

*Moving*

Sindra van Yssel

*On*

Loose Id

*Bondage Ranch 3:  
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## **Bondage Ranch 3: Moving On**

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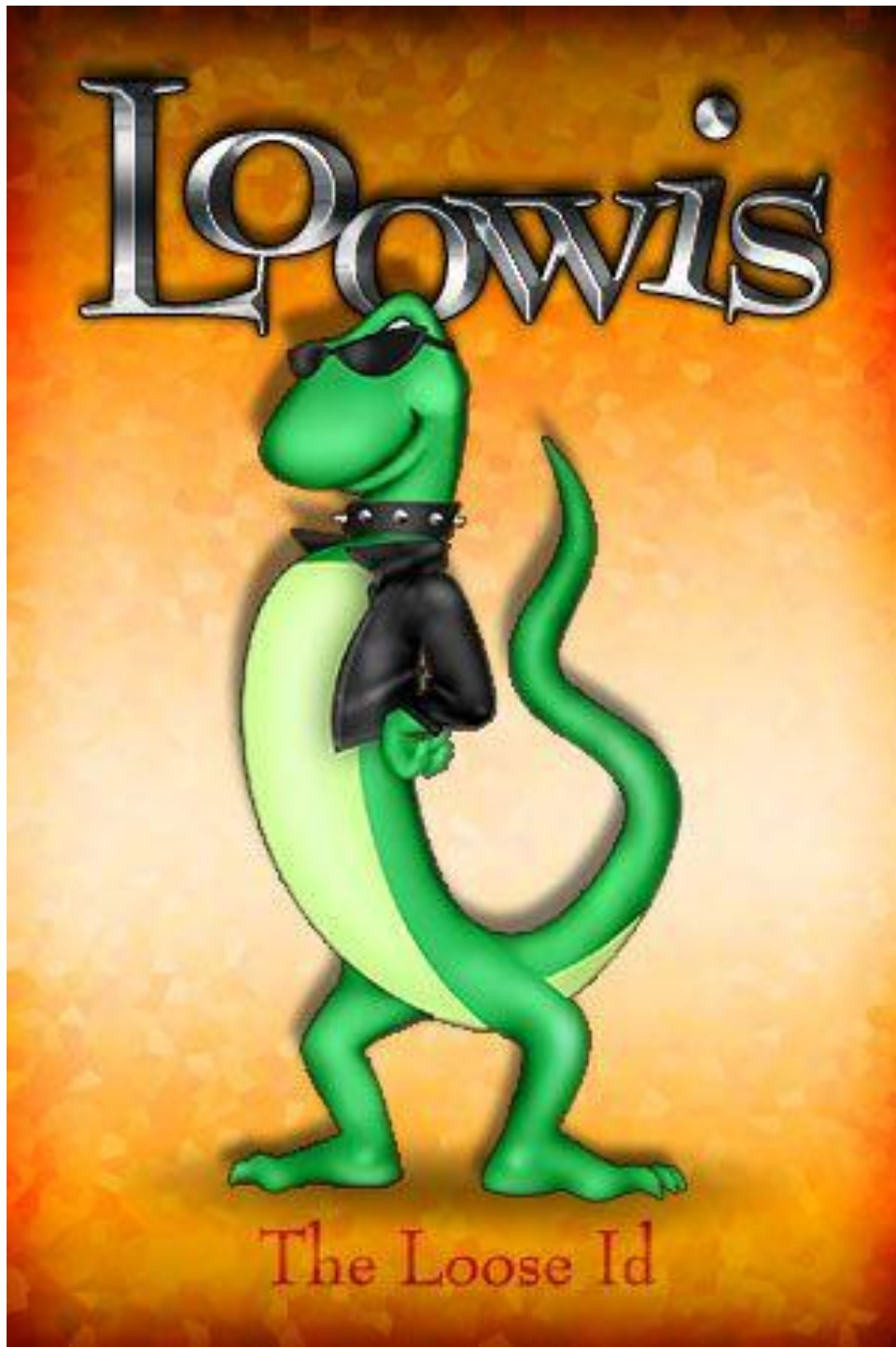
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## Chapter One

*A year earlier...*

Felicia Selena Kinnison, called Selena by everyone but her mother, walked down the concrete steps from the county courthouse clutching her purse in one hand and a piece of paper in her other hand. They'd awarded five thousand dollars a year in child support. It didn't matter. She wasn't ever going to see that money anyway. Al would find reasons not to pay, and it'd cost more in lawyers than it was worth to get it out of him. All she really had to show for ten years of marriage, besides the official divorce decree that she clutched in her hands, was her nine-year-old son, Thom. She smiled. That was plenty. They'd make it somehow, him and her. She knew it wasn't going to be easy. It was going to be a hell of a lot better without Al than it would have been with him, though.

She'd been willing to write off getting hit once, when he'd promised it would never happen again. The second time, she had tried to convince herself he hadn't really *meant* to hit her. It didn't really work, but she hung in one day at a time, never quite picking up the phone to call a lawyer. Then she caught him threatening Thom.

*Screw that, and screw him.* She knew now that if she had stayed, it would have gotten worse. His performance in court and his attitude throughout the divorce proved to her that he had an anger in him she would never satisfy. She knew she had her flaws. She wasn't as thin as she was when they got married, certainly, and he didn't like that. Maybe she wasn't what his mother had taught him to expect in the way of a housekeeper either. Considering she worked part-time and he did

absolutely nothing around the house, she didn't think she was too bad. It sure seemed to take up plenty of her time. She liked things carefully in order, planned, and he didn't like that either. He had an image of what life was supposed to be, and for whatever reason, she wasn't it. Above all, she wasn't sexy enough. She wasn't sure how bruises were supposed to help that. It was true she didn't feel very sexy. She felt worn out, tired. Maybe she wasn't a very sexy, or sexual, woman. If he didn't like what she was, he shouldn't have married her in the first place. Other than a few pounds on her tall frame, she hadn't changed that much. Not all of those extra pounds were fat, either. Some of it was muscle. Maybe he liked that even less. But a park ranger needed to be fit.

In any case, he'd become a completely different person.

There was a hotel across the street, she noticed, taking stock of her surroundings. It was a newer place, a seven-story facility right in the middle of town, not like those sprawling old hotels she used to pass by almost daily along the strip. Modern hotels had bars, didn't they? And bars had drinks. She wasn't going to overdo. But Thom was at her mother's until morning, and she didn't often get the chance to drink at all. If ever she needed one, it was now. She walked to the curb, waited for the flashing sign to change to WALK, looked both ways, and crossed the street.

The hotel did indeed have a bar, and a bit of a lounge too. There were two men in suits at the bar. Probably lawyers. "Gin and tonic," she told the bartender, a younger woman with a pierced nose. It was what she always had when she had a cocktail. The woman turned to make it, when Selena interrupted. "No, wait," she said. "I'll have something else."

The woman turned and looked at Selena, raising her eyebrows and looking bored. "What, then?"

