

PUSHING

Sindra van Yssel

Loose Id

LIMITS

Bondage Ranch 2: Pushing Limits

Copyright © June 2010 by Sindra van Yssel

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-802-0

Editor: Georgia A. Woods

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

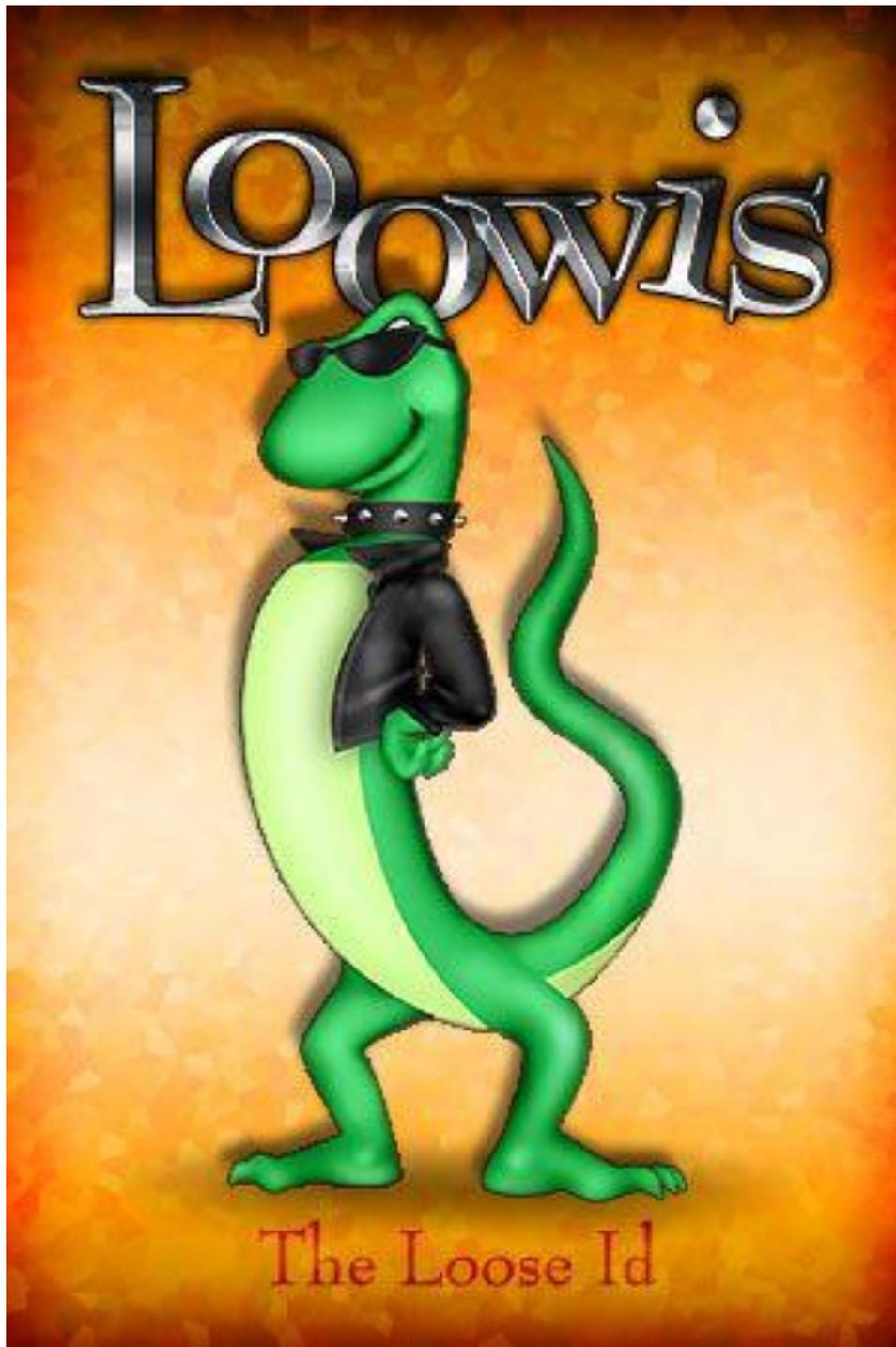
This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.



<http://www.loose-id.com>

Chapter One

Samantha Grayson stood at the edge of the Allison's living room. She hadn't been sure she'd ever come to Bondage Ranch again after the last time, but here she was, drawn like a moth to the flame. She'd dressed the part again, wearing a black vinyl bustier that made the most of her smallish breasts, a short leather skirt, and high-heeled sandals.

In the center of the room, Dylan Allison, the host of Bondage Ranch, fabulously dressed in a white ruffled shirt and a velvet frock coat, looking more like he belonged at Versailles than at a BDSM party, held court. The woman at his side, Dylan's wife and sub, Alex, was resplendent in a floor-length dress, the waist pulled in tight by a corset. A small fortune in pale blue silk stretched over hoops that held the skirt so far from her legs that someone could be hiding under there and no one would be the wiser. Her breasts half spilled out of the low, square-cut neckline.

With them chatted Bruce, a lovely Dom she'd played with a few times. Once he'd made a point of never letting a scene become a relationship, just like Sam. But at his side in a black leather minidress was a voluptuous woman that he'd apparently been seeing for months. Sam had chatted with her online a time or two but never met her in person.

One man stood with them she didn't recognize. Dark haired, tanned skin, ruggedly handsome. Obviously a Dom. Even though a stranger, he seemed to fit in with them effortlessly, and they were all chatting and laughing. It looked like fun.

She decided to quit feeling sorry for herself and walked over to them. Alex noticed right away and said something that made the others turn. She saw Dylan

murmur something to the stranger, and Alex nudged him hard in the ribs. She had no doubt it was about her. Well, she could retreat or go forward. She continued on.

“Hi,” she said brightly.

Alex didn’t wait for her husband to manage the introductions. “Arthur, this is Sam. Sam, Arthur. I think you know everyone else.”

“Hi, Arthur. I haven’t actually met Laera, but we’ve exchanged posts on an e-mail list,” said Sam, looking at Laera. “You’d better be Laera, or the Zen Master’s in trouble.”

Laera laughed. “I’m me all right.”

“Why do people call Bruce ‘Zen Master?’” asked Arthur.

“Just a pet name, I think. He’s into meditation and stuff, and he’s all Dom, so I guess that’s pretty much it,” explained Sam with a sidelong glance at Bruce. “He used to be free and fun, but now he’s chained by his hand on the leash. Or so I hear.” She shrugged. “I don’t get out much.”

“That’s a shame,” said Arthur. He glanced down at her breasts as she shrugged.

Surely he had better examples to look at nearby, but the gesture gave her the confidence to grin at him. “That Bruce can’t play or that I don’t get out?”

“He can play,” blurted Laera. “He just has to make it fun for me somehow.”

Sam nodded. “That’s what it’s all about. But it lets me out. *Ménage à trois* only works for me when it involves two men.” *Like I have any experience with that. Hard enough to find one good one.*

“That might be fun to watch,” Laera said, “but I think my master has the weekend planned.”

“Not this time, Sam,” said Bruce.

Sam looked up and met Arthur’s gaze. For a moment they just stared at each other. She felt like her gaze was held captive by his dark brown eyes, and it made her squirm. He smiled at her, and she relaxed and smiled back.

“So, Sam,” Dylan broke in. “I saw Gordon around. He went off to the dungeon, but I don’t think he was with anyone.”

Gordon. She had played with him a couple of times before it turned bad. She’d gotten her nipples pierced on something of a whim. They had still been healing, so she’d placed them strictly off-limits for play. But apparently the lure of golden rings was more important than a sub’s safety to Gordon, and her safe word had started a loud argument. She’d taken the rings out as soon as she was home. “No thank you. I’d rather schmooze for a while before picking a partner. Get in the mood, see who’s interested. Get to know someone new.”

Like I’m any good at schmoozing. But better than than Gordon. She realized she’d glanced over at Arthur when she’d said “*someone new*” and he’d noticed. She blushed. She also noticed Dylan rolling his eyes and Alex elbowing him again.

“So Sam is short for Samantha?” asked Arthur.

Samantha was what she was called at home. She liked to keep the two separate. “Maybe,” she said. “It’s just Sam when I’m here.”

“It’s short for smart-assed masochist,” said Dylan under his breath to Arthur. Sam heard him perfectly well. Walking over to join the group had been a mistake. She wasn’t part of the in crowd anywhere, and she never would be.

“Excuse us, please,” said Alex. “My lord and master has just told me he wants to have a private talk in the kitchen.” She hooked her hand into Dylan’s elbow.

“I—” Dylan looked confused for just a split second, since there hadn’t been time for him to say any such thing, and then told Alex, “A talk and some discipline.”

“I was pretty sure of that,” said Alex drily, letting him precede her to the kitchen.

Arthur chuckled. “Is not being called Samantha a hard or a soft limit?” he asked.

She blinked. “I suppose it’s negotiable,” she said slowly. “But I’d rather be called Sam.”

Arthur nodded. "A soft limit should be observed unless one knows what it means to push it," he said. "Sam it is."

"Thank you. And thank you for not laughing at Master Dylan's joke."

"It wasn't actually funny," replied Arthur.

"We're off to play," said Bruce, casting a meaningful look at Laera.

"Oh my," said Laera. "I know *that* look. It was nice to meet you finally, Sam. You too, Arthur."

With a few likewises and nods, they were gone, leaving her alone with Arthur. Now that it was just her and him, she was aware of how wide his shoulders were, how physically strong he must be. Strength like that could be comforting or dangerous. Not that they were really alone. There was a sea of leather folk in the living room. But for the moment, despite the occasional jostle, he had her full attention.

"I take it you're a regular," said Arthur.

"Yep. You're new."

"Yes. Just moved to the East Coast. You have a list of your limits?"

Well, he's not wasting any time. She hesitated.

She lifted her skirt slightly, revealing a garter with two pieces of paper folded to fit between the silk and her thigh. He looked like he enjoyed the show, which was of course the idea. She handed them over.

"Two pages," he said. "Nice."

Sarcasm. Great. But maybe he wasn't being sarcastic. He didn't look annoyed as he read over the long list, full of far more things she wouldn't do than things she would.

He looked up. *Here it comes.* He handed the papers back to her. That was okay, she told herself. I'm used to rejection. "Not what you'd hoped for?" she asked.

"Not what I'm used to. Not quite the same thing. It's good you know what you're looking for. You've put a lot of thought into this."

“I usually get told I think too much.”

“The more thinking you do before you play, the more likely it is you’ll be able to let yourself feel *while* you play.”

“So how about you?” demanded Sam. “What do *you* like to do?”

“I demand respect, and that goes both ways. I expect obedience. And I like making sure my partner has a good time, which means something different for each person. I like putting the skills I’ve learned and earned to good and appreciated use.”

She waited, but he didn’t add a snazzy pickup line, and he didn’t back away either. Respect she could do. Obedience—well, usually, and it both thrilled her and scared her. It had gone wrong too many times. Still, there wasn’t much point in being at Bondage Ranch again if she wasn’t prepared to get burned once more. “I can do that.”

“We’ll give it a try, then. For one hour. Then we can negotiate whether we want to continue.”

“Usually they say they want me for a weekend,” she blurted out. “Although it doesn’t always last that long.” She shrugged, feeling like she’d said too much. But his eyes dropped to her cleavage, just like they had the last time she’d shrugged. *He likes that, does he?* “I take it you don’t mind if I do that again.” And she did.

He looked back up at her eyes. “I won’t apologize for enjoying your body, either with my eyes or any of the rest of me.” He grinned. “But as delightful as that is, I’ll have you doing other things too.”

“Oh.” She took in a sharp breath. For a moment she felt that breathless, flying feeling that came from giving up control before she reeled herself back in. “You’ll respect my limits?” Sam asked, looking him straight on. Some Doms liked it when you didn’t meet their gaze, but she wasn’t going to miss reading him fully on that question.

“Yes. And I’ll respect you,” said Arthur firmly.

She nodded. She didn't trust what he said. But she'd give him a chance.

"What's your favorite safe word?" he asked.

"Red for stop, yellow for caution," she answered.

"We'll use that," he said. She took a breath of relief. A lot of Doms frowned on caution words. Caution words gave a sub a little extra control. After all the bad scenes she'd been through, she needed a little extra.

"Hold my hand, please," he said.

Sam looked at the hand extended to her. Palm down, the way Arthur put his hand out was insistent, the "*please*" of his words formulaic. Please or no please, she knew an order from a Dom when she heard it. But holding hands—that was about as vanilla as it could get. She had to concede it wasn't on her list of limits. She put out her own hand palm up, and he held it firmly.

"Show me around," he said. "I've not seen this place before, and it will be more fun with a beautiful tour guide."

My God. We're not going to actually do anything in our hour, are we? Whatever. It would be more enjoyable than spending an hour in the meat market Dylan and Alex's living room could be sometimes. Besides, Gordon had just entered the room. Just the sight of him made her feel a little less safe, although he probably wouldn't try anything again.

At least Arthur seemed to understand what limits were for. Or he was doing a good job of faking it.

She led Arthur into the hall the dorms were in. Bondage Ranch was a vanilla resort most of the year under a different name, and people came from all along the East Coast to visit.

"I imagine you've been in the hall," she asked, "and put your stuff in your room already?"

"You can call me 'Sir,'" Arthur told her, "for now."

Sam nodded, her pulse quickening. Different tops liked to be called different things, and she'd never minded providing it when asked. She actually liked it. "Yes, Sir," she said. She took a breath in.

"I've seen the dorms. And my room. Which is yours?"

Sam hesitated. If things went badly she'd rather he not know, but he could find out easily enough. *I'm too cautious. Except when I'm not cautious enough.* "One-K."

"Try again," he said firmly.

"One-K, Sir," she replied, annoyed at herself. She'd been doing this for years. She could keep protocol when asked to. Even the doms who wanted her to talk about herself in the third person never had anything to complain about in that regard, although none of those kinds of Doms had ever worked out for her and she did her best to avoid them. *Maybe I should add that to my list.* She kept walking, leading him to the end of the hall.

A sign on the door at the end said DUNGEON in white letters on a black background. The letters had been made by dripping wax. That was one of the noes on her list, although she'd had wax scenes that were soft, sensual, and entirely pleasant. It depended on the melting point of the wax and how high it was dripped from. One scene with a guy who thought that wax dripped from a dyed candle just an inch above her body was hot in the sexy sense rather than just in the second-degree-burn sense and she'd turned that box into a no. Better safe than sorry.

She realized she'd been standing there taking a flight to memory land when Arthur cleared his throat. "And this sign leads to...?" he asked.

"Um, the dungeon, Sir." And then added, against her better judgment, "Perhaps you should put on your glasses?"

"I can read the sign," Arthur said drily. "What I'd really like to know is why you're hesitating."

"Nothing really, Sir," she said. She opened the door hoping that would stop the conversation.

The dungeon was a large room with high ceilings and a hardwood floor. It served as a ballroom for Dylan and Alex's vanilla guests on other weeks. They no doubt would have been startled by the transformation. All sorts of bondage equipment had been set up. Only a few people were playing, but later in the evening it would be mobbed. There were X-frames, spanking benches, bondage frames, a whipping post, and a couple of bondage tables. One of the tables had been covered with a white cloth, as usual. That was where waxings took place. The cloth was there to protect the table and would be thrown away at the end of the weekend.

Arthur stepped through the door with her. "One of my limits, Sam, is dishonesty, and another is evasion. If you tell me that the reason for your hesitation has absolutely nothing to do with the way you see BDSM, I'll respect your privacy and move on. But I don't think that's true, so tell me what was on your mind."

Sam just stared at him.

"Hand me your list of limits again," said Arthur. "Perhaps I missed the part where answering questions was a no."

Shit. "I was thinking about a waxing I got, Sir."

"So that wasn't always on your 'won't' list."

"No, Sir. But the Dom didn't know what he was doing, and he had a dyed candle, which has a higher melting point, so the wax is hotter—"

"And he was probably dripping it from too low as well?"

"Yes, Sir, he was."

"Is that the only waxing you've had?"

"No; two before that." She glanced at the table.

"All here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Hated it all three times?"

Sam shook her head. "No, the first time was with white candles, and well, it was startling but not bad really. The second time Bruce—"

Arthur cut in. "While you're with me you will talk of other Doms with respect unless you can tell me why they don't deserve it."

Sam bit her lip. She hated being interrupted. "Yes, Sir. Master Bruce, who you met earlier, played with me with crayons. Big fat Crayola crayons, like they give to kindergartners, dipped in a flame so the tips were hot and melty but not too hot. He wrote things on my body. Answers to questions he asked of me."

Arthur chuckled. "That's inventive," he said. "There's always something new to learn. So you enjoyed wax when it was done right, hated it when it was done wrong, and that resulted in you describing it as something you absolutely will not do under any circumstances?"

It seemed silly when he put it that way, but dealing with burns afterward had not been fun at all. "Better safe than sorry, Sir."

"If Master Bruce wanted to play with you, he might get a different answer on the question of wax play?"

She considered that. "Yes, if he asked. I suppose he would, Sir."

"How very sensible," said Arthur. She thought that was a compliment, but she wasn't entirely sure.

It would be a fun thing to do again. "What kind of candles would you use?" she asked.

"Pure paraffin, or paraffin mixed with an oil with a melting point around room temperature or lower that I knew didn't raise the melting temperature of the paraffin significantly," Arthur answered. "From a height of at least two feet. Nothing near the face, and a blindfold or cloth to cover the eyes. I'd stay away from your pubic region too, because ripping wax off with hair is a whole different kind of play. However the final answer is that I won't. It's on your list of limits. End of story."

"Yes, Sir," said Sam, because she felt she needed to say something. She wasn't about to say he could ignore her limits. Not only might it lead to all sorts of complications, but the sincerity and forcefulness with which he spoke the last words

impressed her. A lot of Doms seemed to think the purpose of a limit was to be pushed, like K2 was there to be climbed, and when you were done it was time to go after Mount Everest, moving from limit to limit until they all lay conquered.

“They’ve got a nice setup here.” Arthur squeezed her hand. “And you have nice warm hands.” She always thought they were a bit on the rough side, compared to what men expected from women, but he seemed sincere.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said.

“Let’s see the outside.”

“Yes, Sir.” She walked outside, giving his hand a squeeze back. “Most play happens in the dungeon, but when there’s nice weather, some people move outside. The demonstrations are nearly always outside unless it’s raining.” Sam had been part of a few demonstrations. She had enjoyed the experiences. She knew exactly what was going to happen to her, and someone almost always asked her to play afterward.

The play stations outside were widely spread. There were stocks not too far from the doorway that led from the dungeon. A swing set had swings at a nice height for sex. A wooden stage faced a hill from which an audience could watch. Farther away certain trees were the favorites of those who came here regularly, valued for the texture of their bark or for the attachment points provided by sturdy, low branches.

Chapter Two

The list Sam had handed Arthur was the longest he had ever seen. There were only two columns, one for yes, one for no—no shades of gray. She was a soft player by the standards of the people he'd hung out with in Los Angeles, but a lot of the limits showed good sense. No bondage she couldn't get out of—a good idea for playing with strangers. He was amazed at the level of detail she went into—five lines for describing exactly what kind of nipple clamps were acceptable. Naturally he was packing the wrong kind.

He didn't have a problem with the limits. He didn't need to play rough. He didn't even want to with a woman. It wasn't because he thought women were weak or couldn't take it. A few women hung out with the leather boys in LA, and they were as tough as nails—tougher than most of the men, because any sign of weakness meant that the Doms would give up on playing with them and spread the word. No, there was something about the softness of a woman's skin that made him want to hold back from anything really extreme. Sam's limits were fine with him.

The "been there done that" attitude Sam had as she pointed out the different features of the outdoors certainly hadn't been part of Arthur's fantasy woman. But somehow there was a vulnerability to her too. It took courage to go forward with all those vulnerabilities, and she'd obviously been burned before, figuratively as well as literally. Any mistakes he made with her would go onto the list she carried in her garter, the list of things Sam wouldn't do and the risks she wouldn't take. He'd just have to avoid making mistakes. She was going to be a challenge. He smiled. He liked challenges.

He walked over to the swings and sat down on one. He reached over to the rope that held the other swing and gave it a tug. "Come join me," he said. Sam walked over dubiously and stood next to the swing he had indicated.

"I trust you haven't forgotten how to swing, Sam," he told her, pushing off from the ground and pumping his legs to speed the swing up.

"No, Sir, I haven't forgotten. But I'm wearing a very short skirt."

Arthur jumped off, raising a small cloud as his feet hit the sand. He dusted himself off and looked at her seriously. "I gave you an order that is well within your limits as stated. Public nudity—yes. I have a very good memory. Your proper response is 'yes, Sir' and to hop on the swing. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Sir." The words sounded a bit stiff, but she looked so vulnerable. He was demanding more than that she just take her clothes off and be done with it, he knew. With each swing she took, she'd be exposing herself anew. It was active submission, not merely passive obedience. He knew full well the former was harder. And more rewarding.

She sat down and began to swing. He knelt on one knee in front of the swing's path. She'd know he had the perfect vantage point to see up her skirt. And she'd know he knew she knew. She wasn't naturally graceful, but she was getting the hang of it.

"You have lovely legs, Sam," Arthur told her.

"Thanks," she said. Her voice was petulant, dripping with annoyance.

If he let that slide, he knew she'd only get further and further from the headspace a submissive craved. He reached up and grabbed the rope that held the swing, his muscles straining as he fought its momentum. She jerked to a halt. He kept his expression blank, a skill he'd acquired from numerous games of poker. If he looked like he was angry, he suspected the little sub would be frightened into her safe word. On the other hand, if she knew he wasn't, she'd think that she'd get away with more back talk. He plucked her off the swing, sat down in it, and put her ass up over his lap as easily as if she'd been a rag doll.

Everything about Sam said she was an experienced submissive, but Arthur was beginning to understand what Dylan might have meant by telling him that Sam stood for smart-assed masochist. He'd heard the phrase often enough and had wondered why any self-respecting sub would go by Sam. But it seemed to fit. The crack about glasses had been one thing, and he'd written it off as an attempt to be funny. He could deal with a little brattiness if it made him smile. But the false "*thanks*" would have sounded rebellious and humorless even if she'd included the "Sir."

He pulled up the skirt, revealed what he already knew was a bare bottom beneath, and gave her four quick whacks on her behind with his palm before suddenly stopping. He didn't have a good view of her face, but from her expression when he'd grabbed her and flipped her facedown, he didn't think she knew why she was being spanked. Her moan was one of pleasure, not punishment, and she spread her legs invitingly. She was irreverent because it worked for her. Maybe he should just let her go when the hour was done and let her find a top who didn't care about the dynamic as long as he got to spank a willing ass. The thought of giving someone else a go didn't please him at all, however. He wasn't going to give up yet. He set her on her feet and got up.

"Sir?" she asked.

"Come this way," he said and walked off toward the stocks. They had a nice large locking clasp, he noticed. He wouldn't be using it; that definitely qualified as bondage one couldn't get out of on one's own.

He looked back. She was lagging behind, smoothing her skirt down.

"When I put your clothing someplace, I expect it to stay. Hold your skirt up if that's what is necessary to keep it bunched, but I put your ass and pussy on display, and they are expected to remain that way."

Sam visibly shuddered but nodded. "Yes, Sir." She rucked up her skirt and hurried her step. "You want me in the stocks to spank me?"

“I could spank you on my lap well enough. All you need to know is that I want you in the stocks and I’ll observe your limits.”

He saw her relax at the reminder that he intended to observe her limits. She nodded and did as directed. He lowered the heavy wood over her wrists and head. She had slender wrists, and without the manacles attached, she’d have no trouble slipping her hands out of the holes. Furthermore, almost any adult would be able to lift the unclasped wooden top half of the stocks using just their neck and back muscles. He took a step back and moved around to the front where he could watch her face. He stood a few feet away, his arms crossed and his face impassive.

