rose up onto his knees, his cock in front of her face. She slid down just a little more into the cushions and took him in her mouth.

“Oh yeah.” His hands slid into her hair and held her head, tipping it back just a bit more so he could thrust deeper. She wet her lips and slid them over the thick length of him, let him bump the back of her throat, let him slide in and out with a slow, languid rhythm. She gave a hum of pleasure that brought another noise from him and reached between his thighs for his balls, drawn up so tight. She fingered them lightly, cupped them gently.

“Mmmm.” Her mouth vibrated around him again. He felt so good in her mouth, so male and solid and delicious. She wanted more, so much more, to touch him everywhere, to feel the softness of his skin, the roughness of his hair, the clench of his muscles beneath her palms. She let saliva accumulate in her mouth so he was really wet and really slippery, gliding in and out in a leisurely tempo.

Then he pulled out and rose a little higher, spreading his legs a little more, until his balls nudged her mouth. “Lick me,” he said in a hoarse command. “Lick my balls.”

She dragged her tongue over the tightly puckered skin, over and over, then pressed her nose into the crease of his groin and inhaled the scent of him. She nipped his thigh and made him jump and moan again, licked over the spot, then opened wide and drew one testicle into her mouth. She sucked so gently, let it slide out slowly through her lips, sucked the other one too, then flicked her tongue behind them. His thighs shook, his hands tightened in her hair. Her hands slid around and tightened on his ass, his cheeks clenched into rocklike hardness as his hips moved.

“Do you want to come in my mouth?” she whispered, and looked up at him kneeling above her.

His eyes blazed down at her. He didn’t answer for a long moment, and she opened her mouth over his cock again, holding his gaze. She sucked him deep, then pulled off, her head tipped way back into the cushions. She stared up at him, mouth open, his cock in her hand.

“Christ, look at you,” he muttered. His thumbs slid to her cheeks. “Sitting there with your mouth open for me, your lips all shiny and wet and swollen. I wanna fuck

your mouth so bad. Jesus, Shaela, you make me lose it. Totally. Fucking. Lose it.” And he thrust back into her open mouth, fucking it. A dark thrill shot through her at his words, again reminding her of the power she held, and heat exploded under her skin and flashed through her entire body. She sucked him hungrily, worked over his cock with lips and tongue, until his thighs quivered even more and his thrusts became shorter, tighter and then his taste flooded over her tongue, sharp and bright. It tasted like rapture.

She swallowed and sucked, sucked and swallowed until he stopped moving and his hands relaxed on her head and he let out another long noise, a combination sigh and groan that sounded as if it came from deep inside him.

“Love that,” he muttered. “So much. So good.”

“Good.” Satisfaction drizzled through her, and she kissed his lower belly just above the dark curls before he moved away. He dropped to the couch beside her and pulled her into his arms.

“Are we done?” she asked playfully. He gave her bottom a little tap, sending more heat to her center. God, she loved that.

“No. Not even close to done. But let’s go into the bedroom. And I’m in charge. Remember?”

She nodded.

He tucked himself back into his jeans but didn’t fasten them, left them low on his hips and led the way into her dim bedroom. “Maybe that was a good thing,” he said, turning and sliding his arms around her. “Took the edge off. Now I can take my time with you.” He kissed her on the mouth, so gently, with lingering tongue, then began to remove her clothing.

She let him tug her cardigan off, carefully easing each arm from the sleeve, then lift the loose shirt she wore over her head. She’d worn the tiny pink demi bra with black bows she knew he liked so much, and as he gazed down at her the warm appreciation



in his eyes heated her skin. "So pretty," he murmured, tracing his fingers over her flesh just above the lace edge of the bra.

Then he worked her jeans down her legs and off. She stepped out of her heels and stood before him in bra and panties, the pink panties that matched, with black bows on her hips and pretty much nothing in the back.

"This is nice," he said, dragging his hands over her in long, luscious strokes of heat, from hips to the sides of her breasts, down to her waist. He bent and laid a trail of kisses from one shoulder to the other, nudging her chin up as his mouth danced across her collarbones.

"Yes," she moaned. "Nice." And she turned herself over to him and the pleasure he could give her.

\* \* \* \* \*

What had possessed him to ask for that painting? Viv's face had gone all soft and knowing as if she thought she knew something. And that comment about Shaela seeing a lot of it. As if they were going to be together forever.

Jesus. Alek's gut burned as he lay in bed in the dark, Shaela's soft breathing beside him telling him she was asleep.

And her goddamn father. What the fuck was up with all the insulting comments? Alek burned even more remembering that, remembering how he'd hurt inside at the look on Shaela's sweet face. No one could talk to her like that. He wasn't going to allow it.

What was wrong with him? Why was he getting all tied in knots about this stuff? When Shaela had invited him to come for dinner with her parents, his initial reaction had been pleasure that she wanted to do that. Then he'd started to have misgivings about what it all meant. It was such a...a relationship thing to do.

He rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb Shaela, and wandered out to her dark, silent living room. He flicked on a lamp and his eyes fell on the painting, sitting on the floor propped up against the wall, illuminated by the glow of the lamp. He stared at it.

He was in love with her.

His stomach plunged sharply, unpleasantly, and he felt like a fist was squeezing his throat. No. This couldn't be happening. He'd fallen in love once before and what a fucking disaster that had turned out to be.

And this time—Jesus. The stakes were so much higher. He rubbed his bare chest, looked up at the ceiling. What was he going to do?

Shaela had feelings for him too. He knew it. This could work out. He didn't have to have his heart ripped out and shredded to pieces again, although at that moment he felt like someone had grabbed hold of his insides with a giant fist and yanked them outside his body.

Emotions simmered and bubbled inside him, disturbing and confusing. He'd been in denial for a while now. He'd never felt such an intense emotional connection with other women when he'd tied them up. That's the way he'd wanted it. Intense emotion, AKA love, didn't belong with tying up. They had to be separate. But every time he tied Shaela up, every time they had sex even without bondage, the intensity of his feelings for Shaela ratcheted up a notch until now he was about to burst with them.

He was in love with her. And he could never tie her up again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The luxury hotel the convention was taking place at gave the event a more normal feel. And the people wandering into the ballroom looked pretty ordinary too. Shaela followed Alek into the lobby, Alek carrying a large bag over his shoulder holding the ropes he wanted to use for the demo.

He'd been in a weird mood all morning, since they'd woken up in her bed. He'd been curt, stone-faced, almost hostile. When she'd asked him what was wrong, she'd

gotten an abrupt, “Nothing.” She’d even asked him if he was mad at her about something but he’d denied that too. Then he’d offered to find someone else to do this if she didn’t want to.

Mystified, she’d said, “No. I want to do it, Alek.”

His frown had deepened, his mouth had tightened.

Weird. She sent him another anxious glance as she hurried to keep up with him striding across the marble floor of the hotel lobby, past the long expanse of check-in counter lined with people, past the bank of elevators, past leather chairs and potted palms. Bad enough she had no idea what to expect at this freaky convention, but he was acting all moody and dark and she had no idea why. She pressed a hand to her fluttery stomach.

Alek stopped at a long table to check in and she picked up a brochure. Her eyes roamed over some of the topics—Intro to Bondage. Okay. Intermediate Bondage. Sure. Breast Bondage. Oh dear lord.

Altered States of Consciousness Through Breathing.

Shaela’s own breath quickened and she blinked at Alek as he approached and handed her the plastic tag to hang around her neck.

“Let’s go in,” he said, not even looking at her, and he led the way into the ballroom. The workshops had started earlier in the morning and already crowds of people milled about in the ballroom, taking in displays and demonstrations.

Shaela surveyed the displays as they walked past—lots of vendors selling all kinds of ropes, sexy clothing and toys. Another big breath in and out. This was a whole new world to her. Though it was kind of exciting.

At Alek’s request she’d worn black shorts and a snug black T-shirt. He must have something specific planned. She licked her lips as they approached a stage. Letting him tie her up for him alone—incredible. In front of another man—hot. In front of a whole crowd—petrifying.

The experience was bizarre. And then Marco showed up with a camera to take pictures of them. He smiled at her reassuringly and she gave him a shaky little smile back.

But it turned out she wasn't nervous standing up there in front of all those people once they got going, Alek talking into a small microphone clipped to his shirt while he wrapped her in ropes. But nor was she as transported as she usually was when he did that, distracted by the crowd, the noise, Alek talking and the pop of Marco's flash. And the fact that Alek was so cool and detached about it wasn't exactly arousing. So it was simply a demonstration, nothing sexual about it—well, okay if she was completely honest, some of the knots he'd tied had pressed into her in sensitive places that had sent small flares of pleasure through her. He was just so damn good at that. But for once, he didn't seem to care about that. He was doing it for the audience—not for her.

And it made her stomach tighten and her heart ache.

## **Chapter Twelve**

It was killing him. He'd asked her to do that goddamn demo but that was before he realized he loved her. He was stuck tying her up. At least it had been in front of hundreds of people. He'd been able to stay professional and disengaged. It was just about the ropes.

But it was killing him.

Touching her body, seeing the pleasure flare in her eyes when he got a knot on exactly the right pressure point. Knowing how high he could take her. But yet knowing he couldn't do that.

Now they were home and the wild hunger he'd been suppressing all day at the convention tore through him, a surge of dark lust so powerful he took a step toward her without thinking. "Get on the bed."

His voice came out in a rough growl and she unhesitatingly climbed onto the bed and gazed back at him.

"Lay down. On your stomach."

She stretched out and he moved beside the bed, reached down and stroked his palm over the back of her thighs up to the edge of the short shorts she wore. He knew she was sensitive there.

"Roll over." She rolled to her back, wide-eyed, and he unfastened the button and zipper of the shorts and tugged them off, leaving the tiny thong panties. He turned her over onto her stomach. Nice. He loved her ass. And her lingerie.

He slid his palms over her thighs, down to the back of her knees, making her shiver, then back up. His fingertips lingered in the crease at the bottom of her cheek, then stroked up over the swell of flesh.