"I'll have a...a...sex on the beach," she said. She had no idea what was in a sex on the beach, actually, but she'd heard the name before. *Take that, Al. Not spontaneous, not sexy? I said that without a blush.* Of course, it made her a bit

aware of her ignorance of cocktails, since she really didn't know what to order or why. *So? Not being big into drinking is not a bad thing. Maybe if Al had drunk a little less—no. If Al had drunk less, it would have taken me longer to realize he was a jerk.*

The bartender worked her magic, grabbing bottle after bottle with smooth, practiced ease. If her customer skills weren't the greatest, no one could fault her dexterity. In a few moments she had slid a highball full of ice and orangeish liquid toward Selena.

"With an alligator?" the bartender asked.

"Huh?"

"Would you like a slice of lime with that?"

"Uh, sure," Selena said, cracking a bit of a smile at the image of the lime as an alligator. "And I'll take it back to one of those tables, if that's all right."

The bartender looked amused. "Sure. Five dollars."

Selena paid and took her drink to the remotest table for two, since there weren't any tables for one. She didn't feel like making small talk with the bartender or with the lawyers. Just her and her little scrap of paper, the one that marked her as a free woman and severed forever any claim Al might have on Thom.

She sipped at her drink. For a cocktail, it didn't taste too bad, actually. It didn't seem to do much for her mood one way or the other. She'd hoped to be transported from the doldrums to singing. *Maybe "Hit the Road, Jack" or "These Boots are Made for Walking."* She managed to get a little Nancy Sinatra going in her head, but that was as far as it went.

"Seat taken?" a low male voice asked. She looked up.

If he had been anything but drop-dead gorgeous, she would have told him she wasn't in the mood for company. He had broad shoulders, deep brown eyes, and a square jaw. If his blond hair was long, he would have been perfect, but it was close cropped, not quite a buzz cut. He wore tight blue jeans and a white ribbed T-shirt

underneath an open black leather jacket. She traced his lines with her eyes for a moment. “Not at all. Feel free.”

He took the other chair, slid it around so they were at right angles to each other rather than sitting across, and sat down. “I hate to see a beautiful woman looking so down, drinking alone.”

“Well, ain’t no beautiful women here.” She sipped at her drink.

He smiled. *Perfect teeth too. Some people have all the luck.* “I beg to differ. You have the most gorgeous lush red hair, and—may I be frank?”

“As long as you’re not Al, you’re good,” she retorted. Al had never much appreciated her sense of humor either.

The stranger chuckled. “You have a lovely curvaceous body.”

“Is that the polite word for fat these days?” Selena asked.

He shrugged. “Some people don’t like the waifish supermodel look. And I’m one of them. I’m James. What’s your name?”

“Selena.”

“Pleased to meet you, Selena.”

“Likewise.” They shook on it.

“I hate to say this, but you don’t look like the type to get a drink this early in the evening.”

“Just got a divorce,” Selena said. It wasn’t exactly bragging, but it was good to tell someone. “You don’t look like the early-drinking type either.”

“I wasn’t here for a drink. I walked by, saw a beautiful woman sitting alone, and thought I’d try to seduce her.”

*Well, that’s certainly straightforward.* Selena would have said something about how if there’s a beautiful woman about, he certainly shouldn’t spend time with *her*, but there weren’t any other women in sight except for the bartender. She definitely had the waifish look, although the short-cropped hair and pierced nose didn’t exactly scream supermodel. *So he means me.* “So go for it,” she said.



“I could tell you that your hair looks the most dazzling copper when the light hits it, and it’d be true. But the fact is, I’d really like to see you smile. I don’t know that I’m all that good at the sweet talk.”

“You’re doing fine,” she told him, smiling a bit. No one had told her she looked nice for a long time. *Actually, that’s not quite true. I kept telling them I was married.*

“Not quite the kind of smile I was looking for, but it certainly goes better on your face than a frown.”

“What sort of smile were you looking for?”

“The kind where your mouth goes open and you make a low moaning sound without meaning to speak. The kind where your breath gets all ragged and your fingers want to claw at something.”

“That’s a smile?” She really did smile this time, showing him teeth. “I haven’t smiled like that in a long time.”

“I can fix that,” he said. Calm. Confident.

“You can, can you?” She had never really done the bar scene. She felt a little awkward, but it seemed to be going fine, and his confidence was contagious.

“But you’d have to follow directions.” His eyes were looking into hers, his gaze hot, examining.

“Directions?” she asked. *I’m no good at this.*

“Give up control,” he explained. “Feel the moment. Let me do what I want to do with your body, and I promise you, you’ll feel wonderful.”

She hesitated a moment. She loved the idea of a man in charge. But he was a stranger. *It’s not safe.* She started to get up.

“You’ll need a safe word.” He spoke like she hadn’t moved, although his eyes followed her every motion. “And if you use it, I’ll stop immediately. You’ll always be free to go, of course.”

She knew what a safe word was. She’d come across the phrase in a novel about sexy vampires. She sat back down. “It has to be safe.”

He nodded. “I’m a stranger. And what we want to do is best done in private, although I know a few people who would disagree with that. Being alone with a stranger is not a perfectly safe thing to do, and I’d be insane to tell you it is. All I can tell you is this—it’s not a good idea to go into a hotel room to be alone with a man you’ve never met, and you are perfectly safe with me. I know that, and there’s really no way I can prove it to you. You believe it, or you don’t.”

She stared at him for a long time. *This isn’t the sort of thing I do.* Which, she knew, was exactly why she wanted to do it.

He opened his wallet. There was a flash of something silver, and then it was gone. He placed a driver’s license on the table. *James Robert Culver*, she read. She glanced at the birth date. Thirty-eight. A bit older than she was. She smiled. *Always did have a thing for more experienced men. Although there are probably twenty-year-olds with more experience than me.*

“Call a friend,” he said. “Tell them where you are, who you’re with, when you expect to call back, and to call the police if she doesn’t hear from you.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you...” she said, her voice trailing off, since she didn’t have a good way to tell him what it was. *It’s that I know I shouldn’t trust you.*

“Of course not. What’s the phrase? Trust but verify. Do the smart thing. Not only with me but with anyone. I won’t tell you it makes you completely safe. It just makes you safer.”

She nodded. The fact that he didn’t try to push her, didn’t try to tell her she was a chicken, was earning him major points. She racked her brain. Who could she call for something like this? *Hey, I’m shagging a stranger.* Not her mom, certainly. *Laera.* She didn’t see Laera very often these days—Laera lived in Northern Virginia, and it was a bit of a drive—but Laera was her most open-minded friend. It wasn’t always that way. She remembered Laera from high school as something of a shy wallflower. But Laera had changed.

She got up. “Excuse me,” she said.

“Of course.”

She walked out of the lounge to the lobby and took her cell phone out of her purse, dialing Laera's number. *Be home*. Laera picked up on the fourth ring.

"Laera? Selena."

"Hey! The divorce final yet?"

"Just put the paper in my purse. Thought I'd do a little celebrating."

"Good for you! I'd meet you halfway, but I'm on a date."

*On a date, but at home. Got it*. Selena hoped she hadn't interrupted sex, but she doubted Laera would have picked up the phone.

"I'll keep this short, then," said Selena. "I'm about to be on a date too, with a guy I just met. A total hunk. Can you be around to get the phone in three hours or so? Because if I don't call in three hours, I want you to call the police."

"Sounds like you picked a winner," said Laera drily.

"I don't know him. Actually, calling you was his idea."