A minute passed. He could see it slowly dawn on her that he wasn’t going to be spanking her.

“This is humiliation,” she said at last. It was on her list of things she didn’t do.

“No, it’s not. No one is out here but you and me at the moment, and a few people pitching a tent a hundred yards away. But if you sincerely think that my intent is to humiliate you, you may of course use your safe word, which is “red,” and I’ll help you get out of this position, which I will point out you can get out of at any time. Why do you think you’re here?”

She shook her head slowly. He waited. “Um, I forgot to say ‘Sir’?”

He raised an eyebrow. She could do better than that, he was sure.

“Did I forget to say ‘Sir,’ Sir?”

“Yes, you did. And your tone was disrespectful as well. Furthermore I think you’re in the habit of being disrespectful to get spankings from Doms, so you won’t be getting one from me for that.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “Sir.”

“Were you enjoying the spanking, Sam?”

Her face turned red. “Yes, Sir.”

“Then you’ll get another, as a reward, when—not if—you do something to be rewarded for.”

He hoped she would, because he was going to enjoy spanking that pert little ass of hers.

This isn't going well, thought Sam. He was respecting her limits, but she wasn't having a fun time. And she had gotten thoroughly cheated out of her spanking or anything else that was fun to do on the swings and was stuck on her knees, hands and face stuck through the stocks. Part of her knew that she'd cheated herself out of those things, but that didn't stop her from feeling downright petulant.

He was thoroughly in control. *The way Todd was.* She had to fight down an impulse to throw the wooden block off and run away. It wasn't true. Todd didn't respect a safe word, but this man actually reminded her of it the moment she complained. He wasn't just in control of her; he was in control of himself. This control she liked.

Nonetheless, just holding a position was not what she came to Bondage Ranch for. Still, he did say she'd get a spanking when she did the right thing. *So what am I supposed to do?*

Maybe he liked it when girls begged. It wasn't her style, but she'd try it. "Please, Sir, may I have a spanking?"

He smiled. "Very nice. But no, not yet."

What the hell?

"What do I need to do, Sir?" she asked, figuring he wouldn't tell her.

"Be respectful for a full fifteen minutes," he said. "You've gotten to seven so far."

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Best to be careful with what she said. She knew from the four whacks she'd gotten that he was strong and would get her ass red and hot in short order. She hated to admit it to herself, but the number of people who would play with her at Bondage Ranch was shrinking, not growing. Adding Arthur to the list of people who wouldn't was not going to help, and she

wanted his hands on her ass. And his cock in her pussy. Why was she getting wet when she wasn't even doing anything?

"If you would like to fuck me, Sir, you may."

He simply nodded maddeningly. "I hope we'll get to that. I noticed it on your list with the 'safe sex only' note next to it. Of which I totally approve, by the way."

She thought of something else. "How much time do we have on our hour, Sir?"

"About six minutes, which is three minutes after your target of fifteen minutes of respect expires."

She turned her head down so he couldn't see her expression and frowned. Usually there was some sort of sex after a spanking, if not an actual fucking then a quick fingering while her ass was in the air and her pussy exposed to the Dom's view. After being spanked, she was always very wet and it didn't take her much to get off. *Maybe two minutes of spanking and a minute of intense finger action on my clit, or if I can do myself while he spanks me...*

She looked up at him and thought better about giving him instructions. It would go his way.

"Yes, Sir," she said.

He chuckled. "I didn't say anything."

To say "yes, Sir" again would probably be taken as smart-assed, but she couldn't think of anything else she felt like saying. Instead she just bowed her head, subvocalizing it to herself over and over.

Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir.

He moved behind her. He pulled her knees apart, and she yielded to him, conscious of the outside breeze against her pussy.

He didn't give any more warning before she felt a hard slap across her bottom. The next two targeted just one cheek, rocking her forward.

"Thank you, Sir," she said, feeling tears run down her face, wondering how long it had been since she had last let tears flow. It had been a long time.

The fourth slap targeted her bare pussy. It was probably lighter than the others, but it felt ten times as intense, sending jolts all around her entire body. Her legs quivered, instinct telling them to close to protect herself, desire telling her to spread them wider. She felt his hand on her hip steadying her, and she managed not to move. One across. One on each cheek. One between her legs.

“Oh yes,” she said, and the next blow didn’t come. “Oh yes, Sir,” she said, and his hand shook her again, making her curl her fists. The pattern resumed.

“Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir.” She felt like she was flying, the pain and the pleasure mixing, lifting her, and making her weightless. Her whole body shook with an orgasm, rattling the wooden stocks and making the metal latch clang. Still it continued, and she floated dreamily on.

When she focused her eyes again, she was out of the stocks and in Arthur’s lap. He was sitting cross-legged on the grass, holding her.

“Welcome back, Sam.” His voice was soft.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said.

“The ‘Sir’ is optional. Your hour is up. You’re a free woman.” He chuckled. “I hope you had a nice trip.”

She nodded. “Thank you. Very nice.” She paused, suspecting she’d be looking for another partner soon. She’d had a good time, but she didn’t think he was too happy. “So, um, now what?”

“I’d like more time with you. Three hours.”

Sam smiled. *So he likes me after all, despite being all stern.* She could deal with stern. In fact she thought he carried it off well, and she had no complaints about his spanking technique. He knew what he was doing. Three hours, though, and more people would have gotten paired up. This was her one fun weekend for six months, and she wanted more security than that. One look at him and she didn’t want to bargain. She knew it was her right to, that they weren’t playing. But surrender was so much more enticing.

“If I please you, Sir, will you take me for longer?”

He grinned. “I don’t promise to be easy to please.”

The words sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She didn’t really want easy to please from him. “Sure, I’m up for it.” She tried to sound nonchalant, and then belatedly added, “Sir.” Might as well get started off on the right foot.

He shook his head. “Not so quickly. Limits are important to you, obviously. And you know now that I’ll respect yours. I want to see a new list.” He looked up to the sky. “Looks like a front’s coming in, so we’ll meet at nine thirty near the big leather couch in Master Dylan’s living room.”

“So, just like everyone else, you think I have too many limits.” Sam sighed, disappointed. Whether it was in him or herself, she didn’t know.

“I think your limits are fine, for playing with strangers. And I won’t pretend we know each other well. But I don’t *think* you can get more out of yourself than that list shows. I *know* you can.” He grinned wickedly. “I’m pretty inventive, though. If you come back with the same list, I can think of several fun things to do with you that are well within the limits you spelled out.”

The way he said fun made her think they would be a lot more fun for him than they would be for her. But maybe he was just being devilish. She certainly didn’t want a Dom without a little mischief in him. She had to know more about him though, if she was going to give up anything from her list.

“So who are you? You obviously aren’t new to all this, but I’ve never seen you before.”

Arthur shrugged. There was a hint of vulnerability to him, just for a moment, as he pondered how to answer her question.

“I just moved east from LA,” he told her at last. “Spent twelve years in the army, a few years at UCLA on the GI Bill, and then I discovered the leathersex community out there. I spent a few months there, much of it as a full time slave to a man named Grant.”

So he was bi, thought Sam. And he'd been a sub. His insecurity about that was touching. He didn't want to be rejected by her. "Nothing wrong with being bi," Sam said. Intellectually she agreed with that statement. The small-town girl from Havrefield in her, however, had a whole lot more trouble with that than she had with all sorts of kinky sex. *Well, that small-town girl can just stay at home.* "So you're a switch, really?"

Chapter Three

Arthur shook his head. “No.” He hadn’t been a submissive, not really. He’d been a masochist, perhaps, and submitting had been a means to an end. In Grant’s crowd, you worked your way up, and every top started out at the bottom, feeling what it all felt like before earning the privilege of dishing it out. “No. I liked the sensations. I liked pushing myself to take more, and more, always being the bravest of the brave, but that got tiring after a while too. I had something to prove to myself, and I proved it.”

Twelve years in the army and he’d never quite managed to see combat. He hadn’t been avoiding it. “Send me anywhere,” he’d always written, figuring that would get him sent to Afghanistan or Iraq. It hadn’t. It had got him sent to work at the Pentagon, or in one case a job that involved flying back and forth between Seoul and Los Angeles every other week. He’d gone to college when he left because it was the smart thing to do, but it was just like the damn desk jobs he always got.

When Grant had come up to him in a bar and asked him if he had what it took to take what a real man could dish out, Arthur hadn’t been able to resist the challenge. He didn’t regret it, either. He’d pushed Grant as much as Grant had pushed him. Pain had lost its allure once he knew for a fact he could take as much as anyone. On the way he got a very intense education in kinky sex. He had no desire to submit to anyone ever again.

“Don’t worry; I don’t want to be on top.”

“Good thing.” Arthur grinned.

Sam grinned back. Apparently she didn’t like the idea of a guy who would flip anymore than he wanted to be on the bottom again.

“So are girls as much fun to play with as boys?”

Arthur laughed. “If you called most of the people I’ve played with ‘boys,’ they’d have some pretty choice words for you. But the answer is yes.” He’d dated a couple of women before he’d left for the East Coast. Good, fun, kinky relationships that weren’t ever going to go beyond that. But the experience made him quite sure he enjoyed women as much or more than men.

Sam’s face was getting pinker, he noticed. Arthur wasn’t sure why, but she looked pleased enough.

“Any other questions?”

“Seeing anyone?”

“No.”

“Looking to set up something steady?”

Yes. But I’m not rushing into it. How to say that without hurting her feelings? He just didn’t know her well enough for that. “Maybe. I’m not opposed to it in principle.”

“Glad you’re not set on it,” she said, “because I’m not the type. This is all about here, this weekend, and nothing else. Got it?” She shifted her weight from foot to foot, not quite looking into his eyes.

She obviously meant her words to be final and clear. So why did her body language say she wasn’t sure at all? He knew he was good, but he knew he couldn’t have gotten to her that much, not yet. It was just like some of the things on her limit list—she was excluding a relationship because it scared her, he guessed, which wasn’t the same thing as not wanting one.

Still, no sense in frightening the little sub away. “Got it,” he told her.

“Good. See you at nine thirty.” She turned and walked away, leaving him watching her ass swaying. She hadn’t been walking like that before. He supposed he should be flattered.

Playing with a woman like Sam was definitely different. He'd have no hesitation about caning one of the male subs he'd known from Grant's crowd, but he wouldn't have much respect for himself if he started caning women, especially when the woman was this delicate-looking creature. He wasn't judging those who did, but he'd have to have a real good idea that she could take it before he'd try something like that with a girl.

You, Arthur, are a sexist pig. He walked through the hall that connected the dungeon to the rest of the house. He'd barely even noticed the people playing in the dungeon area, other than to make sure he didn't get in their way. Eyes open, he told himself. It was all a learning experience—if not about S&M, at least about how straight people played.

As for being sexist, one could quickly go crazy questioning one's sexual preferences and trying to make them PC. His hadn't been correct in LA, and they weren't likely to be now. If you expected someone to take what you were dishing out, Grant had told him once, the least you can give them is the accurate knowledge that you're enjoying doing it to them. He'd agreed with that at the time, and he agreed with that now.

* * *

Nine thirty-one, Arthur noted. Grant would have given him a stroke with a cane for each minute he was late. He could take a caning as well as anyone, but that didn't mean he enjoyed them. He'd learned not to be late. That was one of the problems with a play date as opposed to a relationship—you couldn't teach things like that. *Not that I'd teach it that way. To heck with Grant.* He didn't have to be anal about time.

He'd met some interesting people and went through the motions of flirting with a couple of female subs. Sam had made it clear she wasn't interested in a relationship, so he was curious to find out if he'd have trouble finding play partners here, but his heart wasn't really in it. Really, he was just passing the time until he

met Sam again. The worst thing about her being late was that he was worried she wouldn't show at all.

She'd been vulnerable when she'd come out of sub-space, and he could have pressed his advantage. Then he wouldn't be wondering, he'd be holding her and probably be inside her at that very moment. But she had trusted him, and pushing her right then and there would have been a violation of her trust. Honor meant more than lust.

A young Dom had come over to give him some advice; that was almost humorous. The man meant well, and Dylan had probably mentioned that he was a newbie. He'd listened respectfully. You never knew when you'd learn something, but not this time.

He spotted Sam at the doorway, clutching a folded piece of paper. She'd changed her clothes too. She had the whole school girl thing going for her now, although he didn't think a shirt that tied just below her breasts and left her stomach bare would pass muster in any legitimate private school. It was just as well—he didn't have any fantasies about underage women, and no one would mistake Sam for a real school girl up close. There were lines of maturity around her eyes, and the smile curving her lips spoke of experience. Arthur smiled. Experience was to be treasured.

She crossed the room and handed the paper to him. He took it, handing her one of his own.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Sir," she said.

She wasn't his sub right now, he remembered, as he felt a wave of possessiveness sweep over him as well as the temptation to spank her for her transgression. Not because he was upset, but because they'd both enjoy it. "Apology accepted." He kept his eyes on her for a moment to make sure she was okay, but she dodged his gaze, looking down at the floor instead. Some Doms liked that, and he knew at least one that would hand out quite a whipping to any sub who dared meet his eyes. He'd rather be able to look into a sub's eyes and look into her soul. He'd

pull her chin up when he needed to; in the meantime, he'd let her anticipate. Once her eyes were on him, he looked at the list.

There were marks on the outside of the paper where she'd been holding it, little folds from having been held by tense fingers. *I wonder what has her so nervous?*

He opened the paper to find out.

She'd made a lot of changes. He had a good memory, and he remembered what the other list had contained. A lot of things still had the no box checked, but he suspected each new yes had been quite a struggle for Sam. A glance at her eyes told him that despite her struggle she was still afraid she'd be rejected. Some people would be looking for their one favorite activity, and if it wasn't a yes, they wouldn't be interested in playing.

That wasn't him. He knew too much about the variety of ways two people could have fun to get fixed on one fetish. What he wanted was her trust. She had no reason to give him all of it, but she'd given him some. That was enough.

And it wasn't just her trust. He wanted all of her. Sudden desire tore through his heart and his head.

He lifted her chin and kissed her hard.

The suddenness of it took Sam by surprise. She would have jerked away out of reflex had it not been for the strong hand behind her head holding her in the kiss. His other arm was around her waist, hugging her against Arthur's well-toned body.

She gave in, opening her mouth, letting his tongue in. *It's the school girl outfit. Men go wild for that for some reason.* And making Arthur go wild turned her on. She wrestled with Arthur's tongue for a while, twining her own with his, exploring the inside of his hungry mouth. She could feel herself getting wet, and that made her extra aware of the shortness of her skirt, the cool air from the air conditioner on her ass.

Wait. Is this against my limits, this public kiss? They weren't even playing, and she hadn't agreed...

That's it. He's not just playing. The kiss isn't part of a game.

When he finally let her go, she needed air, and not just literally. He was standing there, taller than her, stronger. She put her hands on his biceps and squeezed, running her hands on his body through the shirt he wore. He was strong. Overpoweringly strong. Alone with him, she thought he could probably do anything he wanted with her. That wasn't what turned her on—after all, Todd had been strong enough to do anything he wanted, and he'd gone way too far. Arthur was strong enough to overpower her and yet still had the restraint not to.

"Three hours, then," he said. "You're mine."

Three hours. Not too long. Maybe too short. The way he said *mine* made her heart beat faster. "Yes, Sir. Yes, I am."

"Do me a favor though," he said, "Change out of that schoolgirl outfit, and I'll meet you in the dungeon."

Sam blinked. He looked serious. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I have a thing for older women, meaning over the age of consent." The corner of his mouth quirked up. "Tops have limits too. I think I just found one."

"What should I wear instead?"

"I like leather, latex, vinyl, and skin—think you can satisfy any of those? You needn't wear anything at all for my sake."

"I'll see what I can do," she said.

"Don't spend too long—it may all come off quickly anyway."

She'd taken off her clothes in front of crowds before. Why did it make her heart race to think of this man taking her clothes off?

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"What other limits do you have?"

“Everything you’re willing to have done to you, Sam, I’m willing to do. Which isn’t to say I’ll try to cram it all into a few hours.”

“But—what about what’s not on my list?”

“Things I don’t know how to do safely—the crayon thing you described sounds interesting, but I’d never do it without testing it on myself first. A few other things, I suppose.”

Sam frowned. She’d gone to all the effort to include and exclude specific things; it seemed to her he should do the same. It would be fair and equal. Not that she really wanted equal, quite—she didn’t need a list from him, she just wanted him to be as open as she was. “Why don’t you tell me what they are?”

Arthur raised his eyebrows. “Because some things are just a little gross, and I have better things to do with a beautiful women than talk about them.”

Oh.

He leaned closer. “But I’ll tell you something else. I won’t cane you, and I won’t use a single tail on you. You’re precious, and your gift is precious. I’m happy to spank you hard enough that you remember me for days, but there’s a line between pain and damage that I won’t cross.”

“You’ve never been caned?” Sam had been a couple of times, when she’d been oh so eager to please. She could take it if she had to, but if she was going to take that much pain, the top better be getting hard and ready to come by the end of it.

“I’ve been caned dozens of times. But you’re not in competition with me, Sam. You don’t have to prove that you’re tough.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Just let yourself go.”

Sam blinked.

Arthur gave her ass a squeeze. “Go. I’ll meet you in the dungeon.”

“I’ll go change,” she said. “I’ll be right there.”

He grinned. “Thank you.” He turned her shoulder slightly, pointing her toward the exit, and gave her a swift swat on the rear. On her bare bottom. She felt the skirt flutter back into place behind her. It had probably only been raised a second, but that second was more than enough to make her blush.

She hustled to get changed. He could have asked permission to raise her skirt like that—but he hadn’t. She didn’t know why it made her glad that he just did it because he felt like it. What she knew was that she trusted Arthur to take her places she hadn’t been in a long time. Some subs—and Doms too—kept expanding their list of things they’d do, always seeking a new and bigger high. That could be dangerous. Hers seemed to keep shrinking as she saw how things could go wrong. Now, suddenly, all that had changed.

It wasn’t that being tied up or being whipped or having someone drip hot wax on her had suddenly become perfectly safe. It was that she was aware of the risks and wanted to go on anyway. Something about Arthur made it seem worth the risk.

She looked over what she had to wear still. The bare-breasted look—she loved to be ordered to wear such daring things, but wearing them by her own choice seemed a little much. I brought them of my own volition, she reminded herself, but somehow she wasn’t persuaded. She was afraid she didn’t have much to draw attention to there anyway. She shucked off the skirt and tugged on a vinyl micromini. It was even shorter than she remembered. She put a shimmery gold thong on underneath it, although somehow she doubted she’d get to keep it on. *He’ll probably have fun taking it off.* She shivered. She ditched the shirt and replaced it with a black lace bra. It was a bit transparent but not too bad. She hefted the chains-and-leather-strips top she had out of her suitcase. It consisted of a leather collar from which three thick leather strips ran: one between her breasts, the other two on each side. They were connected by silver chains and kept apart by another silver chain that ran around the back. The picture on the tag that had come with it showed it being worn without a bra, but she wasn’t quite that daring. It didn’t really cover anything at all. She fastened it in place.

She took a slow, deep breath. All this time she'd been coming to Bondage Ranch, years really, and she was still nervous. She didn't know why. Heck, half the people in the dungeon had seen her naked before. And Arthur was just another Dom. Wasn't he?

It had been a long time since she had changed her limit list for anybody. And it hadn't been easy this time. She'd lingered in the dungeon for a little while, not wanting to face the limit list quite yet. The Zen Master's sub, Laera, had been tied to the bondage frame, naked except for cuffs, high heels, and a leather collar. Great tits, and she'd managed to get Bruce Merrick to actually commit to a relationship.

Gordon had a sub with him too, a redhead on an X-frame, which had meant she didn't have to be worried about him being after her. Pretty much all the play stations had been in use. Arthur wasn't there. Sam had felt a tinge of regret about that, wanting to just share with him, although she'd known it was probably best to clear her head.

Even when she'd gone back to her room to work on the list some more, she'd had trouble thinking. Pornographic images of Arthur had flitted across Samantha's mind: getting fucked in the ass; giving head; being whipped; having his cock, which she hadn't even gotten to see yet, being placed in one of the cruel devices she'd seen some of the Dommies use on their male subs.

It was one thing to have a Dom that had done all those things to someone or who had fantasies he wanted fulfilled. Sam had never had any problems saying "*no, thanks, not for me.*" But Arthur'd had all those things done *to him*. *He probably looked at my list and thought, what a wuss.* He had said he didn't need her to make changes or even that the changes she made would be in the direction of being willing to try more. *But he probably does expect I'll be open to more things, now, right?* There was that whole idea that trust equaled fewer limits or even none at all. *Well, perhaps fewer.* He had earned a little of her trust, but the fact that he had that new list of hers scared the hell out of her. And made her wet. Either way, it was too late to take it back.

She straightened, focusing again on the now, and walked to the dungeon. This time she wouldn't be alone. He'd be there.

She saw his eyes on her the moment she entered the room, full of desire. She was tempted to drop her eyes, but she didn't. She wanted to run to him, but she didn't. She let her hips swing as she walked toward him, eyes on his.

"Happy with what you see, Sir?" She dropped a glance down at his crotch, where a very obvious erection strained his jeans, and then looked back up to grin at him. Maybe he'd take it as disrespectful, but she was having too much fun flirting with him.

"Yes, I am, girl." He grinned back at her, hooking two fingers through the collar part of her top. He pulled her to him and kissed her. His other hand slipped between her legs, pushing the panties she wore against her pussy. In a few seconds it felt like they were soaked through, and of course he could feel that too. "Feels like you're pretty happy too."

She flushed, but there wasn't any point in denying it. "Yes, Sir."

He rubbed her clit through the fabric. It was getting awfully warm, and the fire concentrated right at her pussy. He had her at full arousal just like that. If she was a good girl, she would have pulled away. She didn't.

"Think you're going to come right here for me?" he asked.

She bit her lip. "If that's what you want, Sir." Her hips rolled, grinding her pussy against his hand. *Oh my God. I'm so close.* All the blood that hadn't gone to heating her pussy was reddening her cheeks, she was sure.

"It isn't. I want you right on the edge." He tugged at her earlobe with his teeth.

Oh no. "Are you sure, Sir?" She wasn't about to tell him what to do, so she begged him with her eyes.

He wasn't going to be manipulated, though. "I'm sure." He withdrew his hand and ignored her pout and her audible huff of disappointment. "Trust me. You'll come, and you'll come hard, before our time is over."

“Now?”

Arthur shook his head, smiling. “No. Not now.”

“I’ll get you off first, if you like.” She could wait that long, especially with him so hard already. She leaned against him, feeling his cock against her through the denim, and shimmied enough to give him a little rub.

He shifted back but just shook his head, the smile turning into a grin. “You’ll get me off when I say you will.”

Sam tried to bow her head again, but Arthur quickly caught her chin. She understood what he was after and looked him in the eyes. “Yes, Sir.”

He picked up a sports bag that had been sitting on the floor next to him and took her hand. Here come the toys, thought Sam. She hoped that was a good thing. It usually was. It could be.

When was it that sex had become as much about dread as anticipation? Yes, she’d had some bad experiences—and some good ones too—at Bondage Ranch. *Todd*. It had been her one attempt to mix her home life and bondage, when she’d told Todd McAndrew that she liked her sex rough and her men dominant. He’d used that against her. Bondage Ranch was a community that kept people in line for the most part. Back in Havrefield, there was a community of a different sort, just as supportive in general, and Todd had stepped out of line with her—but so had she, just by being who she was and liking kinky sex. No good would come of bringing the community in on it.

Arthur led her over to one of the room’s two St. Andrew’s crosses. Black two-by-sixes had formed a giant X, tilted slightly forward, supported by more stacks of lumber on the other side. Eyebolts set at each end allowed a sub to be attached by her ankles and wrists and still keep her feet on the ground.

“Which way?” she asked. “Front or back?”

“Back to the cross, front toward me.”