“You like to be touched here, don’t you?” he murmured.

Her voice muffled by the duvet, she said, “Yes.”

Her hair obscured her face and he drew it back, tucked it behind one ear, studied her flushed pink cheek and closed eyes.

He sat on the bed beside her and caressed her with both hands, up and down her legs and ass. Then he dragged her panties down and off. Her thighs parted in erotic invitation.

Blood surged hotly in his veins at the sight of her pussy from behind like that, the contrast of innocent bare folds of soft flesh and the wanton way she parted her legs.

Tonight he was going to have her ass. His cock jerked, thick and hard, responding to the white-hot hunger inside him.

He drew a finger up through her folds, hot and wet. So wet. He sucked her sweet cream off his finger, then did it again. “So wet, baby,” he murmured. “So wet for me. I know you like this.”

He played there for a long time, stroking, probing, rubbing. He brushed her clit but didn’t linger, pushed a finger inside her tight, hot channel. And then he grazed his fingertips up between the cheeks of her ass, over the sweet little pucker there. She jerked and groaned again, and when he looked at her face, her top teeth had sunk into her bottom lip.

He was learning Shaela’s triggers—she got off on being watched. And she liked a little pain. His body tightened.

He lifted his hand and brought it down on one firm cheek in a swift smack and her head lifted off the pillow with a small strangled cry. He did the same to the other cheek, watched the pink bloom over her skin with heated pleasure, then did it again, several rapid taps.

“Oh god!” she cried out, writhing beneath him. But she wasn’t even restrained in any way—she could have easily rolled away from him if she’d wanted to.

He smiled, heat stabbing right to his balls at the way she submitted to his fiery caresses.

His fingers played again, her pussy now dripping with hot liquid, and he drew the liquid up to her anus and played there too, with gentle rubs and probes. Her breathing increased, her face became scarlet and her hips lifted against his hand in sweet supplication. Oh yeah, she wanted it too.

Alek stood and ripped off his clothes, his body tight and throbbing, then returned to the bed, kneeling between her legs, gazing at her pussy and the gleam of her ass cheeks where he'd painted her arousal over her. He leaned in and licked, dragging his tongue from clit to anus. Her delicate, sweet taste tingled on his tongue, and he licked again and again, pressed kisses to the curve of each cheek, spread her legs wider with his palms, then parted her cheeks so he could stab his tongue into her.

"Alek!" her voice was a croak. "Oh my god, Alek."

He lingered there, tasting her, tonguing her, torturing her, until he thought she was ready to take him. With one more sharp tap to each cheek, he moved closer, took his cock in hand and pressed the head against her puckered opening.

Lube. He needed lube. But it was nowhere near, so he ran the head of his cock through her cream and returned to the tight opening.

Tight. So tight. He breathed through the overriding urgency inside him, rising up so hot and hard his control started to shred. The need to own her, to take her this way and make her his when he knew she'd never done it with anyone else, blasted through him in red-hot possessiveness. He pushed into her.

A strangled cry tore from her throat, this time louder. He held her hips, thumbs parting her cheeks, clenched his teeth against the need to come that spiraled inside him, and pushed in farther yet.

"Oh, that hurts!" She moved under him, enough that his cock slid out, and he had to take hold of it to find her entrance again, holding her still. "Wait! Wait, Alek..."

His ears roaring, heart pounding frantically, her plea registered in the dim recesses of his mind.

"No! Stop! Alek. I'm asking you to stop." Her words ended on a sob.

He tried to focus his foggy vision, semen boiling in his balls and ready to explode out, pinpoints of heated sensation sizzling over his skin. She rolled away from him and he blinked, let her go.

Jesus Christ. She was safeing out on him.

Shaela sat on the bed, naked from the waist down, and covered her mouth with both hands, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She gazed at Alek, who stared back at her, breathing heavily. His cock throbbed in front of him. It took all he had to control the animal lust roaring inside him, he wanted her so bad. But hell. She'd said stop.

She blinked rapidly at him as they stared at each other, tension thickening around them.

"Shaela. What...?"

"I'm sorry." Her voice emerged thick. "I'm sorry. I want to do that. I do. I just...couldn't."

He shook his head, head still spinning, balls still aching. "God, Shaela..." He rubbed his chest. "I thought you liked that. That last time..."

"I did." She drew in a long breath. "I want you to tie me up." She looked at him from beneath her lashes. It was what she needed. "Please. Tie me up."

Alek stared at her.

How could she tell him that fierce burning pain had scared her? Actually it was more like startled her. She hadn't been expecting it, hadn't prepared for it. The spanking he'd administered had started her up, warmed her butt, sent edgy tingles through her body, but then...oh, god.

"Now? You want me to tie you up *now*?" His voice was raw, eyes blazing.



"Um...yes." She drew back a bit, surprised by the incredulity on his face. "Please." She needed that. If he'd just tie her up, *take* her up, she could do that...for him. She implored him with her eyes.

"No."

She gaped at him, fingers digging into the comforter on his bed. "But..."

"No. I won't. If you don't want to do that, fine. But I'm not tying you up."

Shaela sat there, not sure what to say and apparently Alek wasn't sure either. His face tightened, he lowered his eyes and clenched his hands into fists, still standing there naked and gorgeous. Confusion twisted inside her. Why wouldn't he do that? He always wanted to tie her up.

All day long he'd acted so aloof, as if he was angry at her, though he denied it. If he was angry, she had no idea what she'd done, but now, at this moment she knew she'd disappointed him and she hated it.

She wanted him to be happy, to look at her with that blazing desire, that hot challenge and compelling mastery. But holy crap, that had *hurt* and she hadn't had time to get her head into that space she went to when he tied her up.

Well, she'd killed this party darn good, that's for sure. But why did he look so blindsided? It's not as if she'd told him to never touch her again. She'd just asked him to tie her up, for god's sake.

He rolled off the bed and disappeared into his bathroom. She slid off the bed and found her panties, dragged them on and sat on the edge of the bed waiting for him, heart heavy and hurting. When he returned, he'd dressed in pair of black boxers.

What was going on?

He stopped in front of her, his expression more normal now, his usual air of authority back. "Go home, Shaela."

Her lips parted on a soft gasp. "But...Alek..."

"I need to be alone right now."

Her throat ached ferociously and her lips trembled. "Alek, I'm sorry. We can try again..."

"Not tonight." His eyes shuttered.

What had she done? She stood, pausing uncertainly, then at the black, implacable look on his face, she gave him a short nod and left the room. Left his apartment and crossed the hall to her own. She let herself in, shut the door behind her and leaned against it in the dark. She closed her eyes against scalding tears, then gave a little sniff.

She didn't understand what was going on. So he'd tried one thing she didn't like. Even that wasn't exactly right. The thought of doing that sent heat straight to her pussy. She loved it when he played with her ass. She'd loved it when he'd fingered her there. It had made her orgasm wildly intense. She'd anticipated him doing that, fucking her ass, anticipated even greater pleasure. So it wasn't that she didn't like it.

She'd been scared. She'd wimped out and told him to stop.

And now he was so pissed off at her he didn't even want to be with her. Didn't even want to tie her up.

She craved the tight embrace of the ropes, the sweet bite of them into her skin, the pressure of the knots, and being helpless and free. Sadness washed over her and she rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, wandered farther into her apartment with no lights, suddenly exhausted right to her bones. Heaviness filled her at the knowledge she'd somehow disappointed him, hadn't been able to live up to what he wanted from her.

Tears soaked her pillow when she crawled into bed, until she finally fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alek stirred his coffee, sitting at his friend Evan's kitchen counter Sunday morning. His wife Cosma had poured them coffee, then left them alone with a smile.

"So what's the problem?" Evan asked. "Why do you look like someone just smashed your new Nikon?"

Alek laid down the spoon and picked up his coffee. He'd come there because he needed to talk to someone about what had happened last night, and Evan was without a doubt the best one to talk to, but now, faced with spilling his guts, he decided – nah, he'd really rather not.

He sighed.

"Oh for chrissakes. Is it Shaela?" Evan had met her yesterday at the convention. "Did she dump you?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"You've been in the lifestyle a long time."

"Yeah."

"Has anyone ever safed out on you?"

Evan lifted one eyebrow. "Of course."

"Really?" Alek tipped his head to one side.

"Yeah. Really." Evan shrugged. "That's why you have safe words. Right?"

"Yeah. But..."

"Ah. Is that what happened last night?" Evan grinned. "What the hell were you trying?"

Alek rolled his eyes. He wasn't going to be discussing that little detail. "It wasn't that bad," he said, looking down into his milky coffee.

Evan paused and ran a hand over his close-cropped hair, his answer to a receding hairline and thinning hair. "Obviously it was to her."

Remembering the look of hurt and bewilderment on Shaela's pretty face was like a knife twisting in Alek's chest. "Yeah," he muttered. "I guess I misjudged things."

Evan shrugged. "So. Shit happens. You talk about it and you move on. That's all part of it. Part of the learning and growing."

Alek's mouth twisted. "Yeah. Well...we didn't exactly talk about it."

Evan frowned. "What did you...oh no. No." He shook his head. "Tell me you didn't..."

"No!" Alek's body jerked in response. Evan thought he'd fucking forced her to do something! "No, that's not it at all."

"Whew. Okay. What happened, then?"

"She asked me to tie her up."

"She wasn't restrained?"

"No."

"Oh." Evan sipped his coffee. "I'm confused, buddy. She wasn't tied up but whatever you were doing, she asked you to stop. And *then* she asked you to tie her up?"

"Yeah."

"Ah." Evan's eyes widened. "I think I get it now. She needed that freedom."

Alek swallowed through a suddenly constricted throat. "Freedom." Oh man. He was such an idiot.

"Yeah." Evan eyed him. "So what did you do? Tie her up?"

Alek cleared his throat. "I told her to go home."

Now both Evan's eyebrows lifted.

"Fuck. I know." Alek set down his coffee and dropped his head into his hands. "I acted like an asshole."