"Oh!" said Laera, the judgmental tone going out of her voice. "Where are you?"

Selena gave her the name of the hotel, and the man's name.

"All right, hon. You be safe. And remember to call, because I *will* follow your directions."

"Thanks, Laera."

Well, at least Laera didn't call her crazy. And the tone in her voice at the end hadn't left any doubt she'd follow up. She imagined Laera turning to the person she was with—Bruce, that was the name of her steady boyfriend—and telling him he had three hours, and he'd better make the most of it. She smiled.

"You have protection?" she asked when she got back to the table with James. If she was going to play adult games, she decided she'd best act like an adult. "Because I'm not the kind of girl who carries it on her just in case."

"I don't either, actually," he said. "Believe it or not. But while you were out calling a friend, I found a machine in the bathroom and used up my supply of quarters."

Selena laughed. “Thoughtful,” she said, not sitting back down yet. “Point two. Married? Engaged?”

“Not currently attached in any way, shape, or form,” he said. “If I was married, I’d sure as heck be wearing a ring.”

“Oh, that fades,” Selena said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“You wore one, right up to the end,” he said.

“You know me? Because I sure as heck don’t know you.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said, nodding toward her left hand. “But you still have the indentation on your ring finger. That fades, after a while.”

She looked. Sure enough. She met his eyes again. “Are you a detective or something? Or do you spend a lot of time picking up women in bars?” *Tactful.*

“Believe it or not, picking up women in bars isn’t usually my style.”

“What is?” she asked, figuring she’d sit down after he answered the question.

“I’ll show you. Come.” He stood up and walked past her toward the lobby. She blinked and stared after him. You’d have to follow directions, he had said. *He certainly doesn’t lack for confidence.* And why should he, looking like that? She followed him. She had worn a nice royal blue suit with a skirt to the courthouse, but she hadn’t worn heels, so she could hurry a little bit and keep her dignity. He had long strides.

She arrived at the desk in time to know he gave the same name renting the hotel room as the name he’d given her. It wasn’t that she doubted it was real, but she wanted to know that if Laera called the police, they’d be able to find the room. Or rather, she wanted to know James would understand that if her unnamed friend called the cops, they’d be able to find the room and him.

She thought of insisting on sharing the cost of the room. Wasn’t that what a liberated woman would do? But she wasn’t exactly made out of money. Until she found a full-time job, she wasn’t sure how she and Thom would be making ends meet, even as it was. James seemed to assume he was paying anyway.

Actually, she thought as they turned to get to the elevator, it felt kind of nice.

\* \* \*

It was a simple hotel room with a big bed, a television, and a little desk. Selena didn't really notice anything else. It was the bed they were interested in.

"What's your favorite musical?" James asked as she slowed the door behind her so it closed gently.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't like musicals?" His eyebrows rose.

"It's just an out-of-the-blue question. The *Mikado*, I guess."

He smiled. "Ah, good. I like Gilbert and Sullivan too. Your safe word, then, is Mikado. If you say 'Mikado' at any point, I will stop and make sure you have the freedom to leave, talk, or whatever else it is you need."

"Mikado," she repeated.

"Good," he said. "Have you ever done any BDSM before?"

"No," she whispered. She knew what the initials meant, roughly, even if she was a bit hazy on what they stood for.

He gestured her toward the bed. She walked over and sat down on its edge. He turned his back on her for a moment as he hung up his jacket. He took off his boots, dropping his wallet inside. He took his time.

When he turned back to her, she had to restrain herself from whistling. Nice pecs. Biceps not quite bulging, but definitely making an impression. She bet beneath the T-shirt was a set of six-pack abs too, but the T-shirt wasn't quite tight enough to tell for sure.

"I didn't think you had," he said. "But you've thought about it, haven't you?"

"A little. Not often."

He squatted, getting down at her eye level. "You're thinking about it now. Wondering what will happen. That's fine. It gets your heart going. And other things." His glance raked her body. She'd never felt quite so naked fully dressed.

“What’s going to happen?”

“You’re going to smile,” he said. “You know what I mean. You’re going to enjoy yourself, and you’re going to leave here a very satisfied woman. Take off your clothes.”

“All of them?”

He grinned. “Unless you want me to rip them off.” He stood up straight.

She took off her suit jacket, glanced over at the hangers near the door, and decided she’d settle for a single, neat fold this time. She had a modest white chemise underneath. It struck her that it was her last chance to leave before she was exposed. One glance up at his eyes let her know he was eager to see the rest of her body. She didn’t doubt he’d rip everything off if she simply indicated she was done without saying her safe word.

Her heart beat a little faster.

She pulled the chemise over her head with one easy motion. Best not to think about ripping clothes—she’d not have anything to get home in. She stood up, unzipped her skirt, and let it fall to the floor.

“You don’t need to be in a hurry,” James told her. “Unless you told your friend to be here in ten minutes. I fully intend to take my time with you.”

“Three hours. We have three hours.” She stepped out of her skirt.

He scooped the skirt up, gathered it and the suit, and walked to where his own jacket was. He hung her suit up, neatly. All she could do was stare. *Not all guys throw clothes all over the place for someone else to pick up?*

She didn’t know why she didn’t take advantage of his back being turned to get the rest of her clothes off and hide beneath the soft covers. But she didn’t. She waited until his gaze was fully on her, and then bent down to get her shoes, aware that it almost made her spill out of the white bra she wore. She looked up, and he was looking right where she wanted him to look. He kept his eyes there as she took off her bra. She tossed it to the side.

Next would be pantyhose. She hated being neat with them, unrolling them carefully, making sure they didn't run. At least her job as a park ranger let her wear pants, so normally she didn't have to bother with them. She grinned. *And this time, I don't have to.*

"Done," she said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. She stared back, daring him.

He picked her up, lifted her as if there was nothing to it, and dropped her on the bed. She bounced and then settled. And kept staring.

He knelt on the bed between her legs, and ripped. It took a few seconds for her hose to be in shreds. He didn't try to be neat about it or take the remnants off her legs.

"Do I get to see you with your clothes off?" Selena asked.

"After the first time," James said. "Think of it as a reward."

*The first time?* The thought was interrupted as his fingers gripped the waistband of her panties. They were plain cotton, with little green and blue horizontal stripes. She hadn't been planning on anyone seeing them. She felt her pussy flood with juices at the sound when he ripped them off, and the sudden coolness of the air between her legs.

He bent down, kissed her navel, his tongue diving into it for a moment. He kept kissing his way up, making little detours to suck each nipple to hardness, nudging her chin up to lick her neck. He kissed her lower lip, his clothed body pressing against her naked one. Then his tongue was pressing between her lips. She opened to let him in, sliding her tongue against his. She'd never been so hungry for a kiss.

He took one of her hands in his and lifted it over her head, never taking his lips off her. She let it stay where he put it, enjoying him being in charge. If he kept kissing like that, he could do whatever he wanted. He brought her other hand up too, and then held both her wrists with one hand. She could feel him, all of him, his tongue on her, the coolness of his belt buckle against her stomach, the warm press

of his denim-covered cock lower down. He was definitely hard. And big. She could hardly wait to see how big. *After the first time*, she remembered.