She'd asked the question nonchalantly, but she'd been afraid of that. Facing away meant she was more exposed, but she could deal with that. The biggest issue was that facing the cross, her facial expressions were hidden from the top, so he couldn't tell when he'd lost her attention or when she grimaced at a poorly aimed stroke of a flogger. She could yell her safe word when she wanted to, but her thoughts were her own. She wasn't very good at controlling her expressions.

Apparently she'd been pretty readable this time too. "A problem, pet?" asked Arthur.

She shook her head quickly and willed her face blank. "No problems, Sir." She turned to lean back against the X, but Arthur's firm hand on her shoulder stopped her. He dropped his bag on the floor with a plop.

"Tell me the problem," he commanded.

"I just—I'm exposed, facing out." She hoped he'd buy that.

"Try again."

Shit. She took a breath. "You can see my face if I'm that way. I can't hide."

Arthur nodded. "I don't want you to hide, Sam. I get the feeling you've been hiding a lot."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he kissed her before she had a chance. She blinked.

"You're very brave," Arthur said, "and I'm not implying you aren't. Do you know what I want from you?"

She shook her head, then took a stab at it. "Someone to act out your fantasies with?"

He stroked her cheek. "That would be nice along the way. I want your trust and your honesty. I want to know what you're feeling when you're feeling it, and I want to give you one hell of a good time. I know the vulnerability you're feeling, and I've taken it into account. Now up on the cross."

“Yes, Sir.” She leaned back. The wood was cool against her skin but not too bad. A few years ago they’d had a metal X-frame someone had made. The damn thing felt like an ice cube, which was probably why it hadn’t made a return appearance. Alex had probably nixed it. Doms never felt the coldness, so what did they care?

She suspected Arthur would know exactly how a metal one would feel. Everything he did would be completely intentional. That was scary and comforting all at once.

He buckled leather cuffs around her wrists and ankles, each lined with fake fur to stop them from chafing. Her arms and legs stretched as he fastened each one to the eyebolts. He carefully checked the tension, making sure it was exactly as he wanted it.

He brought out another piece of leather and showed it to her. A blindfold. It wasn’t on her list one way or the other. Did she want to see or not see? She wasn’t sure. She closed her eyes as he set it in place. Whatever she wanted, not seeing was what she was going to get, it seemed. At least she wouldn’t see his looks of disappointment.

She frowned at herself. *I’m not going to disappoint him. I’m not going to disappoint myself this time, either.*

She could feel him near her. He smelled like sex. His denim-covered thigh stuck against her bare one. She heard soft sounds like hands rubbing together, but she wasn’t sure what they meant.

He tugged her panties to one side. Something big and warm was pushing at her pussy. Was he going to fuck her right then and there? After the teasing earlier she was ready for it, although she’d thought he’d want to stretch it out a little.

Her panties slid back in place, and his fingers left her. There was still something inside her, although she knew now it wasn’t his cock. Something hard. Something plastic, fully inside her. He’d been warming it in his hands, she realized,

making sure it was all pleasure and not a cold shock. The thought had never occurred to her when she'd heard it happening.

If she hadn't been tied down, she'd have jumped in surprise when it started vibrating. Before she could relax into the sensation, it stopped. His hands touched her shoulders, kneading the tight muscles, first the front and then her upper back. He shifted so that he was between her legs, and she could feel his hardness underneath the denim, rocking against her. She wasn't disappointing him, that much was certain.

His fingers left her shoulders to travel on the insides of her arms. He pushed the stress out of her fingers, then stroked her lightly inside her arms. It was almost tickling, but not. He didn't seem to be in any hurry at all.

His hand was only absent from her flesh for a moment, but the thing in her pussy came to life again, shaking her up from the inside. His hands traveled down her sides, ignoring the breasts that were eager for their touch. She moved her hips in an attempt to rub her clit against his jeans. She couldn't move much, but it was just enough. Just a few more strokes, she thought.

The vibration stopped, and he pulled back. She could still just barely brush her pussy against him, but it wasn't enough contact to get her over. She moaned in frustration. She felt Arthur's eyes on her. The bastard was probably enjoying her distress.

"Not yet, my girl."

His girl. The fact that it was only for a few hours didn't change its truth. She'd given him the power to stop the orgasm she'd have brought to completion with her fingers in just a few seconds. She tugged at her cuffs, but they held firm.

His teeth bit her left nipple lightly through the thin lace of her bra. He teased it with gentle touches, soft pinches, and little sucks until it was hard, and then teased some more until it was aching and hypersensitive. The lace chafed against it; she didn't know if she liked that or not, but when he started to give her right nipple

the same treatment, she wanted it. Only when it was brought to the same hard peak did he put his hands on her hips.

“Please.” She hadn’t even been aware she was going to say it until she heard it come from her mouth.

“Please what, my girl?”

“Please touch my tits, my cunt, please, Sir.” Begging was on her list as something she wouldn’t do, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t going to ask again to come, though, even though she wanted it badly.

His tongue flicked against a nipple. “You’re coming along wonderfully.”

That didn’t mean he was going to do what she asked, apparently. He lifted what little there was of her skirt and dug into her hips, holding her when she tried to grind herself against him.

“Please?”

He turned the vibrating thing on again and backed away, running his fingers down her legs. In the position she was in, bound to the frame with her ankles wide apart, he had complete access to her inner thighs—and more if he wanted it. Twice he got close to her pussy, but he didn’t slip any fingers inside her panties. Each time his hands went away again, she moaned.

Her left thigh stung as he slapped the inside of it. The egg stopped vibrating again. He seemed to know when she was close, when another touch would send her over the edge. He was using both hands, alternating, the right striking her on the left side, the left on the right, each time missing her pussy by less than an inch. If he kept that up, she’d come, even from just that. She tried to spread her legs wider, offering herself to him, but there was little she could do.

Naturally he stopped.

The next thing she felt was the back of his hand stroking her cheek. She was about to protest that she didn’t want gentleness when he pressed his lips against hers. It wasn’t a gentle kiss. His tongue invaded her. For a few seconds she forgot

all about her needy pussy and her aching breasts. His tongue, swirling against hers, was all she needed.

All it took was a casual brushing of the back of his hand against her breast, causing the lace of her bra to slide across a sensitive nipple, for everything to come rushing back. She wanted his kiss, his cock, his tongue, his fingers—everywhere and anywhere.

His lips parted from hers and whispered to her. “I think you’re ready now.”

She bit back the answers that involved swear words. “Yes, Sir.”

“Do you trust me with you someplace private?”

“I don’t want you someplace private, Sir; it would take too long.” *Please. Now.*

“Right here, now, would be against your limits,” he told her. She searched for a hint of mockery in his actual words, but she didn’t find any. He repeated his question. “Do you trust me someplace private?”

She remembered the times she’d written “only in private” on the paper she had handed him—to fucking, to giving him head. Those weren’t the terms used on the list, but that was what they meant. She hadn’t known he’d make her feel like this. She growled. “If you make me come, I’ll do anything you want in private. Screw the limit list.”

“There is no screwing the limit list, love. And I want to be inside you when you come. Answer the question.”

His fingers were exploring her inner thigh again, right in the hollow so close to where she wanted those fingers, keeping her on the verge of coming. “Yes, yes, dammit, yes.”

He had her unbound in seconds. He carried her as if she were weightless. She wrapped her arms behind his neck. She heard him say “excuse me” a few times as he carried her, and she knew that whoever he was talking to knew exactly what was going to happen to her. Her panties were soaked through. It would have been less embarrassing if he’d taken them off.

Just like the limits she'd put down, what seemed like protection got in the way sometimes.

“Ma—Sir?” She'd almost said *Master*.

“Yes, my girl?”

“Will you take my blindfold off before you take me? I'd love to see you.”

“Absolutely.” She felt his arm move beneath her; then he pushed a door open. A slam indicated he'd kicked it closed. He set her down on a bed, helping her to lay down on it. She propped herself up on her elbows. She heard the flick of a light switch, a little glow leaking through the edge of her blindfold. “And you probably thought I'd never say yes to anything.”

He eased the blindfold off her, and she blinked, her eyes slowly adjusting to the fluorescent light in the room. It wasn't too bright, just a little lamp by the side of the bed.

She let him spread her legs again. He tugged the object whose vibrations had given her so much pleasure and frustration out of her pussy. Such a tiny egg-shaped thing, to have caused all that trouble.

He'd had the bag over his shoulder apparently too, because it was sitting at the edge of the bed. He pulled out a little bottle of lube.

“I don't think you need that, Sir.” She was sure he didn't need that. She'd never been wetter.

He grinned at her.

“Oh.” As long as he got inside her, she was okay with it. As long as he made her come.

His lube-coated finger rubbed against her anal opening and then pushed inside. She shuddered. She knew the sane thing was to let him take his time and get her thoroughly slick, if he was going to take her that way. She didn't want sane right now. “Fuck me now, Sir?” She just barely made it a question.

“Soon.” He stretched her, pulling with his finger as he drizzled a little more lube in. It was cool, but it warmed up quickly enough. She wiggled. Soon wasn’t soon enough. She wondered if he only fucked women in the ass, if that was all that appealed to him.

He slipped the egg into her ass, and she blinked. Then he turned it on.

“Oh my God.” She’d done a lot of things, but she’d never had something vibrating in her ass that wasn’t under her control. Somehow she’d missed out on that. He stood up, taking his shirt off and tossing it to the floor, revealing a powerful chest and sharply defined muscles. *Yummy*. She watched him, her hand slipping down her belly semiconsciously.

“No,” he said. “No touching. For the next little while, that’s my pussy, and you don’t play with it.”

She wanted to growl at him, but she didn’t. “Yes, Sir.” Her voice sounded distant to her. She pushed her tits together, trying to maximize her cleavage, wondering if he’d let her squeeze her tender nipples. They needed some kind of touching. The vibration below was driving her crazy.

He kicked off his shoes, then pulled off his socks. There wasn’t anything left but his jeans. He hadn’t told her to stop playing with her breasts, so she didn’t. He was watching her, she realized, and enjoying the view. She pinched a nipple hard. He grinned.

I guess he likes the girlish parts of a girl, after all.

His cock jutted out proudly, happy to be released. Nature had been kind to him. He was longer than average and very thick, with a purplish, circumcised head. He rolled a condom over it with practiced ease and knelt on the bed.

For a moment, she thought he was going to tease her some more. He licked her pussy, once down and once up across her nether lips, then teased the pearl of pleasure above them. She could tell him again to fuck her, but it wouldn’t do any good. He was going to do it his way, and she had to admit his way felt awfully good. She just wanted more, and she wanted it now.

He slid up her body. “I just wanted a taste,” he told her. His thick cock entered her sodden pussy with one easy thrust, stretching her. She bucked her hips, pressing her clit against his pubic bone.

He didn’t make her wait. He pulled back and then thrust back in right away, and then again, and again, his balls bouncing against her ass. On the fourth time the dam burst and she came, shuddering around him, her legs thrashing at the air. Her fingernails dug into his back, eliciting a brief grimace from him. She didn’t apologize. “Yes, yes.” The egg vibrating inside her, his hard, thick cock—it was all too much. Overwhelming, and yet she wanted all of it.

He fucked her hard, her body slamming into the mattress with each thrust. He grabbed her wrists and held them down against the bed, whether to save his back from damage or just because he wanted to restrain her, she didn’t know. She liked being restrained, captured, ravished. Barely had the tremors of her orgasm finished before she felt another starting.

She screamed as his face contorted in ecstasy, his cock pulsing as he powerfully thrust inside her again and again. All she could do was squeeze the mattress with her fingers as she shuddered around him one more time.

* * *

Samantha woke up late the next morning alone. She had slipped out of his arms and gone to her own room to fall asleep. The intimacy of sleeping with a man made her feel too vulnerable. It didn’t stop her from waking up with a vision of him naked, though, and it didn’t stop the memories of sex from bringing heat to her face—and other places.

He was just across the hall and two doors down. Her Pooh nightshirt might not be the sexiest thing ever, but if she found him, she didn’t really intend to keep it on. The fact that his roommate might still be in the room brought a mischievous smile to her face, but it wasn’t going to stop her. That was what Bondage Ranch was all about, after all, putting those inhibitions aside. She grinned.

What had seemed like a great idea seemed less great when she opened the door to find Arthur gone and the roommate deep inside a woman she didn't know. She recognized the roommate. Of all the people Arthur might have been rooming with, it had to be Gordon. She shut the door quickly, but she knew he'd spotted her. If Gordon thought she was pining after him, it would only bring trouble.

So Arthur was up and about somewhere. Maybe he still wanted her, and maybe he didn't. They had only agreed on three hours. The thought that he'd found someone else to play with made her stomach tighten. She went back to her room to get dressed.

She decided she'd be purple today—purple leather mini, purple leather bra, and a black cotton fringe bolero to set it off. She hadn't worn the purple stuff for nearly two years, not since a Dom had told her purple was not her color and it didn't go with her blonde hair. But despite her uncertainties about how the day would go—and despite bursting in on Gordon—she was feeling good about herself. *She* liked the way she looked in purple, and that was what mattered today. She got the clothes on as fast as she could and set out to find Arthur.

Arthur wasn't in the dungeon, either; in fact, hardly anyone was. There were still a few doughnuts left in the boxes on the tables, though, and Samantha helped herself to one. It had been a while since she'd had a doughnut, even though there was a place that made them right across from her work. If the wind blew right, the sweet baking smell of glazed goodness would cut through the oil and grease of the shop. On those days at least half the customers went straight to get doughnuts after dropping their cars off or picking them up, unable to resist the lure.

A roar from outside made her realize where everyone was. Yes, the couples went off to eat breakfast in town most mornings at Bondage Ranch. But the other Saturday morning event, weather permitting, was the pony races.

It was a perfectly clear day. A bit cool for what she was wearing, and the dirt paths outside weren't too easy in heels, especially if it had rained a little the night before. She sprayed on bug repellent and then shucked her shoes next to the door

and walked out barefoot. There were no real horses at Bondage Ranch to leave little surprises for bare feet, just the Saturday morning ponies, and better muddy feet than a twisted ankle.

Sure enough Arthur was there, leaning against a wall and taking in the sights. He looked damn fine in tight black leather pants. There wasn't a girl with him, just another Dom. She frowned at the way her heart quickened to see he wasn't taken yet. Then again, maybe the other man and him—the guy was beautiful—well, damn, they could at least let her watch. She wasn't going to back off. She walked toward them.

Arthur turned as she approached. “Ah, Sam. There you are. Was wondering when you'd wake up.”

“I made it before noon!”

“That you did.” Arthur chuckled. “Sam, this is Aidan. He just got here, apparently. Aidan, Sam.”

“Ah, the lovely lady you talked about.” Aidan had a European accent Sam couldn't quite place. He offered his hand, and she reached out to him, half expecting him to lift her hand and blow a kiss over it. He just shook it firmly.

Aidan let her hand go and smiled. “Nice to meet you, Sam. I know Master Arthur has been looking forward to seeing you again, so I'll let you two alone.”

“Take care, Aidan.” Arthur waved as Aidan backed away. “Good to meet you.”

And with that they were alone. *So Arthur was talking about me.* In her experience people talking about her was rarely a good thing. But it sounded like he'd been quite positive. *That's a switch.*

“Did you sleep all right?” asked Arthur.

“Yes, thank you,” said Samantha. “Like a baby.”

A horn blew, and Samantha's attention went to the cleared circle that served as a track. She'd missed the girls' race, although the “ponies” were still in evidence with their butt-plug tails and their strappy leather getups. She recognized one,

Monica, dressed all in pink. She'd even dyed her hair pink. Personally she'd rather die first, but Monica looked pleased as punch. She kept swishing her tail.

Now it was time for the men, wearing little more than black leather harnesses, pulling little carts with their mistresses inside. All those muscles straining were pretty attractive, she had to admit, from a pure beefcake point of view. "So did you enjoy watching the girls?"

"Not really my thing," said Arthur. "But I'd never seen a pony race before, so I thought I'd watch. There was one thing I appreciated, though."

"What's that?"

"I'd enjoy inserting one of those tails."

Samantha gulped. "Not the pink."

"Oh, good God, no." Arthur laughed.

Samantha grinned.

The mistresses were having fun with their riding crops, but she wasn't sure it made the "horses" go any faster. Then again, it wasn't as much about who finished first but about who looked the best doing it, or the ponies wouldn't wear such ridiculously high shoes.

"I suppose I wouldn't actually safe word the pink," Sam admitted. "Although I might close my eyes. But there's no way I could wear one of those shoes without twisting an ankle."

"That would be an excellent reason to safe word."

Sam sighed. "Glad you agree. It seems I'm always wrong if I use one, no matter what was done to violate my trust. Doms always think I'm just not as good a submissive for saying my word."

"That's not how it's supposed to be," said Arthur. "Most subs beat themselves up too much about using their safe word as it is without the Dom pitching in. But yeah," he said. "I've played with people like that."

"What'd you do?"

She wanted to know what caused a strong, hard man like Arthur to safe word, but that wasn't how he interpreted it. "My fist had a little conversation with his face. I'm not a violent man, but—it was special. He needed to know before he went on to play with the next person that submission is a gift, and it can be taken away if it's not treated with respect. Most people would get it with words, but my read was that this guy wasn't the type to get it any other way."

Sam blinked. "I don't think that's ever been a real option for me." She giggled.

"Oh, I think if you had to punch a guy in public, you'd find that you had a few Sir Galahads around to make sure it was a one-way exchange."

Sam laughed at the image. *Sir Galahads indeed.* "And once they were done proving their chivalric manliness, they'd go back to whispering about Sam the smart-assed sub and how they'd rather not play with her."

"Their loss," said Arthur.

"You keep saying things like that, Sir," said Sam wonderingly, "I think I might just start to believe them."

Chapter Four

Arthur shook his head. He didn't buy Grant's notion that every Dom needed to be a sub first, but he had to admit there were a lot of Doms who badly needed to find out what it was like when the shoe was on the other foot. It sounded like Sam had met more than a few. BDSM wasn't about pushing someone around, it was about finding a way for both partners to get what they wanted and needed—when part of that want and need was a desire to dominate and submit.

The carriage race was faster than the pony race, despite the loads the men pulled. The men wore more practical shoes and were far more determined to show each other up at the finish line.

The festivities over, people started to drift away, mostly back toward the dungeon. Given that the clubs had dungeons that were as well equipped, it seemed to Arthur a waste of a beautiful day to go back inside.

"Let's go play in the woods." He picked up the sports bag that held his gear.

Samantha raised her eyebrows at him. For a moment something warred on her face, and when she spoke, her voice was very quiet. "We haven't agreed on anything for today."

If she'd needed a full-blown negotiation, she would have spoken up more forcefully, and he would have given her what she needed. But he knew what she was doing because he'd done it too. She was just going through the motions. "Oh, I've agreed," he told her. "And if you don't, you can safe word at any time." He reached out his hand.

She put her hand in his. He led her around the horse and pony-girl crowd, who were jabbering away about their fetish to anyone who wanted to listen, and led her

deep enough into the woods that the trees provided a bit of privacy. Someone could wander by at any time, in theory; in practice, it seemed unlikely. That was fine. He was good at tuning out an audience, but he didn't get anything out of showing off for one. He'd much rather focus on his sub.

He found a good sturdy tree he liked and set his bag down. He turned and gathered Sam into his arms, feeling her warm body against his. He kissed her deeply. The ferocity she kissed him back with told him what he wanted to know.

"I want you. And if you don't safe word now, I'm going to tie you up and make you scream."

"Promises, promises." She grinned at him. "How many hours do you want me for this time?"

He'd been disappointed that she'd left him in the night and had wondered if she'd show up in the morning. Now he didn't want to let her go. She'd made it clear she was gone once the weekend was over, but he wanted her for as long as he could have her. "Twenty-four." That would take them to late Sunday morning, when things tended to break up.

She shook her head. "I need to be on the road earlier than that tomorrow morning. Twenty."

He nodded. "Well negotiated." Twenty hours still meant she'd spend the night with him. Like lovers did, not just play partners. He'd only had her for a few hours, and he wanted so much more.

She looked like she was having second thoughts. He pulled her into another tongue-swirling, breath-stealing kiss, and when he was done she was just staring at him, her eyes big, a look of pure adoration on her face. *Yeah. That look. I want that look.*

He took off her bolero and replaced it with his leather jacket. The tree looked pretty rough, and his jacket was sturdier.

"I'm not cold, Sir."

“I want to protect you from the bark scraping against your back.”

“I—Maybe I want to feel it.”

The bark scraping against her bare skin, rubbing it raw while he fucked her. He understood the attraction. There were times in sub-space when no stimulation seemed too intense. That didn't mean one wouldn't regret it afterward. He wasn't about to let her back get bloody or, for that matter, infected. “You'll still feel it. I promise.”

He moved her so her shoulders were back against the tree and wrapped rope around her just under her bra, pinning her upper arms to her body in the process. She wiggled, but she couldn't move much. He watched her to make sure she was breathing okay. She was fine, although just as if she were wearing a corset, she couldn't take the very deepest breaths.

He wrapped cuffs around her wrists. The way he had her upper arms tied, she couldn't reach them back around the tree, but a short length of rope made sure they were as far back as they could comfortably go. She was pretty flexible. The only way she could get more slack in the rope was by stretching her arms back. He watched her try it. She wasn't one to just assume her bonds would hold her; she had to test him. He smiled. He was once the same way. But when she had been in the stocks, where she'd known she could get out easily, she hadn't budged. *That* required submission.

“My mom once told me that trusting a man makes you feel safe, but not trusting men is the way to *be* safe,” Samantha said to him.

He raised an eyebrow. Not a bad piece of advice, if a bit too cynical for his tastes. But he had her tied helplessly in the middle of nowhere. He knew he'd keep her safe, but that didn't mean she knew it. “And what do you think?”

“I trust you, Sir.”

Arthur smiled. “Good.” He knelt down. She shivered, but she didn't object.

He lifted her legs right off the ground and put her thighs on his shoulders. “I wanted to do this last night, but you were gone.” His head was between her thighs,

pushing her skirt up. She shuddered at the first touch of his tongue on her labia. Just the reaction he wanted. She was so responsive. He parted her nether lips with his fingers and pushed his tongue as deeply into her as it would go. She was tangy and metallic, and to him she tasted divine.

Nectar dripped from her as fast as he could lick it up. He flicked his tongue across her clit and filled her with his fingers. She was so wet and so ready that three fingers fit in easily, so he made it four. His tongue swirled around her engorged clit.

She struggled for a moment against her bonds, and then she was rocking against his mouth, moving her body along the rough bark of the tree to get more. He was glad he had given her his jacket.

Her breathing got shorter. He had seen her on the edge enough the night before to know the signs. He didn't slow down, but for some reason she just stayed there, hovering. In fact, the more he finger fucked her, the tenser her muscles seemed to get. If it was all about sensation, she would be screaming right now, but she needed something more, and he needed to figure out what it was and help her get there.

He pulled up the back of her skirt, which was all that protected her bottom from the tree. She looked confused, but the tension started to go. Did she need the pain? She didn't strike him as that much of a hardcore masochist, so it was more complicated than that. Her juices covered his fingers, so much that he could feel it running down his wrist. He stood up, his fingers still in her, curling against her G-spot.

He kissed her, knowing she could taste herself on his tongue. His cock ached, and even though satisfying it hadn't been his main goal, he couldn't help but rub his hardness against her body through the leather of his pants. His tongue plundered her mouth. He wanted to claim her, possess her. When they both needed air, he leaned back and whispered. "Mine."

"Yours, Sir."

He withdrew his fingers and fished a condom from his pants. He freed his cock from confinement, ripped the wrapper, and rolled the condom over it. She didn't say a thing, but she didn't have to. Her body was ready for him, and her face shone with eagerness. He dropped the wrapper, letting it flutter to the ground as he lifted her legs, bent his knees, and entered her.

He moved slow at first, feeling the warmth of her around him, relishing the way her channel squeezed him.

