



# Roped In

Sindra van Yssel

Loose Id

*Bondage Ranch:*  
*Roped In*

*Sindra van Yssel*



## **Bondage Ranch: Roped In**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** BDSM Erotic Contemporary

**Series:** Bondage Ranch

Laera McDougal is lost in the woods when hunky Bruce Merrick finds her, but soon she's lost in her passion as he pulls her into the world of sensual submission. He shows her desires she never knew existed in herself—desires she's eager to have satisfied. She wants more than one hot day and night of sensual exploration, but Bruce never intended to take it further, even for someone who stirs him as much as luscious Laera. Can she find someone else who will make her feel the same way? Or will he realize that it's time to break free from the ties that bind him to his past so that he can once again tie up the woman of his dreams?

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

## Chapter One

Laera McDougal pulled the brambles out of her jeans with a curse. She loved the fresh air of the outdoors, adored working in her tiny vegetable garden, and didn't even mind mowing the lawn that much. But lawn and garden were far away, and she had never really liked camping, not since the time she'd gotten a dozen ticks on her on a family campout when she was ten.

She had, in some fit of boldness, decided to take a hike. The trail had seemed clearly marked, and well used. She had come out all this way on the idea that she might find some measure of peace and direction far away from home. She wasn't the most spiritual person, but the idea that one might find...well, God, Goddess, or whatever might be out there, on a trip alone into the wilderness had more appeal for her than any of the churches that well-meaning door-knockers tried to invite her to. She'd mentioned the idea to her apartment mate and best friend Meagan, not really having any intention of following through on it, and Meagan told her that it wouldn't be safe for a grown woman to go camping by herself, and that she absolutely had to not do it, or take a man with her.

So of course she'd told Meagan she was definitely going, and she was far too stubborn to back down. The thought of saying she went, and going to Atlantic City or something, had occurred to her, but she knew she was a horrible liar. Meagan was a good friend, and Laera knew that she wasn't entirely wrong about the safety issues, but she could take care of herself.

She didn't look like much, maybe. Brown hair, brown eyes. She was of average height, a bit heavy, with thick glasses. But she'd thrown men a lot taller and a lot heavier, men who thought they knew a little judo. Men tended to underestimate her, even when they'd been told what to expect. She wasn't worried about being alone, at least not where human predators were concerned. She'd researched the campground in the northern part of Maryland where she was staying. There were long hikes into the wilderness, streams trickling down from the mountains, not very many campsites—and no bears or wildcats or anything like that. The poisonous snakes

were of the water-dwelling kind. She had practically bathed in bug spray. Nothing was going to happen to her.

And nothing had. Except that she was very, very lost.

She had started off with every intention of simply getting away from her new neighbors, their Winnebago, and their loud generator. Camping may not have been her thing, but she really didn't understand people who came all this way only to bring all the annoyances of the city with them.

What had looked like a regular branching trail must have been made by deer, rather than by people, and it got narrower and narrower. At first, Laera thought that might be a good thing. Back to nature, closer to divinity, wherever it might be. When she finally became uncertain enough to start retracing her steps, there were only a couple of hours of daylight left. Of course she had a flashlight with her, but that wasn't nearly as good as having the sun on her side.

She soon realized that she couldn't find the trail back, either. There were probably plenty of people who could spot each little fallen leaf she had stepped on, every branch she had broken as she brushed by. She wasn't one of them. She tried to head in the direction of the setting sun, thinking the campgrounds were to the west somewhere, but it was slow going. Finding west was the easy part. Whether it was actually the right direction to go, she had no idea. At least it wasn't further uphill. She had hiked up more than down, she was sure.

There was a sound ahead, and Laera's first thought was that it was human. But it was such an odd noise for a human in the woods to make; it started off like a shriek, and ended like laughter, but it was far away, barely audible. It sounded like it was coming from in front of her, further to the west. She reminded herself that the animals were nothing to worry about, except for the kind with six and eight legs. Even they had left her alone so far. She forged ahead, crashing through the brush and no doubt frightening off any animals of the four-legged kind.

A vine caught her foot. She fell forward, wrenching her ankle. "Goddammit!" She tried to stand up, and it would barely take her weight. *Of all the rotten luck.* Unless the campground was coming up very shortly, she wasn't going to make it. The sky was already beginning to dim, the sun just a glow on the horizon now, when she could see it at all through the thick canopy of maples and beeches. She stopped to listen, but there were no sounds, no more of that shrieking and laughing. Even her neighbors' television set would be a welcome sound right now.

She limped along, grabbing onto tree branches when they gave her a chance to take some weight off her ankle. She took the opportunity, since there was no one around, to use every curse word she'd ever heard, most of which no one had ever heard escaping her lips. *Why did I come here?* She concentrated on continuing to move forward. At the least, she hoped to find a clearing where she could stretch her body out and rest for a while. She was not looking forward to spending the night out here, especially given that the forecast had been for rain early in the morning—like four o'clock early—well before the sun rose. She flicked on her flashlight, spraying its beam around for just a few seconds before turning it off to conserve the battery. It looked like the forest thinned a bit up ahead, or at the very least the underbrush was less thick. She took one more step, fell, and found herself loudly damning any divinity irritating enough to be sought so far from civilization. She hadn't wrenched her ankle any worse, but landing on her bum in a thicket of pricklies was not her idea of fun.

“Hey!” came a voice, deep and masculine, interrupting her stream of invective. A moment later she could see the light of a powerful flashlight as it clicked on and flashed its light through the trees.

There was a clearing ahead, where the light was coming from. “Hey!” she called out, and reached for her own flashlight at her belt. She'd been saving it until she couldn't see even where she was stepping, worried that if she had to spend the night in the wild there wouldn't be enough batteries when she *really* needed the flashlight.

She had just managed to flick it on when he found her. He was tall, muscular, with an easy, boyish grin, although his face was rugged and his eyes serious. He was wearing black jeans and a thick blue denim shirt, a couple of the top buttons unbuttoned.

Even in these conditions, she couldn't help but think, *yummy*.

She tried to scramble to her feet, and the brambles refused to cooperate.

“Stop moving,” he told her. “I'll get you out; just be patient a second.”

She did as she was told, although she really would have much rather stood on her own. The hike hadn't just been frustrating, it had been long. She'd been gone from camp since lunchtime, and that was eight hours ago. She'd packed enough trail mix that she hadn't gotten too hungry, but she was exhausted, and only the need to keep going had stopped her from noticing before. So she let him pull the brambles out, his flashlight playing over her as he removed them, cutting a

few of the vines with his pocket knife to stop them from springing back. She watched the knife, warily, even though it was being used for her benefit. A big strong man like that with a knife was dangerous, even for a black belt. As tired as she was, very dangerous. And worse, there was something about him that made her feel perfectly safe, and she didn't trust that. One couldn't throw one's opponent unless one was balanced and prepared. This one could get her off her guard very easily.

"It's a good thing you're wearing relatively sensible clothes," he told her.

She was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, which she supposed was relatively sensible, but what did he expect for someone out hiking in the woods, a cocktail dress and heels?

"I'm not stupid," she said.

He smiled disarmingly. "Didn't mean to imply you were. But some, well, you know." He handed the flashlight to her. "Hold this, please."

She took it. It was heavier than hers, and probably better made. The sort of thing that would make a good weapon, and she'd only really considered the knife. Hmm.

"And don't shine it in my eyes, please," he said with that same calm.

"Oops, sorry," she said, and pointed it at the ground. It was powerful enough that it still made the area around them gently glow.

The next thing she knew he had lifted her and was carrying her in his strong arms. "I can walk," she said.

"Not very well, not with that ankle," he said. "I can carry you for a while, certainly until we get to clear ground."

*How'd he know that her ankle was hurt?* Maybe she had winced a little when he pulled a bramble free, but that could have been for a lot of reasons. She remembered her thoughts about how a tracker would sense her presence and wondered if he was picking up on small clues. Only one way to find out.

"How'd you know my ankle was hurt?"

"I think it was when you called it a 'goddamn fucking ankle' earlier. You've got quite a mouth on you," he said. "Where'd you learn to swear like that?"



"I'm sorry, I didn't think anyone was listening," she replied, wondering what he thought of her.

"Not a problem; I've heard worse. Been called worse, on occasion." He laughed. "Good times!" he said.

He stepped out of the underbrush. There were trees here, a little less dense than the forest behind her, but the brush had been cleared. There was even some grass growing, although it was a bit brown, not getting a lot of light through the canopy of leaves above.

"I'm Bruce, by the way. I don't remember seeing you at dinner, or I'd have been sure to introduce myself to such a pretty lady."

"Laera," she said. "I wasn't at dinner; I left after lunch."

"Lunch?" he said, almost as if it were a foreign concept to him. "Are you staying with Dylan and Alex?"

"No, I'm camping." *What was he babbling on about?*

He chuckled, a rumbling, low sound. He was carrying her with ease, and she wasn't the lightest of women. His breath was nice and easy, his arms unwavering, and his stride long and fast. Even if she'd had a good ankle, she'd have to quicken her steps quite a bit to keep up. There were voices up ahead, and she thought she made out some lights too, and possibly the shape of a building.

"What possessed you to go crashing into the underbrush?" he asked.

She heard a shriek, just like the one she had heard before, but much closer. She turned her head, wriggling in Bruce's grasp to do so. She gasped.

It was a woman's voice, and she could just catch glimpses through the trees, which alternately blocked and revealed as Bruce carried her. The woman had her back to a tree, wearing some sort of beige body stocking. No, she wasn't—she was naked. *Now that had to require a lot of bug spray.* There was a man with her, dressed in black, with a whip, a rather small, multitailed thing, in his hand. And the strangest thing was when the whip hit, and the woman shrieked again, the woman actually grinned afterwards, and thrust out her chest as if wanting more. On each side of the couple a pair of candles burned at the top of long bamboo poles planted into the ground. The whiff of citronella carried to Bruce and Laera.

She was about to say something, when Bruce spoke. “Curious? We can go over and watch if you like.” That chuckle again, low and somehow reassuring, even under these circumstances. “John and Sheila always like an audience.”

“He's whipping her! Shouldn't we do something?” Laera hissed, not wanting to be overheard by the strange couple.

“That's hardly a whip, love. Just a little flogger.”

She stared, fascinated. The woman—Sheila—was tied to the tree, she realized, with rope around her ankles, and her hands stretched behind her back and around the trunk. The woman was squirming as much as her bonds would let her, thrusting her breasts forward for the next stroke, her knees as far apart as the bonds around her ankles would let her have them, her eyes full of desire.

“Master,” said Sheila, loud enough to carry, her voice husky. John flicked the whip—flogger—lightly upward, just a flick of the wrist, and the tails disappeared between Sheila's legs, eliciting a loud moan.

Bruce had quit walking, Laera realized, and was letting her watch. She couldn't deny she was curious. She felt heat rise in her face at the thought, and the fact that the man carrying her, a stranger really, had seen her interest.

“We should keep going,” she said firmly.

Bruce chuckled, and continued on. “This is your first time, isn't it?”

“First time for what?” Laera asked. *Watching two strangers having kinky sex in the woods?*

“First time at Bondage Ranch,” Bruce said. He shifted her in his arms and she got a better view of what lay ahead. They were almost to a building, and there were more people there, if her ears were to be trusted.

“Bondage what?” she asked. Was there a whole bunch of people here, playing kinky games in the woods? Apparently so. And this man who'd come to her aid, Bruce, he must be one of them. Suddenly she didn't feel quite so safe.

“Put me down,” Laera demanded.

Bruce looked at her for a moment and read the determination in her eyes. Gently, he set her down on her feet. She winced, shifting most of her weight to her good leg.

Bruce stopped. "How exactly did you get here?"

"I hiked," she said. "From the campground. I started out on the path, but it forked and got more confusing, and I think I ended up on a game trail."

Bruce whistled. "That's quite a hike."

She glanced at her watch. "I've been gone eight or nine hours. They'll wonder what happened to me if I'm gone much longer."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

*I really am a horrible liar. That one was perfectly plausible, and even so he doesn't believe me for a moment.* "So, you're into the whole pain thing," she said, the words spilling out quickly. "That's cool. Not really my thing, but it's cool. Nice place you've got here for it. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone it's here."

He started at her for a moment. "I'm not especially into pain," he said at last, slowly. "Either giving, or receiving, unless my partner really enjoys the receiving part. It's actually the power exchange that I find to be the interesting part."

"The power exchange?"

He smiled. "The act of one partner submitting to another for their mutual pleasure. Pain is nothing new to us, really. We are all, as human beings, suffering some kind of pain, suffering as we try to control everything around us. To give up power, to stop the struggle and let another take care of you, can actually be a way to gain freedom from that pain. To accept that power, from someone who willingly gives it, provides a relief from the struggle as well."

"And which side do you prefer?" she asked, while telling herself she had no reason to care about the answer. It was hard to imagine this big, strong man on his knees before some kinky leather-clad dominatrix. In fact, she realized, she didn't like that idea at all. Not that she was about to take either side of the "power exchange" Bruce had described, but the sort of man who would grovel at her feet was definitely not for her.

"I'm usually a dominant," Bruce said. "I've taken the other side, because I wanted to know what it had to offer. And I'm a firm believer that one shouldn't do to one's partner anything one wouldn't be willing to go through oneself, if the positions were reversed." He smiled. "And which side would you prefer, if you were to take a side?"

She didn't know much about the world of bondage, but she wasn't completely ignorant, and she knew which way her fantasies ran. She'd had dreams of being tied up, helpless, underneath some powerful man.

"None of your business," she said.

To her surprise, he actually looked pleased by her answer. "Not exactly vanilla, are we?"

"Vanilla?"

"Vanilla. A word we use to mean not-kinky. Plain. Into what a friend of mine calls egalitarian sex, although I would say that it's only people who come as equals who have power to truly freely exchange."

Laera spent a few moments sorting out the double negatives in not not-kinky. "I'm not a pervert. Sorry to disappoint you."

Bruce chuckled. "I know plenty of people here who would be proud to be called perverts, so if the term was meant to wound, I'm afraid it didn't. Although I admit, it isn't my favorite word."

"I wasn't trying to be insulting," Laera said. It wasn't entirely true. She felt he was reading her a little too well, and that thought made her want to either run or start fighting. She wasn't worried he would hurt her, exactly. But the familiar fantasy of being tied up was coming back in her head, and the vague male that usually inhabited it had a very definite face right now. He was definitely dangerous, this Bruce.

"Is there a possibility," she asked, when he didn't say anything, "that I could be—that you could drive me back to my campsite?" *I just specified that he do the driving because I don't trust a random pervert*, she told herself. Her tummy rumbled. A can of Dinty Moore beef stew back at the site was calling to her.

"Hmm. Of course. Under one condition."

"I've already told you I won't tell anyone you people are here," Laera said.

"That's not the condition. We're not actually doing anything illegal, although admittedly most here would prefer to avoid the publicity. But in any case, what would we do to stop you? We're not going to hold you here against your will."

Laera quirked a smile. "I presume it isn't any lack of rope that's stopping you," she said. It wasn't a great idea to goad the man, but she couldn't resist having her bit of fun.

Bruce laughed. "No, it's not. But 'safe, sane, and consensual' is our motto. Which means that I'll only tie you up"—he paused—"when you want me to."

Laera noticed he said "when" and not "if." "Ain't happening," she said. "So what was that condition of yours?"

"You must be starving," he said. "I know a little Mexican restaurant about ten miles away. They have wonderful burritos, and I'm told they even make a nice steak if you like that sort of thing. My condition is that you have dinner with me, and then I'll drive you back to your campsite. My treat."

She smiled. "Now that," she said, "is an offer I really can't refuse."

To get to the car, they had to walk around the house. Laera leaned on him, taking the weight off her bad ankle. Most of the guests were inside now. Bondage Ranch was first and foremost an outdoor retreat, a place where people tired of the clubs that dominated the BDSM scene could get some fresh air. At night, though, despite Dylan and Alex's best efforts to eliminate their habitat, the mosquitoes made outdoor play quite a bit less attractive. The citronella candles John and Sheila had set up might work for them, but Bruce knew from experience that he, at least, was a bug magnet.

Besides, he didn't really have a partner. There were plenty of singles at the semi-annual Bondage Ranch retreat, and he'd played with a few of them before. Most of them had made clear they'd gladly go for a repeat experience, but there was something missing there. He couldn't say he didn't feel a connection—he "connected" with people easily, really, but there was something missing in terms of intensity. April, who had propositioned him just a few hours ago, had said she'd trust him to do anything with her, and he didn't doubt her sincerity. She was into some pretty hard stuff, probably more intense, in one sense, than anything he'd be willing to do to her. He wasn't a fan of single-tail whips, for instance, although he'd studied how to use them at one time. But like so many subs who were into pain, April's idea of a good time was to be transported to some other place, 'sub-space' as they called it, and ride the endorphin rush. That was fine. But

it wasn't what Bruce wanted. He wanted a woman who would be right there, feeling everything he had to offer.

Then he'd seen Laera.

He knew she had submissive tendencies. Her reaction to John and Sheila, and her none-of-your-business answer, assured him of that. That she wasn't part of "the scene" was a turn-on and a warning signal all at the same time. She was the kind of person you romanced over weeks and months, but she was probably only camping for a weekend. She was brave enough to go hiking in the woods by herself, but not experienced enough to bring a knife, so she wasn't much of a camper. He wanted her, not just once—although once would maybe satisfy his cock—but enough times to show her what the world of D/s had to offer. He'd have to move fast, faster than he wanted to, if they were going to make any of that happen. By moving fast, he'd risk frightening her away.

There was a crowd of smokers standing out on the porch, as usual. One of them, a henna-haired woman named Valerie, broke off to talk to him. She was wearing her Domme outfit today, a black vinyl catsuit, with the zipper open to the navel. The skin that showed, and there was plenty of it, had a sheen of sweat. Vinyl was hot to look at, and hot to wear in another sense—it didn't breathe.

Valerie was a good woman, a switch, one who could both bottom and top and enjoy herself either way. They had played years ago, and even harbored hopes that it would be more than that, but it hadn't worked out. Valerie liked variety too much to settle into a relationship. Their friendship, however, remained.

"You found someone," Valerie said. "Won't you introduce me to your new sub?"

Bruce waited a moment for Laera's quick denial, but to his surprise, it didn't come. He wondered what was going through her head.

"Valerie, Laera. Laera, Valerie. Val's an old friend," he explained, and then to Valerie, "Laera's new to the scene."

He glanced sidelong at Laera, but she was just smiling pleasantly, not reacting to the description. "Pleased to meet you, Valerie."

"Likewise." Valerie looked Laera over, from head to toe. "Telling me that you're new is the Zen master's little way to say 'hands off, Valerie.'"

Laera flinched at that, although she kept the smile on. What would it be like to get past that mask and see a relaxed smile? He'd seen one of relief, when he'd found her in the brambles. He wanted to see one of ecstasy. "Don't worry, Laera, she'll behave."

"Zen master?" asked Laera.

"I have an interest," said Bruce. "I'd scarcely call myself a Zen master, or anything close. It's a name they tease me by here, all in good fun. The next line to the joke goes that I am a Top, and no-top—usually because I don't have a submissive with me."

"It isn't that lots of women aren't interested," said Valerie, in a confiding voice to Laera that Bruce could still hear. "He just happens to be very choosy. And we call him a master because of the way he makes women writhe with ecstasy—and makes them fall in love with him so they'll do anything he likes, not because we have any clue as to what he's saying when he gets all philosophical on us. You're in for a treat, honey."

Laera was blushing. Bruce appreciated the testimonial, but it seemed to be making Laera uncomfortable. He took her arm. "We're going to go out to eat. Good to see you, Val."

"Likewise," said Valerie. She kissed him on the cheek before spinning around to leave.

"Which car is yours?" Laera asked, scanning the couple dozen vehicles parked in the roundabout in front of the Allison's house. He got the hint. She wanted to get the heck out of Bondage Ranch.

"Green Prius," he said. Laera leaned on him again, her lush body warm against him. *Now to get her to do that for a reason other than a hurt ankle.*

She didn't say a thing while they walked to the car. But once they were inside and the doors were closed, she turned to face him.

"The only reason I didn't correct her about being your sub," she said, "was because I didn't want her getting all concerned about me not being a part of your little circle of perv—of kinky people. So...don't get the wrong idea."

"Oh, I know you're not my submissive, Laera," Bruce said easily, turning the key in the ignition. The Prius purred to life, its engine quiet. It was one of the things Bruce loved about his car; it didn't drown out a good conversation. "Not yet," he added.

"In your dreams," said Laera.

“We'll see,” he said, and looked over at her. She really was a very attractive woman and he didn't get any sense from her that she knew it. He should tell her. “You really are beautiful, Laera.”

She didn't say anything back to his compliment, just looked out the window all the way to the restaurant.



## Chapter Two

Laera looked across the table at her dinner companion. She hadn't noticed before what beautiful, intelligent-looking brown eyes he had.

Get a hold of your hormones, girl, she warned herself sternly.

She had ordered fajitas and they came just right, with the strips of steak tender and savory, and the onions sweet from incomplete caramelization. He'd ordered a bean burrito stuffed with all sorts of healthy sounding stuff. She'd offered to pay for dinner—he had done more than enough to rescue her, after all—and to her surprise, he'd agreed to split the check. She'd had a couple experiences with men who thought that if they picked up the check, it was the woman's job to repay them in bed. She supposed if it was a question of repayment, he'd already rescued the damsel in distress. It wouldn't be so bad to give him his reward; in fact, it might even be quite pleasurable. She'd pretty much given up on the whole getting-back-to-nature-for-a-spiritual-experience idea. Nature wasn't providing them today; it was serving up brambles. And hunky men. She grinned.

He noticed the smile. “Whatcha thinking?”

“I'm thinking,” she said, “that I've met a number of men who badly wanted to take all of a check, and wouldn't let me have it any other way, and that I would have expected a self-proclaimed male dominant to be one of them.”

“Are you disappointed? Because we can still do that.” He smiled at her.

“No, I'm not disappointed at all. It just surprised me.”

Bruce looked at her intently while chewing his food. He took a sip of his water, and then set it down. “I spoke earlier of power exchange. If I don't respect your power to begin with, then you don't have it to give. Some men like the idea of women—or men—as inferiors. But to me there's nothing more erotic than a fully equal woman who chooses to submit.”

“And you're thinking that I might submit to you?”

He smiled. "I'm thinking it would be delightful if you did, and that I'd love to show you what it feels like to surrender to someone you can trust. As to the likelihood of my chances, well, that I'm willing to discover as I go."

Laera stared at him for a moment. He seemed so utterly self-assured.

They ate for a moment, enjoying their food. Laera sipped at her margarita, feeling a bit of pleasant buzz. She didn't think her judgment was impaired, not just from one drink, but maybe it did give her a bit of courage.

"If I were to submit to you, what would you ask for?" she asked, all of a sudden.

He put his burrito down and gave her his full attention.

"If you were to submit to me right now, I'd ask you to undo one more button on that flannel shirt you're wearing."

She already had two buttons undone, and that displayed a little cleavage. A third would display a lot, but would still definitely keep her legal. Whether her baby blue bra would show or not, she wasn't sure.