“I’m going to taste you, Selena,” he whispered to her. “I’m going to tell you to spread your legs for me, wide, so I can see you, all of you. And you’re going to do it, all the time without moving your hands from where they are now, or I’m going to tie them together and lash them to the top of the bed.”

“Oh!” she said, her core melting at the thought of it. But her mind didn’t roll over so easily. “You don’t have anything to tie me with.”

He smiled. “Sure about that?”

She blinked. He seemed pretty sure. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be tied up. “I’ll be good,” she said.

“Damn. But somehow, I doubt it. Spread your legs, darling.”

She did. He moved off her at the same time. She blushed.

“You have a beautiful pussy,” he told her. “Pretty red curls on top too.” He bent down, his tongue flicking out and catching her right where she was most sensitive. *Oh my*. “Big, swollen clit.”

His fingers were on her inner thighs and then her labia, pulling them apart. “So much juice in there,” he told her, his voice sounding a bit awed. She’d never thought of herself as attractive down there. I mean, sure, she knew men wanted in. But wanted to look? Wanted to taste?

His nose pressed against her mound, and his tongue dived in as far as it could go to plunge her depths. It felt lovely, even if it couldn’t possibly go far enough. The broad part of his tongue slipped against her. He wasn’t tasting. He was devouring. *Oh my god*. His breath was hot against her, barely above her clit. Each lick he took sent a warm wave up from her pussy to cover her entire skin.

He moved. His tongue swirled around her clit and its hood, making them slippery. His fingers let go of her pussy lips, so some of them—she wasn’t sure how many—could thrust inside her. They reached deep, so much farther than his tongue



and so much harder. Their roughness surprised her. She arched her back and pushed with her hips. Her fingers clawed the sheets by her side, just as he'd said they would.

He stopped suddenly. She blinked and then saw where he was looking. Her hands. She hadn't meant to move them. She didn't remember moving them; they'd just moved. He grinned, and she let go of a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. He wasn't mad. He'd been waiting for this. But she'd been so close. Why couldn't he have noticed later?

He ripped fragments of nylon from her pantyhose into long strips. "Give me your hands," he said.

She hesitated. She wanted to surrender but didn't want to give a stranger that much power over her. She lifted her hands.

"I think you'll be able to tear yourself free if you want to." He held the strips of nylon next to her hands. "But this will remind you where your hands belong."

She took a deep breath and crossed her wrists, choosing surrender. He wrapped the nylon around her wrists and tied it tight. When he climbed up to use the other length to tie the bindings to the headboard, she noticed again the bulge in his jeans. She lifted her head and rubbed her nose and chin against the seam.

"Later," he promised, drawing back. She licked her lips. He moved back down between her legs.

His fingers thrust in again, curling to find her G-spot. His tongue teased her clit.

Then his digits straightened, and she felt the length of them again, probing her slick depths. He drew them back, then plunged them in. His tongue's slow, teasing swirls became a fast, insistent blur. He slid more fingers in, stretching her.

She screamed when her orgasm steamrolled over her senses. He stayed with her, keeping the pace while her pleasure coursed over her, intense and long. He slowed down as the waves subsided.

“You’ve a lovely scream,” he told her.

“That was me, wasn’t it?” she asked, blushing.

“Sure was. But don’t worry. It’s early—quiet hours are later.”

She giggled. He grinned. He took his fingers out of her and licked them slowly, like a boy taking extra time with a lollipop. She watched his tongue, fascinated, already knowing how good his tongue felt on her.

He finished sucking on his fingers. “I promised you a reward.”

“You did,” she agreed. “Take ’em off.”

He chuckled. “Try again.”

*Okay, that was kind of rude.* “Please take your clothes off.”

He smiled at her. “If you know what a safe word is without me having to explain it, then I think you know how to say that better.”

“Please take your clothes off, Sir.”

“With pleasure.”

“Before you split your jeans, Sir.” She nodded at his crotch, where his still-rock-hard member strained against the denim.

He laughed.

He took the shirt off first. She could see how strong he was. She’d felt it when he had so easily held her hands still with one of his own. Tied up or not, she was defenseless against him. It had ceased to be a source of worry; now it simply added to her pleasure.

He tossed a couple of condom packs onto the bed from his jeans pocket, and then jeans and underwear came off as one. His cock was long and thick, jutting out proudly from a mass of dark blond curls. “Is that for me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She licked her lips. She didn’t know how it would feel to have something so big inside her. She was eager to find out. She reached out for it—or tried—but the nylon around her wrists stopped her.

“You’re still very much my captive.” His statement, combined with the restraint, made her heart beat faster. He walked around her to the head of the bed and then crawled onto it. The magnificent cock hovered over her. She reached for it with her tongue, tickling the slit. She pulled on her restraints. She could make them stretch enough to get the crown into her mouth and suck.

He stopped doing whatever it was he’d been trying to do to her bindings and took in a harsh breath. “You do much more of that, and I’m going to...”

“Hmm?”

“Come in your mouth,” he said.

She ran her tongue over the tip again, tasting the salty precum. His body shook, and he backed away from her. He pulled her wrists back down so they weren’t stretching the nylons anymore, leaving no doubt who was in charge.

To her surprise, he let her go from the headboard. Her wrists were still tied together, but she was free. Out of sheer stubbornness, she lunged for his cock. He grabbed her wrists and scooped another arm under her thighs, picking her up easily as he turned to sit on the edge of the bed. In mere moments, she was dangling over his lap, ass high in the air, feet, head, and bound arms lolling toward the floor. His cock was hard against her belly.

She almost yelled *Mikado* at the first stroke of his hand on her behind. Memories of being hit were still too fresh. His finger, sliding along her pussy lips, quelled her voice. Then he spanked her again—a sting, fading to an ache, then blossoming as a warm glow melting her pussy. This time a finger tickled around her anus. The thought of taking him in her ass made her shiver. He was too big; she was convinced there wasn’t enough lube in an entire sex shop. But if he did manage to fit—oh, how he would fill her!

His hand stung her bottom again before the glow entirely faded. And again, closer together this time, his fingers still darting to play with her pussy and ass. Again, again, the sensations of sting, ache, and warmth no longer felt so separated but melted together, blurring even with the local exploration of his fingers.

He lifted her off his lap and set her facedown on the bed. She got up on her knees, resting her forward weight on her elbows. She must look like quite a wanton, she thought, displayed like that for him. But she wanted him inside her.

She heard the sound of foil being ripped, and even though he rapidly unrolled the rubber over his cock, it felt like the process took forever. He slid into her.

She looked over her shoulders as he pushed into her, each forward motion stretching her until he was buried all the way in. His brown eyes shone with desire. *So deep.* He pulled back again, and it was all she could do to stop herself from pushing back with her hips.

He slid forward, this time more smoothly. One hand held her hip; the other snaked around in front of her, his skilled fingers finding her clit. The jolt of his calloused touch made her shudder. He stopped holding back. His cock thrust in and out of her in steady strokes, filling her and emptying her, sliding smoothly. She was his to take, and each thrust made her feel totally possessed by this handsome stranger. *John. No, James. That was it.*

He buried himself all the way in. Each time he moved forward, his body slapped against her still-inflamed bottom. It felt so strange, making her feel more alive and more turned on, yet distracting her from the sensations that would take her over the edge. She hovered there, so close.