"Uh. Yeah." Evan sipped his coffee. "Once again, I'm not getting this. Why the hell wouldn't you tie her up? Especially if she asked you to."

He looked up at Evan who watched him with narrowed eyes. Alek swiped the sweat beading on his forehead. Talking about this shit was just about as bad as when it had happened.

Evan pursed his lips and was silent for a long moment. "I was watching you yesterday at the convention, when you tied Shaela. You're good at what you do, but you looked – robotic. Where was the emotion? The passion?"

"I didn't want to tie her up yesterday. I did it because I had to."

"You did it because you had to." Evan shook his head. "Those are not the words of Shibari." He paused. "Have you lost sight of the spiritual journey Shibari is? It's not just about wrapping ropes around women."

"I know that," Alek growled. He knew what Evan was talking about, was fully aware Shibari was as much a journey of self-discovery for the top as for the bottom. He just didn't want to go there right now. A deep knot of fear kept him from wanting to pursue that topic.

But Evan apparently didn't care about that. "The spiritual part of it means knowing yourself. Learning about yourself."

"I know myself."

Evan gave a half-smile. "No. The journey never ends. There's always more to learn. But that takes open and honest communication with your partner. Sounds like that wasn't there."

Alek grimaced. "No."

"Talking to her about what she was feeling, helping her on her journey, is what leads you on your journey."

Shit. "Yeah."

"What is it that you've always gotten from your bondage?"

Alek again found himself strangely unwilling to open up about this stuff. Because he knew Evan was going to call him on it. "I like the control. I like the creativity of it. I like giving pleasure."

"That's it?"

"It turns me on."

"Those are all the superficial things," Evan pointed out. "What have you learned about yourself?"

Alek sucked in air and looked away from Evan across the kitchen.

"What about the emotional connection with your partner? What about the trust she places in you, to tie her up and turn control over to you? What does that teach you?"

"Well. Usually, it teaches me that I don't *have* an emotional connection with my partner."

Evan lifted a brow.

"I don't *want* to have an emotional connection with my partner." That confession was dragged out from way down deep inside. "It's not about that for me. After...well, never mind. It's just about—what I said. Control. Pleasure. Art. That's all it can be."

"What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Bullshit. Remember, you have to be honest with yourself."

Alek grimaced.

"So it sounds like there's an emotional connection with Shaela. You're pretty upset about what happened. You wouldn't be if you didn't care."

Hell. Evan's insight was like a knife digging into his gut. Making him face things he didn't want to face.

"Yeah. I care about her."

"Sounds like more than that, to me."

"All right, all right, yeah, I'm in love with her. That's why I can't tie her up anymore." Alek's chest got very tight and heat swept over him. He shook his head. Licked his lips. God, last night, the fear inside him had battled with the pain of seeing the look on her face when he'd said no, when he'd sent her home.

"I guess that makes sense to you in some weird twisted way."

Alek shot him another glare and Evan laughed.

"What I don't get is how you could have been doing that all these years without caring about your partners."

"I cared about them. I just...shit. It's a long story." He'd spilled as much of his guts as he wanted to right then. That ass-kicking painful memory of what had happened years ago was staying well buried deep inside. "Brigit and I were together for a year."

"Not like this. I saw you with Shaela. There's a big difference."

Alek stared at his friend. "Like what?"

"There was no chemistry between you and Brigit. Or you and Sandy, or you and...what was her name? Never mind. You looked pretty grim yesterday but holy crap, sparks were flying like a blowtorch."

Alek had to admit the chemistry between him and Shaela was explosive. Off-the-charts combustible. Oh yeah.

"You may have tied them up and they all liked it, but it was...superficial. And what about the power exchange?"

What about it? Hadn't he realized that's what was happening with him and Shaela? That his pleasure was her pleasure. That despite being bound, she had power over him, and he'd never experienced that with anyone else. Because he'd never cared about anyone else like he cared for her, and for her to have that much power over him—okay, hell yeah, it scared the fuckin' crap out of him.

Evan was right. He had to be honest with himself. He knew how important honesty was if you were going to tie someone up.

"And you really ought to know that you're always learning. So you screwed up. Learn from it. Learn something about yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. You don't know everything and you never will. There's a fine line between being masterful and being a jerk."

"Jesus. Enough with insults, already," Alek muttered.

Evan just laughed. "Isn't that what you came here for?"

"Hell no." But he met Evan's eyes and gave him a crooked smile. "Okay, I was a jerk last night. Not when I was...but after...I didn't handle myself very well."

"Yeah, sounds like it." Again Evan grinned and leaned back in his chair. "You gotta talk to her, man. I don't know what kind of shit you're keeping inside yourself, but if you love her, you have to talk to her about it. She needs to know what's going on." He shrugged. "Whether or not you tie her up, you two have to agree on that. You don't get to make decisions like that for her, no matter how dominant you are."

Alek's gut cramped. Evan was right. He'd known that deep inside before he'd even come there, just hadn't wanted to admit it. But hearing his friend say it out loud, he couldn't ignore it.

"She must like to be tied up."

Alek met the question in his friend's eyes, and nodded slowly. Hell yeah. She loved it. She floated off into subspace on a beautiful trip every damn time, so precious and gratifying. She came in electrifying, soul-shattering, whole body and mind orgasms. He loved giving that to her. But...that damn fear gnawed at his insides, making him do stupid things.

He remembered back to the first time he'd tied her up. How he'd seen inside her. How he'd longed to show her how it could be. And he'd taken her there, taken her so far.

He could take her further.

Except maybe he'd hurt her so much she probably thought the whole scene was bullshit and wanted nothing more to do with him. Dammit.

"I better go talk to her." He slid off the high chair at the counter. "Thanks, man. For the coffee."

They shared a look and Evan gave him a nod.



## Chapter Thirteen

Alek knocked on Shaela's apartment door but there was no answer. He called her cell phone as he walked into his apartment. Got her voice mail. Sent her a text message — *Where are you?*

He waited, sitting on his couch, every muscle tight, until his phone buzzed. *At work,* he read.

What else was new? He grimaced. Sunday afternoon and Shaela was at work.

*When will you be done?* he texted back.

He waited for several long, stretched-out minutes for her reply.

*Don't know. Late.*

Shit. He tossed his phone onto the coffee table and sank back into the couch. Well, he had stuff to do too. After the shoot on Friday for Shanghai Express, he'd left his computer running to convert all the raw images he'd shot to TIFF. That batch should be done and he could go and start another, start working on fine-tuning the images, adjusting light and dark, sharpness and clarity, deleting ones he didn't want the client to see.

So he drove to his studio and spent the rest of the day there, working, immersing himself in his images and software and blocking out everything else.

For a while.

His stomach started to complain about being hungry with some noisy rumbling, and the mouthwatering images of stir-fried beef and vegetables, crispy golden spring rolls and steamed rice didn't help. He grinned, though. Damn, those were good images.

He'd pick up some food on his way home — enough for Shaela too — and hope she was there.

In the mood for Asian food after all the pictures he'd looked at, he stopped at his favorite restaurant and ordered several takeout dishes—too many, but he was starving and he was hoping to share. Moo shu pork, General Tso's chicken, ginger beef, lo mein, fried rice, an order of crispy wontons, and what the heck, a few shrimp egg rolls. The smell of the warm food in his Jeep as he drove home made him want to rip open the containers and stuff a wonton into his mouth.

Juggling the big bag of food, he stopped and rapped on Shaela's door. Waited. No answer. With a frown he unlocked his own door and went inside. He deposited the bag on the counter and pulled out his cell phone, called her number again. It was seven o'clock. She couldn't possibly still be at work.

"Hello?"

"Hi." He wanted to immediately demand, "Where are you?" but restrained himself. "I have Chinese food. Are you hungry?"

He heard a soft sigh. "Starving. But I'm still at work."

"Jesus, Shaela!" He swallowed back the words that wanted to spill out of him. She'd been there all fucking day! Well, so had he been working, but...*Jesus*. He repressed a sigh. "You must be tired."

"Yeah. Tired and hungry." Her voice sounded sad and uncertain, too.

"We need to talk, sweetheart. Come home. I'll wait for you."

After a brief pause, she whispered, "Okay. Be there soon."

He snapped his phone shut and surveyed the food. He'd said he'd wait but he was hungry enough to eat twice, so while he changed and waited for her, he munched on a few wontons and two egg rolls. That would keep him going.

Her soft knock on his door had him hurrying across the loft apartment to let her in. She stood there, dressed in black leggings and a long white T-shirt with orange and yellow flowers that looked like they'd been painted onto it, with a tiny denim jacket over the top, a sad mouth and lines of weariness on her face.

"Come on in," he said, standing aside. "I have lots of food."

"Good." She walked over to his kitchen counter where he'd arranged the containers along with plates and chopsticks.

"Glass of wine?"

"That would be nice." She let out a long breathy sigh as she perched on one of his black stools, eyeing him cautiously, with flickering eyes.

He told her about his day as they filled plates with food and ate. He'd let her eat, have her glass of wine, wind down a bit, and then they'd talk. She still seemed a little stiff, a little distant and cool. He didn't blame her.

When they'd finished, she helped him put the food away and slide their dishes into his dishwasher. He closed it up, turned to face her, set his hands on her shoulders.

"Okay," he said. "Now we need to talk."

She didn't meet his eyes, looked down between them. "I don't know, Alek. I'm really...tired."

Shit.

He clenched his jaw, heart thudding heavy in his chest.

"How about tomorrow?" She lifted her eyes to look up at him. She did look exhausted.

"Sure," he said. "Tomorrow will be better. I'll make dinner for us here. Something nice."

"Okay." With another melancholy smile, she drifted out from under his hands and out of his apartment.

He sank onto a stool. Took a breath. She wanted to be tied up? Okay. Good. She was gonna be tied up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaela stood in front of her closet the next morning, wearing only panties, trying to decide what to wear to work.

"I want you to wear this."

Her heart lurched and she whirled around with a gasp, a hand flying to her chest. "Alek! Jesus! You scared me!"