She lifted her hand. She didn't think she wanted to "submit," or anything like that, but the idea of seducing this resourceful, handsome, and straightforward man was a different matter. She didn't go for one-night stands as a rule, and she knew she'd have to leave her campsite and go back home at the end of the weekend. She had just started a job as a public librarian in a new county, and she didn't have enough leave saved up yet to extend her trip, and it would be short notice anyway.

She unbuttoned the button. She was gratified to see him staring, just long enough to know her action was fully appreciated, and then he met her eyes again.

"You have wonderful breasts," he said.

"Thank you." She blushed and poked at her food.

"The other thing I would ask is that you look at me."

She looked up. I'm not being obedient, she told herself. I'm just curious as to what I'm supposed to see.

He smiled. He looked at her breasts, and then back to her eyes again, very deliberately. "I like what I see."

She started to avert her eyes from his hot gaze again, but he very gently put his hand on her cheek, turning her back to face him. “You knew what you were doing, and knew what effect it would have on me. It is exactly as you wished. Let's not turn away from each other with coy glances that pretend otherwise.”

She looked at him, feeling like with that one button she might as well have tossed all her clothes away, as naked as she felt before his eyes. “I'm not submitting,” she told Bruce. “I just decided I—”

She faltered, but Bruce simply waited for her. “I wanted to seduce you.”

Bruce smiled. “I appreciate your honesty,” he said sincerely. “But I have every intention of getting your submission.”

“Good luck,” said Laera. “I'm not that kind of girl.”

“You mean you don't know yet if you're that kind of girl,” Bruce corrected. “And the only way you're going to find out is to try.”

Laera wasn't sure what to say to that. She knew he was partially right. If she didn't see where her yearnings took her, she'd always look back on the weekend with regret. She didn't really know him well enough to have good reason to trust him, and yet, she did. There was something about him that put her at ease. That didn't mean much, as some salesmen had the same knack and they were anything but sincere. But he'd had her at his mercy when she was stuck in the brambles and feeling helpless, hungry, and dehydrated. He had a knife, too. And he'd done nothing but cut her free.

The way he watched her made her think he knew exactly what she was thinking, but he simply said, at last, “This is wonderful food and it will go cold on us if we don't eat it. Shall we continue this conversation on the way back to your campsite?”

Laera nodded, relieved. She needed time to make up her mind.

Laera was finished with her food first, which didn't surprise Bruce one bit. He was a slow eater, especially when it was food he liked. He liked savoring every bite. It was hard to keep his attention focused on his food, however, with such a beautiful woman sitting in front of him. Beneath her green and blue flannel shirt was a pair of full breasts, half revealed to him every

time she bent to take a bite. Now that she was finished, she was leaning back, watching him, occasionally reaching with a languid arm to sip from her margarita.

Against his regular practice, he sped up a bit. He didn't want her to order another margarita simply because she got bored, and he didn't yet know her well enough to know if she would. If she wanted to loosen her inhibitions with a drink, that was her decision, but he wanted her fully present for everything they might do, and for everything she might consent to have done to her.

He offered his arm to her when they left, and to his pleasure, she took it. He would have been more pleased if he had thought she appreciated a touch of old-fashioned gallantry, but she was obviously still having a little trouble with her ankle, although it seemed to be getting stronger.

"I had a sense you were in a hurry to get away from the ranch," he told her, "but I'd like to take a look at that ankle when we get back to your camp."

"It's not broken," she said. "It'd hurt a lot worse."

He nodded. "But it might be a sprain. If it's swelling, you'll want to elevate it, and have some ice on it, too."

"That would put a crimp in your plans, now wouldn't it," she said, immediately wishing she hadn't.

"Maybe," he said. "But there are plenty of things that are perfectly enjoyable to do with a lady who has her feet elevated."

"I do believe, Mr.—" She realized she didn't have his last name.

"Merrick," he supplied.

"Mr. Merrick, that you might just *want* my ankle to be a bit swollen."

She knew better, he was sure. She was testing him, bantering, trying to figure him out. Which was absolutely smart. The fact that she was obviously intelligent made her even more attractive. If that was possible.

"Oh, I hardly need that as an excuse," he replied, grinning.

"I see. Isn't this the time when you tell me not to use your name, but to call you 'Sir' or 'Master' or some such?"

Bruce shrugged, although he was a bit pleased to find out that she knew a little of the BDSM world. Some people found those titles very hot. Some Doms, and Dommes too, needed them to help set the scene. But equally often, they were a way to get past the actual person you were playing with to some kind of abstract ideal. There was nothing abstract or impersonal that he wanted from Laera. "Feel free to call me Bruce," he told her with a chuckle.

Laera glanced at him sideways. "People only do that in books and the Internet?" she asked.

So her interest in submission was at least enough that she'd read a few books and visited a few Web sites. Or chat rooms. "No, people do that in real life, too. I know a woman who hasn't called her husband by name in two years, but I don't especially envy her. Is calling a man 'Master' a fantasy of yours?"

Laera rolled her eyes. "Not hardly."

"Then don't."

"All right, Brucey baby," she said.

He winced. "Let's not go too far in the other direction, either, please," he said evenly. She was going to try his patience, he could tell. The strange thing was he expected to enjoy it.

"Yes, Mr. Merrick," she said. He glanced over at her quickly, not wanting to take his eyes off the road. There was no trace of mockery in her voice or her expression, and she'd managed to combine both the respect of a title and the personalization of a name in one neat package. While she hadn't explicitly agreed to anything, he now knew that she was going to be his, for one evening, at least.

"So, where are you from?" he asked.

"I live in Northern Virginia," she said. "Near Vienna, if you know where that is. You?"

"Just outside of Philly." A long way apart, too long for a relationship, probably. He didn't give away the disappointment in his voice, but he was a bit chagrined to have it at all. He was getting ahead of himself. He had just the one evening, just the one moment, and regardless of the future, that was the best way to approach things. In that one evening he'd have to show her not what he could do, but what she could enjoy, and just how much she could enjoy it.

"What do you do?" she asked.

“Lots of things,” he said. “I do guided-meditation classes. I do a bit of computer consulting now and then, which pays most of the bills. I’ve sold a few paintings. You?”

“Paintings, wow,” she said. “I’m a librarian, of the public library reference desk variety. I’ve a small staff working for me.”

She’d have a rather large staff working in her later, he thought, but decided to hold his tongue. He turned into the campground, the only one she could have possibly hiked to Bondage Ranch from.

“Left here,” she said.

He pulled onto the dirt road. His Prius wasn’t exactly made for that kind of driving, but it could manage.

When they finally pulled up to her campsite, he was completely unsurprised to find one small tent and one car.

“Actually,” she said, as she got out, “my ankle feels a lot better.”

“I’d like to have a look anyway, please.”

She wasn’t lying. She’d actually forgotten about her ankle during the conversation, and hadn’t noticed it when she took the first couple steps, either. She could plant her feet quite nicely, if she needed to, and be well balanced if she had to throw an assailant. Somehow she didn’t think that would be an issue with Bruce around.

She sat down on a crude wooden bench that had been built near the fire pit and stretched out her leg while he knelt in front of her. She could hear the TV blaring from the next campsite over, not quite able to make out the words over the steady hum of the generator, as he took off her boot, then her sock. “You know,” she said, “anyone might think, with that pose, that I was your mistress,” she said.

He just smiled. “I don’t care what anyone thinks, but me and you. You’re not under any illusions, I trust?” He met her eyes for a moment.

“No, Mr. Merrick,” she said.

He turned back to her ankle. “Not swollen,” he said, touching it, pressing lightly. “Tender?”

“Yes!” she yelped.

“I don't think it's a sprain, but it's not a simple twist you walk off and don't feel at all a few hours later, either. There's some bruising. Stay there, and I'll get an ace bandage and wrap it up, more so it has a little protection than anything else.”

He got up without waiting for an answer, went to his car, and got a first-aid kit from the back of his car. It was the size of a small briefcase, but the big red cross made of tape on its black exterior revealed its purpose.

“That's a hell of a first-aid kit,” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, it is. I keep it in the car so that if I go to a play party, I'm sure to have it. More often than not, there's a doctor there and I'm not needed. But people do some stupid things sometimes. And even when people aren't being stupid, accidents happen. We pride ourselves on being safe, sane, and consensual, but 'safe' is a relative term. So is sanity, I suppose. I'm a very conservative player.” He got out a roll of cloth bandage, and closed the briefcase with a snap.

“So you go to play parties often?”

“When they don't conflict with a class I'm teaching, or a job, yeah.”

“Bring a girl, or pick up someone there?” It wasn't really her business, and she had no business being jealous. She hadn't even done anything with him yet, unless the button counted. It felt like it ought to count. It certainly had sent a thrill up her spine, and she felt it every time his gaze took in her chest.

He didn't seem to mind her asking, however. He finished wrapping her ankle, then pulled the cuff of her pants leg down again and put her sock back on carefully before turning to meet her eyes as he answered. “Sometimes I demonstrate some technique, usually involving rope bondage,” he said. “And then I like to have a partner lined up ahead of time. Sometimes I end up with someone there. Most often, I'm just there to hang out with my friends.”

She liked the fact that he didn't try to sugarcoat the answer or dodge the question. He didn't seem to be bragging about his conquests or trying to pretend he'd been saving himself for her.

“Quite the rowdy neighbors you have there.”

Laera rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it. They have that television going nonstop. Kinda destroys the whole 'experience nature' thing, you know?”

“Yes, I do, actually.” He smiled and pivoted his body next to the bench. The next thing she knew his lips were touching hers. She rolled and leaned forward to meet him, feeling the warmth of his arms around her and his mouth on hers. When she parted her lips, his tongue slid between them to meet hers. His tongue danced with hers, twisting inside her mouth and sending a shudder down her body that went all the way to her core.

“You’re a great kisser,” she told him when their lips finally parted.

“I just thought I’d experience nature,” he told her, kissing her lips lightly between words. “It blocks out the television.”

“Unless you remind me.”

He chuckled. “Good point, Laera love. Both TV and not-TV, are equally distracting thoughts. We have to get beyond those.” He winked. “Perhaps you’re the one with a true understanding of Zen. And maybe we better try the tent.”

“We can still hear the noise there.”

“Did you want to go back with me to Bondage Ranch? We’d have a gauntlet of people to get past, and I’m sharing a room with two guys. Which might mean it’s empty, and it might mean I’m sharing a room with two guys and two girls.”

Part of that was tempting. She didn’t doubt that he’d still want to do things with her if the room was full, and it sounded like they wouldn’t be the only ones doing things—having sex—in the room. That might be something to be experienced someday, but she wanted this man to herself now.

“No. We’ll try the tent,” she said.

He grabbed the first-aid kit and picked her up, cradling her in his arms, the first-aid kit dangling from his fingers. The safest and best thing to do seemed to be to wrap her own arms behind his neck. It turned out to be remarkably comfortable. “I’ll try to do a better job of distracting you,” he told her. “Will you let me show you what can happen when you let me take charge?”

“I will indeed, Mr. Merrick,” she said. She wasn’t about to back out now. At his direction she unzipped the tent. He carried her inside. He set her down on the sleeping bag that covered half the floor of the tent and zipped the tent back securely. Good. Bugs were not invited. She sat down, cross-legged. He sat down across from her.



She was a little disappointed that he didn't leave her to go get some rope, or something. But she decided that if she was going to submit, it was probably best not to start by telling him how to—what was the word?—dominate her. The word made her shiver, although she wasn't in the least bit cold. Submission was intriguing to her. The flip side—being dominated—was intoxicating.

He was watching her, and she had the feeling that he could see right through her, but he waited until her eyes were on his. “Unbutton your shirt, Laera,” he told her.

She bit back the words “I will if you will” and sat up straight, popping the fourth button down and moving her hands quickly to the fifth. He grabbed her wrists, gathering both with one hand and holding them securely with remarkable ease.

“It's not a race, Laera, to get on to the next part. It's a moment to be felt, one button at a time. And watch me. Don't worry about watching your chest; I'm sure you can get the buttons without looking, and I'll be keeping an eye on it.” He grinned as he let her hands go. “What man could resist?”

Plenty, she thought. Yes, she had nice big tits, which did look quite decent when being held up by a bra. Not that she was sagging horribly or anything, they just weren't exactly what books tended to call “perky.” And her stomach was more a curve than a washboard. But she forced herself to watch his eyes as he took her in and slowly moved from button to button, watching his reaction as she uncovered more. He was right; she could feel every moment this way. And each moment was embarrassing, and exciting. The look on his face was full of desire, and that didn't change from the fourth button on through to when her shirt was all the way undone and hung loosely at her sides.

“Take it off...slowly.”

She shrugged it off one shoulder then the next, unbuttoning at the wrists before letting it fall to the floor of the tent.

He collected her hands again, taking each in one of his, and moved forward, putting his arms around her and pulling her hands behind her back in the process. His motions were slow, letting her know exactly what he was doing, and he used so little force that she felt she could break away at any time. She didn't want to.

He nudged up her chin and kissed her neck, his lips soft and almost a tickle, sucking lightly here and there, not enough to leave a mark. It felt wonderful, and then his lips were going downward, kissing along the line of her cleavage. He took his time to get to her belly button, and then moved up again. When he was just below her bra, he pulled back to look at her eyes.

Somewhere, while she'd been distracted, he'd shifted his grasp so he held both her wrists in one hand. His grip was firm, and part of her wanted to see just how strong he was, to struggle for the sake of struggling. She was afraid he'd let go if she did.

"Your safe word," he told her, "is 'red light,'" he told her. "Say it."

"Red light," she said. She knew vaguely what a safe word was, something to say if she was in severe pain or needed medical attention, something like that.

His eyes on her were intense. "If you say it, I will stop. I will release you, make sure you're okay, and everything we're doing will come to a stop until, and unless, you ask me to continue. And it doesn't matter why you want to say it. If you need to say it just to reassure yourself that I will indeed stop, that's enough reason. Some people think it's brave to not say their safe word unless they absolutely have to. Don't be any braver than you want to be. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Merrick."

"If you don't say it, I won't let you go, and I won't stop. Got it?"

"Uh-huh," she said and decided to test him. She tried to separate her wrists, pulling in both directions against the hand that held them. It tightened a little, but nothing else. She was no weakling, she knew. But he was stronger. Oddly, the fact just made her feel more secure.

"I thought you might want to do that," he said, smiling. He looked a little bit smug, but in a good way. "Would you like to have your wrists tied behind you?"

"It's not up to me, is it?" she replied.

"No, it's not," he told her. "But it's not up to you whether to answer my questions or not either, so I'm just going to hold them here until you decide to answer me."

They stared at each other, and then seconds grew long between them. Finally Laera whispered, "Yes."

"First then, you need to take off your bra for me." He let her wrists go.

Damn. She thought she looked sexier with it on actually, although if she'd intended to be seen in it she'd have picked out a black one to contrast with her creamy skin. Still, it hadn't been a question, and her fingers were already working on the hooks by the time she consciously thought about it. He wanted it off, it came off. The thought sent shivers down her spine. How had he gotten to her so quickly?

She shrugged off one strap, then the other, holding her bra in place before finally slipping it slowly off altogether.

"Your cheeks are pink," he told her. "Are you embarrassed, Laera? You needn't be. You have lovely breasts. Now put your wrists back into my hand."

He could have grabbed her wrists, but he didn't. He just held his hand behind her, waiting while he watched her. Laera wasn't sure why, but she got a glimmer as she obeyed. With each wrist she put behind her back and placed into his waiting hand she was handing herself over to him, giving him power to dominate her. His hand closed around her wrists.

With his free hand, he opened the first-aid kit. He was stocked for a whole slew of hurt ankles, she noticed, as he grabbed another roll of cloth bandage. There was nothing in Bruce's kit that was out of place in a first-aid kit, but she had a feeling the sheer number of cloth bandages—there were five or six of them, besides the one on her ankle—wasn't just for medical purposes. She wondered what else he might have in there.

He wrapped the bandage around her wrists several times. He tied it snugly from where he sat, not needing to see what he was doing.

"Always prepared, aren't you?"

He chuckled. "Most of my gear is back at the ranch. But yes, there's a thing or two in here, just because it stays in the car with me. The bandage I tied your wrists with isn't really very good for sprains—it's just not elastic enough."

She tugged on it, and sure enough, it didn't stretch. Neither of her hands were free. And both of his were. One was on the middle of her back, between her arms. The other was on her stomach, just under her breasts. His little finger just brushed against her breasts, sending a shiver down her, a good shiver. Black belt or no black belt, she couldn't stop him from doing whatever he wanted to now, and that feeling of vulnerability started at her chest.

To her surprise, the next bit of pressure came from her back, nudging her. "Sit up straight," he said. "I'd have you kneel, but I think that might be harder on your ankle than this is, and there are other things to do."

She straightened, conscious of how the move listed her breasts away from Bruce's hand, but also how it thrust them out toward his chin. He smiled appreciatively.

"Good girl," he said. Had any of the dates she'd had over the last several years said that to her, they would have found themselves on the floor looking up. Yet from Mr. Merrick it just sent a flush of warmth through her. She arched her back a little more and watched his eyes flash.

"Let's see what you like, my lovely Laera," he said. His hands slid along her stomach, along her sides, over her shoulders, leaving her breasts and especially her nipples aching with neglect. The sides of his fingers brushed her tits occasionally, and she knew it wasn't an accident. She wondered how he'd take it if she wiggled and tried to increase the contact, but the very serious look he had on his face quelled that idea. He was watching her every reaction.

"You'd really much rather I was touching your breasts, wouldn't you, Laera?" She didn't nod, didn't even reply. *Yes*, she thought at him, as if that would do some good. In the absence of his touch there, it seemed like her nerves had all concentrated themselves in the tips of her breasts, her nipples hard and aching.

"Answer," he said, his voice firm and commanding.

"Yes, touch me."

"I can't give you what you want without you communicating with me, Laera," Bruce said, moving his hands to cup her breasts, rubbing them gently. "Although this time I guessed."

She jumped a little as the pads of his palm brushed against a hardened nipple. "Sensitive," he said. "So sensitive." She was aware of the heat of his gaze on her face. He was taking in her every reaction. He moved his fingers, rubbing the nipple of her left breast gently between two fingers. So much sensation, moving from her breasts to her core. She loved having her nipples played with, always had. But this felt so good, so intense. Her arm tried to move, reflexively, to stop the sensation, to push his hand away from that intensity that bordered on pain, and she was grateful and frustrated that her wrists were tied so securely. She couldn't stop him.

The thought was almost too much for her. This could go on forever, his rough, callused fingers rubbing, lightly pinching. The image of the puppy dog eyes of one former boyfriend as

she'd batted his hand away returned to her briefly, and then vanished. She couldn't do it to this man. And if she had, he'd just grab her wrist and do as he pleased. Her traitorous back was arching further, pushing her breasts into his hands. He pinched her. She had never liked that, didn't like it—but it felt wonderful, almost *too* wonderful, right now. Her panties were soaked.

“Fuck me,” she said. He could play with her tits all he wanted, but she wanted him in her to push her over the edge.

He just raised a maddening eyebrow.

“You're an amazing woman,” he told her. “Such lush breasts, so sensitive, and yet able to take so much.”

“Fuck me now,” she told him.

“As soon as you take off your jeans and your panties,” he said calmly.

How could she with her hands tied? Was he telling her that he'd never enter her? She let out a whimper and choked it back. Maybe they called him the Zen master because he said such maddening things, like the sound of one hand clapping or something. She couldn't take them off. He'd have to take them off.

“Could you take them off?” she asked. The briefest pause, where he didn't react, just kept sending jolts of sensations running from her breasts to her pussy. He was sucking on one breast now, flicking the nipple with his tongue. “Please?” she added.

He looked up, smiled.

“I think I just could,” he said.

He stripped her naked, getting her socks, too, so that all she wore was the bandage he had put around her ankle. She stretched out her legs to help.

“You smell wonderful,” he told her. “So aroused.”

“That's the bug spray,” she said.

“I don't think so. Stay still a moment.”

He reached around her and grabbed her wrists with one hand. The other quickly loosened the bandage around her, and then he had one wrist in each hand and was pulling them around her body. It took him merely a few moments to have them retied over her head. She lay back on the

ground, wanting to spread her legs for him, to invite him inside, but thinking that was maybe a little too forward.

He pulled her thighs apart with gentle but firm hands. She wiggled.

“Fuck me, please?” she asked. She had never had to say please before.

He kept looking at her, with that same intense look, while he took off his shirt, shoes, socks, and pants, calmly and efficiently. His cock wasn't calm, though. It was hard and long. And thick. No wonder he was popular back at Bondage Ranch. He was definitely going to stretch her.

“Fuck me, please?” she asked again. “I'll do anything you ask for the rest of the time I'm here, but please, I want you inside me.”

“Yes, pet,” he murmured, sliding on a condom. Good thing he remembered that precaution because she'd been on the verge of forgetting. She was starting to chide herself when he entered her with one smooth motion, burying himself all the way inside her.

She reached up her hands to hold him, but he grabbed her wrists and pushed them back against the sleeping bag.

She came on the next thrust, as his body pushed against her clit and the whole of him was buried inside her. She screamed, her body spasming, thrashing against the sides of the tent, his body holding her in place.

“Good girl,” he said to her.

It felt like he was growing inside her. Laera blushed at the idea of that magnificent cock getting even bigger. She pushed at him with her hips, in rhythm with his thrusts. She hadn't caught her breath yet, and she felt another explosion rising inside her. She opened her eyes, not realizing they had been closed, to see his smile. His hot gaze swept her face and her body.

His smile tightened, and his eyes closed for a moment in concentration, and then he moved, his cock staying in her, kneeling now between her legs instead of lying flush on top of her.

His thrusts slowed slightly. His strong hand under her ass kept her elevated at the right height for sliding in and out of her. He still hadn't come yet; he was waiting on her. For a moment, she frowned, feeling pressured to perform, and then his fingers closed around her right nipple. He increased the pressure gradually, pressing it between two fingers, and she forgot all about who was supposed to come first or second or anything as the sensations rolled over her.

“Incredible,” she murmured. Then she heard herself screaming again, felt his cock swelling inside her, his body jerking with hers, coming with her. The waves of pleasure rolled over her for what seemed like forever, and this time he let her bound hands up so she could wrap her arms around him. They held each other until both their orgasms had subsided.

He slid out, neatly taking the condom and putting it in a zip lock bag in his first-aid kit. Just as well, because there wasn't really a place to discard it in the tent. He gathered her in his arms, kneeling on the floor of the tent and pulling her on to his lap.

She froze.

There was someone outside the tent, just outside. She could see the silhouette against the moonlit yellow vinyl walls.

“Hey,” said the voice, which she recognized as belong to one of the people from the generator and television group. “You're kinda loud; mind keeping it down? You're not alone out here, you know.”

She felt her fist curled in anger. *It's probably a good thing I'm naked, because I'd go out there and let him have it if I wasn't.* She opened her mouth to tell him just where he could go.

She was stopped by the low rumbling sound of Bruce laughing. A smile played on his face. “We'll keep that in mind, thanks,” he said, in a warm, friendly seeming voice.