“Come, girl,” he said. Her body obeyed, her pussy clenching around his cock, her legs wobbling, her whole torso shaking. He moaned and in a moment followed her, swelling and pulsing deep within her body. Her mind swam for a moment, a sudden weakness coming over her. *Wow.*

She felt him slide out, leaving her suddenly empty. He lay down beside her, gathering her in his arms, moving her so her head was on his chest. The wrongness of it gave her a shiver. He was a stranger. Yet to lay her cheek against his chest felt so right, so safe. She closed her eyes.

He heard his phone buzz in his jacket. He'd left it on vibrate, and he was tempted to say to hell with it. He could always explain he hadn't felt it. Besides, it might be some kind of spammer or his mother asking him if he'd found the right girl yet. *Just pulled out of her, Mom!* Of course he'd never say that, and he didn't really know Selena, anyway. She'd be worth getting to know, although he had a feeling for her this was it—a one-day fling caused by the euphoria of being able to move on from a bad time in her life, but no more. Still, she was so responsive. She was a natural. He had told himself it was pure hubris to think he could spot a submissive by the way she held her drink, but he'd been dead-on about Selena. And her pussy was tight, wet heaven.

He was glad to have given her an afternoon of carnal fun. The poor dear probably hadn't been sleeping well lately, to have fallen asleep so quickly. He'd checked her pulse and listened to her breathing until he was satisfied she was healthy and sleeping.

He slipped out from under her, putting a pillow under her head to replace his chest. She made a little noise but didn't wake. The call could be a total waste of time, but in his line of work, there was always a chance it was vital. He padded quietly over, fished it out of his jacket pocket, and pressed the button to take the call even as he took it with him to the bathroom. No reason to disturb Selena with the talking.

Turned out all he had to say was, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes," and the other line went dead. Some idiot had called in a bomb threat for the high school. The odds it was real were at least a hundred to one against. If it was, though, chances were there was no one better equipped to deal with it than him any closer than Baltimore or DC. He'd been a demo expert in the army for ten years before becoming a cop. There wasn't enough bomb-squad work to keep him busy out in the far exurbs, so he'd ended up on all sorts of investigations, but bombs were always the priority.

Selena was still asleep. He'd untied her wrists the moment he thought he could do it without waking her up, so that had been done some time ago. He dressed quickly. Strapped on the holster he wore under his jacket, the one he'd quietly undone when his back was turned. He hadn't wanted to spook her.

Dressed, he walked over to give her a kiss. She smiled in her sleep but didn't wake. He smiled a little. *I told you I'd make you smile.* It was too bad he couldn't let her sleep the night away, preferably in his arms. He'd let her have what sleep she could get, and he'd give the room a call before the three hours were up if the scene at the school needed him as little as he hoped. If not, he had a backup plan. He was tempted to look in her purse and find out her full name and address, but he knew he really didn't have the right. Or the time.

He closed the door quietly, making up the time he'd spent by ignoring the elevator and sprinting down three flights of stairs. He told the hotel clerk to give the room a call in forty-five minutes and remind the girl sleeping there she needed to make a phone call. If the police got called looking for him in that hotel, he'd never live it down. He chuckled a little. *No, that would definitely be bad.*

It turned out to be one of those times where the one chance in a hundred came up. He never had a chance to call her. He spent the next two hours puzzling over the destructive device of some very clever high schooler who must've had second thoughts and called it in. Figuring out who did it was a job for later, although other people were already working on that. His job was to stop it from going off, and he did.

## Chapter Two

“Now you be good for your grandma,” Selena told her son. He took after his dad in his looks, with honey blond hair that was darkening as he grew up and brown eyes. She knelt down to brush a little hair from his eyes, conscious the cowlick wasn’t going to stay put for long no matter what she did.

“He’s always good for me, Felicia, aren’t you, Thom?” Mom’s red hair had a bit of gray in it, but it still looked beautiful. Selena hoped she was as lucky in her old age.

“Yes, Grandma,” Thom nodded vigorously for emphasis. It wouldn’t be too long before he started shooting up, and she wouldn’t have to kneel to fix his hair or wipe a smudge off his mouth. She supposed it wouldn’t be much longer than that until he wouldn’t let her touch his hair at all.

Grandma and Thom usually had a good time together. Thom was a believer in having a backup plan, in any case. He had two of Selena’s old Nancy Drew books tucked under his arm. She’d always been a fan of the titian-headed sleuth and took a few out to reread every few years, but seeing Thom enjoy them was better still. She was glad he wasn’t too concerned about reading “girl books” to enjoy Nancy Drew.

“So don’t you worry about us, Felicia, and have a good time.”

“Yes, Mom.” Her mother was the only person left in the world who called her Felicia. She didn’t hate the name. It just wasn’t her. Even her father, who lived out in Colorado now, called her Selena. She loved both her parents, even if there had been a time when they got divorced that she had been livid at both of them. The

memory of that experience had kept her together with Al a bit too long, but Thom seemed to be dealing with it all better than she had.

She hugged her mother and her son, kissed Thom on the cheek, and then walked out the door. At her car, she turned, as she always did, to see Mom and Thom waving from the porch. She waved back and disappeared. It had become something of a weekly tradition, Thom going over to Grandma's Friday night, with its own set of rituals, but it seemed to work well for all concerned.

She was spending Friday night over at Laera's. Selena didn't have a date, and Laera's boyfriend, Bruce, who usually came down from Philadelphia every other weekend, had something he'd needed to do in New York, so it was a girls-only thing. Just what I need, thought Selena with a smile.

She'd not had much success with men since the divorce. Partly she didn't have the time, between work and being a mother. Also, not very many men were interested in a woman who already came "encumbered" with a son. But her memory of the evening with James played a part too.

If he'd wanted to be found, he would have left a phone number, Selena had decided. He hadn't, and he'd left it for the hotel desk service to give her a wake-up call, tell her he'd had an emergency, and remind her to call her friend. It was best to leave it as a single wonderful experience that helped her move on.

A few days later she landed a full-time job in the city, patrolling Rock Creek Park for the park service. Working part-time had allowed her to always be home by the time Thom got home from school, but she needed the extra money to keep him fed and clothed. A year away from his father seemed to be helping him, despite extra hours spent in after-school care. His grades were up, and he smiled more often. That made everything worth it.

She'd had a few Friday night dates, but no one had measured up to James, and that wasn't just a matter of cock size. She tried to get one to spank her, and it was an absolute disaster. He actually started laughing while he was spanking her, and his hand didn't feel near as good anyway. She hadn't brought the subject up again.



When Laera had suggested a night over at her apartment watching a video and chatting, it had sounded like a good plan to Selena.

She knocked on the door at eight. Laera opened the door for her and gestured her in. Her friend was a few inches shorter than Selena, with long medium brown hair. She was wearing an oversize orange T-shirt, the edges of purple shorts poking out beneath.

“Go on into the living room,” said Laera. “My apartment mate is out at *her* boyfriend’s, so we have the place to ourselves. I’m finishing something up in the kitchen.”

“You’re cooking? I thought the great thing about your Bruce was that he liked to cook, and you don’t.” Selena wandered into the living room as suggested, but the apartment was small enough it wasn’t hard to have a conversation with someone in the kitchen if you were willing to raise your voice. She plopped down on the big, comfy-looking, slightly worn brown couch.