"Sorry. I let myself in."

He stood there, holding long loops of thin rope in his hands.

"I want you to wear this," he said again.

She blinked.

"Wear what?"

"This." He held up the rope, eyes glinting. He lifted his chin.

Her brows snapped together. "What are you talking about? I'm going to work!"

"I know."

"I can't wear that to work!"

"Under your clothes." He advanced toward her purposefully. "Hold still."

What was going on? The other night she'd asked him to tie her up and he'd refused and freaked out and things had been weird ever since. In fact, things had been weird even before then. Now he *wanted* to tie her up? And he wanted her to wear the ropes to *work*? Dear lord.

Her heart pattered in her chest as he dragged the length of rope through his hands. Arousal did a little flip in her belly. God, she just had to see rope in his hands and she got turned-on. She raised a hand and pressed it to her chest between her breasts. "Um...Alek..."

"Do it. For me."

He stopped in front of her and found the center of the rope, then started his careful, methodical wrapping, tightening and knotting, turning her body as he did so, dressing her in a kinky undergarment. Heat flared under her skin, her panties dampening. She

closed her eyes against the erotic sensations, the rope sliding over her skin, wrapping her like a hug, feeling the vibration all the way inside her pussy when he tightened it. All day she was going to feel these ropes and get all hot and wet. Oh. God.

"There." He adjusted the rope above her breasts. "Anything too tight? Uncomfortable?"

Her head spun a little, but she shook it and focused. "No." On the contrary, she felt all safe and secure.

He brushed his mouth over hers, slid his hands to her shoulders and turned her back to her closet. "Now, pick out something to wear."

Well, that would be a challenge. Anything too clingy or silky would reveal the ropes, and she did not want to be on the receiving end of odd looks from coworkers or clients or even – gah! – Slave Driver Sam. She reached for a crisp cotton dress with a full skirt that buttoned up the front and tied at the waist. That should work. The fabric of the dress rasped over the soft ropes in a sensuous slide as she dressed, filling her senses. She took a deep breath as she slid her feet into high-heeled sandals.

Alek dragged a finger down her back, over the ropes. "I'd love to see you in just my rope and those shoes," he whispered. "Later."

"Um...you're still making dinner?"

"Yeah. Seven o'clock. Be there."

He kissed her again as they each headed out to start their workday. It had become quite comfortable to get up in the mornings at either his place or hers after spending the night together, dress, drink coffee and kiss him goodbye, but this morning they hadn't spent the night together, had barely talked and she felt confused and off balance.

Shaela's carefully planned day immediately got all screwed up by Slave Driver Sam arriving at her cubicle looking for the status report of the spa project. "I'll have it done this morning," she promised him, unsure how she was going to do that since she was supposed to be meeting with the architect of the Martin project.

"By ten o'clock," he said as he walked away.

She started typing furiously, but less than half an hour later, Sam called an emergency meeting in the boardroom. Blowing out a breath, she printed the status report and slid it into a folder. She could give it to him at the meeting—well before ten o'clock.

"I called this meeting to discuss a serious problem," Sam began. "We have to come up with a plan to deal with it immediately."

"What's the problem?" Natalie inquired.

"I'm getting to that," he snapped. Everyone shrank back in their seats.

"Hudspeth Enterprises want to move up the opening of their new office building." He glanced around the table. "By a month."

Muted gasps echoed in the room.

"But we're a month behind on that project," Shaela said slowly.

"I know!" Sam slammed down a hand on the table. "Goddammit." He shot a glare toward Shaela. Her stomach tightened yet again. Was he blaming her? "We need to take urgent action and get things back on track. I don't care what it takes."

Shaela felt her temples begin to throb. They'd already been working such long hours, and they had all those other projects to work on, too...

"But—"

"No buts," he snapped back. "The client is going to give us a ten percent bonus if we can do this."

Shaela rolled her lips together to keep her mouth from dropping open. That was a huge contract and ten percent was a lot of money. A *lot*. No wonder Sam was so agitated. "So we need to come up with a solution to the problem," he continued. "Shaela, I want you to take charge of this and come up with a plan by Wednesday morning."

She stared at him. "Um...is that instead of the rest of my work? I'm supposed to meet with—"

"Of course not! The other work still has to get done! God, what a stupid question," he said, rolling his eyes. "We're already behind."

Her cheeks grew hot and nausea rolled in her stomach. Glances were exchanged around the table again.

Sam started talking about efficiencies at his previous employer and how they had kept project deadlines tightly under control. He started to drone on and on while everyone glanced surreptitiously at their watches.

Finally, Shaela ventured to ask, "Sam, is there anything else specific you need to tell us? Or should I get to work on that plan?"

He looked at her as if she had something growing out of her ears. "Fine," he snapped. "Get back to work."

Everyone gathered up their papers and pens and cell phones and hurried out of the meeting room.

Shaela handed Sam the folder with the status report. "What's that?" he asked.

"The status report. You said you needed it by ten o'clock. Here it is."

She held out the folder and he just rolled his eyes again and turned away from her. "Priorities have changed," he said and left the boardroom.

Her body tightened and she sucked in a long, long breath. As she expanded her lungs, the ropes she wore beneath her dress dug into her skin. Just a small bite, but it reminded her that she could handle pain.

This could not go on. She could not take being talked to like that anymore. Did Sam not see what was happening? Even he was stressed. He'd always been a tough and demanding boss, but lately he'd been getting more and more controlling and rude.

She sat at her desk and stared at the computer screen. She already knew her coworkers all felt the same way she did—they were wasting valuable time doing

administrative tasks when they should be focusing on the design work they'd been trained to do. They were all on the edge of burning out, from the stress and long hours and frantic pace every day. They were behind on this project, not to mention others. And now the pressure had been ramped up.

She loved her job and felt proud to work for such a respected company but she couldn't go on like this. She had to make a choice. She either had to make an effort to effect some changes there, or she had to quit. The idea of telling her father she'd quit her job made her stomach cramp, but...she had to do something.

"Shit," she muttered. She opened up the folder for the Hudspeth project on her monitor, looked at the project timelines. Where could they save some time? What could they do?

Her neck felt like stone and her head throbbed an hour later, but she thought she'd found some possible solutions. But that didn't address the real problem. And she was going to find a solution to that too, because dammit, she did not want to quit.

When Natalie and Pilar invited her for lunch, she blew out a frustrated sigh.

"Are you okay?" Natalie asked, her forehead creasing.

"Yeah. No."

Pilar stepped farther into her cubicle. "Let us know if you need any help with that Hudspeth project," she said quietly with a quick squeeze to Shaela's shoulder. "You shouldn't have to do that all on your own."

"You have your own things to work on." Shaela sent her a weak smile.

"Want us to bring you something? A sandwich?"

"That would be great. Thanks."

She started making notes and adding up how many extra hours of work everyone was putting in. She remembered what Alek had said about it and her mind started flying. They didn't get paid overtime, but she estimated how they could be meeting project deadlines sooner, and the cost savings they could realize if everyone on the team



had the extra hours they currently spent on administrative duties. She sat back and stared at the numbers on her computer screen. It was easily double what it would cost to hire someone to assist them.

She sat at her desk, aware of the thin ropes she wore beneath her dress. Nobody knew she was bound under her clothing. Alek had carefully arranged the ropes around her like wanton underwear, and her crisp cotton button-up dress hid it all. But she knew it was there. Felt the rope rubbing her pussy as she walked, making her swell and grow wet. It made her think of Alek and how much she wanted to get home to him. How much she wanted to make him happy by showing him she'd worn his ropes all day. How much she wanted to talk to him and find out what was going on with them.

She had to do this. She stood and walked to Slave Driver Sam's office and knocked on his door.

Sam looked up. "Yes, Shaela?"

"I have something I'd like to talk to you about," she began, her stomach tight. She straightened her shoulders, the ropes on her skin a reminder—she could do this. After what she'd done with Alek, she could do anything.

"I'm busy for the next while," he said. "How about at five?"

Five o'clock? She kept her face blank. She was supposed to be at Alek's at seven. She didn't know how long this was going to take—hopefully she'd still get home in time. But again, she had to do this. She nodded. "Okay. I'll come back then."

She'd keep it brief, concise, to the point, present him with her business case and be out of there in half an hour. Ample time to get home.

At five o'clock she returned to Sam's office, heart tripping a bit, but the constriction of the rope reminded her how strong she was, how safe she was, how she could do this.

"I know you tasked me with finding some solutions to the Hudspeth project," she began. "But I realized there's a bigger issue at play here and I've come up with a solution for that too."

Sam frowned. "Bigger issue?"

She leaned forward. The ropes tightened on her in a dark hug. "We're all stressed lately," she said. "Even you seem to be feeling the pressure." He opened his mouth, his thick black brows a slash above his glasses, but she hurried on. "Like I said, it's affecting all of us. In the meeting this morning, I know you were stressed, but..." she swallowed. "When you talk to us in that tone of voice it makes us feel as though you don't respect us."

Sam sat back in his chair and blinked at her.

"We all work hard and do a good job. We've all been putting in long hours and working our butts off. This is a great design company and we all want it to be successful, but we're running behind on almost every project. Here's what we can do about it." She presented the business case, with the numbers she'd worked on, careful to stick to facts and figures and logic, which was how his mind worked. She avoided talking about how overwhelmed she felt at times, how tired, how uninspired when it came to actual design work because she was so bogged down with other details. How she might have to quit if this didn't help things. Because he wouldn't care about stuff like that. Just the facts.

He had a lot of questions, but she took that as a positive sign, since he actually seemed to be listening and taking in what she was presenting.

Sam took off his glasses and rubbed his face. "You're right, Shaela. We are behind on every project. And I have been stressed. I apologize if I've been...uh...hard to get along with."

She smiled slightly but relief bubbled inside her. It didn't sound like he was going to fire her right at that moment.

"And your numbers all make sense." He shook his head. "Maybe I've been a little shortsighted, but in this economy, we have to be careful about every penny we spend."

"I understand that."