“Thanks,” said the man outside; then he walked off, but not before Laera started laughing herself. That set Bruce off laughing again, and she laughed some more, and then he laughed. *I'd never tire of hearing that sound*, she thought, and then did her best to banish the thought. They held each other and shook until they were all laughed out, and there were tears in Laera's eyes.

## Chapter Three

Bruce looked at the lovely, naked woman in his arms. After they shared their laughter, she had fallen asleep. He smiled. Who would have guessed that she'd be so sensitive? And she'd certainly enjoyed being tied up. It was a shame she'd have to pack up in the morning. It had been a long time since he'd had so much fun with a woman. Naturally, she had to live a couple hundred miles away.

*She'd be worth the drive.*

He pushed the thought from his mind. It wasn't sensible to think of her that way.

Her responses made him sure that she'd enjoy more, *much* more, than simply having her wrists tied and a little rough play with her tits. There were plenty of people into bondage and breast play, but this went deeper with her. She struggled with submission, but she had a taste for it too. He'd seen the excitement in her as she'd followed his orders to strip. Watching her struggle with herself had been its own pleasure.

It had been years, he realized, since he'd played with anyone outside the BDSM community. Mostly, he played with experienced subs who knew what they wanted, could negotiate for it, and all he had to do was provide. It was a good way to build up technical skill, and he enjoyed being skillful at everything he did. It wasn't a very good way to find someone he'd have feelings for, however. Perhaps that was precisely why he'd done things that way, although he'd always told himself that the odds of finding someone who liked the things he liked in bed were just not high enough outside the community.

Would she like everything he had to offer? He had no idea, but the thought of finding out was making him hard again. And he really wanted to hear that laughter again. He thought of waking her so that he could make love to her again. It was around eleven o'clock. She had to be off her campsite by noon, he knew, or pay for an extra day, and then she'd be headed home. Thirteen hours. It seemed a shame to waste any of them sleeping.



But she'd been hiking for seven hours when he'd found her. She had to be exhausted, and probably needed her sleep. Not just for comfort, but to drive home safely. So he'd let her sleep, curled up in his arms, as long as she needed to.

He laid his head back. There were worse fates. In fact, he felt very privileged, just holding her like that. She was so warm, so cuddly, so full of lush curves.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

He woke up first, just as the early morning light started to make the walls of the tent glow. Laera stirred a bit when he moved from contact with her, but didn't wake. His cock twitched at the sight of her. He'd not feel guilty about waking her up now. He watched her breathe, watched her breasts rise and fall. She was sound asleep, would be for a while, most likely.

He got his clothes on as quietly as he could in the small tent, and stepped out carefully, zipping the tent behind him. It was a beautiful day. It was also five miles to the nearest place that would sell eggs. He knew this area well. He'd been coming to Bondage Ranch for years—how long was it? Ten years. Since way before Alice. He cringed, took some deep breaths, and focused on the rhythm of his breathing. He hadn't thought about Alice for a long time. He didn't want to think about her now. He got in his car, started the engine, and headed for the store.

Years of experience with meditation helped him keep his mind focused on whatever he wanted to focus it on, most of the time. But not this time. There was something there that needed to work its way through.

It had been three years. Alice had been his last permanent partner. They had been about to get married. Then Alice got a job in San Francisco. He could have gone with her, but he had reasons to stay. His mother had less than a year to live, as it turned out, and he had known it wasn't long. He didn't need her, not as a child needs his mother, but she relied on him to get her groceries and medication, and to run her to the doctor. She was too frail to drive. He knew that as much as he loved Alice, he'd never forgive himself if he left then. Later, after his mother was beyond needing him, he'd happily have gone. He told Alice as much.

"I can't be your slave so far away," she told him. They'd used the word so lightly. "Slave." "Master." They were hot words. They all seemed so very true until the moment she'd reached up,

taken off the gold necklace that they called her collar, and set it on the table just before she walked out.

He didn't know what to say. For years he'd played back the words he should have said. "Please don't leave." "I love you." Even in his darkest moments, "You're not allowed to leave," but he knew better. He accepted her freedom as a gift, and he could never have held onto it against her will. He told her on the phone later that she didn't have to be a slave for him to love her.

She said, simply, that she had to be his slave for her to love him.

She left Philadelphia a week later, but not before he had seen her at a play party, tied to an X-frame, a Dom named Blake holding the flogger that brought her skin to pink life. Had she meant to goad him to an act of possessive anger? Was she testing him? Or had she just wanted to deliver the message that what they had just wasn't that big a deal to her, and that she could easily move on? Or did she just figure that he was too broken up to go to the party—and indeed, he wouldn't have if he hadn't borrowed a videotape from the host that he'd wanted to return.

Whatever she had wanted, he'd simply left. He didn't want to watch.

He liked women. Heck, he loved them. And no partner of his before or after Alice had ever complained that he wasn't caring. Then again, neither had anyone in his classes, nor had his mother, nor had any of the people at the soup kitchen he worked at every other Sunday. He was a good person, and he cared for people. What he didn't let them do was care for him.

But that was okay, he told himself. No one needed to. He could take care of himself.

He bought charcoal, a spatula, some paper plates, an iron skillet, the eggs, some cheese, chives, and tomatoes, and headed back. And despite the niggling thought in the back of his mind that he hadn't really dealt with whatever it was he'd needed to deal with, he convinced himself the matter was closed and concentrated on the road, the early morning fog, and the fresh air of the mountains.

When he drove back up, he could hear rustling in the tent. She was getting up, so he wouldn't be able to surprise her with breakfast in bed, but he'd get it started at least, by the time she emerged. The campsite had a suspended charcoal grill over a metal tray for those who didn't bring a propane stove. He cleaned it out, poured in the charcoal, and lit it.

He heard her footsteps behind him.

"I thought you'd left," she said. "Gone back to Bondage Ranch." There was a trace of accusation in her voice, although he could tell she was trying to keep it away.

He turned around. She was wearing the same clothes from the previous day, but her shirt wasn't tucked in and her hair was tousled. "I couldn't miss fixing you breakfast, now could I?"

She surveyed the fixings he'd brought and shook her head. "Looks real good," she said. "Real good. Only a few things better than breakfast first thing in the morning."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Such as?"

Laera hadn't been angry when she'd woken up alone in the tent. She'd been disappointed, but she told herself she knew the arrangement was a temporary one. She had to be back at work in twenty-four hours. She wasn't going to fall in love with Bruce. A peek out of the tent revealed him and his car gone.

*But where am I going to find another man like him?* The night before had been, without a doubt, the best sex she'd ever had. She wasn't sure what it was, whether it was the rough play with her nipples, having her hands tied up, or that tone of command when he'd told her to take her clothes off slowly. Maybe it was the way his hands seemed to know their way around her body or that magnificent cock. Either way, he'd shown her only a glimmer of his world, and she wanted to know more—more about bondage, and more about him. She wanted at least his phone number or an e-mail address. If he didn't know people in her area, he probably knew people who did. He was the gateway, a very scrumptious gateway, and when she woke up alone she wondered if she'd find the courage to find another.

She'd just have to drive up to Bondage Ranch herself and deliver that briefcase of a first-aid kit he'd left behind. She pictured it. "Forgot something?" she'd ask. And she'd deliver a slap. Because damn it, she *was* getting angry. He should have left a note. Something besides the damn box.

By the time she got out of the tent, she was in full fury. He'd told her he would show her what it was all like, damn him, and he'd left before she was done being shown.

And there he was, jeans covering that cute ass of his and flames licking at the grill.

That was why, when he asked, "Such as?", her reply was one she'd not even thought herself capable of a day before.

“Such as a blowjob,” she said. He was so controlled, she burst out laughing when his eyes popped at her remark.

“I’ve got the fire going,” he said at last.

“I can see that.” She moved to the table, which was in front of the grill, sat on the bench, and turned to face him. A small thrill ran through her. Now she was in control of the situation. She could wrap him around her finger if she wanted to. Too bad she didn’t want to.

He looked at the fire and seemed to decide that it could be left just for a few minutes. He walked over and took her wrists. She felt her heart pounding. Maybe she wasn’t in control after all.

He had nothing in his hands, and yet when he put them behind her back, holding them with one hand while he fiddled somehow, he managed to do something. They were clearly attached when he let her go and smiled.

“Don’t struggle hard,” he told her. “You’ll get loose. But I don’t have time to do you up properly. And I’m pretty sure you don’t want to be free.”

“Why’s that?”

He raised his eyebrows again and shook his head slightly.

What was he trying to tell her? She thought she might have it. “Why’s that, Mr. Merrick? If you would like to tell me?” His gaze was cool and even, not even the slightest bit angry, just immovable. She bowed her head.

He tilted it up and made her meet his gaze with a firm hand on her chin. “Because I saw how your body responded. And I saw that little look of superiority on your face just for a moment, followed by discomfort. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not your superior, I’m your equal. I just happen to know a little more about bondage and a bit more about how to read a submissive. And you’re right. A blowjob would have been better than making you breakfast.”

He crouched a little, putting himself at the same level as her for a moment. She took that all in. He did read her awfully well. And she was glad he craved her, er, oral attention. She’d only done it twice before really, and it hadn’t been that satisfying either time. She didn’t know why she’d mentioned it. Just to see him squirm, really. And now it was her doing the squirming.

“You’re going to stay right there and I’m going to make you breakfast,” he said.

She did as she was told, but her fingers explored what was going on behind her back. He'd buttoned her cuffs together. He was right, she could get out of it easily, not because she could get the cuffs unbuttoned—a few tests showed that would be quite difficult—but because the buttons would come off at some point, unless she was very still. *Very clever.*

*And the man gives lectures on rope bondage.* She could only wonder what that was like. She'd not be able to find out. His ropes and whatnot were probably back at Bondage Ranch. And while the idea of brazenly going there and returning the briefcase had appealed to her a few minutes ago, the place made her feel decidedly uneasy. All those women were there who had probably played with Mr. Merrick before, for one thing. And it was one thing to admit to one man that yes, you had submissive fantasies, but quite another to walk through a group of people as a man's submissive.

“One omelet,” he said, setting a paper plate on the table with a nicely rolled mass of eggs and cheese, with flecks of red and green. “You might want to let it cool a little.” He reached behind her and unbuttoned her cuffs. “It should hold up well enough to eat with your hands, though.”

“I've knives and forks in my car,” Laera told him. He must think she was completely helpless. No, that wasn't it. He just liked to do it all himself.

“Set the table for two then, lovely Laera.”

“Yes, Mr. Merrick,” she said, getting up and getting plastic silverware from the camping set she had in her trunk. *Why did she get such pleasure out of saying those words?* The bondage thing, yes, she could understand, and the sex was wonderful, but she really liked saying “yes” to him. She was a strong, independent woman, always had been. It wasn't like the words came easily to her either; she had to struggle to say them, and yet, it felt really good to hear her own voice saying the words.

Just a few more hours, she thought. It was meant to comfort, to remind herself that she'd be back to being her own independent self in just a little while. Yet she didn't ever feel as “herself” there, as she felt right now.

She waited to eat until he had made an omelet for himself as well, and then dove in. It was delicious. She hadn't realized how starved she felt until she had the first bite.

When she looked up, she realized he'd eaten only a third of his.

“You must think I’m a horrible glutton,” she said, feeling a bit embarrassed. She knew she ate fast, but was she that bad?

“Not at all, I’m just slow,” he said. “I like to be mindful—” he broke off.

“And not just shovel it in? I get it.” She grinned. How would he take what she was going to do next? The worst that could happen was for him to grab her wrist again and stop her. That wasn’t too bad last time. She just hoped she could keep the reflex to throw him to the ground when he did that in check. “I’ll give you something worth being mindful about.”

She used her fork to cut off a gooey piece, speared it, and brought it to his mouth. He blinked in surprise, and then took it in, his lips sliding off the fork as he pulled in the food. She resisted the temptation to load up another forkful while he chewed. If he liked it slow, so be it.

He smiled at her. “Up on my lap, girl,” he told her.

She grinned and climbed on up. His arm went around her waist, holding her securely, and her thighs were pinned between his thighs and the bottom of the table. It was another one of those positions that didn’t go at all well with any judo moves. She wasn’t used to being defenseless. Even missionary position gave her a little more opportunity to use her partner’s weight against him if he got out of hand.

The strange thing was, she kind of liked it.

He let her feed him, forkful after forkful. Now and then his hand would go to her shirt and he’d unbutton another button. The generator was still running in the background but her neighbors didn’t seem to be up yet, so they weren’t watching, probably, unless they were peering from inside the windows of their Winnebago. He stopped at the button just below her breasts and slipped a hand inside. She felt herself crinkle and harden against his palm. Her mind wandered, wondering where his hands would be if she was wearing a skirt. Whether he’d let her wear panties underneath it, if he had his way.

“Another forkful, please,” he reminded her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her focus returning, although the hand kneading her breast was awfully distracting. She cut off a little more and lifted it to his mouth. He ate it.

“I want the next one from your fingers.”

She smiled, cutting off another one with the edge of her fork. She hesitated just a moment, wondering if he thought her uncouth for not using the knife, but the fork was just as good for

such soft food. If he wanted it done differently, he'd certainly tell her. She didn't feel she had to guess. She smiled. The omelet was warm and wet, a little sticky against her fingers. When she held it up for him, he sucked her fingers in with it, licking and cleaning them. She could feel him stir beneath her. She wondered if he was thinking about her earlier comment about oral sex. He probably was. She regretted saying it, really. She hadn't much experience, and the way she had made the comment, he was probably building her into an expert in his mind. She squirmed. That didn't do anything to stop the growing hardness pressing into her bottom, and he held her still, not letting her move far.

"Laera, you really are the most interesting woman. And beautiful," he added, before she could retort that "interesting" could mean all sorts of things.

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick," she said.

Suddenly his lips were on hers, his tongue pushing into her mouth. His lips were hard against her own, almost painful, but she just wanted to be closer. She put her arms around him and kissed him back, hard, not caring if her lips were bleeding at the end of it. He kissed her like he couldn't get enough of her.

"Come with me," he whispered when their lips finally parted, his voice deep and scratchy.

"Come where?" To Philadelphia? Or perhaps he meant the other sort of coming. She started to smile.

"To Bondage Ranch. After you pack up. There are things you should see." His eyes sparkled. "Activities you should find out if you like. And I promise you that I'll let you go in time to get home before bedtime."

*What was there to see? Activities I should find out if I like?* Her imagination flitted all over the place, seeing bodies, whips, ropes, orgies—it was hard to focus. "I don't know what to say," she murmured. *I need time to absorb this, don't I?*

"Say, 'Yes, Mr. Merrick.' You'll have plenty of time to absorb it all later," he told her, doing that mind reading thing again.

His eyes were on hers and she couldn't look away. That look of his was so intense. When he ate his food, he concentrated and savored every bite. She was just like his food, she realized. He wanted to see every reaction, every move of hers. She had his full attention, and she had to resist the urge to turn away. "Yes, Mr. Merrick," she said.

He smiled. “Good.”

She opened her mouth to say, “under one condition,” and realized that was hardly very submissive. “May I ask a favor of you, sir?”

“I think you may, at that,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

Would you make love to me in the tent, one more time? she thought, but just stared at his eyes instead. *Do I even want that, or did I want him to tie me with ropes, somewhere with room, or...?*

“Help me get stuff picked up,” she said. “And then do whatever you want to. As long as it's safe, and sane.” She grinned. “If it's not consensual, I'll say the safe word.”

He smiled broadly. “Do you remember what it is?”

“Red light,” she said. “Red light.”

“Good. And please do use it, if you need to. Some subs, especially newbies, think using it means they've failed, and it doesn't. They won't use it if they need to.”

“I imagine some go to the opposite extreme?”

“A few,” Bruce admitted. “But not very many of the ones who really want to be submissive. Everyone is different, though.”

She nodded. “Some of us are more different than others.”

He laughed. “So we are.”

A few minutes later, Laera found herself behind the wheel of her Ford, following Bruce's Toyota hybrid through the back roads. What the hell am I doing? she asked herself.



## Chapter Four

Laera pulled her car in just behind Bruce's, but she didn't get out immediately. The cars were all parked on a grassy lot, and from the looks of it, it didn't exactly have cars parked on it all the time. The grass was still pretty green. Still, there were a lot of cars, maybe thirty of them. Had there been that many before? Probably; she just hadn't noticed.

She hadn't noticed how big the building was at Bondage Ranch, either. The "house" part was a good-sized family home, a five bedroom or something like that, but there was an extra wing out one side that was more like a wing of an old hotel, although the doors to the rooms were on the inside, she guessed. She couldn't see them from the roundabout. There were a lot of people here. And they would all think of her as a submissive, as some kind of pervert. She shivered.

He had walked to her car door and was waiting for her. The clear day had turned a little misty; it might be outright rain soon, but he didn't seem to be in a hurry. She opened the door and stepped out. The mist actually felt kind of good; it helped take the edge off the summer heat.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"Who, me? Of course not," she said lightly.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Laera," he said. "I have to have your honesty. If you don't tell me the truth, I can't figure out what you need. I'm not a mind reader."

Well, you bloody act like one, she thought. But she knew only one answer would satisfy, since he had read her well. "Yes, Mr. Merrick, I'm nervous."

"That's better," he said. "You'll be perfectly safe." He put his arm around her waist and guided her to the door. "Now let's get you out of those clothes and into something more appropriate."

Okay, now she was nervous. What would be "appropriate" for a gathering of bondage enthusiasts? She had a feeling she didn't want to know.

He paused at the door. "I'm not a fan of people who stop their subs from talking, but I'd suggest giving yourself time to think before you speak and letting me handle things if you're uncertain. There are a few very lovely sexual sadists here this weekend, and I'm sure they'd love to make you squirm." He winked. "And today, that's my job."

There were a dozen or so people gathered in the living room when they entered, and it wasn't hard to tell which ones were the Doms, and which ones were the subs. A middle-aged woman in a leather catsuit sat on an elegantly curved wooden chair with a younger, well-muscled man completely naked at her feet. On the red leather couch sat two dominants, both male, one in leathers, one in dark jeans and a T-shirt. Kneeling on the thick carpet in front of them were two women about Laera's age. One wore a short black dress, her hands demurely crossed in her lap. The other's dress had a cutout through which her bare breasts were displayed, with shining silver rings through her nipples. Her back was cut out, too, and you could see her ass—and the fact that she wasn't wearing underwear.

She wasn't getting any less nervous.

Two gay men stood to the side, dressed in skintight jeans and harnesses that showed off their furry, muscled physiques; one of them held a leash that went to the other's collar. A lesbian couple were tangled in a comfy chair, the sub on her mistress's lap, three buttons unbuttoned on the sub's thin white blouse, the mistress's finger idly playing with the fourth. The submissive looked nervous and excited all at the same time. Her hands were around her mistress's neck, and, Laera realized, cuffed together there.

There was a man walking over to meet them with his sub a step behind him. He wore leather pants and a deep V-necked shirt with ruffles, and yet didn't look the slightest bit effeminate. His walk, his steady gaze, the muscles exposed by the neck, let her know he was all man. The woman behind him was beautiful, with blonde hair that hung in waves over her shoulders, her short red dress half concealing, half displaying her breasts which were thrust up by a corset.

"Dylan, this is Laera," Bruce said. "She wandered onto the ranch by mistake and discovered she had an interest, so I'm showing her the ropes." He grinned. "So to speak. I'll be glad to cover her fee for the weekend."

Fee? Of course, this kind of place didn't just come into being out of nowhere. The price for a normal hotel for the weekend was pretty steep. Mr. Merrick might be talking hundreds of dollars. She opened her mouth to protest.

Dylan shook his head. "There's barely a day left and she's not taken any sleeping room up. She's a beginner? I'll waive the fee. You just have to convince her to come—and pay—next time." He grinned back with a sidelong glance over at her. "Nice to meet you, Laera."

Laera smiled and nodded. "Pleased to meet you, too." *Do I say "sir" at the end of that, or what?* "Sir," she added, and no one looked at her amiss, so she guessed she got it right.

"Whether she comes again will be up to her, of course," said Bruce firmly. "But I was going to ask another favor—of Alex, actually, if you could spare her."

Dylan stepped to the side, a nod his answer, and the blonde stepped forward.

"Laera is about your size and shape," said Bruce. "I was wondering if you could find her something to wear, Alex."

*I'm her size and shape? No way.* The other woman was thinner, had larger, firmer-looking breasts. *She's gorgeous. If that's what Mr. Merrick sees when he looks at me, he's deluded.*

But Alex only nodded, smiled, and reached out to take Laera's hand. "I'll be happy to, Master Bruce," she said. Looking at Laera, she added, "I think I have just the thing." She winked conspiratorially.

Laera let herself be led out of the living room and up the stairs. She hadn't realized until she got to the stairs just how short Alex's dress was, but looking up, it was obvious Alex wasn't wearing underwear. She hurried up with a blush when Alex grinned back at her.

Alone in the living room, Bruce found himself wondering what he'd gotten himself into. He certainly hadn't come up planning to play with a new sub. It was just supposed to be a light weekend, in the company of people who'd largely given up on the idea that he was available, no matter how single he was. He'd done scenes with over half of the people in the living room. The gay master, Keith, had once gotten a lesson in rope bondage from him by being on the receiving end. Bruce was straight, but bondage didn't have to be about sex. He had to admit, however, that he preferred it with "all the toppings."

Marcia—the cute little sub on Veronica's lap—he'd tied to an X-frame once and brought to three orgasms. Good times. Veronica wasn't interested in men like her sub, but she was a good mistress and understood Marcia's need for variety. “Want to unbutton a button, Master Bruce?” she asked. Marcia gave him a look both hungry and nervous, all at once. The nervousness was largely a put-on, he knew, and Marcia was best with a top who found that sort of thing cute. He bent over, undid the button, thanked Veronica, and gave Marcia a kiss on the forehead. Marcia pouted. She wanted more, but that was all she was going to get at the moment. Bruce didn't think Laera would be particularly understanding, and he wasn't interested in fucking with her mind. He'd seen the look on her face when she surveyed the room and had wondered if she was going to run. He hoped Alex would be gentle with her. He thought she would. He'd played with Alex too, once upon a time, with Dylan's careful supervision, of course. Between Alex and him there hadn't been, and never would be, any sex, just a lot of ropes. Dylan was a great master and perfect for her, but he was a bit challenged when it came to tying knots. No matter how many times Bruce had tried to show him, Dylan couldn't quite wrap his mind around it.

There was something safe about playing with married women like Alex, who had their husbands' permission and approval. There was no danger of getting caught up with them, no worry it would carry over into something more than friendship. More to the point, there was no danger of getting so attached he got hurt.

With Laera, there was the danger of getting attached, and if he did, a near certainty of getting hurt. Or of her getting hurt, or both. *Why am I doing this?*

Possibly, he told himself, because you're already attached. He dismissed the thought. He didn't fall for anybody that easily.

“She's cute,” said Dylan, interrupting his train of thought.

“Yes, she is,” agreed Bruce.

“Be careful with her.”

“You know I'm always careful, Dylan.”