“I’m not cooking. I’m baking,” Laera yelled back. “It’s different. Cooking is art. Baking is just measuring and timing.”

Selena laughed and looked around for the stack of DVDs. The last time they’d done this, a few months ago, Laera had had all sorts of strange stuff. They’d spent as much time laughing *at* the movies as laughing with them, but it sure had been fun.

The familiar red envelope the DVDs came in poked out from under another piece of paper. Selena reached for it, but not before noticing the flyer.

*Bondage Ranch, the getaway for the pansexual BDSM community from New York to Richmond. 40 acres, secluded from view, tucked deep in the Catoctin Mountains. Huge playroom, and outdoor play stations as well. Spend an entire weekend living out your bondage fantasy.*

There was a post-office box listed and a little map with directions. Selena raised her eyebrows. It was in the Catoctin Mountains, near where she had worked for a year in the state campground as a park ranger. She’d no idea anything like

that was there. In fact, she could have sworn the only thing you'd get to if you followed the directions was a huge house where they sometimes had ballroom dances.

Laera came behind her and politely but firmly took the flyer from her surprised hands. "I didn't mean for you to see that," she said.

Selena laughed. "But I did."

Laera turned red. "And now you'd rather forget it. Right?"

"Oh, no, not at all. May I see it again? And why are people sending *you* stuff like this, anyway?"

Laera looked torn. Selena was sympathetic. "I'm not going to judge you," she promised. "I'm just insatiably curious. And I didn't mean to snoop. It was right on top of the video."

Laera was still blushing. "Bruce introduced me to some pretty kinky stuff. And I found I liked it. Sometimes we go. Ohmygodthebrownies."

Selena plucked the flyer back out of her hands. Laera glared at her but didn't have time to protest as she ran back into the kitchen. *This might be what I need. Get that memory of James out of my head once and for all, and find a man who knows what he's doing with the whole spanking thing. At worst, I'll prove to myself it was a fluke caused by the alcohol and the emotional day. I don't really like spanking or being tied up, do I?*

She read the flyer again. *An entire weekend living out my bondage fantasy.* She was pretty sure her mother would take Thom if she wasn't too specific about where she was going. She always felt a little guilty about leaving the two of them together for any time but Friday evening, but they both seemed to have a great time. She suspected her "guilt" was partly a desire to be more needed.

There was only one place up that little road that could possibly hold the major get-together implied by the words. It wasn't called Bondage Ranch. She knew it as the Allison Dancing Studio and Inn, where they used to hold square and contra dances. She had never been able to talk Al into going. She understood they hosted

some sort of historical ballroom dancing event most weekends, but it wasn't for learners like the other had been, and it wasn't cheap. That had to be the place, though. *Bondage Ranch. Cute.* She was pretty sure there weren't any horses to ride or cows to rustle. Maybe the name referred to another kind of animal that needed taming. She blushed. *That's not what I want, is it?*

Laera came back out with a plate full of brownies. "All for us!"

Selena looked at the plate dubiously. "I'll put on five pounds."

"Some of them are slightly burned," Laera admitted. "We can skip those. I've got a cache of truffles somewhere."

"Ten pounds."

"And it'll look like three would on me." Laera patted her tummy with her free hand. She still hadn't found a spot to put the plate down. "Being tall must be nice. You always look good, even when your dress size is bigger than mine. Now, may I have my flyer back?"

"My dress size is always bigger than yours. And not until I make a copy. I'm going."

Selena enjoyed the look of horror on Laera's face for a brief moment and then dived for the plate as it fell from Laera's hand. Laera was on the floor with her instantly. "Five-second rule!" Laera announced and piled the ones Selena hadn't quite rescued back onto the plate.

"You just wanted some of the calories to fall out," accused Selena, laughing.

"I didn't make me drop the plate. That was you. You don't really want to go."

"Sure, why not?" Selena tried to sound casual.

"Because the only wild thing you've done in your life is that one evening you called me about the hunk you picked up. Speaking of which, I never did get anything out of you about that. I think you owe me—not only was I your contact on the outside, but here you are, reading my mail."

Selena set the plate down on the glass coffee table between the couch and the television and lounged back on the couch. Laera jumped on the couch too, sitting cross-legged, watching her expectantly.

“Okay, well. Not too much to say. It was very nice, very good, and he was really well endowed. And it involved spanking and some bondage.”

“What kind of bondage?” Laera wanted to know.

Selena thought about the torn-up pantyhose. Not exactly an elegant picture. “Some.”

“Ropes? Chains?”

Selena smiled at the eager look on Laera’s face. “Neither. Anyway, I’d like—I want—I’m going, and that’s that.”

Laera’s face softened. “Okay, Selena. I admit I didn’t think I’d be going either, the first time. If this is what you want, well, you’re a grown woman and can make up your own mind. Just—well, don’t be shocked by anything Bruce and I do.”

Selena blinked. So that was what Laera was worried about. She’d met Bruce once, and he seemed like a very mild-mannered man. She knew from the way Laera glowed when she mentioned his name that the two of them were so right for each other. What exactly did they do, and what exactly would she be seeing? She wasn’t sure Laera was in the best mood for the third degree right now, so she did the sensible thing. She grabbed a brownie and took a bite.

Laera watched Selena’s face, and her own face fell. “Too burned?”

“They’re...fine,” Selena lied. She’d been trying to keep her expression looking positive, but obviously she’d failed miserably. She’d hoped they were only extra dark because Laera had used dark chocolate.

“I’ll get the truffles,” said Laera, getting up.

“Laera, I’m going to be wondering all evening if I don’t ask. What exactly are you and Bruce going to do that I’m going to be so shocked by?”

Laera looked Selena in the eye. “Whatever he wants. Sometimes privately, and sometimes not.”

“That doesn’t sound very satisfying.”

“Sometimes he asks me to do difficult things, but he’s never had me do anything I wouldn’t do again, in exchange for how he makes me feel afterward. Most of the time, I end up feeling incredibly pampered, spoiled, and loved. And very, very horny. He’s pretty good about taking care of *that* too.”

“Oh.” Selena’s pulse quickened at the thought of it. Laera went back into the kitchen for the truffles.

Ten minutes later they were laughing, watching the worst vampire movie ever. Selena put a mental reminder to stock up on chocolate when she had Laera over for the next movie night, whether that happened with or without Thom present. They were very good truffles, soft and sweet, melting slowly enough in her mouth for the taste to linger. A good friend, a movie to laugh at, and chocolate. Almost perfect.

“I do not drink...vine,” said Laera, in a mock deep voice, and they both laughed again. In the original *Dracula*, maybe it wasn’t funny. Delivered as something profound by a Technicolor vampire whose toupee wasn’t quite straight, well—it was too bad the directors didn’t realize they were making a comedy.

\* \* \*

“I hear you, James,” said Major Cramer, Maryland State Police, leaning forward across his large oak desk. “And I appreciate the fact that you didn’t know any of the victims personally, so I don’t have to exclude you from the case on that basis. I realize you took some risk in letting me know of your connection. But the answer is no.”

James frowned. “But I know the people in the BDSM scene, Major. Not the victims, individually, no. But they know me. I’d fit in.”