She moaned with each push inside. "Yours, Sir."

He grinned and brushed his lips against hers, teasing her with an almost kiss. She reached out her tongue to lick his lips and missed.

"Don't stick it out if you don't intend to use it," he told her.

"I'll use it however you like, Sir."

He licked her lips, keeping his own just out of range, his tongue parrying hers when she tried to reach. He picked up the pace, thrusting deep inside her, sliding smoothly, her pussy fitting him like a glove. She winced for just a moment, the expression changing to ecstasy as she hungrily reached for his tongue and his lips.

He grabbed her ass, holding it and protecting it from the tree, and drove into her hard and fast. If the tree had made her feel like he thought it had, her ass was already plenty tender. He pulled on her cheeks, stretching them apart. He felt the bark against his knuckles, but that didn't change his resolution to protect her. Suddenly she screamed, her pussy contracting over and over again, her whole body shaking with pleasure.

That was enough to push him over the edge. He came, his cock pulsing again and again as he gasped for the air he'd forgotten to breathe. "Mine," he said. "Mine."

She whispered back. "Yours. Yours. Yours."

It just didn't get any better than this. She wanted this to be light and temporary? Screw that. There was no way he was letting her go.

He held her for a long moment, reluctantly withdrawing and lowering her legs when he felt himself start to soften. Slowly he untied her, wanting to hold her less awkwardly. She pulled the condom off him and gave him a squeeze that made him get harder.

“Are you warm enough for me to take my jacket?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m very warm.” She gave him an odd look but shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to him. He laid it down on the bed of wet leaves and then pulled her down to join him. The jacket kept last night’s rain off their bottoms, at least. The air smelled of the earth, the forest’s slow recycling of organic matter mixing with the oxygen richness of the trees.

She stroked the bare skin of his cock lazily as they reclined and kissed. His cock was extra sensitive. She had the good grace to stay away from the tip, concentrating instead on his shaft. If her grip had been firmer, she no doubt could have gotten him to a full erection, but she seemed to be enjoying herself. He smiled.

They nibbled on each other’s lips. God, she even tasted good. It had been a long time since anyone had given him this much pleasure. “Tell me about yourself, Sam.”

“You don’t want to know, Sir. I am what you see.”

“I haven’t seen nearly enough to know it all. And I want to know everything about you.”

Sam shook her head, slithering down his body. “You told me not to stick my tongue out if I wasn’t going to use it, Sir, and I’m”—her eyes glittered—“going to use it.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but when her lips kissed the head of his cock and slowly slipped over it, he just groaned. Her tongue slid across the underside. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked him in.

She didn’t finish until she’d sucked him dry. She looked up at him and grinned, wiping off a little cum he suspected she had let dribble onto her chin on purpose.

He wasn't going to want to give her up at the end of the weekend, he knew that already. But she'd been very clear. "*Here, this weekend, and nothing else.*" It was as much a limit as anything on her list, and he'd tried to push against it. He couldn't say he didn't enjoy her alternative to a safe word.

He also knew full well he wasn't going to let this limit go without a fight.

* * *

Arthur looked at Samantha, not sure he'd heard her correctly. Her eyes were glistening, but her voice was firm as she repeated it.

"I need to leave, Arthur. Sir."

It was two o'clock in the morning. They stood in the dungeon, which was still full—people played even later into the evening than this. They'd laughed and talked, watched and played. He'd made her come so many times he'd lost track. He couldn't blame her for being exhausted. He was tired too.

"We can go to bed," he said, knowing that wasn't what she meant.

She had ignored all the little invitations he'd given to talk about herself and life outside of Bondage Ranch. He'd spilled information about himself along the way: how he managed a hardware store, rooted for the Dodgers, liked science fiction, and used to play bass in a club band in LA. She seemed to enjoy hearing it; she just hadn't reciprocated. She even asked him questions about the club scene in Los Angeles—the leather scene, not about his band.

"No," she told him. "I mean I need to go home."

He'd suspected when he'd found her gone from his bed the night before that she had an unlisted limit about sleeping together. He wasn't going to let her just bolt. "You said you were going to stay until morning."

"I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Whichever you like," she said, shrugging. "You're a wonderful Dom, Arthur. And you've showed me the very best time of my life."

“So stay.”

“That’s why I can’t. If I stay, I’ll never leave.”

Arthur grinned. “If need be, I’ll drive you home.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“Once you find happiness, Samantha, maybe you’re not meant to leave it.” He believed in her. How could he make her believe in herself? Her eyes brimmed with tears. He yearned to kiss them away when they fell. “What are you afraid of, Sam?” He gripped her shoulders firmly.

She twisted away and turned her head so he couldn’t see her cheeks. “You.”

“Really?” He grabbed her hand. “I’m not letting you leave until you tell me the truth.” Because if she told him the truth, she’d have to hear it herself. He knew full well she wasn’t afraid of him as much as she was afraid of herself, afraid of falling in love. He had a healthy ego, but not enough to think he’d made her fall in love with him in just a weekend. *But we’re on that path, and she knows it.*

“I can’t spend the night, Arthur. I just can’t. We’ve gone as far as I can go.”

That was closer, but he knew she could go further. This was one limit they both needed to push—and one he hadn’t agreed to let alone. “We’ll talk about that in bed,” he said, turning and walking toward the dorms, pulling her along. If there was anything left of the submissive headspace in her at the moment, she’d follow. He knew the effect of a commanding, sure voice.

She said it quietly, and he wished he hadn’t heard. “Red.”

He stared at her for a moment and let go of her wrist.

“Thank you,” she said.

He’d played with men who thought safe words were just for physical things like excessive pain or danger of injury. For a moment he was tempted to channel them, but he stopped. He was almost sure that sleeping with him wouldn’t do her any harm. But she’d used the word, and it wasn’t his place to decide any more.

His lips were tight as he reached into his back pocket. He took out a business card, and since she didn't have any pockets, he tucked it into her bra. She trembled at the touch, and he almost smiled as her flesh quivered against his knuckles.

"My phone number. If you ever change your mind."

For a long moment they stared at each other. He wanted to throw every rule of safe, sane, and consensual out the window and grab her and sling her over his shoulders. But he wasn't going to. He was more in control of himself than that, no matter what was good for him or good for her. Honoring limits, respecting safe words: those things were a matter of honor. He didn't blink. She could change her mind if she wanted to.

She turned and ran.

Arthur looked after her. He noticed a few people were staring, and he looked back at them after Sam was gone. They turned away once they knew they'd been noticed.

Alex Allison didn't turn away, though. She walked over to him. He really wasn't in the mood for company, particularly female company. He'd drive home himself if he didn't know he'd be safer doing it in the morning.

"Sorry, Arthur."

"What are you sorry for?" He kept his voice from sounding like a bark. There was no reason to be impolite just because things hadn't gone as well as he'd wanted.

"I kind of set you guys up."

"I had a great time." He smiled. "She did too. It seems I just got more emotional about it."

Alex nodded, although she looked like she wanted to disagree.

It wasn't true, he realized. Sam had been every bit as emotional; she just wasn't showing it in the way he wanted her to. "She's a wonderful woman. I'm going to go to bed. Good night, Alex." Arthur turned to go, not wanting to talk about it any further.

“If you had another chance, you’d play with her again?”

“Hell yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder enough to spit out the words and kept walking.

“Good night, Arthur.” Alex’s voice was soft, but somehow it carried to him anyway.

He was sure he’d get over it. He didn’t have a choice. Unless she called.

Chapter Five

Three weeks later Samantha was in the grocery store selecting apples, but her mind was on Arthur. A dominant like that didn't stay unattached for long, not if women had anything to say about it. She'd cried herself to sleep the last three nights. She was such a fool, burning the card with his phone number on it the moment she got home.

No. It would never have worked out. She had been so close to falling in love with him, and that would mean an end to her nice, quiet, seminormal life. If she was in love, she knew she would do just about anything for the person she was in love with. Dangerous things, even. Thinking about the things a dominant man like Arthur would have her do made her tingle in the all the right places.

She'd wanted to surrender everything to him, and she just couldn't do that. There wouldn't have been any of her left, and Samantha Grayson, small town girl, auto mechanic—that was as much her as the sexually open person she pretended to be at Bondage Ranch. She could be that person for a couple of weekends a year, but she couldn't do it all the time. And it was that person, Sam the vixen, who Arthur had given his number to.

"My, my," said an unwanted but familiar voice. Todd. "Look who's here!"

Better a grocery store than a dark alley, thought Sam. Todd probably wouldn't attack her even in a dark alley, but she wasn't entirely sure. Still, it was best to be civil. She nodded at him. "Todd."

"I seem to remember seeing some sexier clothes in your dresser," Todd said in a conversational tone. "Why aren't you wearing something that shows off your boobs a bit better?"

Samantha looked around. No one was close. She was wearing blue jeans and a black, red, and white plaid flannel shirt. She was comfortable in them. “Not here in public, Todd. Please keep your voice down.”

Todd leaned closer, his voice dropping. “In private you’d like to give me a blowjob, wouldn’t you?”

“No, Todd, I wouldn’t.” She wanted to edge back, but then he’d raise his voice again.

“Oh no, you wouldn’t. Not unless I held your head and fucked your face, because that’s the way you like it, isn’t it? A little force?”

Samantha sighed. *Enough*. She wasn’t going to be intimidated by the twerp any longer, no matter how much bigger than her he was. Why she’d ever revealed anything of herself to him was beyond her; it had been a mistake even bigger than getting rid of Arthur’s phone number. “You don’t get it, Todd. Just go away.”

Todd grinned at her. “I’ll go away. But just you wait, Samantha. Next time, I’ll bring the ropes.” He turned and walked away from her, leaving her standing there clenching her fists. One of them had held an apple. She tossed it into her bag, although she had no intention of eating it. She’d split the skin in two places and no doubt bruised the rest.

She wrinkled her nose. Apples that weren’t good for eating were still fine for pie. She tossed a few more apples in her bag, not being so picky this time, and wheeled her cart toward the milk. She’d always make mistakes, but she wasn’t going to let it wreck her life. Maybe Arthur would be there next time she went to Bondage Ranch, and maybe he wouldn’t have been grabbed by some other woman—or man—and maybe they’d work it out. Even if they didn’t, she was a bit more confident for having known him for a weekend.

Milk, milk. She tried to focus on what she was doing. If she thought about Arthur, as nice as he was to fantasize about, her thoughts wouldn’t stay positive for long. She finished buying her groceries and headed home, stopping in the hall to pick up her mail before heading up the stairs to the apartment she rented. There

was the usual junk mail and one letter. The return address surprised her. *Alex Allison*. She wondered why Alex was writing to her. It wasn't time for another Bondage Ranch flyer, and those were just marked "BR" in the return address anyway. In any case, the envelope was discreet, so she didn't have to worry about the mailman starting any gossip.

She put away the groceries first, tossed the junk mail into the blue recycle bucket she kept just inside the door, and walked into her bedroom. She sat at the edge of the bed and opened up the letter.

Dear Sam,

I wanted to invite you to come join us on a Tuesday night for some fun when you feel ready. I don't know if you know this, but a few of us have been getting together at our house on the first Tuesday of the month. It's a little more intimate than the bondage weekends, invitation only, but I know it's quite a drive for you. We're quite a drive for almost everyone. If you would like to come, let me know. Pretty much everyone is paired up for these little shindigs, so feel free to bring a date. If you have any questions, call me at 555-325-2178.

Alex

Alex had her address—and her phone number too, for emergencies—as part of the form she filled out and sent in with her check each time she'd gone to Bondage Ranch. Which meant, of course, that Alex had Arthur's address too. She'd always thought of it as a good thing that Alex and Dylan could be trusted to keep all that information confidential.

She was pretty sure, though, that Alex's phone number wasn't on the BR flyers. She didn't remember seeing any phone number, actually, just an e-mail and a PO Box.

She wasn't going to go alone if "*pretty much everyone*" was paired up. She might be an occasional masochist, but that sort of pain she could do without. There

was one alternative, though. It was up to her. *Call, or don't call.* She sat down on the edge of her bed.

It was too soon since the last time to go playing. It was a long drive, two hours there and two hours back, for just an evening. She'd have to take either Tuesday or Wednesday off work for it to make any sense at all, and she'd used up most of her leave after her mother died. *Which means swapping one of those days with Craig and covering his weekend at the shop.* Craig would probably be happy enough with the deal. He didn't much care for working weekends.

One way or the other, she didn't want to cry herself to sleep another night, wondering what she'd missed. She picked up the phone and gave Alex a call.

"Hello, Alex Allison, Maryland Regency Dance."

She'd known the dungeon was some kind of ballroom. She wondered if there was much money in regency dance or if the Allison's were just independently wealthy. *None of my business, really.* "Hi, Alex, this is Sam."

"Oh! Hi, Sam."

"I got your letter, but—um, I have a problem."

"Oh?"

"I mislaid Arthur's phone number."

"Arthur?" asked Alex. "Arthur...oh, I think I know who you mean."

My goodness, thought Sam, she's even worse at lying than I am.

"We simply can't give out someone's phone number, Sam. I mean, think of how you would feel if I gave yours to him."

I have been; I have been. Her heart gave a thump at what she was about to say, but if she wasn't going to say it, there hadn't been any sense in calling. "That's exactly what I'm asking you to do, Alex."

"Hmm?"

"Would you mind calling Arthur and giving him my phone number?"

There was a brief pause. "I think we can do just that."

Was there a note of triumph in Alex's voice? Sam was pretty sure there was. It wasn't the first time she'd been steered toward someone by Alex—come to think of it, she'd met Bruce that way. Alex was a regular BDSM yenta. "Thank you, Alex."

Now all she had to do was wait. She wasn't very good at waiting, never had been.

She got up and went to the kitchen to make herself a salad and then changed her mind. It wouldn't hurt to do a little cooking, and she hadn't eaten very well lately. Not that ramen, eggs, and some sliced up veggies was a feast, but it at least hit more than one food group and would be filling. After that she'd get the pie going.

* * *

Three days passed, and there'd been no word. She'd eaten all of the pie. Arthur, Samantha figured, had moved on. His hand had probably found some other woman's collar to tug. His cock had probably found some other woman's pussy to fill. They'd had a good time, but men like Arthur could move on easily enough. She'd missed her chance.

Either that or he was being a bastard and making her wait just because he thought she deserved to twist in the wind.

The phone rang a few minutes after seven in the evening.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Samantha," said a deep male voice.

Was that Arthur? She wasn't sure. She'd only heard his voice for a short time, and the phone distorted voices anyway. "Who's this?"

"Arthur Marcelli," he said.

"I see." So he had been making her wait, after all. She should be making peace right now, but the words, and the frosty tone of voice, left her lips too fast to rein them in.

"Alex told me you wanted to go with me to a party at Bondage Ranch."

“That wasn’t what I told her.” She was pretty sure she’d just told Alex to have Arthur give her a call. “But yes, that’s pretty much true.”

“Would you like me to pick you up?”

“Um, where do you live?”

“Just north of Baltimore. Towson.”

Him picking her up would mean she’d have to give him her address. Although with her home phone number, he could probably find it out anyway. “You’re almost on my way to Bondage Ranch. I think, then, it would make more sense for me to drive to your place and then for us to drive from there. I’m completely out of your way. Or would that injure the fragile Dom ego?”

Arthur chuckled. “Does it really seem that fragile?”

He had a point. “Okay. No.”

He gave her his address. “I just wanted you to know you were worth driving for.”

“And you wanted to know I’d wait by the phone for you for a while before you bothered to call back?” she retorted.

“No,” said Arthur. “My phone didn’t let me know I had a message until today. I’m sure the folks at the cellular store would explain to me why, after I waited in their line for an hour, but until their service improves, I think it will remain a mystery.”

She sighed. “Oh. I’m sorry. I guess I’m just used to Doms playing head games.”

“Yeah, Doms suck,” Arthur said.

Sam laughed. Tensed muscles in her back and shoulders she hadn’t known were knotted up relaxed. It was going to be okay. No, there was no guarantee of that, but there was at least a chance.

She was hit with the realization that from his perspective, she’d sat on his phone number for weeks and was still making *him* call *her*. Doms weren’t the only

people who played head games. This time, maybe neither of them were playing, despite appearances.

“I’ll see you around five that afternoon,” she said. “Um. Do you still have that list of limits I filled out for you?”

“I sure do,” he told her.

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. There were some things she’d put on that list—waxing came to mind—that she wasn’t sure she was brave enough for. She supposed she’d have to be, because she wasn’t going to disappoint him by taking it back. “Well, I’ll see you then.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. And do let me drive the rest of the way. That fragile Dom ego thing, you know.”

She laughed again.

“Samantha.”

She thought of correcting him, but she bit it back. The way he said her name, it was as if he was savoring the syllables, as if “Sam” would have been over too quickly. “Yes?”

“Once you get to my place, you’re giving me authority.”

A shiver ran down her spine. *Scary. But hot.* “Yes, Sir.”

He smiled. “I’ll furnish you with a trench coat, and you can wear nothing else at all from my place to Bondage Ranch.”

“I can, can I?”

“Can and will. Just because I like you,” he said.

It was as if nothing had interrupted them, as if they were right back where they had left off at Bondage Ranch. No, there was nothing wrong with his ego. When she’d questioned him, she’d expected him either to back down or to get all prickly—that was what most Doms did. He just kept on going. She could say no, if she wanted to. She could win this one. She didn’t want to.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll see you at five on Tuesday then, ready to dress as directed. Sir?”

“Yes, Samantha?”

“I’m nervous.”

“I know.”

“You know, it’s a funny thing, but knowing that makes it a lot better. I’ll see you then.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good night, Sir.”

“Good night, my girl.” He hung up the phone.

My girl. Was that what she wanted, to be his girl? It was the sort of thing a vanilla lover might say, but it didn’t sound very vanilla coming from Arthur. Something inside her really liked that. “I’m mine,” Sam said into the phone, knowing full well that if Arthur could still hear her, she’d be tempted to say something entirely different.

* * *

On the tenth of November Sam walked up the steps, staring at the knocker for a moment and hesitating. It was a cool late autumn day. She had her own trench coat, an old beige one, so she was wearing it. But she wasn’t naked underneath. She had bought a new red bra and thong set from Victoria’s Secret. She wasn’t wearing anything else but the trench coat and her shoes. She didn’t think she’d ever before worn so little in public, unless you counted Bondage Ranch as public. *Not that anyone can tell. At least it was cold enough people didn’t stare at her for wearing a coat.* A red leaf fluttered its way down in her peripheral vision, as if to remind her that fall was passing into winter.

Arthur lived in a town house. Nothing fancy, but well kept, at least on the outside. She knocked.

He opened the door a few seconds later, smiled, and gestured her inside. “I see you brought your own trench coat,” he said.

Sam smiled. “Yep,” she said nonchalantly. *I can do this. I can totally do this.* She walked past him, waited for the door to click closed, and unbuttoned the coat. She let it drop to the floor. She spun around to give him a view. The push-up bra enhanced what she had and pushed it up as two mounds of bare flesh atop some lacy scalloping. The thong displayed an ass that no man had ever complained about. “You like?”

He stared at her for a moment, eyes wide. “Yes, I’d have to say so, but...”

“But what? You can make me take it off if you like, but do you at least appreciate the—”

“Thanks for letting me use your treadmill—whoa!” came a male voice behind her.

Arthur suppressed a chuckle. Sam whirled her head. A man in his thirties, blond haired and blue eyed, stood behind her checking her out. Her blood turned cold.

“Hot girlfriend,” said the stranger.

“We’re working on that part,” said Arthur. The idea that he wanted her as his girlfriend almost made her forget she was pissed. “Samantha, meet Gary. He works for me. He came by to use my treadmill. Put your coat back on.”

Sam bent down and grabbed the trench coat, shrugging it on and holding it shut with her arms tightly hugging herself. She was sure her face was as red as her lingerie. *What the hell did he have company over for?* Gary had quite a sheen of sweat on him. He might have gotten that on the treadmill, or the two might have been up to something more intimate. She looked at Arthur, but his white dress shirt and black leather pants didn’t show any signs of recent physical exertion.

“You could have warned me,” she said.

“You didn’t give me much of a chance,” said Arthur.

“Don’t worry. I’m outta here. See you Thursday, boss,” said Gary, striding through the foyer and sliding past Sam and then Arthur.

“Take care, Gary.”

She waited for the door to shut behind him before she spoke again. “What was that guy doing here when we’re about to go on a date?” she demanded.

“Well, you are ten minutes early,” pointed out Arthur, “and Gary would have been gone in ten minutes. He works for me. He’s my plumbing expert. I run a hardware store. His treadmill at home broke. If I didn’t have a date with you, I would have gone over to his place to fix it. I assure you, if I’d known you were going to strip off in the foyer, I’d have been quite alone. Or at the very least I would have charged for tickets.”

She looked him over, trying to find signs that he was joking. She concluded he was, even though he didn’t crack a smile. There was a telltale twitch in his eye. She took a deep breath and forced herself to button the trench coat back up slowly.

He moved over to her, almost touching, and leaned close, speaking softly in her ear. “You, Samantha, have very nice taste in underwear. And I’m going to enjoy taking it off tonight nearly as much as I’m going to enjoy watching you come. But for the moment you can keep your bra and panties on.”

She shivered. “Yes, Sir,” she said, registering the use of her full first name a moment after she said it. *He keeps doing that.*

Now he smiled. “That’s what I like to hear,” he said.

“I’m Sam,” she corrected. “Remember?”

He ignored that and offered her a gentlemanly arm. “Shall we?” he asked.

She shrugged, ignored the arm as easily as he’d ignored her reminder, and walked out the door. Why were Doms always arrogant? She wasn’t sure how else she wanted them to be exactly, but...

The click of a car door triggered by a remote clued her in to which car was his. A dark blue Mazda Miata. *Nice car.* She settled into the passenger’s seat before he could help her in. He let her shut the car door while he walked around to the driver’s seat.

“So my question, Samantha,” Arthur said, as he buckled himself in, “is a simple one, and I realize I’m not bending over backward to make it perfectly easy. But you set out this morning wearing nice undies and planning to flash me in the house, and now you’re fighting me.”

“That’s not a question,” she replied quickly, unable to stop herself.

“No. The question is, why?”

Chapter Six

Arthur started the engine. It was going to be a long night. From what Alex had told him, it was going to be a very intimate gathering indeed, just a handful of couples even if they had full attendance. It was harder to go unnoticed in a situation like that. He'd find someplace private to deal with Sam nonetheless. She was understandably flustered by Gary's presence, but he doubted that was everything. He reviewed his actions and thought them sound. In any case, the headspace she was in right now wasn't the headspace she wanted for herself, and while he couldn't control what she was thinking, it was still his job to help her get there.

She didn't speak again until they were out on the freeway.

"I don't know." She sighed. "I saw the other guy, and I thought maybe I'd been set up, that you had some fantasy about a threesome or whatever. Suddenly I realized I was in a house with a man I barely knew, and one I didn't know at all, and—things seemed horribly out of control."

Arthur smiled. "Instead of wonderfully out of control."

She stared at him for a moment before asking, "Huh?"

"You don't really want to be in control, do you, Samantha?"

"I suppose not," Sam said. "But..."

She let it hang, and he didn't bail her out. If he spoon-fed her the answer, it wouldn't mean a damn.

"I do like giving up control when I can," she finally said. "And I've no desire to top. It's just not easy to do when—when you're not sure you trust the other person, or when they don't seem to have their end under control, you know?"

“Preach it, sister!” he said. “I totally know where you’re coming from there.”

“That’s a really nice thing to know,” Sam said softly. He could hear the smile in her voice.

Trust. Having things under control. People sometimes could make it sound so simple. *Do you trust me?* In real life it was a matter of degrees, of how much trust, and it was never infinite. He took a different tack. “In any case, since you almost asked, I *do* have fantasies about threesomes. You?”