He stared down at the papers she'd given him, all the numbers. "Yeah," he finally said. "Let's hire someone. An assistant. If you're right about this..." He looked up, his eyes intent. "And you'd damn well better be—we'll easily save the cost of that salary in a year."

"If we make that bonus, it will cover the cost of that salary."

His eyes narrowed.

"And with some help, I think we could be even more productive," she said, hoping she wasn't pushing things.

"You'd better be," he said again, but this time the corners of his mouth twitched up. Just a tiny bit. "I'll get Human Resources on this right away. And your ideas for the Hudspeth project are great too."

"Thank you. And thank you for taking the time to listen to my proposal." She rose to her feet, ready to dance out of his office.

"Are you happy here, Shaela?"

His question stopped her in her tracks. She blinked at him. Slave Driver Sam wasn't known for his caring. "Um...yes."

"I just want you to know that you're a talented designer and we don't want to lose you," he said, and her chin almost hit the carpet. "I also like that you see the big picture. You have a good head for business. You have a bright future here, Shaela."

She stared at him, opened her mouth, closed it again. Then smiled. "Thank you."

"Go home, it's late."

She nodded and turned to leave. She'd done it! She danced back to her office to shut down her computer and grab her purse. She'd done it! She could have flown home, she was so ecstatic.

She couldn't wait to tell Alek all about it! Excitement bubbled up inside her. He'd be so proud. Hell, she was proud of herself. She'd made a difference, not just for herself

but for the whole team, and she'd done it without pissing off Sam or losing her job. In fact, Sam had complimented her! How freakin' wild was that?

Her excitement dimmed a little, remembering how tense things were between her and Alek, how uncertain she was of what was happening between them.

In her car, the digital clock showed ten minutes to seven. God! She'd been in Sam's office that long? Oh lord, she was never going to get to Alek's by seven. She fumbled for her cell phone, knowing she shouldn't use it while driving, but she was in a hurry and didn't want to pull over. She tried to call Alek to tell him she was on her way. Things were bad enough between them and she didn't want him to worry or to be annoyed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alek kept glancing at his watch. She was late.

Again. He sighed.

He'd planned such a special night for them, in the hopes that after spilling his guts – which made said guts churn with nerves – things would go well. Shit.

That damn job of hers. It was going to kill her. He'd seen the exhaustion when she dragged herself home, the weekends she went in to the office when he'd rather be playing. Last night she'd been ready to drop.

He paced back and forth in his living room. Sat on the couch. Got back up. Looked out the window.

It wasn't just selfish, much as he wanted her to himself every minute of the day. That wasn't realistic, he knew that. But he wanted her to be happy. She loved the design part of her work, so maybe she needed to look at other options. But she was so determined to have a "career" with a big corporate design company. She said she enjoyed the business aspects of it, but holy crap, this was killing her.

He was just checking his cell phone only to discover the damn battery was dead, when she finally showed up, still in her work clothes and out of breath from running from the parking lot. He first felt relief that she was okay, then a spurt of anger.

"Sorry I'm late!" she cried breathlessly. "I'll just go change and..."

"Wait, Shaela. Where were you?"

She paused, hand on his door. "At work. What d'you think?"

"That is what I thought." He walked toward her. "You were supposed to be here at seven. So we could talk."

"I...I know. I'm sorry. I just...something happened –"

"This has to stop, Shaela."

Her brows tugged together and she tipped her head to one side. "What has to stop?"

"You're running yourself ragged for that company. You get home late –"

"I said I'm sorry!"

Her voice had risen, and he paused and rubbed his forehead. "Look. Look at yourself. You can't keep this up."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, maybe you need to have a good look at this 'career' of yours. Think about other options."

"Like what?" Her voice had chilled by several degrees.

"I don't know. Other jobs..."

"This is the job I want! What the hell, Alek...I can't believe you're saying that! You know this is important to me."

"Let's talk about this over dinner."

"Let's not! Let's talk now! Is this what you wanted to talk about tonight?" Her voice rose.

"No, but..."

"First you act all cold and moody, like you don't care about me at all. Then you send me home without even telling me what you're mad about. First you want to tie me

up, then you don't. Then you do. Now you're trying to run my life. You're driving me crazy! And I am *not* going to give up my career, what I've always wanted! This is who I am!"

"Hold on..." He wasn't trying to make her give up her career – what was she going on about? Jesus, she was all emotional about this and it was his own damn fault. "That's not what I'm saying..."

"Yes, it is." She straightened and tossed her hair behind her shoulders, narrowing her eyes at him. "You're into all your kinky rope stuff, you think you can tell me what to do. Well, you can't, and neither can my father."

He almost took a step back, her words stabbing him, reopening an old wound. *Kinky rope stuff*. What the fuck?

"I could tell you're mad at me about something," she continued. "Ever since Saturday morning. I have no idea what's going on but it's clear you're angry about something, and I guess this is it. So just forget it." She waved a hand, eyes flashing. "Just forget everything. You. Me. Us. I'm outta here. That's not what I want my life to be."

And she turned and stomped on stiletto heels across the hall to her own apartment. He heard the grate of the key in her lock and then the eardrum-bursting reverberation of the door slamming behind her.

Great. Just fucking great. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but he sure as hell hadn't seen that five-ton truck coming to take him down.

## Chapter Fourteen

Shaela stormed into her apartment, let the door fly with a crash and then sank onto her big squashy couch. She stared across the room. Had that really just happened?

Breath sawed in and out of her through a tight throat. Her hands trembled and she clasped them together.

How could he be like that?

She should have known. She should have known that a man into tying women up was going to want to control everything. And the way he'd been acting. She should have known things weren't going to work out between them.

Never mind that the things he'd said to her were almost the exact same things she'd been saying to herself earlier. She couldn't go on like that with her job. She'd actually thought of quitting, if she couldn't improve things at work. But it was different when *she* thought those things, when *she* made the decisions about her life, not someone else telling her what to do.

Like her dad had just the other night, damn him. Like he had her whole life. How could Alek be like that?

Her heart squeezed so hard it hurt, and she had to close her eyes against the stab of pain. She'd thought she was in love with him.

She flopped back against the couch cushions and stared up at her ceiling. Okay, she did love him, but there was no way she was going to let a man control what kind of life she had. Shaela blew out a long shaky breath, thinking about her mother and everything she'd given up, only just now recapturing some of the pleasure she got from creating. That was not going to happen to her.

But what was she sacrificing instead?

She brushed her fingers across stinging, wet eyes, her throat aching so much she couldn't swallow. Regret at the excitement she'd been so eager to share with Alek wrenched at her heart. Without him to share it with, it seemed diminished. Less important. After all, it had been him who'd made her think about those things, who'd encouraged her to talk to her boss about them.

Shaela straightened abruptly. Once again the ropes dug into her flesh and she winced at the memory of Alek wrapping her in them that morning.

Why would he have encouraged her like that, giving her those ideas of ways to approach the problem at work, if he didn't even want her to have a career? A frown creased her brow and she rubbed at it with her fingertips, trying to think.

Why indeed? Would he have wanted her to sabotage her own career? Is that why he'd suggested doing something? No. Shame washed over her. Alek wasn't like that.

He wasn't anything like her dad, who didn't want to see anyone else being more successful than he was. Alek had made her think, and more importantly, he'd made her think she could actually do it when she'd hesitated about walking into Slave Driver Sam's office.

Her fingers slid into the open collar of the dress and felt for the ropes beneath her clothes, and her heart ached.

Alek was the one who'd taught her how strong she could be. Who'd told her to look inside herself and see who she really was. Who'd encouraged her to be who she really was, even when she didn't want to, when she'd resisted. He'd showed her how much more she was capable of than she'd ever thought by pushing her outside her comfort zone—by making her try new things, and not just sexual things but ordinary little things like eating sushi and wearing black lace underwear. And being assertive with her boss. It had changed her in every aspect of her life.

Tears flooded her eyes and blurred her vision. Now what was she supposed to do?

\* \* \* \* \*



There was a time to push, a time for aggression, a time for domination. But Alek knew this wasn't it. His impulse was to chase Shaela across the hall, kick in the door of her apartment if he had to, grab her, restrain her, spank her, and make her listen to him.

But he could just imagine how that would go over right now. Yeah, he was learning.

He wandered to the door of his bedroom and surveyed the scene he'd set—soft music playing from his iPod speakers, candles lined up around the room radiating a soft golden glow onto the bed, where ropes lay waiting. The corners of his mouth turned down and he huffed out a sigh.

Huh. So much for that. He'd wanted it to be special tonight. He was going to tell her how he felt about her, even though it was scaring the crap out of him. He was going to apologize for the other night, for being such an asshole, he was going to try to make her understand.

He'd just been worried about her. And she'd flipped out. And then threw that "kinky rope stuff" comment at him. Jesus. He rubbed at the pain in his chest, reliving those words with a sense of déjà vu. He'd been ready to take a chance with her, to tell her how he felt, but...now?

Hell. She liked to be tied up. She had to know that, admit that to herself.

Didn't she?

Food. He needed food. He'd think better with a full stomach. He changed from his dress pants and shirt into an old T-shirt and baggy shorts. In his kitchen, he glumly piled food on a plate—a selection of mozzarella, salami, cherry tomatoes, black olives and artichoke hearts he'd picked up from Emilio's just for them—Shaela's favorite antipasto. He set the plate on the counter and grabbed a beer from the fridge, popped the top and drank deeply.

Hell. Obviously he'd screwed up even worse than he'd realized if she was that mad about such a little thing. Except, with a wince, he realized it wasn't that little to her. He

recalled the things her father had said to her Friday night, how he'd been so pissed off that he would talk to Shaela like that, and how hurt she'd been.

He rubbed his mouth and leaned against the counter, the antipasto forgotten. He couldn't wait forever. He still had to apologize to her, though that "kinky rope stuff" comment still had him reeling.

The knock at the door was so faint it didn't at first register. Then he jerked up from where he leaned against his kitchen counter and stared at the door. While he strode across his apartment in his bare feet, another knock bumped the door.