Cramer nodded. “You’ve only a bit of training in working undercover, James. Hardly any real experience. You don’t work homicide. We’ve got county cops, state

cops, and the FBI all working on this. I've asked, but they don't anticipate a need to use undercover officers on this case, and if they did, they'd rather have you brief them on how they should behave and let them take it from there."

James nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. There wasn't anything he could do. He hadn't been eager for the conversation, but it was the right thing to do. He was uniquely qualified to work on the case, undercover. Only a few people he knew in the BDSM scene knew he was a cop, because he'd stopped telling people years ago when he noticed some people weren't comfortable with a policeman knowing what they were up to. Not that he cared or that he was obligated to enforce every little local vice law. No one on the force knew he was part of the scene either. He wasn't especially a partygoer, and he didn't haunt the clubs. He wasn't into edge play and didn't enjoy inflicting pain, just a few intense sensations. He much preferred to be with a woman one-on-one in the privacy of a bedroom than in a club, but he still knew people in the scene. Now and then he gave talks at the BDSM social groups, usually on soft, sensual play. Some of the more macho and inexperienced doms liked to scoff at his little speech. Usually their subs brought them back into line. Even the experienced people into heavy pain knew they could benefit from a change of pace, and that soft fur could set off a hard caning quite well. More than a few times he'd been asked by some sweet little sub for a private one-on-one demonstration after the talk. He'd usually been happy enough to oblige.

There had been four murders in ten months, up and down the coast from New Jersey to Virginia, all men who'd been to some kind of BDSM gathering in the last couple of months before their deaths. All were single and seemed to think of themselves as dominants. All were played with—or tortured, depending on how one looked at it. He looked on it as the latter, although the official reports suggested things might have started as sexual play and escalated from there. He doubted it. Only a few people had a taste for the level of pain involved, and they almost always presented themselves as submissives, not dominants. Each successive case had been a little more severely handled. The last one had cuts all over his face and body. All of them had their throats slit at the end. There were no DNA samples besides

the victims'. Whoever was doing it was careful and didn't have sex with his or her victims.

The presumption at this point was that the culprit was female, but only because of a few words posted on the Net. It was the best clue the police had, and it wasn't much. They didn't even know if they were dealing with one murderer or two. One of the victims had written "hot date with a redhead tonight" on a social networking site. He was dead by ten in the evening, in his home.

The cities in the east were close enough together that people from one place might go to the clubs or BDSM social organizations in another and arrange dates. With the Internet anything was possible anyway; it was likely enough the victim and murderer never met until the fatal day. There were plenty of people looking at that angle, scanning message boards and forums, even doing a little investigating in the chats and virtual-reality spaces where people into bondage might hang out. They'd come up empty so far.

There were all sorts of reasons for a smart killer to do everything as far away from home as possible. The redhead might live in Ohio and never venture east but to kill, for all James knew. But most killers, especially serial killers, weren't that smart. They got full of themselves, drunk on their power, and they made mistakes trying to demonstrate it. The fact that the gruesomeness of the crimes was increasing made James think the killer was traveling down that road.

James knew only one place where kinksters would gather from all over the area in which the murders had taken place without a big concentration of them from any one particular city. That place was Bondage Ranch.

Twice a year there was a well-attended "retreat" for kinky folks there. Some conventions in the cities drew more people, although more of them would be from the home city. Concentrations in one city seemed to be something the killer or killers were trying to avoid. If you wanted to find a lot of potential victims in one place, Bondage Ranch might be a good place to start. The Bondage Ranch retreat

was this weekend. It was a long shot, but the worst it would be was a waste of a few days.

“James,” said the major. “I know you. And I know you’re thinking right this moment of how you’re going to investigate anyway. And what I have to say to you is this: if you want to hang out in bondage clubs or whatever on your own time and keep your eyes open, well, that’s your personal business, and if you find out something, I’d be glad to hear it. Go where you want to go and have a good time, since you seem to enjoy that sort of thing. I think you’re a good enough cop to know the difference between keeping your ears open and getting in the way of an investigation. Don’t get in the way of the investigation, James, and don’t create the appearance of using division resources. Are we clear?”

*The appearance, hmm? Yes, we are very clear.* James stood. “Yes sir.”

“Dismissed.”



## Chapter Three

To say she felt out of place at Bondage Ranch was an understatement. She'd intended to at least shop for some clothes in basic black, but between Thom being sick early in the week and some crazy work scheduling as a result of a major demonstration on the Mall, she hadn't found the time. Now she wished she had shopped on the way and settled for being late. She knew she wasn't dressed to fit in, but she hadn't quite gathered how out of place she'd feel in a red print knee-length dress. Most people were wearing black, although "wearing" seemed to be a generous term, given how scanty some of the outfits were. There was a flash of purple latex, red leather, or shining silver chain as a change of pace. The most normal thing around her was the room itself, an outsized but otherwise fairly ordinary living room with a scattering of sofas and chairs. The living room was crowded enough she would have had to push her way through to get anywhere, and she really didn't know where to go next anyway.

"Can I help you?"

She looked down to see who the speaker was. A pretty young woman with hair the color of honey and generous curves was at her side. She was dressed in a tight dark blue spandex dress with a very low-cut neck and a very high hemline. A thin leather collar adorned her throat.

"Um, just looking around." Selena shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

The woman smiled. "Are you on the guest list?"

She hadn't noticed anyone else getting asked. She really did stick out like a sore thumb. "Yes, I should be. I sent in my release form. I'm Selena Kinnison."

The woman smiled more broadly and stuck out her hand. “I’m Alex, your hostess for the weekend. I remember your name.”

Selena shook it gravely. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise. Are you a top or a bottom, Selena?”

“Um—a bottom, I suppose. Um, you?”

Alex laughed, although Selena wasn’t sure what was funny. “Oh, I’m submissive. Except when I’m not. How’d you learn about us, Selena?”

“I saw a flyer at a friend’s house. Laera McDougal. Maybe you know—”

Alex had put a finger to Selena’s lips. It was a normal shushing gesture, but somehow it seemed more sensual. “We don’t use other people’s last names here. You may use your own if you like, but for privacy reasons it’s best not to make that choice for others. In any case, I know Laera well. She and Bruce aren’t here yet. She warned me she might have a friend show up.”

“Warned?”

Alex laughed again. “Did I say that? I must be getting foot-in-mouth disease from my husband. Um, ‘informed.’ She asked me to keep an eye out for you to make sure you don’t get hurt. We only send out flyers to people we know or who have been recommended to us, but as you know, sometimes things happen and they fall into the wrong hands. In your case I think it may have been a happy accident.”

Selena smiled.

“You know what a safe word is?” asked Alex.

“Mikado,” said Selena without thinking. “I mean, yes.”

Alex raised an eyebrow but left it and moved on. “Never play without one, certainly not until you really know what you’re doing and know your top even better. If you’re in the public areas here and you call out ‘Danger,’ people will come to rescue you, but yell ‘help’ or ‘stop,’ and we’ll think it’s all part of your play.”

“‘Danger.’ Got it.”

“If I may ask, are you straight or gay or bi?”