She hesitated before answering. “Of the two hunky guys and little old me variety, yes, I have fantasies about threesomes. I’m not looking to pretend I’m a lesbian to turn some guy on.”

Arthur chuckled. “Put that way, I’m not sure that there’s anything less of a turn-on than a girl *pretending* to be a lesbian.”

“I don’t mean to say that I’m totally opposed to—well, it’s not like it has to be all about me, or that I’m super selfish or anything. I realize that I should be involved in turning the Dom on just as much as he is me, but—anyway, it’s just not me, and I don’t want to pretend I’m something I’m not.”

He had a long, straight stretch of road ahead of him and fewer cars nearby—he decided he could risk a quick sideways glance. Sam was holding her own hands, fidgeting with them. She was nervous. There was a time and a place for a sub to be on the edge, but in a car where he couldn’t give her cuddles wasn’t one of them. He’d have to make do with words. “Good. I won’t offer you anything that isn’t me—and I don’t expect you to offer me anything that isn’t part of you, either.”

She smiled. “Good.”

“Of course, that means I have to get to know you better. Which works out nicely, because I *want* to know you better.”

“Fair enough.”

He heard the uncertainty in her voice, but he pressed on anyway. “What do you do for a living?”

The moment of silence stretched out like the open road in front of them. She'd answer, or she'd sit there the whole time, and he'd leave that up to her. He was pretty sure he had more patience than she did.

"I fix cars," she mumbled.

"You fist what?"

She gasped. "I didn't say I fist anything! Fix! Fix!"

He grinned. "So you're an auto mechanic." She had layers he hadn't even suspected. He should have known she did something like that, though, when he had felt the roughness of her hands.

"You heard me right the first time!"

He laughed. "Guilty as charged. So the very feminine Sam, siren of Bondage Ranch, is in reality Samantha, auto mechanic?"

"Something like that."

"You know, from a marketing point of view, Samantha the siren and Sam the auto mechanic might work better."

"Why do you think I like being called Sam?" Sam retorted. "My mom called me Samantha and always corrected anyone who did otherwise."

Arthur nodded. "I'm rather partial to feminine names. For women at least."

"Glad you clarified because I just can't call you Arthurina. It's a hard limit."

He laughed out loud. He didn't want to ever take that sassy streak away from her.

"I would be happy to be your Samantha this evening, Sir," she said.

"I would be honored," he said. It might not be a big thing, but obviously it was quite a step for her. A limit she didn't need, that she'd managed to overcome.

"How long ago did you lose your mother, Samantha?" he asked, having noted the past tense.

"A year ago."

“Father?”

“Never really knew him. He died when I was two. You?”

“Both parents still alive, but I was raised mostly by my uncle. It’s a long story.”

Sam smiled. “We’ve got a long drive.”

Arthur grinned. So they did. And he supposed he owed her the same kind of information he’d asked for, as much as he didn’t feel like going over it.

“Dad was in the military and got sent overseas a lot. And Mom—she just couldn’t handle being alone with just a couple of kids. She needed—or wanted—a man in her life. Kids were in the way of her affairs, so—off we went to live with Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe was—is—a good man, and he wasn’t going to let kids suffer just because their parents were screwed up.

“When Dad came back and found out what his wife had been up to, well, he didn’t want to have anything to do with her. But Uncle Joe was Mom’s brother, and it got complicated. Dad took us back for a year, and then he got himself shipped out again, and back we were with Mom for a week, and then back to Uncle Joe. I of course vowed never to be anything like my parents.” He chuckled. “So naturally I did ROTC in college and spent the next twelve years in the army.”

“Did you ever get married?”

He shook his head. “No. It works out for a lot of people. It can be real stressful on others. Somehow I didn’t really expect it to work out for me.” There’d been a girl, Marcy. They weren’t really in love, now that he looked back at it. But they got along well enough. He’d made the right call, though—what they had wasn’t strong enough to deal with the life he’d expected to have in the army, even though Marcy wouldn’t have been anything like Mom.

“So you probably didn’t have much trust for women, huh? Is that why you ended up hanging out with guys after you left the army?”

He stared at the road. Was it? He’d never thought of it that way. It took a few seconds before he felt he could give her the answer her question deserved. “No, I

don't think that was it, really. My mom is my mom, and I love her despite all her faults, and yeah, I've some pretty strong feelings about those faults. But I've met too many good women to project her faults onto them. I'm sure it's all complicated, but sometimes, you're just in a place, at a time, and the right—or wrong—person comes along and opens a door, and you go through it, or you don't go through it.”

“Yeah.”

He looked over at her since the road was clear. She was fidgeting with her hands again. He realized he was thinking of himself as Samantha's right person, opening a door. But maybe she was doing that for him. These things were always easier in hindsight. Either way she was acting a little bit spooked by his comment, so he changed the subject. If she was going to be nervous, he wanted the right kind of nervousness. “So how are you feeling under all those clothes?” Exactly how she looked under that trench coat was burned into his mind. She'd let the top gape open, giving him a good look at flesh and red lace. Undressed like that, she was positively inspirational.

She blushed but looked right at him and answered. “With you, Sir, I feel just fine.”

They didn't stop talking until they got to Bondage Ranch.

Arthur parked the Miata and strolled around to Sam's side of the car. This time she took his arm with a smile. He grinned back as they mounted the steps. At the big retreat, the door had been unlocked and guests wandered in, showing their IDs at a desk in the foyer. This time it seemed most polite to use the old brass gargoyle door knocker.

“You ready, Samantha?”

“Yes, Sir,” came her sure answer, although he could see she had been rattled a little bit by the lack of cars in the driveway.

He thumped the knocker against the door once, twice, three times and waited. There was a spy hole in the door. It turned black for a moment, and then the door was open.

It was a very different-looking Alex Allison that greeted them. Naked except for a black leather G-string, a golden belly chain, and a black leather collar, she stepped backward to let them in. "Master Arthur," she said, bowing her head for a moment, "and Sam." She smiled warmly at Sam, sneaked a sidelong peek back at Arthur, and then grinned back at Sam. Something wordless passed between the two women, and Sam visibly relaxed.

"May I take your coat?" Alex asked Sam. Arthur wasn't wearing one. Sam was looking at him for a cue. He smiled and nodded slightly. Sam stuck out her tongue, but there was a smile dancing in her eyes. She took off the coat and handed it to Alex. The sight of her was no less breathtaking than it had been in his foyer.

"You've been riding like that?" said Alex, putting the coat over her arm. "How very daring of you."

Sam smiled. "I think he makes me braver."

Arthur didn't think courage was something Sam lacked, actually. It took courage to stand up for yourself. It took courage to submit after you'd been hurt, and it took more courage to face up to one's fears and chase one's desires than it took for any so-called natural submissive to simply surrender.

He offered his arm to her again, and she took it.

"Very good, Master Arthur," said Alex, opening the nearby closet and hanging up the coat. "The rest of us are in the living room."

They walked into the living room. Sam looked up to quickly whisper to him. "I've never seen Alex in so little before!" Then they were with the others, and Arthur didn't have time to respond without being rude.

Dylan was there, sitting in the large black comfy chair, a red velvet pillow at his feet. The red leather couch was occupied by Bruce, who was lounging on the length of it. He straightened at their entrance, making room in case they wanted to share the couch. Laera was sitting on the plush white carpet, her legs folded up beneath her. Her dress barely covered her ass and had cutouts all over the place, but somehow her nipples and pussy were covered, even if the majority of her back,

stomach, and breasts were bare. The fabric was very formfitting, and he was guessing that Laera's nipples had been played with recently because they were making quite an impression against the fabric. He looked but didn't stare, even though the lady and dress were intriguing. He had what he wanted right there on his arm.

There was an empty wooden chair with a red brocade cushion, whose elegant curves reminded Arthur of something from pre-revolutionary France, and the couch.

"Hey, Sam, glad you made it," said Bruce warmly. "Good to see you again, Arthur."

"Hi, Sam and Arthur," said Laera brightly.

Dylan simply nodded at each of them. "Arthur. Sam. Welcome."

"Thank you all," Arthur said, smiling and nodding at each.

"Hi," said Sam.

It had probably been Alex's idea to extend them an invitation, thought Arthur. He'd already noted how Dylan didn't seem to hold Sam in much regard. *Interesting*. Of course people didn't think alike just because they were in a Dominant/submissive relationship, but there was something else to Dylan and Alex he couldn't quite put a finger on. Not necessarily a bad thing, but different. He crossed over to the chair, figuring Sam would rather not be too close to the other couple, and pulled her gently onto his lap. She nestled her warm body up against his, facing away from Dylan, with her side to Bruce and Laera.

Alex entered right behind them and took her place kneeling at Dylan's feet, her back arched, her knees apart. He'd been in that position enough times to know it wasn't comfortable for long, but she knelt with grace and showed no signs of fidgeting.

"Excuse me," Arthur said to the others and kissed Sam deeply.

Sam smiled. "What was that for?"

“You sticking your tongue out. Don’t stick it out unless you intend to put it to good use.”

She stuck it out again, as he knew she would, and he collected another kiss. He smiled. Life was good. In a vanilla gathering, it would have been horribly rude to be all over each other like that, but people in the scene understood.

“So who else are we expecting?” asked Arthur.

“No one,” said Dylan. “We invited Sue and Veronica, but neither of our Dommies could make it this time. If you keep rewarding her for misbehavior like that...”

Arthur smiled. “I get to decide what constitutes misbehavior. She looks cute when she sticks her tongue out.”

He hadn’t met Sue or Veronica, so they were just names to him. If they had been coming, it would have made just five couples. In the other cases, it sounded like the Dominants had been invited rather than the submissives, but Sam had been different. Perhaps because the others had been invited by Dylan, but Sam was Alex’s idea? Maybe. He kissed Sam’s neck lightly and whispered, “You all right?”

Sam smiled at him and whispered back. “Not what I expected, Sir, but I think you’ll keep me just fine.”

Arthur ran his hand through Sam’s blonde hair. She purred.

“The usual Bondage Ranch notion that the living room is for socializing and the dungeon for playing is somewhat suspended,” Dylan told Arthur. “No place is off-limits for playing. At some point, we tend to all decamp for the dungeon. Any particular piece of equipment you’d like to play with once we get there? Zen Master here asked for a St. Andrew’s cross, and I’ve got a swing set up for Alex.”

Arthur nodded. “The bondage table with a sheet, if that’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Dylan told him.

He felt Sam tense in his arms. She understood the implication of the sheet. But in spite of her instinctive reaction, she turned to him and asked in a sweet, politely inquisitive voice, "Am I in for a waxing, Sir?"

"Yes, you are," he said.

"Thank you, Sir," she said and turned her head away again, but not before he'd caught the look of contentment on her face. Looking past her, he saw Dylan's raised eyebrows and Bruce's amusement. And though Alex's back was mostly to him, from the corner of her mouth that he could see, he was quite sure Alex was smiling. It may have even been a smirk.

She was right where he wanted her, right there on his lap. He was winning her trust, step-by-step, and he wouldn't betray that for the world.

Chapter Seven

So, thought Sam. Just the six of us, all very cozy. Somehow it was more frightening this way, scarier than a crowd of people in the dungeon. Alex, who when she was running the regular events could tell most of the Dominants when to jump and how high, was kneeling, collared and almost naked, before her husband and master, Dylan. Sam was never sure what to make of Dylan. In fact, whereas Alex seemed to be in charge at Bondage Ranch, Dylan always seemed happy to simply chat and let things take care of themselves. Yet here was Dylan, dressed as always in his lovely ruffles, looking completely in control. Arrogant, even.

At least Master Bruce was the same as always, with the exception, perhaps, that he had a regular sub now. Laera wasn't quite kneeling, but she too was at her master's feet.

Arthur's lap was comfortable, and his shoulder was a pleasant place to lean her head. But she felt vaguely out of place, not quite as submissive as the others. It had never bothered her in a larger setting, where she could simply be herself and not focus on the others, but she felt she was falling short in comparison to Laera and Alex. The other women were so curvaceous, she felt almost flat in their company. At least she could show she could kneel with the best of them.

She turned her eyes back to Arthur and realized he had been watching her. He knew she had been looking between Laera and Alex.

"Sir," she murmured, "could I kneel for you?"

"Yes, Samantha."

She got the feeling he knew exactly what was going on in her mind. Maybe he'd been there himself once, but she doubted it. He just wouldn't care what people

thought of him. She slipped off his lap and onto the carpet, taking the same pose as Alex, placing her hands behind her back. One advantage of being on the floor was that her back was now to the others. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

“Is there anything else I can do for my Master?” she asked.

He nodded. “Unhook your bra, Samantha, and give it to me.”

“Samantha,” said Dylan, addressing Arthur. “She actually lets you call her Samantha. You must have made quite an impression.”

“It’s just for today,” Sam said quickly, and as quickly regretted it, both because it was defensive and because she knew it drew attention to her. She raised her hands behind her back, unhooked, and handed Arthur her bra. Her back was to the rest, so only Arthur could see her breasts, which was just as she wanted it. He draped the brassiere over the back of the chair.

“Even so,” Dylan said. “Quite amazing.”

Shut up about it already, Dylan. Her lips, however, remained together. Sometimes she could control her tongue.

“She hasn’t lost any of her spirit,” said Arthur with pride in his voice. *Pride for her.* She arched her back a little more. *I might not have the biggest tits in the world, but he seems to like them.* He reached out to brush her right breast with the back of his hand, his knuckles teasing her nipple. It tingled in response.

She heard the sound of a zipper behind her. Alex or Laera are losing more clothes, she thought, and then realized she hadn’t seen a zipper on either of their costumes. A moment later she heard a slurping sound. She turned scarlet. She had a pretty good idea what was going on behind her back and knew Arthur could see everything quite clearly. Just when she thought she was even, the ante had been raised.

Well, she wasn’t going to just back down. “May I pleasure you with my mouth, Sir?” she asked Arthur, looking up at him. She licked her upper lip.

“No, thank you,” he said, running his hand through her hair.

“No?” she blurted.

“No, thank you,” he repeated. “Just sit for now.”

“I think,” Dylan said, “I actually watched her walk out on a man for asking her to do that very theeeeeeeee—ow!”

Despite her determination to keep her eyes fixed on Arthur, she couldn't resist turning around at that. Alex was the one with her mouth full. And Dylan didn't look like he was enjoying himself. “Alex!” he said. “No teeth.”

Alex drew back. “I'm sorry, Master,” she said. “It won't happen again. Probably.”

Sam probably could have kept quiet if Laera hadn't started giggling. But she did, and the other girl's low-pitched laugh brought on Sam's own soprano giggle.

To her surprise, Dylan smiled at her. “Back to work, Alex,” he said, “but you'll have to make up for that indiscretion, however much you think I needed to be quiet.”

Alex said something in response, but only after following directions. Whatever she said wasn't intelligible with her mouth full.

Bruce chuckled. “So my slave girl thinks that's funny, does she?”

Laera giggled again. “Yes, Master. But I would never do it to you.”

“And why is that?” asked Bruce.

“Because you'd never put your foot in it so thoroughly,” she said and started giggling again.

At that, Arthur chuckled. He put his hand on Sam's cheek, gently turning her head back to face him. “It's interesting,” he said softly, “how other people are. But you and I are just us. You're not in competition with her, Samantha.”

“Yes, Sir.” Still it gnawed at her. “But I really want to go down on you.”

“I will explain later, Samantha,” Arthur told her calmly, “and hopefully take you up on that offer in the near future.”

Dammit. Men were not supposed to be calm when she offered them a blowjob, much less refuse her. She was pouting, and she knew it, but she didn't try to hide it. She didn't figure she'd do a good job at covering up anyway. She took a breath. Just because Arthur was projecting an outward calm didn't mean he was unmoved by her offer. A glance at his crotch told her that much. A poker face she could deal with, as long as she knew he wanted her.

He leaned forward, reaching for her, his fingers at the base of her ribs, almost tickling. Slowly he brought them upward, his touch featherlight. She drew in her breath, trying not to squirm away, but tickling was not his intent. His fingers curled around her breasts, lifting them, the pads where his fingers met palms rubbing against her nipples. She didn't forget there were other people in the room. It just didn't matter so much when his hands were on her.

Her nipples tightened, pushing stiffly against his palm. He moved his hands, cupping from beneath, exposing her nipples to his view. She felt the heat of his gaze and saw he was pleased at the way she had responded to his touch.

"Laera," said a distant voice, "please get everyone drinks. And a glass of water for Alex."

"Yes, Master Bruce," said Laera. She heard the sound of the other woman's bare feet on the carpet as she walked to the kitchen. Well, at least it wasn't her. It would be nice to have something to drink, even if just water. One never knew how thirsty one was until someone mentioned drinking.

Arthur withdrew his hands. "Help out Laera, Samantha," he said.

She frowned and looked to the back of the chair where her bra was. She knew better than to ask for it, and he didn't offer, so it seemed likely she was going to have to help out topless. She took a deep breath, managed a shaky smile, and got to her feet. "Yes, of course, Sir."

She followed Laera into the kitchen, trying her best to pretend she was fully dressed. She had plenty of practice, after all. But somehow her mind wasn't letting her. She knew better. She was wearing as little as she was wearing because she

chose to let Arthur decide what she wore, and she'd wear even less if he just gave the word. Best not to think of how far she'd go, because she'd end up blushing.

She found Laera waiting for her in the kitchen. "Hey. Sub time!" Laera said, grinning.

"Huh?" said Samantha.

"This is when Alex and I plot. Or whoever else is here. We can take a little time gathering a tray of drinks." She got out two big, round wooden serving trays and started pulling glasses out of the cabinet. "Ice is in the bin in the freezer; just put ice in a few of the glasses. Sodas are down below in the fridge. There's usually a bottle of rosé in there too. Master Dylan will want a glass of that."

Sam got out the bottle of wine and a variety of cans of soda. "Wouldn't it be simpler to ask people what they want and then bring it to them?"

"That's what I told Alex the first time. But this way we can be busy in the kitchen and talk just between us subs. This is a lot different than the big retreats, isn't it?"

"Yeah it is," Sam agreed, feeling like it was a major understatement. She was trying to put her finger on what made her so nervous. "Aren't they going to wonder why we aren't moving more quickly?"

"No. They're watching Alex."

Sam made a face.

"You can't blame him too much for watching, Sam. He seems like a pretty nice guy, actually."

"Arthur?"

"Yes, Master Arthur."

"He is, actually. I...I don't know if I can give him everything he wants from me."

Laera grinned. "I thought that with Master Bruce too. But I discovered I was willing after all. The strangest thing is, I think he also thought I wanted more than he could give."

"And did you?" asked Sam, curious. Bruce had never settled down with just one girl, not for years. He'd been with someone regular when she first met him, but there was some sort of unhappy ending to that. The girl had moved out west, she had heard, and Bruce had taken it pretty hard.

"Yes and no," said Laera. "Turns out he could give more than he thought he could."

"That's really sweet," said Sam with feeling. "You're a lovely couple, and I know Master Bruce is a really good person. Hang on to him."

"Oh, I will," said Laera. She sounded awfully confident. What would it be like to have that much security in a relationship? "You seem a little edgy. Everything okay?"

Sam smiled. It seemed she had a friend, and that was definitely a good thing. Arthur made her edgy, in a mostly good way. He'd told the man in his apartment that he was working on making her his girlfriend. She envied Laera, but it seemed so far from where she was to get there. She had the feeling the only result of trying was that she'd get hurt. "Sam" had been a persona she'd taken off and put on. But he wasn't letting her get away with that. He wanted to get to know the girl behind the submissive, and she wasn't sure how much of her she wanted him to meet. Or if he'd like what he saw. She liked playing with cars, but it didn't exactly make her feel or appear feminine.

There was something else she wanted to talk about. "I'm a bit nervous around Dyl—Master Dylan. I don't think he likes me very much."

Laera pulled the tray full of cans and bottles over to herself and swapped over the one with the glasses, which was going to be much lighter. "We'll just have to bring him around then," she said. "Here, put a glass on my tray. That way I can do all the serving of Master Dylan. And you can serve Master Arthur without me,

unless he wants a wineglass. Then you can just get one from me and have your Dom's full attention."

"Master Dylan won't like me more if he thinks I'm avoiding him," Sam said.

"Well, then we'll both have to do our best. Don't worry about him," Laera advised. "I think Alex has him well under control. In a very nice submissive kind of way. Their relationship seems to work for them, and that just proves there's more than one way to do things. I know I never thought I'd be calling any man master, but then, only in my dreams have I ever met anyone who cares for me the way Bruce does."

"I just wish I'd been able to keep my bra on, you know? It makes me feel extra vulnerable."

"And you are. To Master Arthur. But neither Master Dylan nor Master Bruce will take any liberties with you that he doesn't allow."

That he doesn't allow? Now that was a scary thought. She'd had more than one top think allowing liberties with their bottom was a good way to ingratiate oneself. But somehow she just couldn't see Arthur doing that. Not to fit in—but possibly because of the effect it would have on her.

"In any case there's no sense in worrying about flashing your boobs. I haven't seen one of these things yet where all us submissives didn't end up totally naked." Laera picked up her tray. "Shall we?"

"Easy for you to say. You've still got the most clothes on."

"Not for long, I suspect," said Laera cheerfully. "I'm not wearing any underwear, so when the dress goes, well, that's it."

Sam picked up her tray. She tried balancing it on one hand, like Laera did, and decided she'd be better off holding the tray with both hands. Breaking the Allison's glasses would not make a good impression.

Laera walked out first, and Sam followed. Sam was sure she wouldn't look half as graceful as Laera, but that was okay. She pushed the question of Dylan aside.

The important thing was to look good for Arthur. *That I can manage.* By the time they crossed the threshold back to the living room, she had added a sway to her hips. *Catch this, Arthur. Sir.*

Arthur was leaning back in his chair, looking content—and looking at the doorway, not at Alex. Sam grinned, and grinned some more when she saw how his face lit up at her entrance. She could definitely get used to it, but if she smiled any harder, she was afraid her face might break.

Dylan grunted, and Sam stood still for a moment, watching. He was on the edge, trying to hold off, but Alex was too much for him. His breath came out in a whoosh, and Alex swallowed him down. When she raised her head, there wasn't a drop she'd missed.

"Good job, slave girl," Dylan said.

"Thank you, Master," replied Alex with a grin.

"She's well trained," said Arthur.

"Thanks," said Dylan. "You're doing a nice job with Sam too. She's busted more tops than I can count, and I would have sworn she was untrainable."

Sam felt the smile melt off her face. She'd never outrun her reputation, and she'd never stop being bratty Sam. To think she could be otherwise, just because Arthur wanted it—or even because she wanted it—was all fantasy.

Arthur stood. "I don't think she's been treated properly before. Because she's been *perfect* for me."

Such nice words, if only she could believe them. She looked at Dylan, and that he regretted what he'd said was obvious. Their eyes locked for a moment.

Arthur moved between her and Dylan. "I think you'd better apologize," he said to Dylan. Sam saw his fists clenching and remembered what he'd said about Sir Galahads earlier. Her knight in shining armor. She didn't want a brawl in the Allison's living room. But she wanted him right there, and she stayed behind him.

He'd called her perfect. Even if he was exaggerating, he had the confidence to say it and not worry she'd let him down. And she wouldn't, not if she could help it.

She was angry at Dylan but more hurt. *What Dylan said is probably what half the tops at Bondage Ranch think. Well to heck with them. To heck with all of them. I'll just take Arthur and—where? His place? Her place?* All her carefully protected walls would come crashing down.

Then Alex's clear voice broke the tense silence. "Dylan, *dear*," Alex said firmly. "Switch."

It didn't mean anything to Samantha, but she noticed Laera suddenly start grinning. Was Laera laughing at her too? She'd just finished feeling she'd made a friend, and now she wasn't so sure. But no, Laera caught her eye and nodded over at Dylan and Alex.

"Uh," said Dylan. "What? Here, now?"

"That's not the proper response at all," said Alex, standing.