Dylan laughed. “Yes, it was probably the one thing I didn't need to say to you.”

Sam, the girl whose outfit showed off her nipple rings, stood up suddenly. He had played with *her* a few times as well. Sam had a simple, no-strings-attached attitude toward sex and bondage. Some of the Doms thought she wasn't a very good sub, but Bruce disagreed. She just

knew what she wanted, and if you were willing to negotiate before a scene, she was very responsive and obedient during—as long as you stuck basically to the plan. As Sam walked off down the hall, her Dom, who Bruce had seen but didn't know, got up and started walking after her. At least he had the good sense not to embarrass himself by calling out. Bruce would have laid good money that the Dom had pushed Sam past what they'd negotiated. At that point, it didn't matter whether she'd done whatever it was a thousand times before, trust was lost. Trust was a fragile thing between a sub and a Dom, sometimes. Usually.

“I knew those two weren't going to gel,” said Dylan. “And no, I'm not saying anything bad about Sam—or Gordon either, for that matter. They just want very different things.” He cocked an eye at Bruce, and Bruce looked back. Dylan was trying to tell him something—no, he was trying to get him to figure out something, something that he'd never accept if he was just told. Something, he guessed, about him and Laera. *Wanting different things? Maybe. Maybe not.*

“They're taking quite a while, aren't they?” Dylan said lightly. “Maybe Alex decided Laera was good enough to eat.”

“No,” said Bruce, “she didn't, and you don't think so either or you'd be heading up to watch.” *Why does Dylan want to goad me into jealousy?*

“Good point; well made.”

Then he saw Laera up at the top of the stairs. Alex held her hand, forcing her to walk along with her or let it go. Bruce resisted the temptation to whistle. *Man, she looks fine.*

Laera wore a dress made out of a stretchy gold fabric that clung to her every curve. A deep V neck went nearly to her belly button, held from gaping further open by a series of thin gold chains. As it was, nearly half her breasts were bared. Smaller upside-down Vs slit up each hip, with two more chains running between them. The dress was a bit longer than Alex's, probably a couple inches, so she wouldn't be flashing everyone in the room while coming down the stairs. Her feet were bare.

“She wanted to wear underwear,” Alex said when they finally reached the bottom. “But I told her absolutely not.” And with that, Alex placed Laera's hand in Bruce's.

It was warm, and a bit sweaty. She was still nervous, but not running. *Good.* And when he smiled at her she returned it, a bit weakly, but with her eyes full of want. *Better yet.*

Laera hadn't been at all happy when Alex refused to return her underwear. The stretchy fabric of the dress was barely decent, only the fragile looking chains stopping it from falling open to the point where her breasts would pop out of it. Alex had pointed out that with the deep neck and the slits up the sides, any underwear would be obvious and break up the lines.

"But this makes me look fat," Laera had complained.

"It makes you look curvy," Alex had insisted, "and some men like curvy girls that don't look like they're starving themselves. My husband Dylan is one of them. And I happen to know that Master Bruce is another."

That was the second time she had called him Master Bruce, and Laera felt a surge of jealousy. "And just how would you know that?" she had said.

"Because he's told me so. But you have nothing to worry about from me, Laera. I'm very taken, have been for more than ten years, and Master Bruce doesn't have a crush on me. I'm afraid he doesn't tend to have crushes on anyone."

"That's good," Laera had said, trying to convince herself, "because this is a just-for-the-weekend thing."

"Ah, good," said Alex, but she had a strange expression on her face that Laera couldn't decipher.

At least, Laera had thought, the dress isn't as short as Alex's. But it was still the shortest thing she had worn in years. Her heart was thumping as she walked down the stairs. She remembered that her mother had been married in a large house, coming down the stairway in her wedding dress instead of marching down the aisle. She hadn't been there, wasn't even conceived yet, but she had always had a picture of it in her mind, and for some reason she thought of that now. It was interesting that Dylan and Alex were married; it was nice to know that it wasn't just singles hopping from relationship to relationship that were into dominance and submission. *Even if I'm just here for the moment, it's still nice to know.*

Mr. Merrick's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree when he saw her, and then, suddenly it was all okay. Alex was taking her time down the stairs, and holding on to her hand. It was comforting, in a way, to have a friend, but Laera wished she would hurry it up. She thought she was probably covered from view, but she could feel the rush of air on her naked private parts, and it made her feel vulnerable.

Finally they reached the bottom, and Alex handed her over to Bruce. He smiled, and then gathered her up in his arms. Without her boots he seemed even taller, bigger, more protective. She hadn't fit into Alex's shoes, but maybe that was just as well. As long as no one stepped on her feet.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Mr. Merrick told her. He squeezed her bottom through the dress and pressed her up against him. She felt the bulge of his erection. *Maybe he's not just saying that.*

His hand slid down, lower, his hand on the back of her bare thighs, creeping higher again as he kissed her deeply. The skirt was rising, she could feel it. If he got all the way to her ass—and he wasn't far from it—the skirt would be raised so high Laera was sure nothing would be left to the imagination at all. Her back was to the rest of the room, but she still knew there were people there.

"You two look so lovely together," Alex said. "Have a good time with him, Laera."

Alex, at least, had already seen her naked. But that didn't mean the rest of the crowd needed a free view. She shook her head, her eyes pleading with the man who held her.

"You're so hot, girl," he whispered, "that if you were a bit more experienced, I'd just put you over the back of the couch and fuck your lights out, right here, right now."

*Oh my God.* He meant it. And worse was that the idea shot ripples of pleasure through her pussy.

He knew it too, the bastard. "Your body likes the idea, even if your brain doesn't," he whispered, "yet. That's what you need to know, sweet, submissive Laera. It's time you discovered what you want."

"It scares me a bit," she said. She felt so vulnerable.

"And telling me that you're scared frightens you more, doesn't it? It's okay to be scared, and okay to admit it." His hands were on the lower curve of her bottom now, with no fabric in the way. She didn't know exactly what people could see behind her, but they knew where his hand was, if they were paying attention. She reached behind her and pulled the skirt down in back.

"Did I tell you that you could do that?" he asked, his voice several degrees cooler than it had been.

“No, Mr. Merrick.” Then she added, saucily, “You didn't tell me I couldn't, either.”

She regretted her tone of voice immediately, as his expression changed. He wasn't angry, not at all. Just absolutely calm. His voice was firm. “What I do isn't your place to undo. And new as you are, I think you still knew that.”

She lowered her head, not wanting to look at him when he was like that.

“Look at me and kiss me. Just concentrate on our lips and our tongues. Nothing else is of your concern, do you understand?”

She looked up and nodded. Was there a hint of a sparkle in those eyes? She pressed her lips to his, hoping that she'd make up for her mistake with an enthusiastic kiss. Her tongue entered his mouth, twisted around with it, licking the inside of his lip.

He was lifting her skirt.

She tried to concentrate on the feeling of his tongue, so wet and slippery. It didn't work. She was getting wet, she realized, at the fact that he was lifting her dress, exposing her. More than that, at the way she simply let it happen. The conflict between trying to think only of the kiss, and yet not quite being able to manage, turned her on more. She wondered if they could see her pussy, if they could see it glisten. Her bottom was completely bare now, only her dominant's hand for coverage.

She willed herself to just relax in his arms. Right then if he decided to fuck her, with everyone watching, she wouldn't resist.

He broke this kiss. “Good girl,” he said, and pulled her dress back down.

“Thank you, Master,” she said. He studied her for a moment, but didn't correct her. His arm, outside her dress, held her around the waist.

“Thank you, Alex, for dressing her. Your taste, as usual, was exquisite.”

“You're welcome, Master Bruce,” said Alex, dropping a little curtsy.

“You've got yourself a live one there,” the lesbian mistress said.

“I do indeed. Laera, meet Veronica. The lovely lady on her lap is Marcia.”

Her face reddened as she turned to look at the people who'd had a good view. Marcia didn't have a shirt on anymore, or a bra. She had small breasts with perky nipples. “Pleased to meet you both,” she said.



“My pleasure,” said Veronica. “If you like women, look me up later during the day. We always have room in the bed for an extra girl.”

*Well, that was direct.* She noticed, though, that her body didn't respond the way it had to the idea of a public ravishment. “Thank you,” she said. “I'm afraid I'm terminally straight.”

“What a pity,” said Veronica, turning her attention completely back to Marcia, who smiled for a moment and then moaned as her mistress tweaked her nipples.

“We're off to the dungeon,” announced the man on the couch to no one in particular. He got up. His submissive didn't say a thing, simply followed him out of the room, one or two steps behind.

“Have fun, Ken, Josie,” said Master Bruce.

“Thanks,” said Ken. Josie twitched, but didn't say a word, or even look over to him, although Laera was pretty sure she heard him.

“Dungeon?” she asked.

“Where Dylan has most of the play equipment,” Master Bruce explained. “And most of the public play happens, especially when it rains. A lot of things happen in the private rooms, although as I mentioned, most of us are sharing those with another person or two, so privacy isn't, I'm afraid, high on the agenda at Bondage Ranch. It's more of a chance to get away from the everyday, and hang out with people who are generally accepting.”

“Because you're all into bondage,” Laera supplied.

“Something like that. Not everyone likes being tied up, or being restrained, or restraining another, so technically, not everyone's into bondage. Some people are into the power exchange dynamic, but are hardly into toys and ropes at all. Others are into the toys and perhaps the pain, but the notion of domination and submission takes a backseat. We're all a little kinky, in different ways, and I'm sure we all have our opinions about what other people do. We're not as accepting on the inside as we act on the outside, perhaps. But still, we're not 'vanilla', as they say, so we have that in common. When we have to put a label on it, it's BDSM.”

“Bondage, Domination, Slavery, Mastery?” Laera guessed.

Bruce laughed. “That's another thing we don't agree on. D might be for discipline; S can be for submission, or sadism. M might be for masochism. It all depends on who you ask.”

Laera smiled.

“The dungeon isn't deep in the basement, either. It was a barn once, but a wooden floor has been put in, and some extra windows up high where they let in a little light but don't make everyone feel like the outside world is watching. Not that the outside world is likely anywhere near the ranch. When it's not a dungeon, I think Dylan and Alex have ballroom dancing lessons there.” He looked over to Dylan, who was standing with his arm around Alex and was nibbling on her neck to Alex's obvious pleasure. “That still going on?”

“We have square dancing too now, on Tuesday nights,” said Dylan. “It's more popular, but not as good a revenue source as the ballroom dancing. Or the bondage weekends.”

“It's good exercise,” said Alex. She poked playfully at Dylan's tummy. Laera smiled at the exchange. She had always been more worried about her own shape than any of her boyfriends' physiques.

“It is. You should come down sometime,” said Dylan. He caught Alex's finger and fixed her with a look. Alex just smiled.

She might be in trouble, but she obviously doesn't mind, thought Laera.

“I might,” said Bruce. “I always think when I come down here for bondage weekend that it's been too long, just seeing you guys a couple times a year.”

All of a sudden Laera felt very much the stranger, in amongst old friends. Bruce seemed to sense it instantly.

“I'll take you on a tour of the dungeon,” he told her, focusing his full attention on her again. “Just to see what you like, what interests you, and what you'd never do in a thousand years. And I'll stay by your side the whole time.”

“Is it dangerous?” asked Laera, although she was more reassured than worried by his offer to stay by her side.

“Only if you're worried about sin,” answered Bruce with a smile.

## Chapter Five

Despite Master Bruce's words, the dungeon looked nothing at all like she imagined. She could easily imagine it as a ballroom with its polished oak floor and the tapestries and art that adorned the walls. Only the high-arched roof looked like part of the barn it had once been. She tried hard to survey the room, avoiding looking at its contents. Strange black furniture, with a few dashes of red. Naked bodies. Leather, vinyl, and latex.

"Your eyes are avoiding looking," Master Bruce said. "And that's not what's called for right now. Be present. I wouldn't have brought you here if I hadn't thought you'd benefit from looking."

"I can't believe," said Laera, "that these people are just doing this right out in the open like that."

"They are." Nothing more than that, just an affirmation that what she was seeing was real.

"Are they all exhibitionists?"

"Some are. Some of the tops enjoy displaying their subs, and their subs get a thrill knowing they are doing something that is difficult for themselves, for their Doms. Some simply like the equipment better than the bed at their homes and this is a rare chance to get to use it. Still others hardly do dominance and submission at all when they aren't at a club or a place like this, and they find that the company of others helps set the mood, or helps reassure them that their kink is okay." He said it as if the scene in front of them was the most normal scene in the world. "Now look, Laera, and see what moves you."

She couldn't see the whole room that clearly, so she focused on what was right in front of her. A woman was strapped facing a large wood piece of furniture shaped like an X that held her arms and legs apart. She wore a thong, and nothing else except for a black leather collar and matching cuffs on her wrists and ankles. The X leaned forward a little, supporting her weight.

Behind her, a Dom wielded a flogger. It swished through the air, making a sound a bit like splashing when it hit the woman's back, which was a little bit pink.

"A St. Andrew's Cross," her guide told her, obviously following her gaze. "It gives her something to pull against when she's being flogged, if she has the need, and holds her in place. Keeps her safe, too—a squirming sub can make the tails of a flogger hit the wrong place, which might cause more pain than intended, or even be dangerous in some cases. The flogger he's using is made of deerskin; it's very soft and light. He's probably warming her up for something heavier."

"It still looks nasty," said Laera. She pushed herself against him without realizing it, and he tightened his arm around her waist.

"It does, doesn't it? Which means it still has some psychological effect. Our best sex organ is our brain. Speaking of which, she's probably getting even more out of being tied and helpless than she is from the flogging."

I can see that, thought Laera. A soft ache of need came from between her legs. She wasn't sure it was safe to let Master Bruce know just how she reacted to that.

He just smiled at her. "A sub can also be tied facing out on it. That way, she'll be very exposed, and her breasts and pussy will be easy to play with."

She shivered.

"The thought both scares you and excites you, doesn't it?" said Master Bruce. "It's the part I like best too, actually. That feeling of helplessness, of surrender, is precious. Of course you always have your safe word, if you need it."

"I don't want to be exposed like that," said Laera, knowing she was only half telling the truth.

"I think John probably has a deerskin flogger."

"But I don't want..." Laera started, but it was hopeless. They were headed off toward the couple she'd seen the night before out in the woods. They were just standing to the side, talking, looking as normal as two people in leather could look. John noticed them coming first, and Sheila followed his gaze. They both smiled in greeting.

"Who's your friend, Zen master?" asked John.

Bruce chuckled. "This is Laera. Laera, Sheila, and John. You saw them the..."

"I remember," Laera said, blushing.

"A pretty name," said John. "But she's the interrupting sort."

Sheila frowned over at John, and Laera thought it was probably a pretty good thing John didn't notice.

"Pleased to meet you," said Laera.

"The pleasure's ours," Sheila said warmly.

"Do you have a nice, light, deerskin flogger?" asked Master Bruce.

I don't like floggers, or being hit, or anything like that, thought Laera. But she didn't say anything. She was here to learn and Master Bruce had said it wasn't that intense. She decided that for today anyway, Mae West had it right—try anything once, do it again if you like it.

"Sure do," said John, reaching down into the duffel bag next to him. He rummaged for a moment and came out with a flogger with many wide, flat tails, some dyed blue, some red. It was pretty, actually. "Haven't used it in a while, since Sheila graduated to bigger and badder things. Just get it back to me before I leave."

Bruce took it. Laera half expected to be asked to turn around and lift her skirt, and she wasn't at all sure she'd do it if she was asked. Instead, Master Bruce held out his own forearm, and whacked the back of it with the flogger. It made a nice whooshing sound, the tails splattering against his arm. If he even felt pain, Laera couldn't tell it from his expression.

He surprised her even more by handing her the flogger. "You try," he said.

That didn't seem very hard. After all, she would be in charge of how hard it landed. She held out her arm, as he did, and swung lightly, stopping the handle a bit before it pointed straight at the arm, so that the tails as much fell onto her arm as struck her. They tickled. She laughed. "Okay, that was kind of half-assed," she admitted. She tried again, swinging hard this time. The tails wrapped around her arm and the inside of her forearm stung a little bit, but it wasn't bad, and it lasted but an instant. The rest felt like a hard caress, no more damaging than a sudden tight hug or a friendly pat on the shoulder, just different—a dozen tiny strokes combining, like notes into a chord, into a soft thudding. She handed the flogger back to Bruce.

"New, huh?" asked John.

“Very,” agreed Bruce. “But she has a natural aptitude.”

The words made her glow, for some reason. *Am I that soft a touch for praise?*

“How was that?” Bruce asked her.

“Not bad at all,” she said, smiling and feeling brave.

“It's a good toy for novice subs,” Bruce explained. “And novice Doms, and for that matter anyone who likes a little buildup to their scenes. I have one upstairs and I'm not that much into flogging. The tails build up some speed when they wrap around, so it's important for the ends to hit the intended target. Also, on the other side of flesh that likes being beaten, like your back, is often someplace more tender.” He brushed his knuckle against her breasts and she shivered. Having things like that done to her in public would take some getting used to.

“Of course,” he said, smiling in a way that didn't comfort her at all, but made her heart jump a little, “you can wrap around intentionally, for effect. Sometimes a little sting to tender spots can be...fun.” He stroked the side of her breast some more and she felt her nipples tighten. She looked down. They were very obvious underneath the thin, tight dress. She avoided his gaze, only to end up staring at John, who was staring straight at her tits.

“Keep your eyes on mine, Laera. I hope I don't have to tell you again, but looking away is not something that pleases me.”

She jerked her eyes back gratefully. “Yes, Master Bruce.”

He smiled. “Good girl.”

“The other reason the deerskin flogger is good for novice Doms is that if you wrap around, it may sting a little but it won't do any real damage, assuming you're smart enough not to play above the collarbone. So if you play with someone who doesn't know what they're doing, don't let them use something heavy on you, because a heavy flogger, wrapping around, can really hurt.” He handed the flogger back to John and thanked him.

“Anytime,” John said.

*A novice Dom.* He was giving her advice for after she left this place and went home. She trusted him; she wasn't sure why. *Can I really trust someone else the same way? I suppose I'll have to.*

A scream punctuated the air. A naked woman was tied to a benchlike device. She was on all fours, each arm attached securely to iron rings at the thing's base. You could see her pussy and her anus clearly on display. In any other circumstance, that would have held Laera's attention; the woman was exposed at least as thoroughly as her vision of being tied face up on the St. Andrew's Cross. Angry raised red lines crossed her bottom. Her Dom held a cane in his hand, loosely, but wasn't about to strike with it. Instead, his other hand was on her shoulders and he was leaning down, talking to her softly.

"A cane," Master Bruce said. "Some people like them, subs and Doms alike. I'm not one of them. Having limits isn't just for subs. Doms have them, too. Another good thing to remember. If you decide to like that kind of play, make sure you find someone who knows exactly what they're doing."

Laera shivered. "I don't think you need to worry about me there," she said. She resisted the urge to snuggle up closer to Master Bruce. He was just there for her for a day, after all. It wouldn't pay to get too attached.

"Can't say as I'm disappointed," he said. "What else do you see?"

A naked man tied to a post caught her attention. He was a little on the lean side, but there was nothing small about his erection. His hands were bound above him, attached to a ring at the top of the post. His legs were trussed by ropes coiled around both ankles and the post. Around his neck was a thick leather collar.

In front of him knelt a slender woman with long, straight jet-black hair, who wore a leather bustier and a mid-length leather skirt, and boots that were long enough to disappear under the skirt. She was kissing his cock.

"He looks like he's having fun."

"Yes, I rather imagine he is. Sue's a very gentle Domme, with quite a devious imagination," Master Bruce said.

"I don't see anything especially devious about it. I think if I was a Domme, I'd be, well, not—she's kneeling!"

Her own top grinned. "One gets over some of those inhibitions eventually... Sue will do things from whatever position is comfortable."

As he spoke, the Domme reached into her bag—another one of those big sports bags that seemed to be everywhere—and pulled out what looked like a leather bracelet. She wrapped it around her sub's cock, just behind his balls. The man moaned, but it didn't sound like distress to Laera.

Sue stood, rubbing a soft pelt of fur over her sub's body, occasionally darting her hand down to play with his penis and his balls.

“They'll take all afternoon, and he'll probably be erect the whole time. I don't know how long they've been at it already, but I doubt he'll be coming any time soon. Sue will keep him right on the edge, though. She's very good at reading people. And if he does come without permission, well, Sue will make sure he's disciplined.”

“But maybe he'll like that?” asked Laera, with a grin.

“I rather doubt it. Most often, she'll turn him over to someone she trusts, who will administer the punishment. Or she'll have him stand in the corner by himself. I've never yet seen a sub who really enjoys Sue's idea of discipline, and part of that is because she doesn't really enjoy the disciplining part herself. She does it to make the rest of the scene work.”

“Does she take a different sub each time?”

Master Bruce shook his head. “No, there are a regular three or four she rotates through, I think. You should meet her, actually, if she ends up being finished before you have to go.”

Laera shook her head. “I'm quite sure I'm not a Domme, or bi,” she said. “I think the only reason I noticed that scene is the way she was kneeling; I thought, maybe—”

“You like the idea of kneeling and serving that way?”

“Well, it looks hard on the knees,” Laera demurred. And blushed. “Yes, I do. Dammit.”

“Honesty isn't always easy, but it is essential if you're going to get what you need,” said Bruce.

Bruce felt his cock ache at Laera's words, and forced out the reasoned response. He wasn't there to let his hormones carry him away, like some teenager. He was in control, the dominant to a very lovely first-time submissive. This was going to be about her, not him.



He tried to push out the image of Laera on her knees, his cock sliding into her mouth. Her arms tied behind her back, perhaps. He wasn't totally successful.

He moved behind her. He knew she would be able to feel his hardness against her bottom. For the moment, he just wrapped his arms around her, just below her breasts. "Laera," he said.

She wiggled back against him. "Seems that's an idea we both share a liking for," she said with a grin.

"Yes, I think it is."

"We could go to your room—" Laera suggested, letting her voice trail off.

"What?" teased Bruce. "Don't feel like doing that right here and now?"

Laera shuddered. "I..." she started and stopped. Her heart was racing. Bruce could feel it. What they were doing turned her on and scared her, all at once. "I w-would if you ordered me to, but...I'd...please don't."

Bruce smiled, kissing her just behind the ear. Sometimes when a sub said words like that, it meant she wanted—needed—to be pushed. But Laera wasn't just being coy, she was really scared, and she didn't need to be pushed that hard, that fast. He had been around her enough to know that it would take quite a lot of fear to make this woman stutter. He was touched by her bravery, and her willingness to do what frightened her, but he wasn't going to take advantage. "You're safe, little one," he told her. "For the moment."

Someday she might be ready to take pleasure in it. But not today. That pleasure would belong not just to another day, but to another Dom. The thought made him feel like his heart was in knots. He took a breath and retreated to a safer subject.

"The reason you should get to know her," he said, "is that she's local to you, and it's precisely because she's not your type. She'd be willing to show you around, tell you which parties and clubs to attend and which ones to avoid, who the scary Doms are and who you'd be safe with, and you wouldn't have to worry that the person showing you around has ulterior motives."