He threw the door open and stared at Shaela.

Her mouth trembled, and her wet eyes blinked at him. "Can we talk?"

He stepped aside to let her in.

She walked into the middle of his loft apartment and his eyes widened when he saw her fingers go to the buttons of the beige cotton dress she wore. She carefully opened each button then worked at the belt that cinched her tiny waist. When she let the dress slide off her shoulders, he sucked in a breath at the sight of his rope still hugging her slender body.

She let the dress drop to the floor, and stepped out of it. The rope was just as he'd placed it that morning, between her legs in a pussy-rubbing wrap, around her waist and breasts in a graceful corset. The beige high-heeled sandals made her legs look endless and sexy. What an image—just as he'd wanted to see her, wearing nothing but his rope and stiletto heels.

"I wore it all day," she said, voice throaty and low. "Like you told me to."

His gut squeezed. He watched her.

"Why are you back, Shaela?"

"I'm sorry." Her eyes beseeched his. "I'm sorry I reacted that way. I know you're not like that."

He didn't move. She had to be the one.

"Tell me."

She went to her knees.

And his heart almost exploded out of his chest.

"I'm sorry. I realized..." She swiped at a tear that traced a shiny trail down her cheek, then clasped her hands behind her back. "I realized I was wrong, and you weren't really trying to make me quit my job."

"No, Shaela." He shook his head. "I wasn't trying to make you quit your job." After a short pause, he asked, "Why would you think that?"

"You know why. You were there that night. You heard what my dad said to me."

Yeah. He knew. She'd been so disturbed after that visit, sitting silent and hurt in the dark vehicle all the way home.

Without looking up at him, still kneeling on the floor, she said, "I was still hurt about...the other night. Confused. And I was so excited to see you tonight, to tell you about what I did."

"What did you do?" He walked toward her and stood in front of her. He held out his hands. She hesitated, then brought her hands from behind her back to take his. He pulled her to her feet. They stood there, holding hands.

"I talked to Slave...I mean, Sam." She met his eyes. "I had a business case for hiring an assistant for the team. Like you said. He asked me a-a million questions. We talked for a long time and he actually listened to me. He agreed to hire an admin assistant for our team. That's why I was late."

"Shit." A big sigh whooshed out of him. "Shaela. I'm sorry. I thought you were just working late. Again. I didn't mean for you to have to give up your career."

"I know that." Her eyes searched his.

"That's great news!" Pride swelled in him. "You must have done a great job of convincing him."

She gave a small nod. "And he told me that I have a bright future there. He actually likes me."

The pride grew larger, warmer. "Of course he does. You're amazing, Shaela."

Her lips curved sweetly. "Thanks."

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said again. "I was just worried about you. How hard you work. Changing jobs might have been an option, but I'd never make you do something like that."

"You *couldn't* make me do something like that."

His love for her exploded inside him so brilliant and beautiful his breath deserted him. "And *that* is why I love you so much."

Her mouth dropped open. "You love me?"

"Yeah. Oh hell yeah, a million times yeah." He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her against him. "I *want* you to stand up to me if I'm being a jerk."

"Oh, Alek." Her voice was thick. "I love you too. So much. But why were you acting so strange? And why wouldn't you tie me up the other night?"

"Yeah. About that. Let's go sit down."

He slid his hand down her arm and closed his big warm fingers around hers, led her to his couch. They sat side by side, touching, fingers still twined together. He reached for the soft throw blanket draped over the back of the couch and arranged it around her nearly naked, rope-bound body. "I'm sorry about that night," he said, voice husky. "I acted like an asshole."

"I wanted to...do that. I really did. I just..."

"I went too fast," he said quickly. "I wanted you so bad, and I thought you wanted that, I just went too fast. I'm sorry. But that's not what I meant about being an asshole. I meant after." He shook his head, looked up at her, a tight smile playing with the corners of his beautiful mouth. "I went to talk to Evan yesterday to get my head straightened out. He kicked my ass for me."

She huffed out a little laugh. "What!"

His mouth widened a bit into a rueful smile. "He reminded me how important it is to be honest. With you. With myself. And I wasn't."

"I felt like such a failure. I'd disappointed you and then when I asked you tie me up, you seemed so angry at me, and —"

"I wasn't angry at you," he interrupted quickly. "I was...just a little fucked up."

She stared at him wordlessly, lifted her hand and laid her palm gently on his face.

"I should have talked to you about it." He turned his head into her palm and kissed her there. Then he pulled her onto his lap, blanket and all. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Friday night, after we'd been to your parents, I realized I'm in love with you."

She choked on a gasp. "No! Me, too! I was watching you and my dad talking football and wham, it hit me."

"Really?" She gave three tiny nods. "Wow." He brushed a kiss over her mouth. "I love you too, baby. So much." He kissed her once more, longer. Then pulled away and inhaled slowly. "So. I have to tell you about Delaney."

She tensed and drew back. "Who's that?"

"Old girlfriend." He sighed. "A few years ago. I was pretty serious about her. Well, getting serious."

"Did you tie her up too?"

"No." He swallowed, his chest tight and burning. "We'd been going out for a while, I thought I was in love with her, and I trusted her. I hadn't tied her up and she didn't even know I was into that. One night we were..." He paused. Shaela wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips. "Yeah. We were having sex. I told her I wanted to tie her up. I wanted it so bad. And she freaked out."

"Oh." The word was a soft breath.

"Yeah." His jaw tightened. "She really freaked out, called me a kinky freak who was into 'kinky rope stuff' and stormed out."

"Oh, Alek." She put her fingers to her mouth and stared at him. "I said that...I didn't mean it. You know I didn't."

He gave a tight nod. "Yeah. I know. But when you said it, all that crap came back to me. She was so disgusted with me, made me feel like I'd defiled her, or something. I felt like..." He swallowed. "I felt like the freak she said I was. For a long time, I really wondered if I was."

"You're not a freak."

Something inside him softened at her fervent words, the distress evident on her face. "Thank you. But..." He was determined to get this out. "Since then any girls I've been with, they know about me. They let me tie them up. But I've never been in love with them. I didn't want to fall in love with them. Those were two totally separate things. Tying women up was just for fun, for art, for sex...not for love."

He touched his fingertips to her cheek and held her gaze. "When I realized I love you, I knew I couldn't tie you up anymore."

"But..."

"I know. To me, it made sense. If I was going to be serious about you, there was no room for ropes and bondage. All of a sudden I was afraid. I knew what you thought about my bondage art, how you disapproved of it, and if you'd rejected me because of that—well, you might as well have ripped my heart out and run it over with your car." He closed his eyes. "Because the last time that happened, I didn't love her half as much as I love you." He opened his eyes and met her gaze. "Tying you up that day at the convention was so fucking hard to do."

"That's why you were acting like that. That's why you wanted someone else."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I was a jerk."

"And then that night I asked you to tie me up."

"I'm sorry, Shaela. We should have talked then."

"Yeah. We should have."

He took a deep breath. "So. Tell me. Tell me the truth." He met her eyes. "Do you like to be tied up?"

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Shaela gazed into Alek's amber eyes, so full of love and hope and yes, vulnerability. Her heart ached for how he'd been hurt, how he'd closed himself off to love all this time. What a question! He had to know the answer, but this was important. It was important to her as much as to him. This was a moment when her life was about to go in a different direction than she'd ever thought.

"Yes." She breathed out slowly. "I like to be tied up. You know I do, Alek. And you know I don't think you're a freak." She closed her eyes as she said the words, remembering back to what she'd thought of him, of the things he liked to do to women. But that was before. Before she knew him better. Before she knew herself.

She felt some of the tension in his body ease out. "Tell me how you feel when you're tied up."

"How I feel? Um..." She shifted against him, heat flaring inside her. "I feel...well, at first I felt terrified. I felt exposed. Vulnerable."

His arms tightened around her as she tried to describe the feeling she had of floating, of her head emptying and the peace that had enveloped her. How she'd gone from fear to feeling safe. How she'd tried to absorb the helplessness and turn it into the strength to keep going.

"I tried to fight it, at first. Because I thought it was wrong, because I didn't want to enjoy something so wicked, so wanton. And then I realized I could just let go. I felt free. I didn't have to feel guilty about enjoying it because it was all out of my control."

"Freedom," he whispered, kissing her temple, holding his mouth there for a moment. "You're amazing."

"Tell me how you feel. When you...tie me."



He took a breath in, let it out. "I feel powerful. Of course. And I feel...honored." He swallowed.

"Honored?" She pulled back to look at him.

"Yes. Honored that you would do that for me. Honored that I'm lucky enough to touch you like that, to do my art on your beautiful body. Honored that you trust me enough to let me do that."

"Oh."

Their gazes held for a long shimmery moment and then their mouths met as they melted into each other.

Long moments later they drew apart and Shaela sighed. "I wouldn't have had the strength to stand up to my boss if it weren't for you. You believed in me. You showed me how strong I am."

"I've learned from you too." They gazed at each other for a long heavy moment. His hand slid to cup her throat in a possessive, dominant yet utterly protective gesture. "I love having you bound. Helpless. Vulnerable. Exposed. You have to trust me because I could do anything to you when you're like that. It's the ultimate submission. The ultimate trust."

She nodded, eyes fastened on his, absolutely unable to look away from the power of his gaze. "I trust you. I trust that you will never do anything I wouldn't want you to."

"But I don't want to control your whole life. Know that."

"I know it."

"Evan reminded me about the spiritual part of Shibari. I'd lost sight of it. Forgotten that it's about learning and growing. I got scared when I realized I loved you but I should never have treated you like that. Honesty and communication is so important—I knew that, I just got...screwed up."

"You were hurt. Before. She hurt you, that girl."

He nodded and her own heart ached for him, for how he must have felt having such an integral part of who he was denigrated like that. Like she'd felt so often by her father. "And I hurt you too," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Alek. I love you. For who you are. All of you." She kissed his mouth, then whispered, "Tie me up, Alek. Please. Tie me up."