If she hadn't been pissed at Dylan, she probably would have felt sorry for him. He looked so incredibly trapped, even a bit scared. He was biting his lip. "I didn't do anything to you," he said. "You can't."

"Anytime I feel I need to," Alex said. "That's our agreement. And I don't think you want to break our agreement."

For a moment, there was silence.

"Yes, Mistress," Dylan said.

Laera burst out laughing.

"Oh my God," said Sam and started laughing too. Arthur was right. It sure was interesting how other people were. She'd been going to Bondage Ranch for years, and she'd never ever suspected quite how Dylan and Alex's relationship worked. Who else knew?

"Laera, love, it's not nice to laugh at another submissive," Bruce said mildly. He didn't look surprised at all. He probably knew beforehand. Laera stopped

laughing quickly, and that made it easier for Sam to get herself under control. She glanced at Arthur, who also seemed to be taking it all in stride. He didn't know the Allisons weren't, well, fixed, for lack of a better word, of that she was sure. He just wasn't that easy to throw off-kilter.

"I'll take the chair," said Alex. She still wasn't wearing hardly anything, and Dylan was still fully clothed, but everything had changed between them. Dylan almost slithered out of the chair to kneel down. Alex plopped herself in the chair, legs carelessly akimbo, arms draped over the back like she had been sitting there all night.

"Good boy," she said. She looked up at Laera. "I'll have a glass of wine, please. And the boy will have water."

Her words reminded Sam she was holding the tray, putting things back to a sort of normality. She hurried to help Laera. Laera took the bottle of wine from Sam's tray, poured Alex's glass, and handed it to her. She didn't bother with the water but moved on toward Bruce.

"Shouldn't we get the water?" asked Sam.

"Masters and mistresses first," explained Laera. "*Subs* last." Samantha smirked at the little extra emphasis she gave the word 'subs.'

"Water, please," said Bruce.

"Yes, Master," said Laera, doing the honors as before. Arthur had moved back to his chair by the time they got to him.

"Guinness, please," Arthur said, addressing Sam rather than Laera, although he nodded at the other woman.

"Set the tray down if you need to," Laera told her. "You serve your own master."

She definitely needed to set down the tray, so she did. Sam knew all about pouring beer from watching barmaids when she went out with the boys from the

shop for a pint or two, but Guinness drinkers were of two minds on the subject. “Two pours or one, Sir?” she asked Arthur.

“Two,” he replied, surprised. “And I think I may be in love.”

“Like a real Irishman,” Sam said. She poured some of the bottle into the glass and let it sit. She didn’t want to try Laera’s patience, but it was going to take a few minutes. *Still, there is something to be said for men who like taking their time.* She grinned to herself.

Laera didn’t seem to mind the wait. The look Arthur was giving her, even if she pretended not to be aware of it, was to die for. She didn’t take his pronouncement of love too seriously, but it was nice to be appreciated. A couple of minutes later she finished the pour, set down coasters on the table at his side, and put mug and bottle with them.

“You can serve the boy last, girls,” said Alex. “Go ahead and serve yourselves.”

“What do you want, Sam?” asked Laera with extra formality.

“Just a regular light beer, please.” Sam played along, happy to lengthen Dylan’s squirming. “And what would you like, Laera?”

“I’d like a diet, if you would be so kind.”

They poured each other’s drinks, in no particular hurry, and then Laera got Dylan’s water. They carried their trays back to the kitchen, keeping their expressions as neutral as they could, and then burst out laughing once they got there. Somehow they ended up in a hug.

“Oh my God!” said Samantha again, letting go.

“I know!” said Laera.

“What’s that all about?”

Laera grinned and leaned close, her voice low. “Well, from what Alex has told me, Alex and Dylan were married before they ever got involved in BDSM. When they did, Alex wanted to be the sub, and Dylan wanted to be the top, but whenever she needed to use her safe word—and apparently it was a lot, just because Dylan

has some issues focusing, ADHD or something—things would fall apart. They'd lose all their sexual momentum, and they'd be angry for days.

“So now they do this instead. They don't stop their play time, but when Alex uses her safe word, she takes over until she can trust Dylan to take the reins again. Usually it's just an hour or so. The threat of it keeps him focused most of the time. And they keep moving forward—not having the best evening, maybe, but at least not having a total disaster.”

“But she wasn't in any danger,” protested Sam. “He was just putting his foot in it; I could have handled that.”

Laera nodded. “But your master was ready to leap to your defense. He thinks you're worth fighting for, Samantha—and that may not just be a metaphor. I think she's protecting Dylan's nose as much as anything.”

Samantha snickered, putting the cans and bottles no one had wanted back in the fridge while Laera restocked the unneeded glasses. Only after did she realize she hadn't corrected Laera when she'd called Arthur her master rather than just her Dom or her top. But it seemed right.

“Don't be too long,” came Bruce's loud, clear voice from the other room.

“That means me,” Laera said.

“Well I'm not staying here by myself,” said Sam.

She nearly tripped over Dylan, who was kneeling not at his mistress's feet, but in the archway.

“I'm sorry, Sam.” His head was bowed.

“Oh, that's—”

“Don't be too quick to forgive him,” cut in Alex. “Why don't you and your master talk. I'm going to take him to the dungeon, but he'd really like to make it up to you somehow. Wouldn't you, boy?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Dylan said to her and then looked at Sam. “Yes, ma'am,” he said. And then in a lower voice he added, “I really am sorry, Sam.”

Sam smiled. She wasn't the type to hold a grudge, really, but this one seemed like it might be fun to hold for a little longer. Possibly for all concerned.

She looked over at Arthur, who smiled at her and nodded.

"We'll see about that," she said and patted Dylan on the head before moving past him to where Arthur was. She knelt before him with her legs spread and her back arched, trying to make the perfect picture. She didn't want Arthur thinking *she* wanted to top *him* even if the world was going topsy-turvy around them.

"Sir," she said to him just in case. But there didn't seem to be any danger of him flipping on her. He brushed her hair out from her face and then put his hand behind her back, adjusting her posture slightly until he was satisfied it was perfect.

"Enjoy yourselves," Arthur said to Alex. "We'll be along shortly."

The room emptied, leaving only her and Arthur.

"Well handled, Samantha," Arthur said, beaming at her.

Samantha glowed. "Thank you, Sir. Sir?"

"Yes?"

"When I asked to suck you off earlier, why wouldn't you let me, Sir?"

I'm doing it again. Always questioning the judgment of my Dom, never letting things go, and just being. Him saying no didn't hurt me, exactly, so why am I not able to let it go?

"Because," Arthur told her, "you specifically listed giving oral sex in public as something you did not want to do."

"But I said I would, Sir. I volunteered that. Not that you don't have a right to say no anyway, of course."

Arthur shook his head. "It's more than that, Samantha. You were calm when you made the list and in your right headspace. The job of a master is to let you go beyond that headspace, into another place, where you can serve safe and secure, knowing that you are cherished and that what you decided when you were calm and

yourself won't be violated. Ideally, you can go to a place where yes is the only thing you want to say and yet your limits will still be respected, by your top if not by you.

"Don't get me wrong. I want to take you further. I want to move those barriers. I want to possess you, Samantha. But not by force and not by trickery. And most definitely not because you feel you want to compete with another sub in the room."

Okay, that one was annoyingly on target.

"Sir," Sam breathed, feeling like she was pouring herself into the word. She didn't know how to say it any better.

He ran his hands through her hair and kissed her deeply. Her core responded, warming as if he'd been kissing her a lot lower. She felt like she was melting.

His lips pulled back enough she thought she could get a sentence out. "Sir, I almost want to say my safe word so I can tell you I want to submit to you with no limits at all."

"Limits are good, Samantha. They're what separate the kinky folks from the psychos. I don't want someone who will do absolutely anything for me. Just someone who will do everything that's good *with* me."

"I trust you," she said and realized it was really true. It wasn't absolute trust. It was just enough to be willing to take a leap of faith to trust the rest of the way.

"I'm glad," he said. He kissed her again.

"Sir—Master—just keep me safe and don't worry about all the boxes and—I think, really, half the things I say I won't do are the very things I want so much it scares me."

Arthur smiled like he already knew that. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Samantha bit her lip. *I'm mostly sure.* She hadn't ever stepped out on a limb like this before. "Just keep me safe, and I'll do almost anything."

"Almost is a sensible word, and I'd correct you if you didn't include it. I've run into people who really would do anything, and they can be very scary people. I'll keep you safe, Samantha."

“Thank you, Master.”

Arthur nodded. “Now there’s the matter of Dylan’s punishment.”

A flush came over Sam. *How will he take it if I tell him what I want?* But if anyone could handle it, it was Arthur. “I want—I want him to help you pleasure me.”

“It’s not clear he’ll regard that as punishment,” Arthur noted dryly.

“If he thinks of me as badly as he seems to, it will be humiliating. And if he doesn’t, then I don’t especially want to punish him. I just have a fantasy about two men, and, if you’re okay with it, then—”

Arthur chuckled. “How long have you had this fantasy, Samantha?”

“Seems like forever,” she admitted. “It’s very selfish of—”

“Shhh,” Arthur told her. “Don’t worry about selfish. There’s nothing wrong with knowing what you want. I only wonder if Dylan might enjoy his punishment too much.”

“I don’t care about that if you don’t. You know, I don’t think I’d be able to deal with it if it were another Dom. I—serving one master is hard enough. But a sub, and knowing you’ll be in control—well, that’d be nice. If it pleases you, Sir.” *Did I cross over the line?* She watched him, heart racing. She’d taken him by surprise.

“I have to admit I want you all to myself,” he said. “But I don’t think I really need to worry about that. And Samantha—”

“Yes?”

“I want to fulfill your every fantasy.”

“I want you in my—” Sam took a breath. There she went, topping from below. That wasn’t what she wanted at all. “As long as you’re in control, Sir.”

“What you were you going to say, Samantha?”

“You can take me any way you want to, Sir.”

“What I want is for you to answer my question.”

She bit her lip. “My mouth, Sir. So I can watch you, and so I don’t have to see anything else but you. That’s what I was going to say, but I’d rather have it be the way you want it and know that what I’m doing is what pleases you. If that’s happening, I don’t have to worry about anything else. I know you’ll take care of me. God—after all we did that weekend—”

“It’s okay, Sam,” Arthur said. “It’s okay. I get it. You want it, but you want me to be in charge at the same time.”

Sam took a breath. There it was, the tension that had been with her for a long time boiled down to its essence. She had her own desires, and she really wanted the Dom to be in charge. She wanted both. “Yes.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“One more thing, Samantha. Did you have good conversations with Laera?”

She nodded. So he’d noticed she’d been gone longer than necessary, or he had incredibly good hearing.

“It’s important for subs to talk to other submissives. It’s a lot harder to take on challenges if you think you’re the only one who has ever felt that way.”

Sam nodded. Once again Arthur was speaking from experience, and once again he was right. He was all Dom—but he’d been where she was standing and knew what she needed. Had he sent her off with Laera just for that reason? She suspected so. She’d never met anyone who looked after her like that.

No matter how little clothing she wore, that made her feel warm all over.

Chapter Eight

As Arthur had hoped, Alex had no objection at all to what he had in mind. She asked Dylan if *he* had objections, but her tone of voice indicated he had better not. Arthur chuckled. From the moment he'd met Dylan, he knew the man was nothing like the tops he'd known in LA, but Dylan was clearly struggling more to be a sub. Alex, on the other hand, gave off the same vibe of a few men he'd known who'd earned their rights to be called master but who'd really much rather be topped. It wasn't that he didn't think Alex was enjoying herself, but he wondered how much she'd be able to continue to act fierce if she got resistance.

But she didn't get any. Alex had divested him of clothes, and Arthur could see his reaction. Dylan's rock-hard cock would have spoken up for the idea even if he'd been bound and gagged.

"I really am sorry," he volunteered. "Mouth ran away with me. Not the first time."

Arthur nodded. "I can't have you disrespecting my submissive," he said, keeping his face straight. He had no intention of disrespecting Alex's sub either. Or her master. They'd balance the score, and then it would all be done with.

Grant would be talking about fucked-up heterosexuals if he'd seen them. Arthur smiled to himself as he walked back across the room to where Sam waited for him. Grant had been big on respect, but he didn't hold much with love, and Alex and Dylan loved each other. Anyone who cared to look could see that in their eyes. He and Sam would just have to find a different way to love, because he wasn't going to take the path Alex and Dylan had taken.

Did he really love Samantha? He'd spent a weekend with her plus one date. That was a bit early for love. Fascinated, definitely. In love?

He wasn't sure how or why, but hell yes.

How she felt was a bigger mystery.

He hadn't given her direction as to how she should sit, but she waited for him on her knees. It wasn't the most comfortable of positions, and he could see she was straining to keep it, but raw determination had kept her kneeling at the edge of the room. He smiled.

"You look beautiful kneeling, Samantha. But now it's time to get up. It's all worked out."

"Thank you, Sir," Sam said with emotion. The look in her eyes was worth a million dollars. He didn't know if he could call it love, but it was a heck of a lot more than mere respect. Whatever it was, he was sure he'd never looked at anyone quite like she was looking at him.

She got to her feet, and he held her arm to steady her. She was a bit wobbly for a moment, but that settled down. He gathered her into his arms and kissed her properly. She rubbed her body against him. He could feel her nipples, contracted and hard, through his white shirt. Their eyes met for a moment. She looked like the cat who ate the canary. Which meant it was time to push just a little more.

His slid his hands down her sides, hooked the waistband of her panties, and pulled them down in one easy motion. She let them drop around her feet. "I want you naked," he told her. He'd expected a moment of resistance, but she just kept looking at him adoringly.

She stepped out of the panties and pressed herself against him. "And what more would you have of me, Sir?" He couldn't resist enjoying the feel of her bare bottom in his hands. He gave her a squeeze and then picked her up.

There. That threw her off balance. She looked surprised and then rubbed his biceps. Had she not known he could carry her? She was featherlight to him. He carried her across the room and set her down on a high table.

The table was wooden but padded with black leather to make it comfortable to lie down on. On the sides were numerous rings and attachment points. Samantha lay back. He attached cuffs around her wrists and ankles, then chained them with very little slack to the corners of the table. She tested her bonds and gave him a look of smug satisfaction. She wasn't going anywhere. She obviously liked it that way. He'd tied her so her pussy was even with the edge of the table, her legs attached below at the bottom of the table's legs. It spread her nicely.

Alex led Dylan across the room on a leash and then gave the handle of the leash to Arthur. Showtime. A scene like this was part theater, the rest trust and lust. This one might be more theatrical than most. His Samantha was still grinning at him. Trust, check.

He unzipped his pants. He'd gone commando—no sense in wasting precious time with underwear. He held his cock in his fist. It was rock hard just from looking at her. He held it inches from her mouth. She stuck out her tongue.

"See why I let her stick out her tongue like that, Dylan?" Arthur asked, not actually looking at the other man. He moved forward. Her tongue swirled around the tip, tasting the bead of precum forming there. Her mouth was at just the right height for him.

Just the right height to be fucked too.

"Yes, I see," Dylan said. He gulped, as if maybe Alex had pinched him or something, and added, "Sir."

"If you behave," said Alex, "you might get the same kind of attention Master Arthur's getting later. From me."

"In the meantime, make yourself useful," Arthur said to Dylan, his eyes still on Samantha. "As we discussed."

Dylan moved away and dropped from where Samantha could see him. She would be feeling it though—a little twitch from her let Arthur know the exact moment even without looking. Dylan's tongue was on Samantha's pussy, teasing up and down her spread labia.

Samantha's eyes stayed on Arthur. Her tongue swirled around Arthur's cockhead, along the ridge where head met shaft, almost taking him in past her lips. His cock hardened further and grew. He growled. The head of his cock was almost too sensitive for such treatment, and he was tempted to push himself into her mouth until he found the back of her throat. But there'd be time for more later, and he'd endured worse torture.

Her eyes were on him as she pressed her lips against the tip of his cock and slowly opened her mouth as she moved her head forward. He decided he'd let her set the pace for now. He cupped a breast, squeezing lightly, and ran his fingers through her hair. He took a sharp breath in as her lips pressed against his shaft.

Time to increase the intensity. He gave a signal to Dylan, and a moment later she shuddered. It looked like the boy had been obeying orders rather well judging from her reaction. He'd been supposed to avoid her clit until Arthur gave the signal.

"I want more," he told her. His fingers wrapped around her hair, and he moved closer, sliding his cock deep into her mouth until it tickled against the back of her throat. She breathed deeply, inhaling his scent. Her tongue was just an inch from reaching his sac. If she could only take him in a little more, she could touch it. She tried and almost made it—and nearly gagged on him. He pulled her back by tugging her hair as her nostrils flared and she caught her breath.

"Very good, my girl," he told her, his voice husky with arousal. He knew she couldn't see what was going on as Dylan drew back, so he told her. "Dylan's putting on a condom now, Sam. Alex has a cock ring tied around his base, really tight, so he can't come. He can't even get soft, poor blighter, so he's going to serve you just as long as you want him to."

The ring around the base of Dylan's cock was of the leather variety; it had metal studs on one side and could be attached either with the studs out—or in, if you really wanted to torture a man. Alex had been nice—Dylan was lucky his wife wasn't much of a sadist. Especially given that Alex had, at his suggestion, snapped it shut one notch tighter than she would have had Arthur not been around. It

wouldn't have done a damn thing as loose as she'd had it, except maybe turn Dylan on a little more.

Sam sucked on him hard when he released her head and then reached out with her tongue again, trying to swallow his tip past her gag reflex so she could reach his balls. She just made contact when she gagged again. Again he pulled her back, and this time he wasn't letting go. She was a greedy little sub, and he'd be happy to let her practice later, but he needed to stay a little more in control of the situation than he would be if he let her deep throat him now. He guided her up and down his shaft, tugging on her hair when she tried to take him too deep.

Dylan entered Sam smoothly, in one stroke, and just stayed there for a moment. Arthur saw her eyes go wide. He knew that look—the look of a sub who was really *doing* something she'd only fantasized about.

Alex poured some lube into her hands. Arthur thought she'd warm it up first—she surely knew how it felt cold. She didn't, just shoved two slippery fingers up Dylan's ass, and if Dylan had been wearing shoes, he'd have jumped out of them. As it was, Sam got a sudden deep penetration that hadn't been part of the script. She moaned.

Arthur almost felt sorry for Dylan. Possibly his comments about tightening the cock ring had made Alex turn her inner Domme up a notch.

He told Samantha what was going on where she couldn't see, still slowly moving in and out of her mouth. "Alex...has a strap-on cock, a really big one. She's lubed him up. She's going to take his ass while he's inside you."

Dylan's eyes grew wide. A moment later Samantha had the same expression as the force of Alex's entrance shoved Dylan deeper into her. Her lips tightened around Arthur's shaft in response, and he almost lost it. His cock was hard and aching, but his pleasure was only a part of what was going on. There was more.

Alex looked to Arthur for approval. He looked at Sam. He realized she was very nearly flying. He nodded to Alex, and she started fucking Dylan, pulling him back by the hips to fully impale him on her cock until he was almost out of

Samantha entirely, and then pushing forward, giving Dylan no choice but to fill Sam's pussy to the hilt.

Sam moaned again, her eyes looking glassy. Arthur put a hand on her wrist to check her pulse—she was doing fine, just overcome with sensation. He nodded to Dylan, letting go of Sam's head. His hands roamed around her breasts. Dylan's hands stroked Samantha's stomach. Even Alex reached around, her fingers skimming along Samantha's thighs. Unless he missed his guess, Sam couldn't even keep track of whose hands were whose anymore.

Her body arched suddenly, and then again, undulating violently on the table, which shook noisily against the floor. The sight of her in such pleasure was too much for Arthur, and he let loose, flooding her mouth. She swallowed some and let some drip out of her mouth onto the leather. Then her body shook again, only slightly less intensely. Then another tremor passed over her. She closed her eyes for a moment, and with a force of will he stepped back, letting her breathe through her mouth if she needed to. His hands caressed her cheek. She was so beautiful, sated like that.

He waved at the Allison's, turning his head just long enough to mouth a thank-you. Alex pulled Dylan out of Samantha and then pulled out of Dylan herself. She flashed Arthur a grin, and then both of the Allison's walked across the room, finding their way to the spanking bench.

He undid the straps binding Samantha to the table and lifted her from them, gathering her into his arms. He sat down on the table that had bound her, the leather now slick with her sweat and, in places, other liquids. She curled up against Arthur's furry chest and breathed as if inhaling him.

"Thank you," she said, opening her eyes and looking up at him, her gaze full of trust and maybe love.

Arthur chuckled. "You're very welcome, my girl. Thank you."

"Yours." She smiled and let her eyes close again. She looked for a moment like she was going to ask something of him but then stopped. He could have pressed her

but decided not to. If she wasn't saying anything, then she was probably quite happy with him in control. The last thing he wanted to do was undermine that feeling.

He lifted her off the table. For just a minute he set her on her feet while he wiped the table clean with a rag soaked in antiseptic. Then he picked her up again and carried her to a couch on the side of the large room. She curled up against him there.

"Why here?" she asked.

"You need to be cuddled," he answered. "And I want to hold you. What else is there?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again before finally speaking. "I love it in your arms. Under your control. And I have this life in a small gossip town that doesn't have anything to do with this, and I want that too—and it seems so much like I'm two separate people—the person I am here and the person I am there. Does that make me crazy?"

Arthur smiled. "No, Samantha, not crazy at all. You only give me a glimpse sometimes of that other Samantha, love, but I like what I see of her. You know which one I'm holding right now?"

He could see her wrestle with the question in her mind. If he had the right of it, "Sam" wasn't much into snuggling, and "Samantha" didn't ever feel quite so sexually satisfied.

"Which?" she asked at last.

"Both."

He was rewarded by her snuggling a little closer.

"I want you, Samantha. All of you, and I know that frightens you a little, but I'm not going to lie and say I only want a part of you. I'm not going to pretend I'm willing to share you with another Dom, either." A suspicion arose, one he should

have had before, actually. “Or—with any—you’re not in a relationship in Havrefield, are you?”

She looked up and smiled at him. “No, Arthur. There’s just you.”

He let his breath go. “Good.”

“I’m not willing to share you, either. Not with any woman. And not with a man unless I get to join in.”

Arthur grinned. “Good,” he said again.

He knew a lot of Doms wanted fidelity from their subs but still wanted the freedom to play the field themselves. Fine, if that was how both people wanted it, but too often it wasn’t, and it had never seemed fair to him. But Sam’s words made him realize it wasn’t just an abstraction—he liked the idea that his sub felt a little possessive, and not just because that gave him *carte blanche* to be possessive right back.

He ran his fingers through her hair, his fingertips running along the back of her neck for a moment. “My girl,” he said.

She just smiled and purred. She snuggled up against him, closing her eyes for a bit but definitely awake.

“Are you doing anything this weekend?” he asked after a long silence.

“Why? Is there a club event or something?”

“There might be. I was thinking more just the two of us, actually,” Arthur told her. Would the little sub bolt at that idea?

“Ah.”

Well, that wasn’t a no.

The large ballroom seemed almost deserted with just the few couples. Laera was tied to the cross in one of the most intricate webs of ropes he’d ever seen, and Master Bruce was running his fingertips over the parts of skin the ropes didn’t cover—which naturally included most of the parts you’d get arrested for baring in public. Laera seemed to be enjoying it all, from the sound of her soft moans, which

would never be heard over the din of the normal Bondage Ranch crowd but were quite audible now.

Alex was on a spanking bench, but she wasn't making very many noises—a strap-on dildo, the harness still attached, had been covered with a condom, and she was holding it in her mouth. Dylan was spanking her quite deliberately, with long pauses between each swing. Going slow like that meant Alex could feel each individual stroke with stinging clarity. Seemed things were back to normal for them, anyway, after a fashion. He noticed Sam had opened her eyes and was watching them too.

“If you're up to being a voyeur,” Arthur told her, “then it's time to play again.”