"Like you?" she asked, wiggling her ass against his hard-on again. "I think I feel an ulterior motive right here—although that's a funny name for it."

"Like me," he agreed. "But I don't think you mind."

“Not at all.”

“And I think you can do better than call it an ulterior motive.”

She blushed. Her cheeks were so beautiful when they turned pink. “A hard cock, Master Bruce? Is that what I should call it?”

“Much better,” he agreed. He lifted one hand to cover her breast, watched the color in her cheeks deepen, and felt her heart beat faster. He could feel her nipple stiffen beneath the fabric. She was so responsive, to both the scene around her and to his touch. “What else do you see out there? And don't mind my hands—they'll be doing exactly what they want and going exactly where they want to go.”

“Yes, Master Bruce,” she said. She shivered again, but it wasn't the shudder he had seen earlier. She was enjoying the attention, even in public, or maybe because it was in public. Yes, quite possibly the latter.

She looked around, trying to find a scene that interested her and trying to concentrate while he was sending jolts of pleasure through her. She couldn't believe she was letting him do this in public, and yet she wasn't about to move or use her safe word. Others were doing more extreme things, after all. There was a kind of safety in that. It took her a moment or two as she scanned the crowd of people. There was a lot of bare flesh on display, submissives naked or nearly so, dominants in leather and latex that still showed more skin than one saw at most dance clubs. The people came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. And sexual orientations. She watched a couple of guys going at it on a couch for a few seconds before she realized she was staring. It was interesting, but obviously nothing she could be involved in.

Bruce's hands had moved. One slipped into her neckline, cupping her bare breast beneath the fabric. Everyone could see exactly what he was doing. But it felt so good, his fingers touching her super-sensitive nipple, his knuckles lightly brushing against it.

She recognized Ken and Josie from before. And the girl who had been kneeling next to Josie, the one with the nipple rings, was with them although Laera was sure she'd been with someone else earlier. She looked around and found the missing man, who was leaning against the wall watching the same scene as she was. He did not look happy. *Ugh, drama.*

But the scene itself drew her in anyway. Josie was naked except for cuffs, a collar, and a blindfold. The nipples on her small breasts were red and swollen. Her long dark hair fell across her back in waves. She was chained to the corners of a wooden frame, a black wooden square more than six feet on a side, which bristled with O-shaped rings to attach chains or ropes to. Ken had a paddle out, a flexible thing with a wooden handle, the paddle leather on one side and some sort of fluffy fur on the other. He was reddening Josie's backside with the fluffy side, occasionally eliciting a surprised yelp when he turned the paddle around to use the leather.

In front of Josie stood the other woman. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair, but her face was impassive, only the occasional brief flicker of a smile crossing her face. With her hands she teased Josie's nipples, bending down now and then to give her a soft suck, her fingers freed to slide down Josie's stomach and rub against her clit.

"Those three," she said. The hands on her breasts—both of them had slipped inside her dress now—were driving her crazy. She wondered if Josie was feeling the same way. Her senses were in overload, and yet to have two sets of hands at once must be even more intense.

"Ah. Ken and Josie. And Sam, hmmm."

"Drama?" she asked, instantly regretting it.

"None that you need to worry about," Master Bruce said, and she gave a sigh of relief. "What about the scene?"

"All those hands," she said. Ken was rubbing the reddened bottom of his sub with the fluffy side of the paddle and his hand disappeared between her legs.

Josie screamed, her orgasm shaking her. The whole frame shook as she thrashed. Sam stopped for a moment, and then at a word from Ken bent to suck Josie's little tits some more. Ken drew his hand out when Josie's tremors subsided and resumed the paddling, this time turning to the leather side more often.

"You like the idea of hands all over you?" Master Bruce's one hand withdrew from inside her dress, but had slipped downward over her stomach. She wondered what would happen if she said yes.

*Only one way to find out.* "Yes," she said.

His hand slid under the hem of her dress. I'm not wearing underwear, she thought. And then she remembered Alex mentioning that when she had come down. *He knows.*

Instinctively, she drew her thighs together, but he was having none of that “Spread your feet a little, lovely Laera, unless you'd rather I did it for you and attract a lot of attention,” he told her. She spread her feet, her thighs parting enough that his hand could fit between them. She jumped at the first touch on her clit, then tried to find her breath as his finger slipped into her folds, gathering some of the juices that had welled there. He didn't have to go far. She didn't remember ever being quite so wet before.

When his fingers touched her clit again, they slid across, rubbing where it poked out from its hood. She realized her eyes had closed, the sensations of his hands and the kisses he was placing on her neck overwhelming her. *I'm going to come if he keeps this up. I'm not sure if I can do that quietly.*

Her eyes opened again, hunting for distraction. She didn't find it from Ken, Josie, and Sam. The paddle had been dropped. Sam was kissing Josie's neck and sliding a purple glass dildo in and out of Josie's pussy. Ken had his cock buried in Josie's backside, his hands wrapped around to play with her breasts. Sam's dispassionate look made Laera realize that this was Ken and Josie's scene. *Sam's just an extra helping pair of hands.* It was a calming thought, until she caught sight of the light glistening off of the silver nipple rings Sam wore and displayed. *What does that feel like, to have something like that there, all the time?*

She sought out another sight, something that was sure to quell the rising fire that Master Bruce's rubbing and teasing was building in her core. The man Sam wasn't with anymore. He wasn't glowering, though. He wasn't even watching Sam. He was watching her, watching her try not to give in, not to go over. Watching her Master Bruce's hands on her breasts, lifting the hem of her skirt, rubbing her clit, another finger disappearing in her pussy—

Laera screamed as the fire inside burst into an explosion, her whole body tingling. She closed her eyes, feeling her body give way, her master holding her tightly. She leaned against him, feeling satisfied and lazy. His cock was still hard against her. *I should do something about that.*

Bruce scooped Laera up, carrying her, pushing her knees together with a little shift of her weight. She was past caring who saw or what they saw. She just knew that his hands knew exactly what to do to her body.

She closed her eyes again and nestled against his strong muscular shoulder, wishing she could stay just like that forever.

## Chapter Six

Bruce carried Laera out of the dungeon. She hadn't fainted and wasn't asleep, but he didn't know that he could quite call her conscious either. He liked his subs to be present and alert, but she looked so peaceful he didn't want to disturb her.

Almost everyone had turned to look when she came and screamed. He'd been to clubs that were designed to mask the noise, but Dylan and Alex's dungeon was used for dancing the rest of the year and they wanted people to be able to hear the music equally regardless of where they were on the dance floor. He'd known women who were attention hogs, whose yelps and cries of pain or screams of ecstasy were given extra volume by their desire to have people notice them, but he was sure that wasn't the case with Laera. He wasn't even sure she knew that she'd been so loud.

"Mmm, thank you, Master," she purred, rubbing against his chest like a kitten. He didn't correct her, as much as he usually loathed being reduced to a title. No one since Alice had called him simply "Master."

She wasn't exactly an easy lift. There was some weight to her, a weight that gave her curves in all the right places, made her soft and cuddly. It was a weight he didn't mind carrying at all. He carried her up the stairs and through the hall until he found his own room. By that time Laera's eyes had fluttered open.

"I want you," she said.

"I'll see if anyone's in the room," he told her.

"Don't let it stop you," she said, her eyes fixed on him. He returned the gaze for a long moment. He was so hard, he couldn't wait to bury himself inside her. He knocked. No one answered, so he entered. The room was empty, at least for now. He carried her in and locked the door behind them. He'd rather have to get up at an inconvenient time than to have someone barge

in while Laera thought they were alone. She seemed to have a taste for being watched, but like most Doms, he wanted to be in control of the situation.

He set her down on his bed.

“You made the bed?” Laera asked. “Or do you have maid service?” She glanced over to the other beds, whose sheets were in disarray. “I guess not.”

He shook his head, taking off his shirt and setting it down on top of his suitcase.

“How do you want me?” asked Laera, looking unsure what to do.

“Anyway I can have you,” he said, speaking from the heart. Recognizing that Laera was looking for direction, he said softly. “On your hands and knees.”

She moved as directed. “Of course, you could tie me up. In whatever position you wanted.” She grinned back at him over her shoulder, hiking the skirt up past decency while she did.

Her enthusiasm seemed boundless. *What a lovely catch. Would be a shame to let her go.* He caught himself, and corrected. *It will be a shame to let her go.*

He unrolled a condom over his painfully erect cock and knelt behind her.

Laera pushed her hips backwards, ready to take him in. He'd earned his release, after all. She was still tingling from the last orgasm. It was his turn.

Instead, she felt him against her bottom, hard, but just resting. He rolled down the top of her dress until her breasts were bare and took possession of them with his hands, rolling her nipples between his fingers. They tingled at his touch, and in seconds he had them hard and aching again.

“You have such fine, sensitive nipples, Laera. They really like being touched, don't they?”

*They certainly do.* But a sense of impishness overtook her. “Not as much as I'd like you inside me,” she told him, looking back at him with a grin.

He chuckled. “You're a saucy one,” he said. “And I think it's time you started to realize there is a price to pay for that.” His grin and light tone took all the sting out of the words.

“Whatever you wish, Master Bruce,” she said.

“Good girl,” he told her. “What I wish is to show you a new kind of play.”

He clicked open his suitcase and rummaged for a few seconds, leaving her breasts feeling deserted. Then she saw what was in his hands. Two little tweezer clamps with rubber ends, connected by a delicate silver chain. “Uh-oh,” she said.

He teased her nipples to full hardness again. She watched, still on all fours, her breasts dropping down below her. He slid the first clamp on, tightened it by pushing forward a small ring that went around the tweezers. Pain shot through her breasts. She yelped, then sighed in relief as he loosened them again. Even looser, they still made her nipples ache, but it was bearable. She could get through it. She wasn't at all convinced it was going to be fun.

He attached the other one, this time not going quite as tight before he found the right level of intensity.

“They hurt, Master Bruce,” Laera complained.

“Shhh darling, and trust me,” he said to her.

He moved behind her. His finger found her clit again, running little circles around it, brushing it with the side of his finger. She started to move her hips, wanting more. The tingling from her clit joined the aching from her breasts, confusing her senses.

He entered her at last in one smooth, sliding stroke. He totally filled her, stretching her, and just stayed there for a moment before he began to move inside her, adding another voice to the symphony of intensity running through her. She rocked against him and felt the chain connecting the clamps sway beneath her, pulling. Her brain told her that she should try to stay as still as possible, to stop that swinging from happening again, but her body knew better. She pushed back against him in his slow rhythm, burying him deep within her at each stroke, setting the chain going back and forth in a steady arc.

“The clamps leave my hands free for other things,” he said softly. “Like rubbing your clit.”

“Is that rubbing or teasing?” she asked, and then added, “Master Bruce.”

“It's teasing,” he said softly. “Like this too.” She felt his finger sliding along the crease of her bottom until it reached her rear entrance. She tensed, fearing invasion, but it simply circled, bringing alive the sensitive nerves there.

Her body shook with a mini-orgasm and she heard herself squeal. “Oh wow,” she moaned.

“You're lovely,” he said softly, chuckling. “You like being touched there, but you're not sure about it. Something you should explore later.”



“Oh my, Master Bruce,” she said. *Whatever he wants me to say. Whatever he wants me to do.* Her nerves were on fire. She had never felt so vulnerable, so intoxicated—and she loved it. “Please come in me,” she told him. “I want to know I’ve made you happy.”

“Oh you have, pet; trust me, you have. But you’ve one more to give me, I think.” He sounded so confident, like he knew her body better than she did.

She shook her head wordlessly. She’d come twice in half an hour; there was no way she was going to—

Her whole body shuddered as he thrust into her hard. He moved faster, one hand on her hip for balance, one teasing—no, rubbing her clit hard. His balls batted against it with each forward stroke, his fingers taking their turn as he drew back, one on each side of her clit, half rubbing, half gently pinching her tender nerves there.

She felt the chain swing harder, pulling her nipples to and fro as he pounded into her. She looked down to see it. It didn’t hurt anymore; it was just so damn intense. He was totally in control of her now and she didn’t mind one bit.

Her orgasm blindsided her, all the signals from her nerves crossing and then bursting, her pussy clenching around the large cock inside her, the shaking of her body pulling the clamps even more. “Yesssss!” she yelled, and wondered how far away people could hear her.

He shuddered too, holding himself inside her at her deepest as she squeezed him. “Ahhhhhh,” he sighed as the tension went from him. “So good,” he said, when he could speak again. He held her still as they breathed together, the sound loud in the suddenly quiet room.

She leaned forward, resting on her elbows, her breasts brushing against the mattress. Laera let out a squeak. The extra pressure of the mattress was just too much and she tried to prop herself back up again.

He pulled out of her, discarded the condom in an easy three-foot toss to the wastebasket, and rolled her onto her back. She looked up at him, her dress pulled down and up in ways that didn’t cover at all, bunching up around her waist. The silver chain lay across her chest, perverse jewelry. *I ought to be horribly embarrassed. But I’m not. Not at all.* The look in his eyes made her feel beautiful.

“Mmmmm,” she purred.

“This is going to surprise you,” he said softly, tenderly. *Uh-oh*. He reached up and slowly released one of the tweezers.

Blood rushed into her once-compressed nipple and she yelped. “Owww!”

He got the other one quickly, the pain of one masking the pain of the other a little, but it still hurt.

“Breathe, pet,” he told her. She tried her best, just feeling the ebb and flow of her breath. If it hadn't caused her breasts to rise and fall, it would have been easier, but the unpleasant feeling went away quickly enough, leaving her feeling relaxed. Very relaxed. Like taking a nap, spending the night. Except she had to get to work the next day.

He smiled. “I can get you a soda from the kitchen. Should I carry you with me or just get it for you?”

*Aren't I supposed to be doing the serving? But he's not serving, he's just taking care of me.* She hadn't felt taken care of, really taken care of, by anyone since she was a teenager. It was new. Different. Hardly what she expected to find at a place called Bondage Ranch.

“If you don't mind just getting it for me?” she asked, but she had a feeling that Mr. Bruce Merrick did not suggest doing things that he minded doing. “Diet, if they have it.”

“Not at all. I'll be right back.”

He got his jeans on, but left his shirt off. He had a muscular back, she noticed, with a bit of soft fur on it, not as much as on his chest. Barefoot, he padded off, closing the door behind him.

She looked at her watch. She had to go in two hours. That wasn't nearly as much time as she wanted, not at Bondage Ranch and not with Master Bruce. That's the way life is, though, she told herself. It's not always what you want, or what's fair. And no matter what, I don't regret the last twenty-four hours a bit. It was even, she decided, worth getting lost in the woods for.

Bruce wasn't a big fan of leaving a sub alone, but she wasn't bound and it was clear she needed a little space to process. For that matter, so did he. The more he was around her, the more he thought of her as his—and she might very well be, but just for the next two hours. Whatever he thought, whatever he felt, they were just *playing*, and thinking of it as something more than that was delusion.

No one was going to barge in on her, in any case. Jerry had packed up and gone home, and he had noticed his other roomie for the weekend, Ted, in the dungeon area, happily at the mercy of his favorite Domme.

“Don't tell me you lost your pet already,” Dylan said with a grin when he came downstairs. Bruce had to get through the living room to get to the kitchen for the fridge. Dylan and Alex were still playing host and hostess. They could set up the equipment and play anytime, after all.

“No, I just came through to get her a Coke.”

“*Mi casa es su casa*,” Dylan said, waving him past with a grand gesture. He went on through. Alex followed him.

“Thinking of keeping this one?” she asked as he bent down to find the right soda. “Or are you thinking that caffeine is an evil stimulant?”

“C'mon,” he said, as he found a diet. He straightened and turned to face Alex. “I'm not that bad. I have tea now and then anyway. Even a glass of champagne at weddings. It's only excess that I abhor.”

Alex put one arm to each side of him, pressing her palms against the refrigerator and blocking his way. Bruce couldn't help but smile. She was six inches shorter than him and maybe forty pounds lighter. If he wasn't going anywhere, it was only by his consent. Like bondage should be, he thought irreverently.

“I know what you're thinking. You're telling yourself that nothing in this world is permanent, so why bother with relationships, which can be the most fragile thing of all? You're telling yourself permanence is a delusion, or some such Buddhist crap, and so why should you ever try to make a relationship last?”

“It's not crap, Alex. Permanence *is* a delusion. Open your eyes and see for yourself.”

“Oh yes, we all die and life is short. It isn't the philosophy that's wrong, *Master Bruce*,” Alex said, emphasizing the name she used for him when they had scened together, but with a trace of derision in her voice Bruce didn't like at all. “It's the way you use it as an excuse not to get over Alice being a bitch.”

“Laera lives near DC, Alex. Nearly two hundred miles away.”

“That makes things harder, all right. It's a lousy reason for not trying. If you were going out with some nice Philadelphia girl—no, change that, some *wicked* Philadelphia girl, I wouldn't

be on your case. But we both know that's not the case. You go out of your way to play with people who are in relationships already, so that you don't have to risk your heart being wounded again."

Bruce didn't bother to protest that he only did things with women whose partners were fully consenting to their participation because Alex already knew that. She was right. He had sought out that kind of partner.

"You also ignore every piece of evidence that the few you play with who aren't attached keep falling in love with you," Alex went on, "so that you don't have to even think about how to respond."

The bondage didn't seem so consensual anymore. "Let me go, Alex; I need to get back to my sub," he said, using that intense, masterly tone that always worked.

Alex twitched. "You know what the delusion is, Master Bruce?" This time her voice held none of the mocking tone of before, only concern. She lowered her arms. "The delusion is that you think you can make your heart permanent, so that you're afraid to risk getting it broken." With that, she stepped aside. "I know you won't want to play with me anymore now and I'll miss that, because you certainly know what to do to me and you're a good, kind man. But I'm not willing to play without being a friend, and I can't be a friend without trying to shake you out of your funk."

He started to walk past her, and then stopped. He looked at her, tilted his head, and shrugged. "Thank you, Alex. She's a special woman and I'm glad she struck you the same way. She'll just have to be someone else's because we're just too far away." Even as he said it, he felt his chest constrict. The idea of her being someone else's was pretty painful and he had difficulty pushing the thought out of his mind.

"Get the girl her soda," Alex said, waving him away. "She'll wonder if you boffed some other girl if you take much longer."

Bruce laughed. "I sure hope not."

Laera sat by herself in the empty room, her knees up and her arms around them. *Damn, that was good sex.* She couldn't imagine giving that up. Was it so powerful because it was just the one day, or would a relationship, two people who really knew each other inside and out,

make it even better? She hoped it was the latter. Either way, she didn't think she'd be going back to *vanilla*. *I may not need the extra charge in my life, but I sure do like it. In fact, I'd give up sex itself before I gave up feeling like this.*

She turned her thoughts to Mr. Bruce Merrick and sighed. Just one day. It seemed like such a good way to keep things safe a few hours ago. Now all she wanted was for him to tell her just what to do—and she sure hoped that it was something that would make most of the people she knew blush.

You're not here to fall in love with a man you can't have, she told herself sternly. You're here to learn. Her eyes fell on Master Bruce's open suitcase, the one from which he'd produced the nipple clamps. *Hey, he wouldn't have left it open if he'd wanted it to be private!* She scooted over and looked inside.

There were ropes there, lots and lots of thick ropes, cut to various sizes, neatly coiled and tied with some kind of knot. She'd never be able to put them back together if she undid them, so she lifted them carefully to see what was underneath.

There were two floggers, one of them not unlike the smooth deerskin flogger that she'd tried out in the dungeon, and the other a bit thicker, with more of a suede texture. Both were blue, not the black that seemed to be the dominant color of most BDSM gear. She didn't see any canes, or whips, or riding crops—she had always thought those looked sexy, but she wasn't at all sure she wanted to find out what one felt like. Maybe. In any case, he didn't have one with him. There was a clear acrylic dildo, and a vibrator, and a funny pink plastic butterfly that came with all sorts of straps and things whose purpose wasn't at all obvious to her. There was a feather. She pricked her hand on something, and looked down. The skin wasn't broken even though she had felt a dozen pricks. The offending culprit was a glove studded with sharp little points on the palm side. There were two of them.

She heard a noise in the hall and sat up guiltily, but the door didn't open. Not him. She rifled through some more, knowing she shouldn't, not quite willing to resist.

There was a red blindfold. A set of safety scissors, the kind doctors used to cut bandages with. There was a black box with Chinese characters on it which contained a set of carefully packed glass cups in different sizes.

What she didn't see were any handcuffs or collars. He didn't even have the nice-looking, comfy leather cuffs she'd seen on Marcia, Josie, and a few others in the dungeon. She shrugged. Maybe he had another case somewhere. She was pretty sure there hadn't been anything like that in the first-aid kit. Most of what had been in *that* was more or less legitimate first-aid stuff.

She looked around and decided she better stop fooling around. If he'd been back when she'd expected, she'd have been caught snooping. What was keeping him? He knows a lot of people here, she realized. He might have gotten delayed. But she was pretty sure he wouldn't just forget about her.

She knew full well that it would be a very long time before she forgot about him.

## Chapter Seven

When at last he opened the door, Laera was sitting, looking quite innocent, she thought, on the futon. Her legs were tucked sideways beneath her and she had straightened Alex's dress. The way Bruce's eyes lit up when he saw her told her she had struck the right note, not quite kneeling, not quite just sitting either. He handed her the soda and sat down next to her. He had gotten a glass of water as well, but he wasn't drinking it.

"You're beautiful," he told her, brushing a lock of brown hair from her face. Her stomach did a pleasant flip. When he said the words, she realized that she really did feel beautiful.

"Thank you," she said.

He watched her calmly, as if nothing was more interesting than how she pulled the pop tab or how she sipped her soda. The only problem was, the more he watched her, the more guilty she felt about going through his stuff. Still, a girl couldn't help but be curious.

"Does it taste good?" he asked.

"Not really," she said, and then laughed at herself.

"Why do you drink it?"

"Well, the diet is better for me than the sugared stuff. You can see I have a little, well, extra to lose."

He smiled. "I don't think you have anything extra that doesn't look good on you, actually." He reached out, stroking her shoulder and upper arm, and then his hand dropped to her breast and over the curve of her belly she had always thought a bit unattractive. "You have wonderful curves."

"I looked at your stuff," she blurted out, embarrassed. His touch felt so good and his appreciation seemed so genuine, but she wasn't used to it and didn't know what to do with it.

"I thought you might," he said, smiling. "That's why I left it out. Find anything interesting?"

Well, that was easy, she thought. "You don't have any handcuffs. Or is there another box somewhere I didn't see?"

He shook his head. "I don't own a set. Handcuffs are nasty metal things that can hurt like hell if you struggle. That's a good thing if you want to restrain someone who might want to do you harm, but it's not particularly a good thing for bondage." He shrugged. "Some people find them sexy and that's fine, but they aren't practical."

"Not even the fur-lined ones? Those looked pretty comfy."

He smiled. "They make some nice wrist restraints with velcro these days. Very simple, easy to use. If you find yourself playing with another beginner and are looking for equipment to buy, those are fine."