He groaned and rose to his feet, still holding her in his arms, wrapped in the soft blanket. Her hands tightened on his shoulders as he carried her to his bedroom.

He set her on the bed and she looked around. Music by The Strike Boys pulsed and shimmered through the dark room and the faint smoky odor of extinguished candles and melted wax still drifted in the air. Rows of candles were lined up everywhere—on his dresser, the bookshelf, along the deep windowsill. He moved around the room, lighting the candles, which had obviously been burning earlier. When she'd stomped out. Her heart squeezed and she put her hands to her mouth.

"You planned this," she said, her voice breathy and trembling. The room began to glow.

"Yeah. I was going to tell you tonight that I love you. And apologize. Grovel." His lips lifted into a smile as he finished lighting the candles and hers did too—as if he'd ever grovel!

Her gaze fell on the ropes lying on the bed beside her and her stomach leaped. She reached out and fingered the ropes, looked up at him as he dragged his T-shirt over his head, then stepped out of the baggy cargo shorts. Naked, he stood before her, so beautiful, so powerful and masculine and strong.

She handed him the rope and his eyes darkened as he took it from her. She extended her hands in front of her. He had her wrists bound with twists of his hands, a few quick loops around them, one between, and a knot, rough and not pretty.

"I want to make you feel good, Shaela. I want it to be good for you." She gave a jerky little nod. "I want to take you as far as you can go—and then a little further."

Higher.” He lifted her wrists and pressed an open-mouthed kiss there, just above the ropes, let his tongue linger. “I want to make it up to you. Tonight.”

Her body quivered, warming and softening. “Okay.”

“We’ll take it slow.” He leaned forward and brushed a kiss over the corner of her mouth. “So slow and easy.” His breath mingled with hers as they sat there. “I want you to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

His mouth brushed over hers again and heat flared over every nerve ending in her body.

“Take me there,” she whispered against his mouth. “Take me to that place—and do anything you want to me.”

Heat stabbed right to her core as she said the words. She was afraid of it, but she craved it, with a wild, elemental need. Relief that he still wanted her, still cared about her, mingled with the need.

Alek groaned and she loved that she could do that to him. The joy of yielding to him mingled with power—the power to thrill him with her submission. It was a never-ending loop of gratification, of giving and receiving, pleasing and getting pleasure, and her heart swelled inside her chest until she thought it might burst.

“Slow,” he whispered again, feathering kisses across her cheek, nudging her hair aside, his breath a warm tickle, his mouth a sweet torture. Her eyes fell closed. His body pushed her back into the softness of the bed, lifting her bound wrists above her head, and he kissed her again, soft and sweet, endless, long and slow and deep.

His tongue slid into her mouth and he licked inside, then softly bit her lips. The weight of his body was a delicious pressure and she arched a little to press her breasts harder against him.

She tasted him too, with a drag of her tongue across his bottom lip and he sucked her tongue into his mouth. Heat radiated off him and she felt the fine trembling of his body as the kisses went deeper, hotter, sweeter.

She longed to touch him, feel him, but the ropes were firm as she tested them. Stretched out on her back, her fingers curled into her palms above her head. He lifted his head to study her, the thin ropes still encircling her body, and she felt his eyes move over her like a caress, her nipples tight and needy.

“Roll over.”

She dipped her chin, then rolled over, arms still outstretched. Her stomach swooped a little remembering the last time. Was he going to try again? She wanted him to, she really did, but memory of that flash of searing pain as he’d tried to enter her had her body tightening.

“Breathe, Shaela.” His hand stroked feather-soft down her back. “You’re tense. Breathe.”

She drew in a long breath and nodded her head against the duvet. The music undulated and pulsed through her body. His hand continued to move over her back, so gentle and slow, up and down, over her nearly bare bottom and thighs, all the way down to her ankles. When he picked up one foot and started to massage it, she jerked a bit. Her feet were really ticklish.

“Relax,” he murmured. “Gonna make you feel good, baby. So good.” His thumbs dug into the arch of her foot and a soft groan escaped her. Oh yeah. That was good. He worked at her foot for a few moments, and when something soft brushed her toes, she thought he had kissed her there. He moved to the other foot, a delicious languor working its way through her body, spreading from her feet up her calves, where he paid attention next, kneading the muscles there. He pressed open-mouthed kisses to the backs of her knees, and she melted deeper into the soft bed. His touch was slow and dreamy and leisurely. At the same time as he set every nerve ending on fire, her muscles went soft and heavy.

His hands on her butt began with tender touches, deepening into stupor-inducing, deep massaging motions, pushing every bit of tension out of her body. Until that moment she didn't realize how much tension she'd been holding in her muscles—after working all day with the stress of project deadlines and talking to Sam, mixed with the worry over what had happened between her and Alek, she'd been a walking coil of anxiety. It all flowed out though, at the luscious touch of his hands—and his mouth. When he bent to kiss one butt cheek, her tummy fluttered. His lips nibbled there, his tongue dragged over her skin and heat flared inside her from womb to fingertips and toes.

But he didn't stop there, kept moving up her back, fingers digging into knots of tightness in the ridges along her spine and then blissfully into her shoulders. She couldn't help the moan that leaked out of her, one, then another at the incredible slacking of her muscles, at how her body became light and weightless.

He pulled her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck, softly, and then in a startling juxtaposition, he sank his teeth into her flesh there. A starburst of sensations exploded from there and sizzled over her body.

He licked and sucked on her neck, starting up internal tremors and making her quiver. And then he touched her again, this time with his fingertips patting her, a light percussion over her skin and muscles, patting them even deeper into softness. Up and down her spine, her legs, back up her back, the rapid gentle pressure lulling her into a daze. She was even beyond moaning, starting to float.

And then the tapping intensified, a little sharper and harder. That wasn't his fingertips. She lifted her head, so heavy and lethargic, and through blurry eyes saw him holding a cane and tapping her with it. A cane.

But it felt so delicious, the light tapping barely a tease, firing up nerve endings even more. He stopped tapping and dragged the cane lightly across the flesh of her butt, again and again, and the quivering inside her intensified with anticipation. She drew in a breath, waiting, once again afraid but waiting with hungry eagerness. The pressure of

the cane increased as it moved from her buttocks down the backs of her thighs, to her legs, so heavy she couldn't move even if she'd wanted to. And she didn't. She wanted to sink into the barrage of sensations, the rhythm and cadence and tingles, moving up and down her body, never staying in the same place, over her back and shoulders and ass, until she felt her body glow with heat and sensation.

She sensed him moving around the bed as he drummed on her body with tender percussion, never missing a beat, the intensity increasing gradually. Heat simmered over her flesh and seeped into her consciousness, where she began to rise and drift. Pleasure curled deep inside her, tightening into a sharp craving for more.

The problems that had tormented her all day disappeared, flew away like dandelion fluff in the wind, leaving her head empty and quiet. Everything else was gone, nothing else mattered, just that moment. That's all there was. She was free.

More. She wasn't sure if she'd managed to utter the word, her lips barely able to move. "More," she said again, louder. "Please, more."

"You want more?"

She moved her head on the bed as much as she was able.

The intensity of the strikes on her body picked up, faster, harder and she surrendered myself to it, gave herself over to the pain as she had those other times when she'd been bound. She stretched her arms out over her head, curled her fingers into the duvet, and she flew, fed off the pain, floating on waves of pleasure. Flames twisted inside her as the blows rained down on her flesh. When he focused on her ass, the burn radiated from there over her body, a delicious warm glow, an edgy shimmer. He held her right there, right on the edge, right on that delicate balance between pain and pleasure.

The blows moved up her back again to her shoulders, never striking on bone, always on flesh. And then he stopped.

Her body pulsed and simmered with heat, one big hot glow. She felt the bed dip as Alek crawled on beside her and when she lifted heavy eyelids he was in front of her, his

hard cock pulsing. She almost felt afraid for him, the veins were so distended, the tip so flushed, leaking with fluid.

“Up on your knees and suck me,” he commanded and she dragged her elbows toward her to leverage herself up to her knees, hands tied together. She sat back on her heels, bound wrists in her lap, and opened her mouth. A flash of white-hot lust heated her pussy. She wanted him in her mouth so bad, she opened wide and let him push in. Even as he filled her mouth, her other openings craved to be filled with him, and her body craved more of that heat.

He didn't let her suck him long, only a few delicious strokes, and then he pushed her back to the bed, flat on her stomach again. He held her head down with one hand and started laying blows with the cane again on already sensitized flesh.

“You should see your skin, Shaela,” he murmured. “So pink and beautiful with my marks.”

She moaned at his words, drifting again into another place. He'd brought her down a little, now took her back up. Violent pleasure rolled through her body, which became an aching pulse of need. Each blow to her ass bled into sweet hot pleasure, dark pleasure, the sweetest darkest ecstasy.

“I need you, Alek,” she cried out, unsure if her words were even audible. “Need you. Inside me.”

The cane stopped its strikes and stroked over her skin from the nape of her neck to the base of her spin. “Inside you where, Shaela? In your mouth?” His voice was raspy with need.

Well, yes that would be nice, but no, that's not where she needed him just then.

“In your pussy?”

She shuddered with longing.

“Or in your ass?”

Another hard tremor shook her.

"Tell me, Shaela. You know what you want. I want to take you there but I want to make sure. Do you trust me to take you to the limits, to bring you back safe and sound?"

"I trust you, Alek."

"Yes...or no?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

The cane disappeared and his hands cupped her ass cheeks, sensitized and hot. A fast flash of pain bit into her hips as he ripped her thong panties off. She spared a brief regret for those pretty panties, but that thought flew away as his fingers stroked through her pussy, sliding with all the wetness there. The way she ached there with empty longing, she knew she was wet, so wet, and he played there, like he had last time, but this time she craved that burn, so much, her ass lifted into his hands. He kept playing, taking his time, torturing her into a fierce reckless hunger. She writhed against his fingers, wanting their touch on her clit, inside her pussy, inside her ass, everywhere. Excitement laced with fear raced through her. Her pussy clenched hard.