She grinned. He nudged her off his lap, and she scampered off, almost stumbling. He stood too and grabbed her to steady her balance. Then he offered her his hand, palm down, just the way he had after they'd first met. She put her hand in his. Her limits had been pushed enough, he thought, for one day. He discarded the idea of a waxing. Time for something familiar, some light brushes with a soft deerskin flogger and a slow tender fucking.

Chapter Nine

Arthur walked into Charming Chains at a minute shy of eight o'clock. He'd been tempted to show up earlier, but since that first time with the list, Samantha had made a point of showing up early and being ready for him. It seemed to be something she needed to do, an act of submission, and he wasn't going to spoil that for her.

His offer of a weekend had been turned down, but the last several Saturday nights had still been great. Samantha was smart, witty, and fun—and that was just as a dinner date. Afterward they had caught a movie and then gone back to his place, where conversation turned to play, and play had turned to very satisfying sex. He found himself looking forward to Saturdays through the week. It was usually a sure way to a smile and a sometimes inconvenient hard-on. More than once he stroked himself to a messy conclusion, thinking about the weekend before and the one ahead, but he knew more than just lust was involved.

This Saturday night was going to be just a minor wrinkle on the theme. Charming Chains was what Studio 77, normally a disco-themed dance club, called itself the one night a week the disco balls were shelved and the place turned over to BDSM enthusiasts. The plan had been to go to Charming Chains after dinner, but Samantha had called and said an urgent job on a Volkswagen was going to make her late. She was going to grab fast food on the way and meet him at the club.

Hopefully this Saturday will be different in another way. He always offered to let Samantha stay the night, but she always chose the drive home instead. She never suggested that he shouldn't offer, however, so he was going to keep tempting her. He hefted the bag containing everything he needed for tonight's scene. He knew

better than to think that mere objects would seduce a woman. But he was perfectly willing to have them help. He'd use everything he had, without any guilt at all, to make this strong yet submissive woman fall in love with him, because he'd already fallen for her. The way she looked at him, the sound of her voice each time she said "Yes, Sir"—he hadn't been looking for anything but a play partner, but she'd stolen his heart, and she was irreplaceable.

An old man checked his license to prove he was of age in the dimly lit foyer of the club. Their limit was twenty-one. Ten years before he'd probably have been insulted, and ten years from now he'd be flattered, but it was just a small hassle now. The man handed his license back, satisfied.

He walked over to the coat-check girl and took off his jacket. The nights were beginning to turn cold, but he wouldn't normally have bothered with a coat if he'd been wearing normal clothes. The redhead gave him an appreciative whistle and the usual torn-off half of a playing card. He pocketed it in his leather pants with a thank-you. He hoped Sam would like the outfit half as well. He hadn't worn the harness since he lived in Los Angeles. Two broad strips of studded black leather made a cross on his chest, joined at the middle by a giant chrome o-ring.

Sam was waiting for him halfway across the room, back leaning against a wall, her eyes on the entrance. She was wearing strappy black high-heeled sandals, fishnet stockings, a black leather mini, and a white blouse that looked like it was buttoned up all the way. Her blonde hair was straight and long over her shoulders. She looked beautiful. Sexy.

He remembered Grant would walk into a room like that, take up a place at the edge, and make Arthur come to him. Well, he wasn't Grant. He walked toward Samantha and met her halfway. Her white shirt, he noticed from up close, was mostly transparent. Beneath it he could see pink nipples that called out to be touched. *She's feeling brave tonight.*

"Sir," she said with a broad smile.

“Samantha.” He gathered her into his arms, dropping the bag with a thud to the floor. She pressed herself close against him, wriggling, and all was right with the world. He had his lovely girl in his arms and wicked plans for the night ahead he was pretty sure she’d like. “How are you?”

“I’m wonderful, Sir,” she replied, gazing up at his face. Her lips were just an inch below his with the heels she was wearing. It was a perfectly kissable distance, and he took full advantage. If the eagerness with which her tongue twined with his was any indication, she didn’t seem to mind.

When they finally came up for air, he held her with his mouth close to her ear and asked in a whisper, “Is there anything I need to know tonight before we play?”

“No, Sir,” she said, nuzzling cheeks with him. “Just that I am completely available to you.”

Arthur grinned wide. “Glad to hear it, pet,” he told her.

I’m falling in love, she thought. *With a Dom*. It was crazy. But at that moment, she knew she really was completely available to her master.

She didn’t remember a time when she was actually showing less skin than the man topping her. That harness he wore on his chest covered nothing, emphasized everything. His six-pack seemed more pronounced, his biceps bigger. She knew it was an illusion, but it was a delicious illusion.

When she hugged him, she noticed something else. The studs on the leather pressed against her, the thin shirt she wore providing no protection. It wasn’t a painful sensation. It wasn’t even especially uncomfortable, just a subtle emphasis that made her feel even more *there* than usual. It wasn’t the only thing she could feel pressing against her, either. He was definitely happy to see her.

Good. If he was aroused, he’d probably be more eager to push her. She was starting to enjoy being pushed. He always took it carefully, one step at a time, and she always felt certain her safe word would be honored—and not mean the sudden end of the relationship.

Enjoy it while it lasts, she told herself. Although he always gave her his full attention, she was aware he wasn't just attracted to women. And not just women were attracted to him, either, as she thought she'd spotted a couple of guys ogling him when they were out on dates. It was something she'd played in her mind over and over since, imagining Arthur sucking, fucking, and ass fucking his admirers. The competition. And then she'd imagined him turning to her with that smile on his lips and lust in his eyes. The only orgasms that were better than the ones that fantasy triggered were the ones she had on Saturday nights with Arthur live and in person.

She squeezed against him, feeling the studs press into her one more time. She let go reluctantly when he released her.

"I promised you a little play with hot wax when we were up at Bondage Ranch," said Arthur softly. "And I brought along just the right things to follow through on that promise tonight."

Samantha shivered. *Wax*. She had been hoping he'd forgotten, hadn't she? She wasn't sure. He'd want her naked, of course, so as not to get any wax on her clothes. She remembered the burns she'd suffered once before. Despite that, she wanted it. Her body wanted it, if the growing warmth in her core was any indication. Week by week, moment by moment, he was pushing her to exceed her limits. She was aware of his eyes on her, studying her reactions. All she had to do was say the word "red" and he'd come up with a different way to play with her. There was only one thing she wanted to say to him.

"Yes, Sir," she said, her voice low and husky.

Even my voice betrays me.

"You're nervous," he observed.

"I'm scared out of my wits," she said. "But I want to do it anyway. For you, Sir. For me." Trust was a muscle. You had to exercise it to make it strong.

He nodded, unsurprised at her answer. "The table's free now," he said. "It might not be later." He picked the bag up off the floor.

“Then we should go, Sir.” He was already moving, taking a slight detour to grab a folding chair on the way. She hoped he never got tired of hearing her call him that but cut off the thought. Tonight was about tonight. Tomorrow was tomorrow. She turned and followed him.

The table was different from the one at Bondage Ranch. In construction it was simple: four posts of wood that supported a flat table long enough for someone to lie on, all painted black; four six-inch-high posts at the corners with rings bolted into them for attachment points. It didn't look horribly comfortable.

“Someday,” said Sam, “I'd love to see some bondage furniture in neon orange.”

Arthur laughed. “That'd be a hoot,” he said. “Some people have some pretty colorful gear, but the clubs are always very dark, aren't they?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I guess, truth to tell, I'd get pretty tired of having it all orange too.”

He smiled and opened his bag. “Not orange, but sky blue, at least,” he said. He pulled out of his bag some soft-looking blue padding and laid it out on top of the table. It was wide enough to cover the whole thing, but he folded it in half, making it double thick down the center, just wide enough for her body.

Next he took out a light blue sheet, still in its package from the store. He opened the package and draped the sheet over the table, covering it completely, posts and all.

“For my princess,” he said, bowing and gesturing to the table.

“I thought I was your slave,” said Samantha lightly. She meant submissive, but somehow it didn't fit alongside the “princess.” It wasn't medieval enough. Slave—she'd always thought it a scary term. One that suggested no escape, having to be submissive all the time, having no choices at all.

“A princess,” he repeated. “Who gives herself willingly.”

Samantha smiled. He always seemed to find the sweetest things to say. He was right, of course. She was here willingly and wouldn't rather be anywhere else. "I'm guessing you'd like a naked princess?"

"It'd be a shame to get wax on your pretty clothes," he answered with a grin.

She took off her blouse first. *Might as well give him something to look at.* She looked over at him. He had hopped up on the table to watch the show.

"You have lovely breasts, Samantha."

She smiled. "Thank you, Sir." He was either sincere or the best liar she'd ever known.

"I'm going to enjoy dripping wax on them."

She gulped, fear washing over her again. *There's nothing to be afraid of. He knows what he's doing.* Believing it was true, even knowing that it was true, didn't completely solve the problem. But it was a start.

She bent down and carefully took her sandals off. She didn't want to be careful. She wanted to just get everything off as fast as possible, get on the table, and face her fears dead-on. But frantic undressing wasn't going to calm her nerves. She rolled the stockings off, setting them aside neatly. She was dimly aware there were people all around. It didn't matter. She didn't even feel she was being particularly exhibitionistic. There was just Arthur and the table and her, and nothing else mattered. Despite all the naked and half-naked people around him, his gaze didn't wander, either. Didn't men always check out the alternatives? Apparently not. She blushed under the heat of his gaze. She unzipped the skirt and let it fall to the floor.

Arthur hopped off the table and helped her hoist herself up. "On your back, love."

He would—it was always harder that way, more exposed, and she could see more. She lay down, stretching her hands out to the posts.

He bent down to kiss her lightly on the lips before drawing back. She wanted to chase his lips, to lift her head and follow them, but she knew better. She had given up control to him. It was freeing in a way. She didn't have to do anything except what he asked her to do.

"No cuffs tonight," he told her.

Samantha blinked. She'd never thought to put "not being restrained" on her list of things she wouldn't do. "Um, yellow," she said.

"You're not sure you can do it," he said.

"No." Staying still with hot wax dripping on her would be very hard without something to pull against.

"But I know you can, Samantha."

She cracked a bit of a smile. "You're sure about that."

"Absolutely." He looked sure too.

She chewed on her lower lip. He was honoring her caution word, she realized, not moving forward or backward, just waiting. He'd honor her safe word if she had to give it. "Sir?" she asked.

"Yes, Samantha."

"If I can't stay still enough, will you hold me down?"

"Yes."

"Then I think I can do this."

He nodded his approval. "You're brave. Which I knew. Now you know it too."

She smiled a little at that and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She heard the sound of a match being struck, and then smelled paraffin burning in the air. It was a sweet smell, even if what it foretold was scary. She fought the urge to look to check the color of the candles and how high he was holding them and lost. There was a single white candle, less than an inch around, burning in a glass holder on the chair. No large pools of wax could form in a small candle like that, and it didn't

have any dyes that might not cool as well or as fast as the paraffin. She smiled and turned her face back to the ceiling, closing her eyes once more.

The first drop landed on her stomach, startling her. She let out a little yelp before she realized it wasn't even especially hot, just very warm. Her eyes flickered open again. If he was to hold the candle any higher, he'd need a stepladder. The wax cooled on the way down. She watched another drop fall and hit her belly, the wax solidifying on contact. He put a soft strip of terrycloth over her eyes. He had wanted her to see that much, she realized, and now he was protecting her eyes from an accident.

She remembered a Christmas Eve church service a long time ago, when she'd been little, and everyone held little candles as they dimmed the lights and sang "Silent Night." The candles melted, the wax ran down, and some of it flowed to where she gripped the candle. It had startled her with its heat, but it hadn't burned. And this candle was higher than that one. Even if he brought it down quite a bit, it wouldn't hurt her, although she'd definitely feel it. She balled her fingers up into fists. It didn't help as much as something to hang onto, but it was better than nothing.

Drop followed drop, a little faster. Hotter, but only for a moment, and then the feeling would subside, only to be duplicated somewhere else. One on her breasts, then one just where her neck met torso. Her belly. Her left thigh. She was starting to get used to the heat of it, even if there were some nerves he had yet to awaken. No doubt the first time he got her shoulder, she'd bite off another little yelp. Or her right thigh. It was oddly asymmetrical—he kept getting her left thigh and never her right. He seemed fascinated with that little line right down the middle from her collarbone to her cleavage, returning there again and again, never to the sides except lower down, on her breasts and her stomach. She tried to figure it out, but gave up and went back to just feeling.

It felt wonderful once she got used to it. He was cooing to her, telling her how brave she was, but she didn't even feel especially brave, just cared for. She didn't

have to do anything but lie there, and she was getting his full attention. She moved her legs a bit apart instinctively. She felt like she was floating, the heat of the falling wax just pushing her ever upward.

She heard a fast brush of air. A moment later she felt two fingers pushing inside her. She slowly returned from her dreamy state, the callused fingers moving within her insistent that she pay attention. There was nothing else for a timeless interval, just the moving and the heat growing in her core until it was hotter than any candle. She moaned and bucked her hips to meet his fingers. He held her down with a hand on her shoulder, his fingers moving faster in response to her motions.

He had her full attention all centered on those two fingers. “Yesssss,” she hissed. He slowed down a little as she reached the edge of ecstasy, holding her there. He knew just how much to move them to keep her fully aroused and not push her over. As much as she wanted to come, the thought that he controlled whether or not she did and when turned her on even more. Her nipples tightened farther, the contracting areolae splitting the wax that had hardened around them.

She loved how he made her feel. Even in her frustration she thought she could stand to be held on the edge forever as long as it was by him. But at last she blurted out the words: “Please, Sir.”

He rubbed his thumb across her clit roughly and then plunged his fingers deeply in. She screamed out her pleasure. She had stayed still enough for the wax, but she wasn’t staying still anymore. Her whole body responded, legs kicking out, chest shuddering. True to his word he held her down, his free hand on her shoulder and his other arm pushing down on her thighs even as his fingers moved inside of her.

It was several minutes until the last few aftershocks settled down. She was dimly aware they’d gathered a bit of an audience, and the fact made her blush. She was used to feeling she’d “been there, done that” with bondage and watchers. But Arthur was taking her heart places she hadn’t been before.

“People,” she murmured to him.

“Just us,” he told her, putting his arm behind her. The crowd didn’t stay. A scene was one thing, but a couple of people just holding each other wasn’t that interesting.

“Just a moment,” he said. She was grateful for the soft padding he’d brought, because she was quite sure she’d have been sore without it. It wasn’t as soft as a bed, but it was comfortable enough to wait for whatever he had in mind.

To her surprise, he handed her a mirror. Its handle was too simple and unadorned to seem feminine, although she’d never thought of guys as having much to do with mirrors with handles. She took a look at her face, by habit. Her lipstick was a bit smudged, but she realized that probably wasn’t why he had given her the mirror. She moved it downward, angling it so she could see her body. A single line of milky translucent wax ran from her neck to her cleavage, as she’d thought. Moving farther down, she saw that the next bit, including her breasts and coming to a point just above her navel, formed a heart. Down lower, a *U*. On her thigh, a simple *A*. *I love you*. It took her just a moment to realize the *A* was a signature, his initial.

He loves me. She fumbled with the concept. *When did this go from two people who had kinky fun to love? What does he want of me?* It wasn’t just him—her feelings had gotten stronger too.

“I love you, Samantha,” Arthur said, quietly but aloud.

“Oh, Arthur,” Samantha said, wanting to say it back but frightened. He’d been a 24-7 slave for a while, from what he’d told her. *Is that what he wants from me? And even if I hold it back, will I slowly fall more and more under his spell until I have nothing left to give?* She’d fantasized about feeling that way, about being consumed, but the reality scared her more than a hundred waxings ever would.

He only let the disappointment at her response touch his face for a moment. “Let’s go to my place,” he said. “Where there aren’t so many people around. Not sure why we came here in the first place; we could have done this on the dining room table.”

“Next time,” she said. If she couldn’t say the words he wanted, she’d at least say what she could. “I’ll happily go to your place with you. And I’ll wear the wax all the way back. It makes me feel good, Sir.”

* * *

“Arthur,” she said after they crossed the threshold, the door closed behind them.

“What is it, Samantha?”

“Make love to me, please,” she said softly. Just calling it sex wouldn’t do. She hung her jacket up on a hook in the foyer, knowing her translucent shirt revealed hard pink nipples and hinted at the wax beneath.

He grinned. “Nothing I’d rather do,” he said. He scooped her up, and she laughed, hitting his shoulders lightly with her balled-up hands in mock struggle.

He carried her to the bedroom and set her down on the bed. She sat up on the edge. He sat down next to her, kissing her. She kissed back eagerly. He moved lower, kissing along her jawline and down the lines of her neck. Each kiss sent sparks over her body, hardening her nipples and making them ache and making her pussy wet.

He kissed her nipples through the cloth, then sucked them wetly into his mouth in turn. He gently bore her down until she lay on the bed, then lifted her legs so he could get in between them. He pushed her skirt up, and she felt his hot tongue on her pussy. She wanted him now. He looked up at her, his eyes dancing, and she thought for a moment he was going to tease her with light flicks of his tongue, holding her on the edge. He did that so well, but right now she just wanted him inside. She wanted to be of one flesh.

He stripped off quickly. She pushed her skirt off and kicked off her shoes. She spread her legs wide in invitation.

He got a condom from the drawer, ripped the packet, and rolled it on. She’d almost forgotten about that—good thing he hadn’t. It seemed like she’d been

waiting forever, but at last he entered her. She growled, raking her fingernails across his back. He pulled her blouse open to her belly button and pushed his cock in as deep as he could go, filling her channel completely.

“Oh!”

“Like that?”

“Oh yes.”

She met his gaze for a moment. This time he wasn't hard to read at all. He was ready to pop at any moment, she suspected, and they'd just begun. He slowly pulled back, lowering his head to gently pinch a nipple between his teeth, and then plunged in again. His eyes shut in concentration, as if the sight of her was too much, and his jaw tightened, but it didn't stop him from fucking her hard and deep and fast. He may have been ready from the moment they started, but God, the man had excellent control.

Samantha grinned to herself. As much as she liked his control, this time she wanted to overcome it. She caught him by surprise when she rolled him over and straddled him, but he rolled right back and pinned her. She smiled, happily vanquished but still feeling as fierce as he looked. She scratched his back with her fingernails, growling at him. He tore off the last button on her blouse, sending it flying halfway across the room. She bit his neck. He pinched her nipples hard and then captured her mouth with his. Their kiss was rough. She'd have a bruised lip if she wasn't careful, but the thought only caused her to press harder against him, so he would too.

Another thrust, deep and rough, and her pussy couldn't take anymore. She shuddered, her muscles clamping down around his cock, fire coursing over her. Still he didn't come with her, although he tore his lips away and grunted, clenching his jaw in concentration.

He kept moving inside her, slowing down, bumping against her clit with each stroke. Her hands moved across his back, feeling the warmth of the skin she'd scratched before. *I love you. Come inside me.* She opened her mouth, not sure which

she was going to say, and ended up not saying anything at all. She came again, a soft fluttery feeling compared to the volcano that had overcome her before, but it was enough to shake him. He came, long and hard, emptying himself. She smiled at him and closed her eyes. She was just going to rest for a minute.

Chapter Ten

Arthur looked over at Samantha. He had just gotten up to drop the condom in the wastebasket. Her breathing was slow and steady. She was falling asleep at his house. He smiled. It was a wonderful evening.

He watched her for a while. Then he moved her slowly, carefully rolling off her stockings. She didn't budge but sighed in a happy-sounding way. The blouse didn't look too uncomfortable to sleep in, so he decided to leave that rather than risk waking her up trying to get her arms out of it.

He brushed the wax that had loosened during their lovemaking off her—he'd have to change the sheets in the morning, but that was okay.

He edged the duvet and top sheet out from underneath her and then pulled them over her naked body. The light he got next. He slipped in next to her, under the covers, her body against his. If the contented purr she gave was any indication, she was as happy with the arrangement as he was.

* * *

Arthur woke up in time to hear the car engine. Sam wasn't in bed anymore. He walked over to the window, looked down at the street below, and watched her car drive away. He slammed his fist down against the top of his dresser. He'd scared her away. *Dammit.*

He wasn't any happier when he got downstairs and found the note she had left on the pad next to the kitchen phone. It was short and to the point. "I need time. I'll call you." was all she wrote.

He crumpled it up into a ball to throw into the trash. His arm pulled back, paper in hand, stopping just before he tossed it.

Carefully he unfolded the small yellow piece of paper and smoothed it. He lifted it to his mouth and tasted the wet spot on it. It was salty. She'd been crying, and he hadn't been there to put his arms around her.

There was nothing he could do about it now. He had to get ready to go to work. He had the Sunday shift. He wasn't going to be his best on such little sleep or in his current mood. Samantha had enjoyed herself; he was sure of it. He shook his head. He didn't need to understand women in general—he'd been told often enough that wasn't going to happen. He just wanted to understand one woman and get that woman back in his bed, his arms, and his life.

I'll give you a little time, Samantha. But I'm not letting you go.

* * *

Getting her fingers greasy was by far the best way to get her thoughts off Arthur and off the weekend coming up, especially Saturday night. She wasn't doing anything on the weekend except curling up with a good, safe book. She had a thick fantasy trilogy full of little hints of bondage sorted out to read, but she thought she'd give it a pass and read something else. Not romances, that was for sure. Some mysteries would be safe. The old-fashioned kind, where the sex was only hinted at and the reader always had all the clues in front of her before the detective solved the case. *I'll be safe from naughty thoughts if I spend the weekend with Ellery Queen.* Luckily the local library had a good store of old novels, probably because they didn't have the budget to replace them.

She chuckled. When her mind wasn't on work, it was on what else could keep her mind away from him. *Screw that.* She wiggled under the '93 Chevy Malibu she was working on. It was leaking oil, but that was fixable. It was the sort of car she'd like to own, because it needed fixing constantly at its age and she enjoyed the work. The current owner, Mrs. Springer, should probably have gotten rid of it, since her idea of car maintenance entirely involved paying other people for it. She'd probably sink more into it in a year than the vehicle was worth. Mrs. Springer thought she

was being frugal, keeping it around, but it brought to mind the phrase her mother had been so fond of: *Penny wise, pound foolish*.

So it went. Brake jobs, oil changes. Rebuilding the motor in a three-year-old car whose owner thought he could get away with putting off oil changes indefinitely and hadn't given his poor car even one. She wasn't wholly successful at keeping sex or the weekend before off the brain—one mention of the word lube had her thinking of Arthur—but for the most part it worked.

She turned to crossword puzzles in the evening.

By Friday, she was wondering if he'd call. But he didn't. What did she expect? She'd told him she'd make the first move. She wanted him to do it anyway, to come claim her. She'd picked up the phone a half dozen times to call him. She wanted him in control. She wanted to have things her way, with her life, in her town. She wanted it all, and she had to decide what she wanted most.

She stopped by the library and picked up a whole stack of books. Miss Marple would come to the rescue if she remembered who done it in the Ellery Queens. It had been years since she'd read them though, since she was a teenager, so she didn't expect to remember. It would be nice and quiet. Her landlady, Mrs. Stemple, was out on vacation, so the first floor was empty. No one would come knocking around wondering if she holed herself up with her books all weekend long. The only other apartment was currently unleased. She'd stocked up on frozen dinners the night before.

She walked up the stairs to her place and wedged the books between her body and the wall so she could get a hand free to work the lock. She twisted the key, tried the knob, and frowned. She hadn't unlocked it. She tried again, and it opened. She realized she'd actually locked it the first time, which meant it had been unlocked before. Had she been that careless? She had been preoccupied lately. *Time to quit being lazy and lock the deadbolt too for a while so I don't forget*. She got her books back carefully in both arms, gave the door a little hip check to open it, and sidled in.

A hand grabbed her arm. The books tumbled to the floor. Before she had time to react, the door was closed again and she had been pulled inside.

Todd McAndrew stood there.

“What the hell, Todd? What are you doing in here?”