"But you'd rather use elastic bandages?"

"No, I'd rather use cotton rope. Of which, you may have noticed, I have plenty."

"Oh," she said. Good one, Laera, she told herself. Then again, this wasn't quite the ordinary type of conversation she was used to having.

"Anything else you found interesting or had questions about?"

She could see why he might be popular for teaching classes. He knew they were short on time and yet he had seemingly infinite patience for her curiosity. "I was wondering about those little glass cups."

He chuckled. "You did quite a bit of unpacking. They're used in traditional Chinese medicine, but that's not exactly why I have them. The idea is to create a vacuum in the cup, while affixing it to a sensitive part of the skin. Suction is created that can vary from somewhat intense to very intense. It's hard to make it really mild, or the cup won't stay on."

Laera's eyes widened. "Sort of a super hickey creator."

Bruce laughed. "I suppose. I never had anyone want me to use them on their neck exactly. Your breasts are very responsive, so it's possible you might find some pleasure in them. Anything else?"



She knew there were other things she wondered about, but she was drawing a blank. She shook her head.

His eyes still had that same intensity with which he'd listened to her questions, but something in them let Laera know that the ground was about to shift. He could read her, she felt, so much easier than she could read him, but something had changed.

“Stand up pet, and take that dress off. It's lovely on you, but it's about to be in the way.”

Her heart felt like it skipped a beat. She hesitated just a moment, then stood up, getting off the futon. She was about to lift the dress over her head in one easy motion when she remembered him grabbing her wrist the night before. There weren't buttons on this dress and she didn't have any underwear, so she couldn't undress too slowly, but she could still give him a show. *He thinks I'm beautiful.* Undressing for a man, on the rare occasion a relationship had gotten that far, had always seemed something to get over with quickly and hope that he wasn't too disappointed at what lay beneath. This man though, this man she knew wanted to see all of her.

She slipped a shoulder off. When that didn't cause too much indecency, she tried the other shoulder. The dress was still largely held in place by friction and the tautness of the stretch fabric and the golden chains. She peeled it off of one breast and then the other, first covering them with her hands, then cupping and lifting them for him to see.

She had a moment of mischief cross through her mind and she pinched her nipples, just to the edge of that blurry line between pleasure and pain.

“Very nice,” he said. “Keep playing with them.”

She blushed. She didn't know why she didn't think he'd notice or what she was thinking exactly. He noticed everything as far as she could tell. And it wasn't really all that subtle. Now she was in for it.

She felt her body shaking, but she kept it up, rolling her nipples between her fingers, tugging them forward, up and down, pinching them a little bit harder until she gasped a little. His gaze was steady, interested. Aroused. She was turning him on. The heat didn't leave her cheeks, but the shaking stopped.

“Continue with the dress,” he told her.

She shimmied out of it, inch by inch, feeling the stretch around her hips. It took steel nerves to keep the same slow progress going when she knew she was revealing the first hint of

hair on her mound, but it would have taken quite a lot of nerve to give Master Bruce anything but her all, as well. Only when the last scrap of fabric was down to her thighs did she quickly shed the rest of the dress onto the floor.

“You remembered well from last night,” he said, smiling at her. “You're very trainable.”

That gave her another tummy flutter, even as her mind questioned it. *Trainable?*

“You'll make some man very pleased if you find someone permanent.” She could see the sadness in his eyes when he said it. No, she told herself. You're just seeing what you want to see.

He reached for a coil of black rope and stood up next to her. “I swear though, that after very much time of being around you, I think I'd start to tear your clothes off the moment you came in the door.”

This time, the flutter was considerably lower than her tummy.

Bruce placed the black rope against Laera, just below her breasts, letting her feel the softness as he rubbed it against her. She stood still, watching him, holding her breath. He waited for her to notice and start breathing again. She let it out in a long sigh. He smiled. She smiled back, bravely, he thought.

He lifted her breasts as he wrapped the rope underneath them, around her torso. On the second pass he wrapped it over the top sides of her breasts, dipping just once between to catch the line that ran underneath, making an X, and then up again, and around.

He stopped, holding the ends of the rope taut, listening to her breathe. She was breathing a little fast, but nothing to be concerned about. She was excited, not too tightly bound to breathe properly.

“Good girl,” he said. “You have such lovely breasts. May I tie your arms, as well?” He knew that some Doms thought that asking permission too often would wreck a scene. He loved to hear a sub say “yes” too much to forgo the pleasure. Especially this sub.

“Yes, Master Bruce,” she said, her breath catching again.

He smiled. From the look in her eyes, she liked saying “yes” as much as he liked hearing it. “Well answered,” he told her, and wrapped the rope around her upper arms, pressing them

against the sides of her body, continuing the wrapping over and around her breasts once more, and then again around her arms, ending with a neat knot between her breasts.

“Can you still touch your wrists behind your back?” he asked her. He knew that she could. Her back arched as she moved her hands back.

“Yes, Master Bruce,” she said, eyes shining.

“If things start to feel too tight, or you're getting numb anywhere, or getting that pins and needles feeling, I want you to tell me right away,” he told her. She nodded. Good. “If you can't verbalize, I want you to say your safe word. You remember it?”

“It's 'red light,’” she told him.

“Would you like me to tie your wrists?”

“Yes, please.”

It crossed Laera's mind that being tied up by a man she barely knew, alone in a room, was not perhaps the safest thing she'd ever done. That was another reason for public play, she supposed, besides the exhibitionism and the equipment. There was safety in people watching.

But having her wrists tied over her head the night before in the tent had led to the best sex she'd ever had. *Well, until today.* Wise or not, she wasn't going to forgo the pleasure. And if her first act had been foolish, she thought she knew this man well enough to trust him now.

He had a shorter length of rope for her wrists and he wrapped it around them several times. She couldn't see exactly what he was doing of course, but when he finished she could hardly move them. And yet they felt perfectly comfortable, save for the slight stretching she felt in her arms from having them back there in the first place. Even that wasn't bad, just a reminder that she could feel.

“Would you like to see yourself in a mirror?” he asked her.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He pulled a mirror from one of the side pouches in his suitcase, where she hadn't even thought to look. It's probably just as well I'm not that good of a snoop, she thought. It was one of those old-fashioned brass mirrors, round with a handle, the kind you'd use with a vanity mirror to see the back of your head. He held it out in front of her, moving it back until she could see her

whole torso. The black rope was stark against the creamy pale of her skin. Her arms were suntanned, but her torso was not, well protected by the one-piece swimsuits she usually wore when she went to the beach and the loose shirts she favored during the summer.

I look good in black, she thought to herself.

“You like what you see,” he said. It was a statement, not a question.

“It feels so strange,” she replied.

He brushed a knuckle across first one nipple and then the other. Her nerves there flared to life. “Does it?”

How could just a touch feel so intense? “I don't think I can take much more of that, Master Bruce,” she said, slightly panicky.

“That's for me to decide, isn't it, Laera?”

“Yes...” she said, doubtfully. Yet the thought that it was out of her control made her relax rather than feel more tense. She'd have to take what he chose to give her or say her safe word. She almost wished she didn't have one, so that she could truly give up control and relax even more, but it was enough to know for herself that she wasn't about to say “red light” unless she absolutely had to. She didn't want to disappoint Master Bruce. She didn't want to disappoint herself even more.

His hands hovered, then dropped to his sides, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “They've gotten a lot of attention recently,” he said. “And the ropes around them make them more sensitive too. Just a breath, I suspect, is enough for them now.” He bent over and blew on her left breast, a puff of warm air with his open mouth followed by a cool whistle of air as his lips puckered.

“Ohhhh,” she sighed. It felt lovely. He had to be right; they had to be extrasensitive right now to feel so much from just a breath, to harden at mere air. She turned her body, eager for the same treatment on the other side, then hesitated. *I shouldn't be telling him what to do, should I?*

He read her hesitation and smiled. “It's fine to tell me what you want, Laera. Just understand that I'll give you what *I* want.” He blew alternating warm and cool air, until the cool sent a shiver down her spine. Her nipples were aching now, without even a touch to them.

“It's not just your body that's supersensitive, love,” he told her. “Your mind is the most powerful sex organ in your entire body and it's going into overdrive.”

She started to nod and he put his arms around her. She tried to hold him back, only to be reminded that her hands were tied and how very vulnerable she was.

“Speaking of what *I* want,” he said, and covered her lips with his before she could reply. His eyes were alive with desire. His tongue pushed past her lips, finding hers. At least her mouth wasn't bound, and though she was helpless in his grasp, she could give him as good as she was getting with a kiss. Their tongues danced and wrestled, and she pressed her lips against his with a fierce hunger.

The feeling of the wiry hairs on his chest against her breasts was almost painful, they were so sensitive, but it was a sensation she'd gladly endure just to be able to kiss a moment longer. When he at last let her go, she stumbled, and he had to reach to hold her up.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Oh wow,” was what she heard herself say. *Now that didn't sound very sophisticated, did it?* “Yes, Master Bruce,” was all she trusted herself to add.

He picked her up again and carried her over to the sturdy looking brown maple chair in the corner. He sat down, moving her over his knee, with her ass in the air.

She knew what was coming, she thought. And he didn't disappoint. His hand stung the first time, and then the sting faded. He spanked her again, more of a thud this time, longer, but less of a sharp feeling. She liked that better. She must have told him with some twitch, some intake of breath, something, because he kept going without the sting, not striking any harder, just making her ass feel warmer, and warmer, and warmer still. She wriggled her bottom in a way that she hoped showed her appreciation because it was the only movement she could make. Her hair was falling to the floor and she knew that she wouldn't get right side up again until he decided it was time. She was pretty sure he'd know the right time.

She found herself drifting off to the feeling, the strokes blurring together, and then suddenly he stopped. She felt his fingers enter her and she gasped. She remembered how his fingers had felt in the dungeon, with all those people watching, and yet this was more intimate. She hadn't wanted to stop him then. She couldn't stop him now, didn't even want to be able to.

There was no way she was going to come again, she knew. She had to be orgasmed out. Still the sliding of his fingers felt so good inside her, she didn't want it to stop. It was nice,

comfortable, warm, like a massage but on the inside. He certainly didn't need any oil to make his fingers glide. She felt so wet she half expected to feel it running down her thighs.

He curved his fingers, finding her G-spot, and she gasped, caught by surprise as the soft pleasure burst into intensity all over her body. A guttural sound was ripped out of her. She tried to reach out her hands to grab something, anything, but they were bound still. His hand was on her though, the one that wasn't inside her, steadying her shoulder, squeezing gently.

"Oh my God," she said at last, when she stopped her spasms in his grasp.

"Master Bruce was doing nicely," he said lightly. "No need to exaggerate."

She laughed. He held her until she stopped laughing, and then brought her slowly and gently upright, letting her sit in his lap for a moment. He reached behind her and undid her wrists in a matter of seconds. His timing was good. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, so she did.

He simply held her for several long minutes. At last, she broke the silence.

"Thank you, Master Bruce."

"You're very welcome, Laera. And thank you. I haven't had this much fun in quite a long time."

"Why not?" she asked.

His face clouded for a moment, and then he said a bit gruffly, "It was a compliment, Laera. You've been wonderful to play with."

He undid the knot between her breasts and slowly unraveled the rope, careful not to let it give her a burn as he unwrapped it from her body.

He tossed both pieces of rope, loose, toward his suitcase in a jumble. It struck her as odd, from what she had seen of the man, that he wouldn't take the time to put them away properly, and she wondered what was going through his head.

"We're almost out of time," he said. "You'll soon want to be on the road and I want to get you and Sue acquainted, if possible, before then."

Just like that, they were done. Laera supposed he was right. She could have spent a long time saying good-bye to him, and would have paid the price for it in the morning or on her ride

back. She slid off his lap and walked to where the dress Alex had loaned her was, pulling it on with her back to him.

It's just as well her back is to me, thought Bruce. He'd had subs compliment him or rail against him for his poker face, but he suspected he was pretty readable right at the moment.

He didn't want to let her go on time and he didn't want to let her walk out of his life and find another Dom. Perhaps she would become one of those who hopped from Dom to Dom and he would have a chance to play with her again at some point in the future, perhaps at Bondage Ranch. But he didn't really think so. She didn't strike him as the type. She was more the type who settled down, who formed an attachment, and put a seeming lie to the notion that all attachment brought suffering.

Yet he was certainly suffering now. *I had a wonderful evening, morning, and afternoon. And yet, because of an attachment that I knew wasn't a good idea, I'm having negative emotions about the future as a result.*

The key to finding his balance, for Bruce, had always been in simple regular practice. Re-coiling his ropes properly would be a good start. He picked the longer one up, the black one he'd used to bind Laera's breasts, and wrapped it around his arm to shape the figure eight coil he preferred. Even once Laera dressed, he didn't meet her eyes, but picked up the shorter red rope he'd used on her wrists, making a simpler coil because of its length. He tucked them neatly in his suitcase and then put his shirt back on.

He risked a glance at Laera. She was so beautiful, so full of womanly curves, such an honest face. It might not be what some would call a pretty face; her jaw was square for a woman and there were a few laugh lines breaking the smoothness of her skin, but it had character.

"So," he said, "to Sue." He walked out, holding the door open for her. Once she was through it, he didn't look back but just listened for the sounds of her bare feet following behind him.

Did I do something to piss him off? Laera wondered. Try as she might, she couldn't think of anything she might have done. Perhaps this was Master Bruce's real self and the kind man she'd been with a few minutes before just an act to get inside her pants. She didn't really believe

it though. He'd been too unselfish. He had to have known he could have gotten more from her while giving less. So what, then?

They walked downstairs into the dungeon. It was less busy now. Dylan and Alex were there, not playing, just watching the handful of others. The scenes of nakedness and leather, the swish-thuds of floggers, and the moans of submissives, were all a blur to her as Master Bruce asked whether Sue had left and where she was. Dylan thought she was outside with a couple of her subs.

Master Bruce—it was probably better to start thinking of him as Mr. Merrick again, thought Laera—grabbed a bottle of bug spray that was on a table by the door, quickly got his hands and the back of his neck, and then handed it to her. “The bugs are usually better after the rain,” he said, “but why risk it?”

“Thank you,” she said, sounding a bit stiff even to herself. She had a lot more bare skin to cover and it took her longer. When she looked up, she noticed he was staring at her.

She suppressed a smile and raised her eyebrows.

“You're in bare feet,” he said. “And the ground is rocky. I'll carry you.”

“I can make it,” she said.

He opened the door, held it open with his backside, and then scooped her up. She had a quick instinct to start kicking but didn't.

“Please,” he said, “let me do this for you.”

Laera relaxed in Master Bruce's—Mr. Merrick's—arms. It felt good. *No sense in fighting it.*

It wasn't just rocky, it was muddy where there weren't rocks. Sue was a hundred or so yards away. Two men, one she recognized from the scene the Domme had been doing before in the dungeon, were carrying something that looked like a fancy stretcher on their shoulders, and Sue sat in it. One of the men was fully dressed, nice shirt, slacks, oxford shoes. The other, the one Laera had seen before, wore only a loincloth. They were watching a woman who was tied to a tree. She was blindfolded and naked, and she was squeezing her thighs tightly together while her apparent Dom, a man in leather pants and a starched white shirt, was giving her water to drink.



Sue turned to look at Mr. Merrick as he approached. He set Laera down so she could stand on her own two feet. "Have a moment, Sue?" Master Bruce asked.

"Sure, Bruce. What's up?"

"I wanted you to meet Laera. Laera, Sue."

"Pleased to meet you," Laera started, and paused. Did she call her Sue, or Mistress Sue, or ma'am, or what? "Sue," she decided.

"That's Mistress Sue," the bearer who was dressed said sharply.

"Oh ease up, Frank," admonished Sue, who then turned back to Laera. "Pleased to meet you, Laera," she said warmly.

"Frank" looked miffed at that, but said nothing. Laera shrugged inwardly. She remembered Master Bruce's comment to her that she should be careful what she said and say nothing if she could get away with it. It seemed though from Sue's warm expression that she was doing okay. *And really saying nothing would have been rude.*

"Laera lives down your way and is brand new to the BDSM scene. Just had her first sessions this weekend, in fact. I was wondering if you could help show her around the DC scene; I know you're pretty active in it."

Sue smiled. "Sure, I'd be happy to," she said. "You've been playing with Master Bruce here, Laera?"

Laera nodded.

"He's a good one, if a bit stone hearted," she said. "But between you and me, it's very soft stone." She didn't drop her voice even slightly.

Laera simply smiled.

"Submissive, then, hmm? I can at least tell you the people to avoid and take you as a guest to a few parties. We've got a support organization too; you might be interested in that, and sometimes it's a good way to meet people. Here's how to get in touch with me." Sue lay down on her litter and handed her a couple of cards. They were both the same. *Mistress Sue—Elegant domination for men who need it*, it read. There was an e-mail address and a phone number.

Laera wasn't sure why she had two, and was about to hand the second one back when Sue said. "I'll want a phone number from you as well. Don't worry, I won't share it with anyone. Frank, hand Laera a pen."

Frank gave Sue a look and then took a pen out of his shirt pocket.

"I'm so sorry," Sue said to Frank, sarcasm dripping from her previously sweet voice. "I didn't mean for you to have to actually serve a fellow sub and injure your precious dignity, which you seem to have forgotten belongs to me anyway. Now ask *Mistress* Laera for her forgiveness and you might have a chance of a lighter punishment for your rudeness."

Frank colored and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Mistress Laera," he said. "I would ask to kiss your feet if I wasn't carrying Mistress Sue."

The strange thing was, Frank looked actually contrite. "I forgive you," she said. She was about to say "and you don't need to call me mistress," when she realized that wasn't how it worked. He'd call her anything Sue told him to, most likely, whether it was respectful or otherwise.

She turned the card over, holding her pen, contemplating. Giving out her phone number to this strange woman didn't seem like the most discreet thing to do.

"Don't worry, Laera, you can trust her. She's a professional, after all," Bruce said with a little amusement. "And even if she wasn't, Sue would be discreet. She's a good egg. I knew her when"—he paused—"well, let's just say for a long time."

Sue and Bruce shared a little chuckle and no one else seemed to get the joke. Laera didn't know if it made sense, but Bruce's recommendation was enough for her. She trusted him. She hoped she could find someone else to trust as well if he was really going out of her life.

He's really going out of your life, she admonished herself silently. Deal with it.

She wrote her phone number on the card and handed it back to Sue.

"This way," said Sue with a grin, "if you get cold feet, I can call you and nag you."

Laera smiled. "That would actually be much appreciated," she said. "But I'm not getting cold feet."

"I do believe you're right," said Sue.

"Please no more," said the girl tied to the tree, plaintively.

“What's he making her drink?” asked Laera. She'd thought it was water, but maybe it was vodka or something that could be really harmful.

“Oh don't worry,” said Sue. “It's only water. She's had quite a bit.”

“Oh,” said Laera. And then, “oh!” as she got it. “Uh, yuck.”

“Not my kind of scene either,” said Bruce tightly. “Shall I carry you back in?”

“May I please walk?” asked Laera. She thought right now that might be better, even if it was a bit rocky. They were going to part and for that she might truly get cold feet if she let him carry her again.

“We're not master and slave...er...submissive anymore, Laera. You can do as you wish. Mind if I walk you back?”

“Not at all,” she said.

They made their way back in silence. The ground wasn't that bad actually, just a bit wet between the toes. Laera liked bare feet outside, always had, ever since her mother had forbidden it when she was eight for fear of broken beer bottles. It might be a bit rough sometimes, but the feel of cool grass beneath her feet was a pleasure.

They went back into the dungeon.

“I need to get my clothes back from Alex,” said Laera. “And give her dress back.”

“Of course,” said Bruce tightly.

They walked over to Dylan and Alex.

“Well,” Laera said to Bruce. “I guess this is it, huh?”

“Yes. Thank you for a wonderful time,” Bruce said.

“Thank *you*,” said Laera.

Nothing more was said. Alex shot Bruce a frown, but took Laera in hand and they walked away back toward the bedroom where Laera had left her clothes.

A few minutes later in jeans and a plaid shirt again, she was driving down the highway, leaving Bondage Ranch far behind.

## Chapter Eight

Laera sat on a blue metal folding chair, wearing only a black bra and matching thong, her legs crossed. Her date for the evening, a man named Thomas whom she had met at one of the leather community organizations she'd gone to at Sue's suggestion, listened with rapt attention. The speaker was a handsome man in his early thirties who seemed to have the gift of being able to speak with authority on any topic at all. He was holding forth on the proper treatment of submissives.

"That's a good idea," agreed Thomas. "Why don't you come and kneel next to me, like Blake's sub is?"

She was tempted to give him an answer, since that's what his question literally asked of her, but she decided it wouldn't be appreciated. She got up from her chair and knelt on the cold hard floor of the warehouse where Crypt of Fate, one of two local bondage clubs, was held. The rest of the week the place was a gay dance bar, but on Friday nights the place was mostly, although not by any means entirely, het and kinky. People were playing at the various stations. Others were talking, either standing to one side or on couches and chairs around the edge of the club. A threesome was making out on the black velvet couch across the way.

Blake's sub, a pretty Hispanic girl named Teresa, gave her a sympathetic look. A cushion would have gone a good ways to make the floor more comfortable and Teresa had been there for fifteen minutes. Laera thought she might last five and was revising the estimate downwards with each passing moment. The nipple clamps Master Bruce had applied a few weeks earlier had been pain mixed with pleasure, an erotic event. Kneeling on concrete just hurt.

"Good girl," said Thomas, patting her on the head.

Woof, thought Laera. Stupid girl, is more like it. She decided to see if she could make three minutes. She glanced at her watch.

She really was trying to get in the proper headspace. Sue had warned her off a dozen men, and a few women, but Thomas hadn't been on her list. He was too new, actually. Most of the good men who'd been around for a while, as with any community, were taken. The problem was she didn't really think Thomas knew what he was doing any more than she did, and the second problem, which she was discovering now, was that he was highly impressionable.

Thomas was frowning at her. *Did I actually woof for him, not just think about it?* Laera was sure she hadn't.

Blake chuckled, looking smug. Teresa was mouthing something to her, but she had never been particularly good at reading lips.

"I complimented you," Thomas said.

"Oh. Thank you." A long silence. "Um, Master."

Thomas smiled, apparently misreading the length of time it took her to voice the last word was a kind of sexy coyness. Just as well. The real problem, thought Laera, is that he just doesn't seem like a master.

*Maybe I'm being judgmental. One has to learn everything somehow.* She just wished he had learned what it was like to kneel on a hard floor for extended periods of time somewhere.

"You'll have her broken to your will eventually," said Blake cheerfully.

Was that what she wanted? Laera frowned. It hadn't seemed like a breaking with Master Bruce, more like a dance, where he tried to figure out what she wanted and then didn't give her a choice about getting it. Thomas wanted to please her, she thought—he'd been going almost too far in that direction earlier in the evening, unwilling to make a single difficult demand of her. They'd tried a scene and Laera had gotten down to her underwear and been chained to a St. Andrew's cross. He had started gradually with a light flogger—and never really got anyplace from there, hitting the same spots over and over again until she was more bored than turned on.