He rolled off the bed and away from her, leaving her momentarily hanging in space, pulsing with sensation. He muttered something she didn't catch and then the bed shifted with his return behind her. The noises she heard puzzled her at first, then she realized he was opening a bottle, and when she felt coolness on her ass as he touched her there, she knew. He'd gotten some lube. This time he was making sure it was good for her. Warmth swelled in her chest, even as she craved that wicked, forbidden entry.

His fingers smoothed coolness over her, between her cheeks, and she let herself go, still sensitized and burning from the caning. She reached deep inside for strength, fire rippling beneath her skin at his touch, at the anticipation. And especially at the anticipation of doing this for him. Of how it would feel for him—because knowing how disappointed he'd been in himself last time had touched something so deep inside her. It moved her that he felt such a deep obligation to know her and her limits, and to push her only as far as she could go, how devastated he'd been to feel he'd failed at that. It



made her feel safe and secure, even with the fear swirling inside her. She was learning, though, learning about herself, and every experience with Alek taught her she was stronger than she thought, she could do more than she thought, go further, burn brighter.

Hands stroked up and down her back, still hot with sensation, gentle hands, strong hands, loving hands.

"I love your ass, Shae. Love it."

She moaned.

"So soft and pretty...but firm enough for this..." And he laid a light slap on one cheek with his bare hand.

Pleasure bloomed and spread fire through her body. She lifted into his hands.

One slippery finger probed at her entrance. Sensation sparkled there, lit up her bloodstream. His finger slipped inside, stretching her, and a long groan tore from her throat.

"I'm gonna fuck your ass, Shae," he said, his voice a dark rasp over her senses. "I'm going to take your ass and you're going to be mine."

"Yes." The word came out on a near sob. "Yes, I'm yours, Alek. I'm yours."

In the far recesses of her mind she had the blurry idea that those words should horrify her, but they were true, so true, and she wanted him to know that. He had to know that. She wanted to be his.

The big blunt head of his cock probing at her entrance had her body tightening, but once again she went deep inside herself. Alek's hands smoothed over her heated flesh. "Easy," he crooned roughly, "take it easy. Bear down a bit, Shae. Don't tighten up. You can do it."

She followed his direction and as she did so he slid inside her. The feeling was strange, a fiery stretching, intense but intensely erotic. He took his time, holding himself there while he reached beneath her to find her breasts, pinching her nipples and

sending flames from breast to womb. "Oh yeah, baby," he muttered, bending over her and laying kisses over her shoulders. "So fucking tight. So hot." He kissed her again. "Just easy. Okay, sweetheart?"

"I-I'm okay." And she was. She craved it, the burning, the heat, the sharp forbidden thrill of it. And he pushed in farther. Fiery flames licked over her ass and heat spread through her body. A fractured cry fell from her lips, and she squeezed her eyes closed and pressed her face into the bed. He gathered her hair back and held it in one hand. Electric sensations whipped through her, sizzling hot and intense. He filled her, and when his hand slid down her abdomen and found her clit, her whole body surged with need, so hypersensitized she could've almost come at the brush of his fingertips. "Alek! Oh god, Alek."

His teeth grazed her shoulder, his hand tugged on her hair. She got lost in it, in the sensations rocketing through her body everywhere, his fingers starting a buzzing inside her, low in her belly, igniting every nerve ending and intensifying into a wildfire ripping through her.

He took her up, higher, so high, to an exquisite sharp peak of pleasure-pain. Then he pulled back, slowed his pace, kissed her back, licked the sweat she felt there. She gasped for air, and begged him to keep going. His response was a soft chuckle.

"Remember, Shae? I'm in charge."

She groaned, pushed her ass back at him in desperate supplication. Eventually he entered her again, and she trembled as once again he fucked her so hard, exactly how she wanted it, taking her to another pinnacle of ferocious bliss, sweet torture. And this time he let her come, his fingers on her clit, his cock buried deep in her ass, fire exploding in her womb and sizzling outward, her body on fire.

She felt him come too, vaguely, so wickedly erotic that way, heard his hoarse cries behind her. "I'm coming, Shae, fuck yeah, oh holy fucking Christ, I'm...co-ming."

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Alek fought for breath, fought for sanity. Jesus. She blew his fucking mind. Every fucking time.

His peeled his sweat-slicked body away from her, staying inside her, still pulsing, her hot body clasp him tightly. He looked down at where they were joined, and his heart jolted at the erotic sight of his cock buried in her ass. So goddamn beautiful. His throat closed up with emotion.

He sucked in more oxygen, slowly withdrew from her body, holding her hips. He pulled her legs back and down, holding her gently and lowering her to the bed. "Shae?" he whispered, reaching up to move her hair back off her face. "You okay, baby?"

She didn't answer and he stretched out beside her, face-to-face, touched his fingertips to her burning cheek. Man. She'd gone way far away. He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, then carefully pulled her into his arms. Her lashes fluttered and her eyes opened, unfocused and dazed.

"There you are." He smiled at her.

She blinked again. And then the trembling started, fine tremors at first, but he felt them intensifying quickly. He needed to get her under the covers.

Working quickly, he untied her wrists, unwound the ropes from around her body, then yanked down the duvet cover and rolled them both under it. He tucked her up against his body, wrapped his legs around hers, stroked up and down her back with slow sure strokes. Her face pressed into his chest and he bunched the puffy comforter up right to her chin, making sure her shoulders were covered.

"I've got you, baby." He kissed her forehead, held her tightly. "I've got you. It's okay."

She made a small noise in her throat.

"I know. I know. You were amazing, sweetheart. So fucking strong. You dug so deep, didn't you?"

Her head moved in what might have been a nod and she burrowed closer to him, still shaking. He wanted to surround her with his body, with his heat, warm her up, bring her back down safe and sound. Aftercare was something he enjoyed, but he'd never felt this huge expanding tenderness inside him, this swell of pride and admiration and love.

His heart hadn't even returned to normal from the earthquake of an orgasm he'd just had, and now it started up again, racing full out in a galloping rhythm. Christ, she could probably feel that and that wasn't going to help bring her down a damn bit. Focus. Breathe. He needed to get her settled so he could go get a cloth and clean her up.

Her shivering eased slightly, then a bit more, until she was calm in his arms, so snuggled into him he didn't know if he'd be able to move away from her. Ever. Finally, he eased back a bit.

She made a soft noise of protest. He kissed her hair, her temple, held his lips there for a long moment, breathing in her sweet lily of the valley fragrance, now mingled with his own scent and the smell of sex. He filled his lungs with it, then moved again, slipping out of the bed. In his bathroom he ran warm water over a cloth, grabbed a towel and returned to the bed.

"Alek." She gazed at him, the pale oval of her face almost surrounded by the duvet.

"Right here. Gonna just wash you up a bit, okay? Are you warm enough?"

"Mmm." She let him tug the duvet away from her body.

"Roll onto your tummy, baby. Yeah, that's it."

He parted her thighs and swiped the warm cloth gently between them, down lower, up over her ass. One more time. Then he patted her dry, so carefully, and covered her back up while he used the bathroom.

He stared at himself in the mirror. He looked the same. He rubbed his jaw, rough with stubble. The fear was gone, replaced with admiration for Shaela and a bubbling happiness. He grinned at his reflection. Jesus.

He flicked out the bathroom light and returned to the bed, where her small body lay curled up, dozing. He slid in beside her and wrapped her up again, and unbelievably his dick hardened. Already.

He petted her and caressed her everywhere, places where she might be tender, places he hadn't paid much attention to earlier, like her luscious breasts, so soft and full with those tight little nipples. He felt her stirring beside him as he played with her body, and then maneuvered himself down so he could taste those nipples. He took one in his mouth and she moaned and arched against him. Her nipple fit perfectly to his tongue, elongating, hardening, and he sucked gently, closed his eyes and lost himself in the sensations—the taste of her, the feel of her, the warm scent of her skin. He sucked one nipple, then the other, increasing the pressure, tugging with lips and teeth until she writhed against him.

"Alek," she gasped. "Again?"

"Yep." He smiled around a nipple, gave a last lick then shifted farther down the bed, under the covers into warm, richly female-scented darkness, parting her thighs and tasting her. So wet, so sweet. He licked and sucked, found her clit and made her cry out, nibbled his way over one hipbone and back up her body.

He entered her and they rocked together, her hands moving over his body, down his chest, up his back, staring at each other wide eyed.

His gaze was riveted to her face, the perfect pale oval of it, her mouth shiny in the candlelight, her big eyes dark, full of worship and longing, love and devotion. He sank into her softness, lost himself in it, one achingly sweet sensation after another, building and building. Pleasure expanded through his chest, swelling inside him.

He fell over her with a long groan, their bodies melting together, the intensity ferocious, the candles at the edges of his vision making it feel as if the bed were in

flames around them. She bit his shoulder, softly, then her tongue glided over his skin, sending sparks shooting through his veins. Her hands slid over him and she moved against him, beneath him, with him, around him, everything to him in that moment, and he lost his mind.

Falling in love hadn't been part of his plan. All he'd wanted was a model for his photographs. Then he'd just wanted to explore—because that's what he did. Tried new things, went new places. And he'd wanted Shaela to try that too.

She'd been afraid, but she was so sweet. So brave. Because she had tried new things, so many new things, and she'd given him her trust to take her new places. But in letting him expand her world, in letting him tie her up and setting her free—she'd set him free too.

## About the Author

Kelly Jamieson is the author of several sexy romance novels. Her writing has been described as “blisteringly sexy” and “a spicy delicious read”. If she can stop herself from reading or writing, she loves to cook. She has shelves of cookbooks that she reads at length. She also enjoys gardening in the summer, and in the winter she likes to read gardening magazines and seed catalogues. She also loves shopping, especially for clothes and shoes.

But her family takes precedence over everything else (yes, even writing). She has two teenage children who are the best kids in the world, not that she’s biased, and a wonderful husband who does loads of laundry while she plays on the computer writing stories. She loves hearing from readers.

Kelly welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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