“I picked the lock,” said Todd smugly.

“Get out of here right now or I’ll call the police.” She wasn’t sure what effect that threat would have on him, seeing as his dad was the chief. But the older Mr. McAndrew was a pretty good guy and wouldn’t put up with his son breaking and entering, even if he got off with a slap on the wrist. At least she didn’t think he’d put up with it.

“You don’t want to do that,” said Todd. The light in the living room, already on, glinted off the blade of the knife that appeared in his hand. She backed away from him, and he walked forward at the same deliberate speed.

Todd smiled. “I know what sort of thing you like. Now even more than when you told me. I’ve been reading your books.”

She glanced down at Ellery and Jane Marple, lying on the floor. “The ones in your bedroom,” Todd clarified. “In the closed cabinet.”

She blinked but stopped backing away. “If you read those,” she said, “you know it’s all about being safe, sane, and consensual. Not anything that happens when you threaten me with a knife.”

“They’re not all that way,” said Todd. “The *Story of O*—now that’s not what I’d call sane, Samantha dear. Not everything there is consensual. Sometimes a woman needs to be forced to give in to her own desires. And I know what those desires are, Samantha. You told me a little when we dated. You remember that. And I’ve read your books, and I know even more. I know what a slut like you wants, and you’re going to get it.”

What I want is nothing from you, thought Samantha, but she stopped herself from saying it. It wasn’t all lust in his eyes; there was anger too. She wasn’t going to

win by kicking his ego, although she had no intention of building it up. “No, Todd, this isn’t right,” she said. “Just go now. I’m not in the mood for this. We’ll talk some other time.” *In a nice, public place.*

“See, there you go,” said Todd. “Trying to be in control, when what you really want is to surrender. We’re going to do this right now, Samantha. I’m going to fuck you silly, and you’re going to acknowledge me as your master. And when we’re done, I might call some of my friends, so they can have you too. You’re going to make me some money, you little whore. If you don’t behave, well, you might get a little cut up.”

He was crazy. How could he believe that anyone would want that? She looked around for some kind of weapon. She had a wrench in her hand half the day, and now there was nothing. There were knives in the kitchen, but he’d blocked that way off. She remembered the nice, heavy lamp in her bedroom. It wouldn’t be hard to get him in there, although he’d probably take it as encouragement if she suggested it. She took another step back and bumped into the wall.

Todd closed the gap. His lips pushed against hers, and he scowled when she didn’t kiss him back. His chin was stubbly and scratchy against her skin. His hand was pulling at the zipper of the jumpsuit she wore to work, the one with “Samantha” embroidered on it.

“Start cooperating, slut, or I’ll cut this open instead, and I just might nick you. You know what I’ve been thinking about?”

Despite herself, she asked, “What?” *At least if he’s talking he’s not kissing me.*

“I’ve been thinking about carving the word ‘slut’ on your body. Sometimes I think about it on your breasts, sometimes on your thigh, or just above your cunt. Sometimes I think it belongs on your forehead where you can’t cover it up. You’d like that deep down, to have everyone know what a slut you are, but I know you can’t admit that to yourself.”

“Bullshit,” said Sam. She tried to knee him in the groin. His legs pinned her too effectively, but even though the attempt didn’t work he knew what she’d tried.

“Play nice or I’ll do it, Samantha. I’ll cut you either way, but it’s up to you whether you want it to show.”

The phone rang, and his attention was diverted. If only there was a weapon within reach! She was pretty sure she was strong enough to knock him out if she had something heavy.

“Don’t even think about answering that,” Todd told her.

“Kinda hard to with me pinned against the wall and all,” Sam told him.

“On second thought,” said Todd, an ugly grin appearing on his face, “answer it. And you’ll say exactly what I tell you to, because the knife is going to be right against your neck. Understood?”

Sam nodded. Whoever it was, at least it would take time. *One of those long surveys on her political opinions would be good right now.*

She walked into the bedroom. Todd was right behind her. She could feel the knife at her back. She didn’t have the space to pick up the lamp to brain him with it, not yet. Maybe that time would come. In the meantime, she pretended to ignore the lamp’s presence. She picked up the phone. “This is Samantha,” she said.

“Hello, Samantha,” drawled a familiar voice. It was Arthur. It sounded like he might be driving or at least parked with cars going past him. The sound quality was a little off too, so definitely on his cell phone. She tried to think of the right thing to say.

“Tell whoever it is, Samantha,” whispered Todd, his voice harsh in her ear. “Tell him. Say ‘I’m a slut,’ Samantha. Now.”

“I’m a slut,” she said into the phone, not liking the way Todd was sounding. He was getting more worked up all the time, and his voice was rising.

“Um. Hmm,” said Arthur, obviously taken aback by the direction of the conversation. “I wouldn’t say that. But you are a very desirable woman who enjoys sex, and I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Fallen in love. How silly, after just a few meetings. Or it would be silly, if I wasn't in love too. I've been wanting for you to call, and now you finally do, and I can't even talk freely. I was afraid of you—and I was afraid of the wrong man.

“What’s he saying?” hissed Todd. “I can tell it’s a man.”

She half covered the receiver, making it look to Todd like it was covered while she hoped Arthur could hear what was going on in the room. “He says I’m not.”

“Convince him,” Todd demanded.

Under any other circumstances the idea of talking dirty on the phone with Arthur might have held some appeal, but this so wasn’t it.

“Me too.” She hoped he’d remember what she was saying that to, but she didn’t dare add more. “It’s true. I’m absolutely, positively, a—”

“Are you okay, Sam?” Arthur’s voice cut in.

“I told you, I’m not what you say,” she replied, trying to sound annoyed for Todd’s benefit. Todd grinned at her. She forced herself to smile back, glad she got a chance to hint to Arthur that things weren’t going well. She hoped he picked up on it.

“I see,” said Arthur.

Ask me a question. Ask me if you should call the police, or what’s going on, or something.

Todd grabbed the receiver from her and hung it up.

“Doesn’t it feel good to admit what you are?” said Todd.

She turned to face him. “I’m not, actually. You know, I used to think that maybe I was. But I’m really quite choosy. It’s taken me a while to find the right man is all.”

Todd grinned. “I’m glad you finally found him.”

The idiot thinks I’m talking about him. I’d rather die.

She turned, her back toward the lamp, and slowly moved her arms behind her, trying to reach for it while keeping up the conversation. “Oh, I needed a strong man,

one who would give me directions and expect to be obeyed.” She kept her eyes fixed on Todd, whose grin was getting wider and wider. Every feeling she’d been pushing back about Arthur, she put into what she was saying. She had never thought herself much of an actress, but then she wasn’t really acting. She just wasn’t talking about who Todd thought she was talking about.

“One I could call ‘Master,’ or ‘Sir,’ or anything he wished. Someone I would kneel to. Someone who would treat me the way I want to be treated.” *Which is a good deal better than you’d even know how to treat a woman.* She had her hands around the lamp base now. She just had to swing it around and brain him with it. Lifting it over her head wouldn’t work; her hands were in too awkward a position for that.

“With respect,” she said, swinging the lamp.

Unfortunately, he chose just that moment to grab her and throw her onto the bed, and the lamp ended up hitting him in the ribs rather than the head. It fell to the floor and shattered.

He didn’t look very happy with her.

Oh, shit. She screamed, but she doubted anyone could hear her.

Chapter Eleven

Arthur had planned to show up with flowers and a bottle of wine and sweep Samantha off her feet the old-fashioned way. He'd done a reverse lookup on her phone number and found her address on the Internet. But he decided to stop just after exiting I-95 to give her a call instead. He'd given her a chance to be the one who called first. She'd find he could be very persistent, but he intended to stay on the right side of that fine line between persistence and being a stalker.

The phone conversation he just had, thought Arthur, was downright bizarre. She was with someone. He could hear his voice and even make out a few of the words and the tone, which was threatening. It was possible that Sam had another lover and was playing a game in which he, Arthur, was just a prop. If so he'd get hurt far worse by wondering about it than by knowing, but he didn't believe it. The Samantha he knew wasn't that sort of person. In fact, it sounded like just the sort of thing she'd have as a very hard limit. And if that wasn't what was happening, then Sam was in trouble. He trusted her. He started his car back up and got to work breaking the local speed limits.

It was exactly seven o'clock when Arthur got out of his Miata and ran up to Samantha's building. The lights on the first floor flared into life, one at each end of the house. *Nobody home there unless two people just happened to turn their lights on at the same time.* But there wasn't any sign of anyone moving around there. More likely, whoever it was had left on vacation, and they'd gotten a timer just like the ones he sold at his hardware store to turn their lights on and off at night, right on the hour.

Thank God the door to the stairway up was unlocked. He'd hate to be breaking and entering if his fears turned out to be wrong, and he wanted to get to the apartment fast in case he was right. Upstairs there was a hall with two doors, but Samantha's was the closer. *Knock or break in?* He tried the lock. Unlocked. Maybe he was trusting too much in the notion of human consistency, but he was pretty sure a woman who filled out a two-page limit list would lock her door. He opened the door. Nothing more was getting between him and the woman he loved.

"Get off me, Todd!" Samantha yelled. She was deeper into the apartment. Arthur broke into a run.

"I'm going to cut you again for that one," snarled a male voice, dripping venom. "You're just a little slut, and everyone will know."

If he'd heard the exchange in a club, involving any other woman, he'd have made a polite inquiry about the consensual nature of a scene before rudely interrupting. "Get off me," could be just play in a world where a real no was indicated with a safe word. Arthur wasn't a violent man. But there was a broken lamp on the floor, blood on Samantha's forehead, and a knife in the young punk's hand, and besides, Arthur really didn't appreciate the man calling Samantha a slut. He punched him hard with a hammerlike fist. It would have caught the side of his head, but Todd made the mistake of turning to look at the sound approaching just as the fist connected, and it ended up striking him in the jaw. He tumbled off Samantha and off the bed and lay still. The knife left his grip and wedged itself in the wood of Samantha's dresser.

"Arthur!" Sam yelled, and the voice didn't sound angry. She sounded relieved. She threw herself into his arms, and all he had to do was catch her. "Oh my God," gushed Sam. "I am so glad to see you!"

He snuggled her close. She wasn't wearing much—just some beige underwear—and her skin felt so warm against him.

"How did you get here so quickly? You live forty minutes away!"

“I was just in the neighborhood,” said Arthur, “and thought I’d stop by and see how you were.” He dabbed at her forehead, his hand coming back with her blood on it. She pulled back from his touch; obviously it stung. The knife had cut in pretty deeply. “Ouch. We better get that cleaned up.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Sam. “But I want to be held a few minutes first.”

“He did that?”

“He’s crazy,” Sam said. “He was going to carve his new favorite word onto my forehead if I didn’t play along.”

Arthur held her tightly. Todd moaned. Arthur looked over the bed at him. “Are you going to get up again?” Arthur asked, trying not to sound too hopeful. “Because I’d really like another chance to hit you.”

Todd stopped twitching.

“I think I get the next shot,” said Sam.

“Definitely.”

“But you can hit him too,” she added.

“I’ll call the police.”

Sam looked like she was thinking about and then shook her head. “I don’t know if that’s really a good idea,” she said at last. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated how?” asked Arthur, his heart beating a little faster.

“Oh!” she said. “I didn’t mean it was a complicated story, exactly, it’s just—well, his father’s the police chief.”

“That’s right,” said Todd from the floor.

Sam looked thoughtful, her grip on him loosening. She was recovering pretty well, he thought. Tough lady. He was proud of her. The fact that this beautiful, strong woman was submissive as well was icing on the cake. He just hoped that she wanted him in her life half as much as he wanted her in his.

“Can I borrow your cell phone a second?” she asked. “There’s his prints on the phone, and we’ll let the cops see my forehead in full gory detail. I’ll call his father myself.”

“Of course.” He was on her turf, and as much as he wanted to protect her from any unpleasantness, it was his job to back her play. He handed her the phone.

Sam realized her life was about to get very complicated. Small towns were great; you knew people, and they looked out after you. But everyone knew your secrets if you let them get half a chance. She could and she should press charges against Todd, but he’d be telling everyone about what he thought he knew about her preferences in bed, and it’d be his word against hers for the most part. Arthur was an outsider, whose word would count in court but not quite as well in terms of gossip. For that matter, there would be a grain of truth in what Todd had to say that would undoubtedly come out in any trial.

And yet, to do and say nothing would let it happen again. Probably to her, but even if not, then to some other woman. She had thought Todd a little intense, but it was more than that. He was nuts, crazy, insane. If he didn’t do jail time, maybe he’d at least get treatment.

“He’s got something he picked the door with on him somewhere. And thank you very much for coming. I’m not feeling very submissive right now—don’t know when I ever will, actually, but I could really use a friend.”

“You’ve got one. And I’m honored to be one,” Arthur told her.

Wow.

“Police department, please,” she said coldly to the 911 dispatcher. “Attempted rape, assault with a deadly weapon. I want to speak directly to the chief of police, if I can.”

There was a pause before a familiar voice came on the phone. “Chief McAndrew.”

“Hello, Mr. McAndrew,” said Sam. She’d known him since she was six and he came to school to give a safety lecture. He hadn’t been chief then, but that hadn’t happened too much later. “This is Samantha Grayson.”

“Ah yes. Hello, Samantha. Sorry things didn’t work out between you and my son, but I know he can be handful sometimes. What do you need help with?”

The poor man doesn’t know it by half.

“A man just broke into my apartment, threatened me with a knife, and cut me, Chief.”

“Shit,” said the chief. “Pardon my French. I’m on my way, Samantha—he run off? We’ll get people there as soon as we can.”

“Oh, he didn’t run off. My boyfriend came by.” *That has a nice ring to it. And I can hardly tell the chief my master showed up.* She noticed Arthur smile at her words. “He hit him right on the chin. The attacker is lying on my bedroom floor, afraid to move in case he’ll get hit again.”

“My God, Samantha.” She could hear him rustling in the background, getting his coat on, probably. “On our way.”

She hated to do it this way to the old man, who’d never do her any harm. But he needed to see the person on her floor as a perpetrator first and a relation second. She knew it wouldn’t stick—fatherly was the first adjective to come to mind when it came to Chief McAndrew, and the instincts would run deep. But if it stuck long enough, she might get Todd off the streets.

“Thank you. We won’t touch the evidence.”

* * *

The chief wasn’t the first to arrive. Two young policemen got there before him—a man Samantha didn’t know and a woman she’d gone to school with. They had apparently been in a car not far away when she’d called—no big surprise; Havrefield wasn’t a big town. They recognized Todd, of course. The man hadn’t wanted to get in trouble with the chief, but Dottie Laumer was having none of it. By

the time Chief McAndrew got there, Todd was cuffed. Dottie found the set of lock picks he'd used to get in with in his pocket.

Samantha had thrown her trench coat on over her underwear. It wasn't sexy, despite the fact that it reminded her of that one Tuesday night, but it was covering. She didn't want to touch the coveralls that Todd had stripped off her. Dottie said they'd be evidence but probably wouldn't hold fingerprints very well. The knife, she said, was likely to hold them quite well indeed.

The chief's expression when he saw his son was one she could have happily gone a lifetime without seeing. But he didn't blame her or even talk to her. He simply said something about recusal and told another officer to supervise the case. He'd be out in his car if they needed anything. Only when all the officers had left—with her phone, the knife, coveralls in plastic bags, and pictures taken of the broken lamp, her forehead, and God knew what else—did Chief McAndrew again walk up the steps to her apartment.

"Samantha," he said. "I understand why you didn't tell me on the phone. You're a brave woman, and I respect you for that. I'm very, very sorry that this happened to you."

"Not your fault, Chief," Sam said. Arthur was there at her side. He'd been quiet except when a policeman asked him a question, but his hand had been there to steady her shoulder whenever the shock of it all started to sink in. The fact that he didn't seem ruffled at all was incredibly calming.

"I raised him, Samantha. I and his mother did. I don't think it's his mother to blame. Anyway, at least you know not to blame yourself. Looks like you've got a good man there, Samantha."

Sam smiled a little at that.

"God bless, Samantha," said the chief and walked back down the steps, looking even older than he had before. It was hard to watch him, but Samantha figured he was owed at least the dignity of her not turning away. She waited until he was out of sight and then closed the door.

She turned, and Arthur was there. His strong arms folded around her as she leaned against his shoulder. She let the tears flow from her eyes. He held her close even as they darkened his light blue shirt.

“Thank you for coming, Arthur. I don’t know where I’d be if you hadn’t showed up. I really owe you.”

Arthur shook his head, rocking her gently in his arms. “I’m here because I wanted to see you. I acted because I couldn’t help but act. You don’t owe me anything, Samantha. I want you, and I want to have you and keep you, but not because you owe me something. Because of the way I hope you feel.”

Samantha looked up. What she had fought against now seemed like the most sensible course of action. She didn’t want to stay all alone in the little apartment that had been so easily broken into. Not for one more moment.

“I’m glad you feel that way, because I’m thinking of asking you for another favor.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to move in on you, but for a couple weeks, I was wondering,” said Sam. “Could I stay over at your house? I’d feel safer.” She felt a little manipulative for putting it that way even though it was the honest truth. What man could resist making a woman feel safer? And Arthur was all man, she knew that.

“Of course, Samantha,” Arthur said. “On one condition.”

Samantha raised her eyebrows. She had a feeling she was going to say yes. She hoped it would be something kinky, not that he needed to make it a condition to make her interested in that. “What?”

“No running away while I’m asleep, leaving just a note to remember you by,” Arthur said.

For a moment she imagined herself in Arthur’s shoes, finding the note she had left. She winced. “I promise,” she said. “How’d you ever decide to come after me after I left that note?”

“Because you’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever met,” Arthur said. “But the fact that you left a teardrop on the note didn’t hurt, either.”

“Oh.”

* * *

She’d been in his home a week. Sharing a bed with someone was wonderfully strange. Falling asleep with Arthur’s strong arms around her every night was bliss. She giggled. Sleep usually happened well after they got to bed.

That second night she had told him he could have her anytime he wanted during the night, even if she was fast asleep. That declaration had made it harder to sleep at first, as she lay awake wondering if and when he would take advantage. But after that she had simply felt secure, sleeping like a baby until she felt him stir against her, resting easily and content after their lovemaking was done.

His car pulled up outside as she stared out the window. He’d had work that day, and she hadn’t. It was the first time she’d really been alone in his house for very long.

The first words she said when he got home were, “I’m sorry.”

Arthur blinked. “For what?”

She looked around the house and gestured helplessly, but he still didn’t seem to understand. There were dishes from breakfast still unwashed in the kitchen. A pile of paperbacks lay next to the couch.

“I can’t do it, Arthur. I woke up wanting to serve this morning, and I just couldn’t.”

“Seems to me you served pretty well,” Arthur said. “I remember you making me bacon and eggs, over easy, just the way I like them. And then making me hard while I ate. Fucking me on the table just before I left for work.” He smiled. “Trust me; I’m very satisfied with your service.”

“The dishes—I just didn’t feel like doing a thing, Arthur. Not one blessed thing. I read all day. I just couldn’t take it anymore.”

He wrapped his strong arms around her. She cried silently, trying to hold it in, but she knew her tears were staining his shirt as she buried her face against his shoulder.

“I didn’t ask you to do it all, Samantha. You’ve been running around for a week as if you have to race me to the dishes and the cleaning. I’ve told you that you don’t have to do it all.”

“But I’m your slave,” Samantha protested. “I’m supposed to do it all, so that you—”

“So that I can eat chips and drink beer and watch television? Bullshit, Samantha. You’re my slave *in bed*, not in the kitchen. Unless we’re making love in the kitchen. We both work, and we should share the housework equally. Not even equally perhaps, as it’s my house and that makes most of it my responsibility.”

Samantha’s breath settled, a little more rhythmic. “I thought you wanted—”

“I want you. And yes, I love your submissiveness in our sex life, but for the rest—I want a partnership. You and me, two equally important people who have needs and wants that might not be exactly the same, but who are going to work them out together.”

She nodded and drew back from him. It took him a moment to let her go. He was on her side; she knew that. But she had to say it anyway. “I need to go back to my apartment in Havrefield.”

Arthur nodded. “I figured you would. I won’t tell you I’m leaping for joy, but I’m not surprised.”

“I don’t want to run. And when I’m here, I want to be here to be with you, not because I’m running. You deserve that much.”

“Are you running from me?”

Her first reaction was to snap back, but he hadn’t said it like an accusation. And anyway she supposed he had the right. He’d just asked it as a simple question,

although of course it was anything but simple. “I did once, didn’t I? No, I’m not running from you. I’d take you with me, if I could.”

“Well you can, silly.”

Sam blinked. Doms didn’t work that way. She came to them; they didn’t come to her. They led; she followed. “You mean it?”

“I have to at least go along and install better locks on your door,” Arthur said, grinning. And at that moment she realized his coming along didn’t mean he was any less dominant. Or any less her master.

“Well, make sure you have a set of keys to it for yourself,” she said. She took a breath and went on. If she couldn’t bare her heart to him, she’d never be able to bare it to anyone. “Because I like the fact that between us, you can take control at any time and make love to me any way you like.”

Arthur stared. “Are you sure, Sam? You don’t need to reclaim your space? You’ve been through a lot. I’ve seen big macho guys try to show off how much pain they could take—heck, I’ve been one of those guys, and...”

For a moment there he seemed at a loss for words. It was good to know it could happen to him too. She had more to say, but she’d let him get his thought out first.

“I think, Samantha, that you’re braver than any of them.”

Samantha smiled. Now for the part that took real bravery, she thought. But then she realized it didn’t anymore. It was just impossible *not* to say.

“I love you, Arthur.”

There. She’d said it. And she’d meant it.

“I love you, Samantha.”

Her heart felt like it skipped a beat, even though she’d known that already. To just look into his eyes and feel—it was almost too much.

“If you need some alone time, Sam, after I’ve installed good locks, you can just tell me. Everyone needs that sometime.”

“I think I had my fill of it today for a while, thank you very much.” She’d been counting the minutes for him to get home even though she couldn’t bring herself to do more than laze around all day.

Arthur grinned. “I missed you too.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, and she put hers around his shoulders in response. He felt so strong and steady against her. She resisted the temptation to explore his body with her hands. There was something that had been bugging her, and it seemed like a good time to bring it up.

“You know you were talking about equality, and then you’re going to come up and replace my locks for me...”

“Yes?”

“I think I need to repay you for that work somehow.”

Arthur grinned. “I can get what I want from you anytime I want.” He misunderstood, just as she’d intended.

“No, no. You need to let me under that Miata of yours. It makes a little whine at low speeds, and it drives me crazy. I want to find the problem and fix it.”

“I don’t hear any whine.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. But it’s there.”

“All right,” he said. “Probably more interesting for you than watching me install locks.”

“Depends on how tight your jeans are,” said Samantha. “But I wouldn’t be watching the locks.” She grinned at him. “Are you going to be sleeping over? Mrs. Stemple—that’s the landlady—will be scandalized.”

“Is that bad?” asked Arthur in a voice that sounded very much like he’d rather enjoy scandalizing landladies.

She laughed. “She wields a mean broom,” she warned.

“I’ll wear a helmet.”

“Not in my bed you won’t.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, okay,” she agreed, laughing again. “You’re in charge in the bedroom, Sir, even my bedroom. And that’s exactly how I want it. But—helmets are a soft limit. Still, you’ve got to have better limits to push.”

“Oh I do.” His eyes were mischievous, but his mouth was determined. “And I will be sleeping over.”

“We’ll not want to maintain two homes forever.”

“No, we won’t. We’ll work that out together. For now, however...” He picked her up.

“Hmm?”

“Right now, I want you in my bed, so I’m taking you there. Struggle if you’d like.”

Sam shook her head, laughing. “You’d have to make it an order, Master.”

☪ THE END ☪

Loose Id Titles by Sindra van Yssel

The BONDAGE RANCH Series

Roped In

Pushing Limits

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.