"If it weren't for the club rules," he had whispered to her in a hot voice after he got her down, "I'd make love to you right here and now."

The club rules, posted on pillars throughout the club, precluded penetration. Apparently the local ordinances frowned on that sort of thing. It was just as well. The tent in his pants had showed that he was plenty hard, but she feared she was as dry as a bone. She'd gotten excited,

stripping, being tied down, and at the first strokes of the flogger, but she just wasn't there anymore. She wanted to be. But she just wasn't. Matters hadn't improved since.

"You're too easy on her," Blake was saying. "She could use some good discipline. May I?"

Laera looked at Thomas, trying to project her thoughts. Just in case that didn't say no loud enough, she was shaking her head. *That should be clear.*

Blake was one of the ones Sue had warned her about. She hadn't said anything scathing about the man, just, "not for you, definitely." A niggling voice wondered if it was something wrong with her or wrong with Blake, but she still had come to trust Sue's judgment. Besides, she'd already come to the same conclusion. Blake was definitely not for her. She didn't even like the lemony smell of the man's cologne.

"Be my guest," said Thomas, looking like a deer trapped in headlights. It's not me that he wants to please, thought Laera. He just wants to please everyone. To fit in.

"Fetch me my crop, slave," said Blake brusquely. It took her a moment to realize that he wasn't talking to her, as Teresa scrambled to her feet and went rummaging through a gym bag full of God knew what.

Thomas was teachable, Laera was pretty sure, if he had the right guide. She might not be the right one—she was all too aware she was a novice—but maybe if she could get him to Sue, or even if they could just fumble their way together and figure out what they both liked? "Master," she said, disliking herself a bit for using the word but thinking it was politic, "I submitted to you this evening, not to him. Please reconsider."

Thomas hesitated.

"It's your decision, man," said Blake. "She's your sub, you're the boss."

"Laera," said Thomas slowly, "I've decided to have Master Blake discipline you."

Great, she thought. My dom is a beta dog, and I don't like the alpha very much.

Teresa handed him the crop.

"Banana," said Laera quickly. It was the safe word Thomas had given her to use. She had to admit it wasn't the kind of thing she'd likely say by accident, as long as there wasn't a fruit bowl.

"What?" said Blake.

Laera kept her eyes on Thomas.

"He hasn't even touched you," said Thomas. "I don't think you can just safe word when nothing has happened; that doesn't seem right."

*God, I suck at being a sub. Maybe I'm not really one at all.* She opened her mouth and words spilled out. "You don't think? It doesn't seem?"

"Sorry, Laera, sorry," said Thomas, backing away from her.

"Safe words," said Blake, "are for poseurs. Isn't that right, Teresa?"

Teresa didn't look at all happy, but then Blake didn't even bother to look at her most of the time he asked. It wasn't because Teresa wasn't attractive, either. God, I would kill to be that thin, thought Laera.

"Yes, Master," Teresa said, shrugging at Laera as if to apologize.

"You definitely can't use your safe word when nothing has happened yet," said Thomas firmly.

"So after he hits me once with that thing, then I can use it?" asked Laera. Not that she had any intention of letting the jerk hit her once.

Thomas paused before answering. "No, that would be ridiculous."

"At least six of the best," said Blake. "And it isn't even a cane."

Thank God for that. Teresa had some nasty looking stripes on the back of her thighs.

"At least six," echoed Thomas.

Laera stood up and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She felt a bit silly trying to look firm while wearing nothing but her underwear in a roomful of people, but that was what she was wearing and this was the time. "No, Thomas," she said.

"Master," Thomas corrected, reflexively. She had presumed the "no" would sink in faster than the title.

"No, I said my safe word. We're not master and sub, or Dom and sub, or whatever. We're just two people, having a discussion about how we'd like to proceed."

"I just told you that you couldn't safe word," said the hapless Thomas. "She can't safe word, can she?" he asked Blake.

“Safe words are for poseurs,” said Blake. “You shouldn't have given her one in the first place. It makes subs feel less secure when they have a choice in things all the time.”

“You can't safe word,” said Thomas to her.

*Screw this.* She had two choices. The most satisfying one would be to wait for Blake to try to swing the crop her way and then toss him to the floor. But she still had a nonviolent option to try.

“Danger,” she called, loud and clear. Just like the no penetration rule, the club safe word was written on every pillar.

The effect was immediate. A dungeon monitor, wearing a big gold star on his chest, headed her way. Sue, who was playing fifty feet away, looked over at her too, and started unlocking Frank from the bondage table where he lay, quite naked and quite hard.

“What's wrong?” asked the dungeon monitor, a plump man about fifty-five, with a leather vest that didn't quite close over his furry tummy.

“She's trying to safe word when she hasn't even been touched yet,” complained Thomas.

“He wasn't honoring her safe word,” said Blake smoothly to the monitor, “I've got it. I'll take him under my wing, let him know what the rules are.”

Laera just stared at him for a moment, struck speechless by the gall of the man.

The dungeon monitor simply nodded and looked to Laera. “What happened?”

“This man,” she nodded at Thomas, “was my date, my Dom for the evening. And he decided to turn me over to this other man,” she indicated Blake, “for a beating. And I wasn't about to let that happen, so I used the safe word we had agreed on for the evening, and he told me I couldn't.”

The monitor turned to Thomas. “Couldn't, how? What were you planning to do then, grab her and force her?”

“I—” said Thomas and stopped. “She just can't do that,” was what he finally came up with.

“You can't not honor a safe word,” said the monitor. “You don't have to play with someone if you think they use it frivolously, but frankly I'd not let a pretty girl like that play with other boys, if she were mine.”



“Blake,” said Sue, nodding at the man. Frank stood right behind her looking angry. Laera felt bad for interrupting their scene. *Maybe I should have just flipped Blake, after all.*

“Why Sue, what does cause you to drop in on us?” asked Blake.

“Stay away from her, Blake,” said Sue in a warning tone of voice. Sue wasn't a big woman and it was amazing to Laera how imposing she could look when talking to people half a foot taller than her. Heels helped, but they didn't completely close the gap.

“Or what, Sue?” asked Blake.

Sue didn't back down, but just smiled.

“May I, Mistress?” asked Frank.

Sue's smile turned into a grin. She didn't take her eyes off Blake. “You may.”

“Stay away from Mistress Laera,” said Frank, “or I'll find grounds to sue your ass off. Possibly for damaging my fist when I pound your pretty boy face in.”

The dungeon monitor cleared his throat.

Sue smiled over at him. “It's all right, Bob. I don't think Blake is stupid enough to make Frank follow through on his threat. He's usually only especially brave when faced by little girls who don't fight back.” She turned to Laera. “We'll give you a ride home.”

“Thank you, Mistress Sue,” Laera said. She wasn't about to begrudge the other woman her title.

“Seems Frank has decided he likes you after all,” Sue said, patting Frank on his naked rear. “Want to help me finish my scene with him?”

I guess I owe it to them, thought Laera, and then immediately rebelled against the thought of owing anyone sexual favors. But viewed on its own merits, it might be kind of fun. It was sure better than spending the evening with Thomas or sitting in a corner holding a pity party for herself until Sue and Frank were ready to go home.

“Sure,” she said.

Bruce Merrick looked at his calendar. There was a fetish night at Betty P's, which tended to attract a lot of the BDSM community, although the crowd was usually mostly the younger, seen-and-be-seen, type. Not that there was anything wrong with that—there was always some

nice eye candy. They liked having a few serious kinksters around playing to help set the mood and make everyone else feel decadent. He hadn't been to a local event since before the weekend at Dylan and Alex's. He should go.

He should, but he didn't want to. He hit his hand down onto the cherrywood desk. I can't believe I'm still stuck on that girl, he thought. She was probably best off without him anyway. Sue had dropped him an e-mail the day before mentioning that Laera had a date. "I hope it turns out well," Bruce said aloud, although there was no one to hear him.

*Which means there's no one here to fool, least of all myself.* He *did* hope she was okay, and happy, and that the date would do her no harm. That was honest. Turn out well? No, he didn't want that at all.

There were other things in Bruce's life that had nothing to do with BDSM, and the best thing he could do, he decided, was to focus on them. He had a stack of books he'd put on his reading list. He was still teaching meditation classes four days a week, which paid the rent for his simple, small urban apartment. He needed some of that calm he taught for himself.

*Focus on the breath,* he told himself as he had told so many students. *Just listen to it flow. In and out, that's all that matters. If you start to think of something else, note it, let it go, and return your attention to the breath.*

The phone rang.

There were certainly times when he didn't consider a ringing phone good reason to stop meditating. But he wasn't that far into it and he wasn't focusing that well. He did better sitting on the floor, although one of the things he stressed was that mindfulness could happen anywhere. He let it ring a couple times and then reached to pick it up.

"Bruce Merrick," he said.

"Master Bruce," said the voice on the other end.

He raised an eyebrow, although that conveyed nothing over the phone. "It's been a long time since you called me that, Sue." Not since way before Alice. "To what do I owe the honor?"

He could hear the smile on the other end. "I don't know, just felt like it. How are you doing?"

"Life is going on as it usually does," he said. He was not going to tell her he'd been thinking of Laera. Sue would be concerned about his happiness and that was all fine and well, but he didn't want to disrupt Laera.

"Your life never simply goes on as it usually does," said Sue. "You're too aware, too alive, to just let it drift."

"Well this time, it's drifting."

"Maybe you need a new focus."

"Perhaps."

"A sweet submissive to focus your attention on."

Bruce snorted. "You're as bad as Alex," he said. "She's always trying to get me fixed up."

"Smart woman," said Sue. "I'd have been the first in line if I thought you'd tolerate all the men in my life, Master Bruce."

"As if Frank would deal well with seeing you submit to anyone."

"Oh, it would be torture for him!" Sue said, and laughed with delight. "But he's been a good boy lately."

"Glad to hear it."

"In fact he helped separate Laera from her last date. You know Blake?"

Bruce growled. He knew Blake. Blake had been the man playing with Alice three years ago. He also knew Sue would have warned Laera about him. Laera seemed to have a good head on her shoulders; he didn't think she'd have dated Blake after Sue gave a warning. Something in Sue's voice made him think she was stringing him along, but as he was about to ask for clarification, Sue spoke.

"Frank threatened to sue him. And then pound him into the pavement. Or perhaps it was in the other order. It was very manly of him."

Bruce laughed. "Good for him. I don't much like the idea of her dating Blake—"

"Neither do I," Sue said, cutting him off. "Which is why I told her that for her next date, I'd set her up with a Dom I could trust."

"Good," said Bruce.

"Someone I'd feel completely comfortable submitting to myself."

“Putting yourself mentally in the place of your sub is the best way to make sure you make good decisions. I suppose that applies here.”

“Yes, I do believe it does,” said Sue. “A principle you taught me, as I remember it, and one I’ve used often since. Although one has to make allowance for different, er, equipment.”

Bruce laughed. “One does indeed.” Sue’s words made him curious, but yes, he’d trust Laera with anyone Sue would submit to. It would have to be a pretty small list.

“The only problem is,” said Sue, “there’s only one person that I’d feel comfortable submitting to. So if I can’t get him to be Laera’s mystery date, well—I don’t know that she’ll trust me anymore. And with no one to trust, it’d be like throwing her to the wolves.”

Bruce silently cursed himself for not figuring out where Sue had been heading before. He got it now. “Manipulative little minx,” he growled.

“You’ve known that for a long time. Saturday night, Bruce. It’s a three-hour drive to Crypt of Fate from Philadelphia. You need directions?”

“That’s what the Internet is for,” Bruce said. “No. Why are you doing this? Laera is better off getting to know people who live near her. Who can be there for her.”

“I thought you might be right at first,” Sue replied. “She loves to explore, she enjoys learning new things. She belongs in our world as much as you or I, and it’s a joy to watch her discovering it all for the first time. But she isn’t a player, Bruce. She’s looking for that one right man.”

All the more reason to keep her away from me, Bruce thought. But he pushed the thought away and said nothing. The silence went on for a while.

“All right,” said Bruce at last. “I’ll come down.”

“Good enough for me,” Sue said. There was a click and a hum. Sue had hung up.

Bruce smiled. *Not giving me a chance to change my mind, hmm?* His heart was thumping hard in his chest.

He was sure Sue wouldn’t have asked him down if she didn’t have good reason to believe that Laera would be happy to see him. He was probably in for a lovely night, well worth the trip.

But he knew he wouldn’t have said yes if he hadn’t wanted something a bit more than an evening. An evening wouldn’t help Laera much; it’d just set back her progress in getting to know

the local BDSM scene. It wouldn't help him either; heck, the last evening had left him mooning over her for weeks.

Their good-byes hadn't exactly been graceful back at Bondage Ranch. Cordial, but that was about it. *I was too damn careful about protecting my heart.* Alex had been right. He *was* ready for something more than a one-time play session. The question was, was Laera? He had no reason to think that she was. And he couldn't blame her if she was somewhat cautious with him now. He'd just have to lay it all on the line and see what happened.

He smiled. *After all, thinking things are permanent is delusion.* It was time for things to change.

## Chapter Nine

Laera stood leaning against the wall at Crypt of Fate. Sue had offered to find something for Laera to wear, but Sue was a few sizes smaller than her so Laera had gone shopping instead. She had fallen in love with a short leather dress which barely stayed decent in the back when she bent over and had a zippered neckline that would display as much or as little cleavage as she desired. It had cost way more than she had anticipated spending however, and she was starting to regret it. She wasn't at all sure she belonged here and she certainly wasn't going to wear this dress anywhere else.

She'd had fantasies of being tied up, of being taken, of being used, all her life. She had thought about those things more than ever since her day at Bondage Ranch. None of them involved the loneliness of standing there waiting for a man to arrive while watching others play.

I'm waiting for a white knight to come and sweep me off my feet and take me away on his horse, she thought to herself, and the fact that I'd like him to tie my ankles and my wrists while he rides away with me doesn't change that. There's nothing adult about that fantasy and I should know better.

Sue said she'd set her up with a guy—no, a master, and frankly she couldn't do much worse than she'd been doing so far picking them out on her own. But blind dates that worked were nearly as much of a fantasy as white knights on horses and whoever it was, was already late.

“He'll show,” Sue had said, but Sue was off playing with Frank and another pet, whose name had passed Laera by somehow. Laera had nothing better to do than watch Sue perform her magic. Whoever it was would presumably have to ask Sue who it was he was supposed to meet.

There were two X-frames that stood in the middle of the room next to each other and Sue had a man on each, arranged so that they faced each other. She was moving back and forth between them, teasing them, talking to them. Laera couldn't hear what she was saying, but whatever it was, the man she didn't know looked scared and Frank looked amused. Both men had

healthy-looking erections poking out just below the midpoint of their respective X, which might have had as much to do with Sue's fondling of them as with what she was saying.

Good, healthy-looking men, but so not her type. She imagined herself for a moment with riding crop in hand, threatening some man, but the fact was she'd be hoping the whole time that he'd just take it away from her. She was as proud as anyone of the things women had done to liberate themselves over the past century or so, but in bed she wanted a man who would take control, not meekly submit for the sake of a hard-on. She was pretty straight, she thought, but she'd rather have a date with Sue than either of the hunks strapped to St. Andrew's crosses.

"Enjoying the show, Laera?" asked someone next to her, and she turned, startled at the sound of her name. Bruce.

He looked absolutely yummy. He wore a white poplin shirt with a deep V neck, black leather boots, and tight black leather pants that left no doubt that he was all man. Laera could hardly wait to see the backside. He even smelled like leather. Now *that* was a scent she liked.

He was looking her up and down as well. She'd chosen a compromise with the zipper, displaying a lot more than she'd ever dare at the library, but quite modest for Crypt of Fate. Still, from the look on his face, she took it that he liked the view.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"A friend of mine set me up as someone's blind date," he said, dropping a bag to the floor. It thudded rather than clanked, full of soft things. Probably rope and maybe one of those light deerskin floggers.

"What a coincidence, I—oh!"

Bruce grinned. "Objections, Mademoiselle?"

Oh, she had all sorts of objections. He wasn't a relationship kind of guy, and she had her fill of playing just to play and was looking for something steady. He lived all the way in Philadelphia. And she was still a bit pissed at him for not seeing her out when she had left Bondage Ranch. She weighed them all in her mind and came up with an answer.

"No objections," she said, intending to just wave them all away. But she couldn't help but add, "But you owe me."

"Oh really?" he asked. She couldn't read his emotions. "And what do I owe you?"

*Now that I've gone down this road, I might as well see where it leads.* “A good-bye kiss. From last month.”

“Let me make sure I understand correctly,” he said. “You want me to start our date with a good-bye kiss.”

“Yes,” she said, and then giggled.

“I'd have to say that's very nontraditional. You're a very kinky woman, Laera.” His eyes laughed, and he put his arm around her waist and leaned forward, his lips almost brushing hers, then stopping.

“I wouldn't want to do this wrong,” he said. “I'm afraid you'll need to be very precise. On the lips, I assume?”

“Yes, on the lips, dammit,” she said. She could feel the strength of that arm around her and she couldn't decide whether she felt supported or trapped.

“Long or short?”

“Long, definitely long. Like you're really going to miss me.”

“With tongue, or without?”

She thought for only a moment. “With.”

“How about if I just do things the way I'd like to and stop asking you so many questions?”

“That,” said Laera with a sigh, “would be heavenly.”

Bruce grinned wide. “I knew I could wear down your resistance eventually,” he said with a wink. “I'll be in charge for the rest of the evening.”

If she was going to protest, she'd missed her chance. His lips covered her mouth. Her lips parted to let his tongue inside and he kissed her deeply. By the time their lips broke contact, she was out of breath and her heart was racing.

“Good-bye, Laera,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

“Good-bye, Master Bruce,” she managed to get out before he was kissing her again, hungrily. She wrapped her arms around his strong shoulders and kissed back, feeling a bit like a teenager necking in the back of a car.

“Hello, Laera,” he said with a smile.

“Hello, Master Bruce,” she replied.



“Is there anything you'd like to place off limits tonight?”

“I guess don't get us kicked out of the club—although even that could be fun,” said Laera. “Don't let anyone else touch me.”

“I have no intention of letting anyone else touch you,” he told her. “Anything else?”

She knew she should have a laundry list to give him. She had filled out a form before her date with Thomas, listing all sorts of activities she would and would not do. A lot of them she didn't even know what they were, so she had just marked “No.” To Bruce, she shook her head. “No, Master Bruce, nothing else.”

“You remember your safe word?”

“Red light,” she said.

“Very good. You know what I've been wanting to do ever since I saw you from across the room?”

She shook her head. How long had he been watching her before he spoke up? “No, what? Does it involve ropes?”

“No, it involves a zipper.”

Her eyes went to his crotch first, but it looked like the leather jeans were of the button kind. He was also more aroused than he had been when she had first checked him out. *Zipper? Oh.*

“The zipper isn't where you want it?” she asked.

He smiled. “That's not even the point. The point is that I didn't put it there.”

“Oh.”

He held the tongue of the zipper in his hand now. So much for displaying just as much cleavage as she wanted. She hadn't worn a bra, because the dress was snug and it would show if the zipper was too low. She felt her nipples tighten at the thought of him controlling the zipper. *Could he see them press against the leather?*

He pulled the zipper up, and up, the whole way until it made for a tight demure neckline barely displaying the place where her neck met her collarbone. His fingers still lingered on it though, so she knew he wasn't going to keep her covered. The only question was how low it was going to go.

She yearned to tell him he could do whatever he wanted to do, to dare him to take control, to remind him that even whether she wore a dress at all was entirely up to him. But the next week, she would be ashamed to show her face and he would be back in Philadelphia. She trusted him to show her a wonderful time, but that was all it would be, a single time, and then she'd be on her own again.

He began pulling the zipper downward. She watched.

Her hand twitched.

He had already passed the point where she had left it; if he pulled anymore, her breasts would fall out.

He stopped. She hadn't been aware she was holding her breath until she let it go in a sigh of relief. He smiled and pulled the zipper back up a few inches. It wasn't where she had it and almost every legal inch of her breasts were bare, but at least her nipples were covered and would likely stay that way if she was reasonably careful. She looked up at him.

He was watching her face. She'd expected him to be gawking at her breasts. She'd worn a dress that showed just a little cleavage one day to the library and felt like half the male customers were staring down her dress. But he was just watching her for her reactions. It made her feel safe.

"If that's where you want the zipper to be, Master, then that's where it will be."

He smiled.

There she went again, calling him Master when he hadn't asked her to. He'd told enough people not to over the years, but for some reason he couldn't bring himself to correct Laera. Instead, his cock jumped at the sound and his heart pounded a little faster. The corners of his mouth twitched. She made him react like no woman had in a long time, maybe ever. *Who has the power here, anyway?*

He'd read her discomfort as he moved the zipper downward. She was excited, yes, but not happy. He'd noticed her hand move to stop him and then stop. He didn't want to push her too hard, too fast. In fact, he wanted to be perfect—all while being suave, relaxed, and in control. Something was going to give somewhere in there.

"And if I change my mind and want it lower or higher?" he asked.

Laera bit her lip, but said, "Then it will be lower or higher."

"Good girl," he said, moving behind her, between her and the wall. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Tell me, Laera, do you think people here have any problems with you being dressed, or half dressed, or undressed?"

She looked around and Bruce's eyes followed hers. About one in four of the female patrons would have been in danger of getting arrested on the street and half the rest would have turned a few eyes. A few men were naked, though not as many. "No," she said. "But they would stare."

"Does that harm you?"

"It scares me," she said, her breath speeding up. "No, it makes me nervous."

"And excited." He made it a statement, not a question, but slipped his hands in to cup her breasts while he said it. The hard nipples poked against his palm.

"Yes," she agreed. "And nervous," she added, as if he might have forgotten that part.

His cock was hard against her back and he was sure she could feel it. The club rules, and his word, stopped him from bending her over and entering her, but he wanted to. The idea of spending an entire evening that turned on was sweet agony. I think I know how Sue's subs feel, he thought.

"I won't make you take center stage," he told her. "Because I don't think that's what you need right now. But I won't be able to avoid eyes being on you either, so you're going to have to put up with it. Do you understand?"

Laera nodded. "Yes," she said. Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

Bruce stopped himself just before telling her to say "yes, Master" instead of simply "yes." It would be horribly hypocritical of him. And yet, he craved it. Did he want her for keeps or was she simply the person in the world he most wanted to spend time with on this particular evening? He wished he knew, but he wasn't going to resolve it now or she'd be standing there waiting for him to do something until she got bored and left.

"You are not to come tonight without asking me and receiving permission. Is that understood, too?"

Laera shivered. “Yes,” she said. The only other thing to say was no. It didn't seem very likely that was going to get her anywhere. She wasn't planning on coming anyway, not in this public place, not without anyone inside her. But the question implied that he intended for her to come, or perhaps get so close she'd be asking for permission. Which he might or might not give. She remembered Frank the week before, begging Sue for permission to come as Sue and Laera had taken turns stroking him, teasing him, running their hands over him. Such a powerful-looking man, and yet so desperate asking a small woman like Sue for permission. Begging, that was what it was. Laera would never beg. He couldn't make her that needy. Especially not with the club rules.

She had called him Master, but she remembered that he didn't really like it. He preferred to keep his distance, take one session at a time. No doubt after they were done playing he'd be back on the road to Philadelphia. She certainly wouldn't be calling him that again. She'd save it for somebody. *For that white knight? Ha!*

His hands were running over her body again and he might as well have taken her dress off for all it stopped him. She felt him shimmy the black lace panties she wore over her hips and down her legs. A rush of cool air seemed to rush up her skirt just then, although it had to be her imagination. Her private parts were tingling. With her panties around her ankles, she stepped out of them. It seemed the most graceful thing to do. He scooped them up and put them away somewhere behind her. She turned and looked to see them in his bag amongst the coiled ropes. He was pulling one of the lengths of rope out, a long one, in black.

“Just look forward, Laera,” he said to her softly. “I'll keep you safe, remember that.”

She turned her gaze back. Not far from Sue a young woman with long, cherry red hair was mounting what looked like an ordinary merry-go-round horse. She was naked, save for her collar and cuffs. A few minutes before, Laera had noticed her wearing a mishmash of black leather, spikes, and fishnet.

The horse wasn't quite normal, she realized; it had an unusually narrow saddle, which the young Goth was straddling. She was trying to look nonchalant, but there was fright in her eyes.

Suddenly the scene in front didn't matter anymore. Master Bruce had put a rope around her neck; the rest after the loop was dangling in front of her. She started to turn to protest, but his voice was calm, soothing.

“There won't be any pressure on the front of your neck, Laera, and the rope is quite loose. The back of your neck can easily take what little pressure it will give,” Bruce told her. To demonstrate, he tugged on the rest of the rope, gently. The back of the rope was pulled against the back of her neck; the front of the loop nestled in her cleavage. She relaxed.

The merry-go-round horse had started moving, and the Goth girl with it. She was strapped in, her hands free enough, but her ankle cuffs clipped to the stirrups. The horse wasn't quite a bucking bronco, but Laera could see that there was plenty of friction going on between the narrow saddle and the girl's sensitive pussy.

Bruce meanwhile had slipped the two strands of the rope into Laera's dress and his hands were brushing against her own pussy. She couldn't make out quite what he was doing exactly. What she did know is that when he was finished and tugged on the rope there was something rubbing right against her clit.

“Shh...” he said, moving around to her front. He was crouched down low. “I'll block people's view to protect your modesty,” he said lightly. He unbent, making himself a little bit more of an obstruction. Then he rolled her dress up to her waist.

They might not be able to see her private parts, but it had to look like he was going down on her or something. She felt a flush come to her cheeks as she looked down. He was only tying the rope off around her waist however, creating tension between a point at the small of her back and where the rope held just above her cleavage. It was digging into the crease of her ass and between her pussy lips and—she could now see—a knot was rubbing up right against her clit. He put the dress back in place.

“You're interested in how that girl is doing on the horse, aren't you?”

“Well, I—” she started. She wondered if she admitted her interest, whether he'd make her do the same. “I had to look at something.”

“Let's take a walk.” He closed his suitcase and picked it up, taking her hand with his left. She started to follow.

“Oh my God,” she said.

“Like the ropes?” He grinned at her.

She hadn't guessed how they'd feel when she moved. It was somewhere on the balance between pleasure and pain. For ropes, they were soft, but they slid against her most sensitive

nerves every time she took a step. She wobbled forward, too distracted to answer his question. How long did he expect her to be trussed up this way, anyway?

They walked around the club. He didn't seem to have any destination in mind as much as he wanted to torture her by making her walk. She felt the sweat break out on her face.

"Feeling good?" he asked, but the smug smile on his face indicated he already knew the answer.

"Feeling very turned on and a bit frustrated," she told him.

He grinned and pulled her to him, one arm around her waist, the other steadying her back, and kissed her deeply. Her mouth yielded to his. His knee pressed between her thighs, pushing the knot against her harder, moving back and forth as he devoured her. Heat rose inside her, all concentrated against that little knot, her arousal building rapidly.

*If he keeps doing that, I'm going to come.* She tried to struggle backward, so she could protest, or ask permission, she wasn't sure which, but he held her firmly for several seconds before letting her lips leave his.

"When we kiss, we kiss until I'm done, Laera," he told her.

"I'm going to come," she protested.

He pulled his knee back. "No, I don't think so," he said, and scooped up her wrists, one in each hand, moving them behind her back where he could hold them together with one hand. It took him only a few seconds to fetch some more rope and tie her wrists firmly behind her back.

She groaned in frustration. "May I come?" she asked.

"No, not yet." He leaned behind her and kissed her neck softly. "When you do," he whispered, "It will be spectacular."

She wasn't going to beg. She set her jaw, and tried to think of cold showers, ice cubes, anything that would cool her ardor. But it wasn't easy with him planting kisses along her neck, just above the rope, and in the sensitive spots just behind her ear.

"Walk with me; we're going to see how our friend Sue is doing," he said.

"I don't think I can walk," she complained. She knew she probably could, but she wasn't feeling cooperative.

"Would you rather I made you?"

“How?” she asked, before realizing her mistake. She didn't know how he'd do it, but she knew from the look in his eyes that daring him was the wrong move. His wicked smile confirmed it.

*Zipppp!* went the zipper, down to her navel. He grabbed the rope around her waist and gave it a tug. She moved forward, trying to keep up with the pace of his long strides and trying to ignore the sensations that were going through her as the rope rubbed. She couldn't do anything about the sudden indecency of the dress either, except shrug her shoulders in an attempt to stop it from falling all the way off. And people were definitely staring as she half walked, half skidded across the hard warehouse floor.

“I don't make empty threats, Laera,” he said firmly. “Or empty promises.”

“That he doesn't,” said Sue, looking up and smiling. “Hello, Bruce. Hello, Laera.” She turned to her subs and said, “I'll be talking to some friends; you two just amuse yourselves for a few minutes.”

Since neither of them had their hands free and both of them had hard red penises, it was an ironic thing to say. Laera didn't know whether to gasp or to laugh. She was glad Master Bruce wasn't quite so cruel—or was he? She did know, from watching the last few weeks, that Sue's subs all adored her.

“Hello, Mistress Sue,” said Laera. She felt the other woman had earned her respect, and therefore the title.

“They'll be hating us now if we stick around,” observed Bruce.

“Oh, I don't think anything would make Frank hate Laera at this point. He wants to fuck her too badly, don't you, pet?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Frank said. Laera couldn't see his face, but she got the impression from the tone of his voice that he wasn't happy at making the admission. She had to admit she was kind of surprised herself. More so that Bruce pulled her close with a gesture that both implied protection, not that she needed it from Frank, and possessiveness.

“Frank should keep his hands off.”

Sue grinned. “Don't worry, Frank will keep his hands where I tell him to keep them. As long as you control your sub, I shall most certainly control mine.”

Laera watched Bruce. She didn't remember seeing him annoyed before, but he was now.

"Don't push it, Sue."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Bruce," Sue replied brightly.

Bruce caught her implication. Laera was his for the night, so Frank would stay away. But should she come here and not be his, well, he couldn't trust Sue to stop anything.

And why should he? Laera was a free woman, able to hook up with anyone she chose. He didn't have a claim on her. But he was jealous anyway. Sue knew it and was playing him perfectly, and he didn't like being played. He thought back to his phone conversation with her and remembered what she had implied about Blake. That had been for the same reason, to suggest that Laera might fall into the hands of a man she knew he despised. Part of that was, of course, because Blake was a cad who hammered away at his women's self-esteem in order to manipulate them, then dumped them to move on to another. The rest was because Blake had been the man playing with Alice the last time he had seen her three years ago.

Alice had known what kind of Dom Blake was, although the man had been barely out of college then. She had known exactly what Bruce thought of him. She had gone to him anyway, for what reason, he never did find out. It didn't even matter anymore. Sue had known what button to press though, to get him running, and she'd pressed it hard. He was half tempted to let Laera go now and walk out. But none of that history was Laera's fault and he needed to find out why he felt so possessive of her.

He turned to Laera, grabbed her, and kissed her hard, his roaming hands taking advantage of the deep and open neckline of her dress. She kissed him back, breathlessly. He needed to get his emotions under control and this was hardly the way to do it, but he wanted her lips against his. He wanted more than that, but he'd have to settle for what he could do right then.

There wasn't anything Laera could do to resist him. Her hands were behind her back and the attention he was paying to her breast felt good too, even if it had caused the last bit of coverage she'd had over it to fall to the side, and even though he was being a bit on the rough side. No, *because* he was being rough. Let me come, she thought. Master, let me come. Please, Master, let me come.



But when his lips left hers, she couldn't voice the words. She just thrust out her bare breast to show that she wasn't daunted and forced a smile at him, almost biting her lip to stop from begging.

He looked right through her, like he just knew without her saying. The cloud over his face at Sue's mention of Frank's desires had gone.

Sue laughed and said, "Have fun playing, you two," just before she turned her back to them and went back to her subs.

He slid the other shoulder off her dress and lifted her out of it. He tossed the dress to drape over his shoulder and then lifted her up, naked except for the ropes. She ought to be turning beet red right now, she thought. Or protesting. Or safe wording. But instead she just felt warm and held, as he carried her in his arms. It didn't matter if people were watching because anyone watching her would know that she was his.

"Mind if I leave my gear with you for the moment, Sue?"

"Not at all, Bruce," replied Sue.

There was a couch in the corner that miraculously was not in use, and that was where he was carrying Laera. He turned her over when he got there and sat down with her, her naked ass in the air, her breasts rubbing against the worn and bumpy surface of the couch's fabric. She tensed, waiting for the feel of his hand on her bottom, sure she was in for a spanking. At least she knew he wasn't mad at her. She was almost getting used to the feel of the rope. An impish smile played over her face and she wiggled her ass at him, which helped rub her against the rope. She couldn't get off that way, but she knew she wasn't going to get relief from the sensation anyway. She might as well enjoy it and show him she was ready for anything he wanted to dish out.

I'm living dangerously, she thought, but she was past the point of caring.

The blow she was ready for didn't come. Instead there was just his finger, sliding under the rope, until it found her clit. It wasn't penetration, technically, even if it was just as intimate. And from where she was, it didn't take her long to reach the tipping point.

"Can I come?" she asked.

"Not quite good enough," he said, and took his hand away. She whimpered at its absence, trying to remember her dignity. It was hard to have dignity, naked and tied, bent over a man's

lap. She tried to rub her breasts against the fabric. It was too rough to be pleasant, but she didn't need merely pleasant right now. The abrasion felt good right then.

He let her catch her breath, then slid his finger across her labia, almost but not quite dipping inside her. A few seconds after he touched her clit, she was ready.

“Master, may I come?”

He chuckled. “I was looking for a please. Master implies, to me, some sort of long-term relationship.”

A long-term relationship? There was distance and the intensity—could she take this kind of intensity for long? She turned her head, to look over at him.

“Master, may I please come?” she said.

He raised his eyebrows further, looking, for once, a bit off balance.

She had tried out a few partners, enough to know that she didn't want to keep searching when one knew exactly how to make her feel good. She wanted to come, badly. But not as badly as she wanted to call him what she'd told herself she wouldn't.

“Master, if you would like, I will come. But if not, then I won't, Master. And if you don't like me calling you that, you may spank me, Master. Or whip me. Or cane me. But you won't stop me, Master.”

He stared at her and then his face softened. He reached out and cupped a breast, rescuing it from the rough fabric and slid his finger across her clit once more. “Come for me, Laera.”

It hit her before she expected it, rolling over her. She felt it take control of her body, making her spasm and shudder against Master Bruce. The waves of pleasure seemed to just keep coming, over and over. It would have been too much if it weren't for the fact she had no way of stopping it.

He turned her over and held her tight as the spasms subsided. He was so warm, so right. “Thank you, Master,” she mumbled, but she knew she was too quiet for him to hear. She felt so vulnerable after what she had said, knowing full well how he would take its meaning.

“Lovely, slave girl,” he told her, giving her a squeeze. She rolled over, pressing her breasts against his broad chest.

*So snugly and warm.*

## Chapter Ten

When Laera woke up, she found herself in Bruce's arms. "Wha-a-a-a?" she said.

"Hush, love. You're all right."

She was naked, but there was a blanket over her, olive green and made of wool. It was a bit itchy, but it was definitely warm. And underneath her naked bottom was Master Bruce's leather jeans, and underneath that was a very hard cock. She wiggled and was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath.

"I think you're awake now," Master Bruce said, gritting his teeth.

"I think so. You feel, um, pretty awake, too."

"We'll deal with that later."

Laera wiggled a little more. "It sure feels like it wants to be dealt with now." What would it be like to just be taken by this man in the dimly lit corner of a public place? Stupid rules. There was another way she could think of, but she didn't think she had the courage to give him a lap dance. She bit her lip at the idea that he might ask it of her. It was exciting and horrifying all at the same time, but she knew the thing she would most regret would be disappointing him by refusing.

"It will have to wait until I can be buried deep in that sweet pussy of yours, Laera."

"That can't happen here," Laera said, sighing.

"No, it can't. And besides, we need to talk. Would you like your clothes on?"

Talk? What about? Laera wondered. Still, the tone of his voice didn't sound too threatening. "I don't need clothes if you'll keep holding me," Laera said. "It's nice being naked in your arms."

Bruce smiled. "I won't make you wear clothes," he said, a twinkle in his eye. "I'm just not that kind of guy." He adjusted the blanket so it draped over from his shoulder to his knee,

moving it out from where it came between her body and himself. She put her arms around him and smiled. She'd give his cock a rest, she decided, and rolled on her side, pressing up against his chest. She thought about undoing some of the buttons on his shirt, but his voice derailed her thoughts.

“Laera, I told you that I wanted the word 'Master' to be reserved for a long-term relationship and you kept using it. Is that what you want, Laera? Me in your life long term, Master and slave girl, boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Was it even possible? He didn't exactly live down the street, unless you were going to call Interstate 95 a street. She hesitated.

“I won't hold you to what you said in the heat of passion,” he said. “I had you pretty wound up.”

“What do you want, Bruce?” Laera asked, deliberately dropping the title from his name. Whatever they did, it started with them being their own persons.

“I'd like to try, Laera,” he said, looking her in the eye. “I can come down on weekends—or sometimes, if you could come up to me, I know of some nice places to play. One of which is my apartment.”

Laera nodded. “Think you can stand me every weekend?”

“I don't think I'm going to be happy giving up a weekend with you for quite a while.”

“In that case, we have a deal,” Laera said, and added, “Master.”

“I'll expect you to obey me, Laera, when we're in clubs or in the bedroom.”

Laera thought about that. She worked every other Saturday, making up for it by getting off every other Friday for a three-day weekend. Still, for four- or six-day stretches, they'd be apart.

“Master, I'll obey you anywhere you like,” she said. “We'll have enough time apart; we should make up for lost time.”

Bruce's eyes widened. She'd surprised him. She tried to suppress a grin. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes, Master,” she said. “I'm very sure. And if I change my mind, I have a feeling you'll listen, and we'll try to work it out.”

He smiled at her. “I can't promise it will work, but I can promise to try.”

"I don't want to share you, Bruce. Maybe I'll change my mind on that someday too, but I wouldn't count on it. I want you all to myself."

"You're a greedy little slave girl," said Bruce. "But frankly, I wouldn't want it any other way."

Laera grinned. "Good. Because right now, Master, I'm greedy for your cock."

"About that," Bruce said. "I was wondering if I could sleep over at your place. I don't know what kind of place yours is, but as long as it has you, I don't care."

"I share an apartment with a girlfriend..." said Laera. She watched Bruce's face. He'd avoided a frown, but his eyes showed a little disappointment. She wondered if it was right to torture one's master, but she figured it was fair enough after what he'd been doing to her all night. She smiled at him, and continued, "...who has kept me awake some nights by moaning, screaming, and shaking the walls with some guy or another on several occasions. I was wondering if you'd like to help even the score."

"I think I could manage."

"I might fail to call you Master in her presence, though. She thinks I'm a shy and tender flower that needs to get out more. I'll have to break her in slowly."

Master Bruce nodded. "Of course."

"It's a half-hour drive, or an hour on the Metro," Laera said. She shrugged, knocking the blanket off by accident. She grabbed for it, but he stopped her.

"I don't think you're cold anymore," he said. "And I like seeing your body. Even with other eyes present."

*Wow.* Laera nodded. "That's your decision, Master," she said. She sighed happily, leaning back against his solid muscles.

"Sue said she'd be giving you a lift here, so I drove down rather than take the train."

Laera laughed. "So that's why she was so insistent that I not get myself here. I hate to crimp her style. I guess you're giving me a ride home?"

He nodded. "Any objections, slave girl?" he asked, teasingly.

"None at all. Am I going to wear the blanket home, my dress, or are we planning to get pulled over?"

“The blanket belongs to the club and getting pulled over would delay us, so the dress. But no underwear.”

“I have a feeling that I'll be wearing underwear less and less on the weekends,” said Laera. “Shall I stand and dress?”

Bruce smiled. “Yes.”

She stood up and took the dress from the bench where he laid it. She put it on over herself, but didn't bother to zip it up. She just turned to him, heart pounding. It was still a bit scary to put herself in his hands, but she couldn't imagine hands she'd rather be in.

He zipped her up, stopping so that the V of the neck dipped into her cleavage and the snugness of the dress pushed her up and over. “You have such a nice full figure,” he told her. “I love looking at you. I love the idea of having you as mine. And I love being yours.”

She looked at him, taking that all in. Him being hers. That was part of the bargain, even if the “her being his” part was what made her heart race. It was all good though. It was what he danced around saying that made her smile the most.

He realized it too. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she told him.

“Let's go scandalize your housemate.”

“Sounds good to me,” Laera said, grinning.

*Five months later...*

Laera walked up onto the stage. She wore the same leather dress she had worn to Crypt of Fate, with the zipper up, modestly covering her breasts. There were differences though. She wore three inch heels that made her legs look long and beautiful. A collar made of braided leather wrapped around her neck. It didn't have rings all over it, or anything else that marked it as anything but an odd choker, but here at Bondage Ranch, its meaning was clear. She belonged to someone. Master Bruce had made it himself. She slept with it on, wore it almost everywhere but to work.

Her master was standing there looking yummy as always, in black leather jeans and a white pirate shirt that laced up the front. Alex Allison waited there for her too, wearing the gold dress that Laera had worn before. It looked fabulously sexy on Alex, but Laera didn't feel jealous. She knew who Master Bruce would be looking at, and it would be her. She still wasn't sure about the rest of the world, but to Master Bruce, she knew she was beautiful.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. She'd taken a little longer with the bug spray than the other two, but then, there'd be more of her showing.

"You're fine," her master told her.

"Nervous?" Alex asked her.

"Of course," said Laera. Her heart was pounding. And yet, she had wanted it this way. She had asked for it. Strange how one could want the very thing that was so very frightening. Master Bruce had offered her several other options and she had declined them all.

He put his arm around her and she didn't feel so nervous any more.

She saw people filing in. A few she knew from the Philly scene. Valerie. Gordon. Marcia. Others from Washington, like Ken and Josie. Plenty of others who she'd seen before, or not seen, but either way had no name for.

Sue arrived with Frank. She had a diamond ring on her finger that flashed in the sun. They took seats up front, which apparently her master and Dylan had reserved for them. Frank was always at Sue's side lately, regardless of who else she was playing with. They'd hardly have a conventional marriage, but they did seem to like each other. Master Bruce had shared with her Sue's comment about how Frank wanted to have sex with her, and the fact that he was front and center made her a little extra nervous. Whether that was his intent, or whether he was trying to add a couple of friendly faces up front, she wasn't sure.

"Here we go," said Alex, and she stepped up to the edge of the stage. Laera took a nice, easy breath. For a moment at least, no one was looking at her.

"Welcome," said Alex, "To our very own Zen Master Bruce and his lovely slave girl Laera." Laera remembered Bruce asking her not to call him that just fifteen minutes before, but it hadn't deterred Alex much. It didn't weigh on her mind too much either, not once Alex said, "his slave girl Laera." It was a part of who she was now and she couldn't imagine ever going back. Bruce was a lovely, caring man and she was his.

“They'll be putting on a rope demonstration for you,” Alex continued. “The focus this time isn't so much how to restrain your submissive, but how to make it erotic for them.”

Alex walked back into the shadows and Laera and Bruce stepped forward. Laera pulled on her zipper and let the dress fall to the ground. Underneath she wore only an intricate web of red and blue rope and bug spray. A collective gasp came from the audience—not that they were shocked at nudity, not this crowd—but at the Master Bruce's lovely art on her own lovely body.

She twirled slowly, giving the crowd a view, the rope edging into her skin as she moved, not quite biting—just a soft, sensual pressure, against her breasts, her waist, and between her legs.

Master Bruce had moved forward. “This is a rope harness, a sexy, beautiful, erotic way to play with your sub. As you see, it can be worn under even fairly brief clothing with no one being the wiser. And it provides a sensual experience. When Laera moves, she's feeling the ropes against her body, caressing her. There are ways we can make for a more intense experience, and we'll discuss those, by putting knots in strategic places. There's also ways to do it wrong, causing rope burn and discomfort, or even cutting off circulation. We'll talk about how *not* to do that.”

She watched him. He'd been doing this for years, talking about what loving couples could do with rope, with a variety of willing subjects to help him demonstrate. But she and he were a team now and she had worked hard to learn to add her grace and practice to his performance. As he talked on, he took the ropes off her, and then put them back on, and she turned to make sure the audience could see exactly what was going on. And she spoke up and told them how it felt even though she felt like blushing half the time. It didn't matter. It felt wonderful. Together they held the audience's attention until she was all tied up again, this time as Master Bruce had promised, with knots in all the right places.

At last they were done and the audience filed out. A few of the Doms stayed to ask Bruce some questions, but he leaned over and whispered to her before he acknowledged them.

“You were perfect,” he told her. “How are you doing?”

“Aroused,” she told him. “Wet.”

He grinned. “I could put them off for a while.”



She smiled back at him. "It's not a passing state, love. Tends to happen whenever you're around and definitely whenever you have me tied up like this. I can wait." It would be torture, she mentally added. But sweet torture.

He nodded. "Thank you," he said, simply. "Your patience will be rewarded."

That sounded good.

He answered a few questions and then turned to her, taking her into his arms. He pulled the rope behind her and she startled as the soft rope caressed her pussy.

"Mine," he told her.

"Oh, definitely yours," she said. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Keep you," he said.

She smiled. She didn't need to be told, but it was nice to hear anyway. "Sounds good to me," she said, and turned her lips up to kiss him passionately.

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Sindra van Yssel

**The BONDAGE RANCH Series**

*Roped In*

## Sindra van Yssel

I live in Northern Virginia with my partner, my teenage son, and a lot of fish. For many years I was active in our local BDSM community. Yes, people really do the things people do in my books!

By day I work in a public library, where I get to meet all kinds of readers. I've a soft spot for happy endings and characters who learn more about themselves, but I enjoy torturing my characters along the way, too. Hopefully you'll enjoy watching them squirm as much as I do.