“Oh, I’m pretty straight,” Selena said firmly. *Of course, that would have sounded a lot more definite without the “pretty” in front of it.*

“You’re rooming with a woman named Valerie. I suspect she’ll try to convince you you’re not as straight as you think you are, but she’ll take no for an answer if you’re good and firm about it. Her motto is ‘anything that moves.’ I think she’s gone ahead to the dungeon or maybe outside. You can get a key for your room over there. We’ve got Frank handing them out this evening. Tell him your name, and he’ll get you the right key. It’s a beautiful day, so there will be a fair amount of socializing and playing outside. In fact, in a moment I’ll be suggesting to people they get a move on and enjoy the weather. They don’t usually all clog up the living room.”

Alex turned, cupped her hands in front of her mouth, and yelled, “Okay, people, there’s a dungeon with empty equipment down the hall, and some beautiful weather outdoors. Get outta here!”

Selena blinked. *So she’s a submissive, huh?* She was even more amused as she watched the crowd obediently scatter. She wished she had talked more to Laera about what she might see here, but she had been too concerned Laera would try to talk her out of coming, and her own resolve had been fragile. Laera was a submissive too, from what she said, like Alex. Like maybe herself. She’d met Laera’s Bruce once, and if any man she’d met had ever given off vibes like he was a dom, other than James, it was Bruce.

She supposed she’d better move along too, but Alex stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Oh, I didn’t mean you. Laera called about thirty minutes ago, by the way, to say she’d be coming a bit later. I know it’s not easy when you don’t know anyone. My husband and I don’t usually play at these events, so if you have questions, let me know, okay?” She clasped Selena’s hand for a moment.

Selena smiled, feeling she’d made a friend. Then she made the connection. Alex must be Alexandra Allison, one of the couple that ran the ballroom dancing resort. Her husband, Dylan, was her dominant? “I’ll do that, Alex. Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure. Oops, looks like there’s someone my master wants me to meet. I’ll see you later.”

“Uh, bye!” It was strange to hear a woman who was obviously the take-charge sort say “master” so easily. But hadn’t that been what she’d dreamed about on a dozen nights alone with a vibrator? She didn’t really want a man running her life—Thom needed her too much, and needed her strong and free—but the thought of being able to say “master” and mean it definitely did nice things to her libido. She watched as Alex sashayed with a swing to her hips toward a man wearing the sort of ruffled shirt that went out of fashion for men at least two hundred years ago.

*Nope, I’m definitely straight. Because if I wasn’t, I’m pretty sure that hip swing would have a lot more effect on me.* She noticed a couple of male heads turning to watch Alex’s ass as she walked across the room.

She walked over to where the man Alex called Frank sat behind a desk. Presumably he was wearing something behind the desk, but it couldn’t be more than shorts, since she could see his legs and his torso were bare. He wasn’t a bad looker either. Nice muscles. He wore a black leather collar around his neck. Presumably he was a sub, with a mistress somewhere. Or a master. Or even both. There were so many possibilities and combinations.

“Hi, I’m Selena,” she said and showed him her license.

“Selena, Selena—ah, here we are. Room 2B. That’s on the second floor. You’re new, aren’t you?” He placed a key card in her hands.

“Do I stick out that much?”

“Yes,” said Frank. “It’s all right, though. I’m sure some people will find that attractive. You’re a fresh face.”

“You’re a submissive?”

“Yes, I’m the proud property of Mistress Sue. She’s not here, though. She’s playing in the dungeon.”

Selena frowned. It didn't seem right to her that someone's mistress would be off playing in a dungeon without them. "Doesn't that bother you?"

Frank chuckled. "You ask a lot of questions, don't you?"

*I guess that was kind of personal.* "Sorry about that. I guess I do."

She was conscious of a presence behind her. A man was tapping his foot impatiently on the floor, presumably wanting his room key. She started to move to the side, when Frank answered her question. "I imagine she does it partly *because* it bothers me. I don't really think I'm ever very far from her thoughts."

Selena smiled and moved out of the way of the short line forming behind her. She didn't want to make anyone more impatient with her than they were already, and she scarcely glanced at the other people in line. *Never far from her thoughts. That's actually kind of sweet, in a completely perverse way.*

*So, I have a key.* Selena walked back out to where her car was parked on the grass alongside plenty of others and got her suitcase. It contained more clothes for the weekend, not that any of them was much more appropriate. She thought she might try a black tank top and jeans tomorrow, although maybe that would make her look all *domme-ish*. She shrugged. She wished she'd packed more appropriate clothes, but she was who she was, and people would have to deal with her or not. On the other hand, if no one showed an interest, she'd not go back home with any more clarity than before. *All I need is one night of really hot, kinky sex.*

When she reentered she looked for Alex, feeling she could use a little more advice. But her hostess seemed to be in deep discussion with a dark, handsome stranger. She thought of walking over and breaking into the conversation. *Hi, I'm Selena, and I'm a sub. Want to do me?* She chuckled at herself. *Down, girl.* She decided to go searching for her room instead. She headed out the door most of the people had gone through when they were shooed out by Alex.

In the hall she nearly bumped into a tall man with brown hair, a massive and quite bare chest, and tight leather jeans. "Hey there, sub," he said. "Be careful."

"Sorry!" she said, hoping to continue on her way.

He blocked the middle of the corridor, so she'd have to squeeze to get through. She hoped it didn't come to that. "What's your name, sub?"

"Selena. What's yours?"

"Gordon. But you can call me Sir, and show me the proper respect."

She'd dreamed of a scene not too different from this, but somehow the chemistry was wrong. *That's because I was dreaming of James.*

"Let me go to my room, Sir," she said firmly, in the same tone she'd use for someone who was littering in the park. Gordon moved. She resisted a smirk. Somehow she didn't think James would be so easily overcome.

She found room 2B, upstairs and on the left side. As Alex had predicted, her roommate for the weekend wasn't there, but her stuff was: two big suitcases, both opened and a bit of a mess. One seemed to be stocked with black-and-red-leather outfits; the other held whips and other toys. Selena put her suitcase in the corner next to one of the twin-size beds and sat down to catch her breath. *So. The dungeon. Or outside, where people are playing.* She'd come thinking to make a private connection, but Alex's description made it seem like everything was so public. In fact, she'd sort of implied that doing things in private wasn't safe, because you wanted other people to be able to interfere in case you yelled "Danger." She straightened up. *It won't hurt me to see, and seeing doesn't mean I have to do.*

The entrance to the "dungeon" was at the end of the hall the rooms were off of, and there were signs pointing the way. Selena opened the door and froze in the doorway.

There was a leather-clad woman teasing a naked, well-hung man with a feather. Two men were taking turns dripping hot wax on a woman strapped to a table. A curvy woman was chained to an X-shaped piece of black-painted wood and was being lashed by a hunky guy. Another woman on another similar setup was tied face outward and was simply being fucked by her dom. At the edges there were others, mostly watching and talking. A couple of doms and one domme were sitting in a circle talking, all while receiving oral attentions from their submissives. One of

the doms had a male sub. Selena watched them for a few minutes. Watching a man give head made her feel distinctly warm. In spite of herself she stepped into the room, finding a better angle.

There was something fascinating about it. No other woman to be jealous of or embarrassed for. On the other hand, there was something about two guys together that excluded her too. She turned away and took in the rest of the room again.

She'd tried to watch porn movies a couple of times. Cheesy plots and the artificially enhanced actresses had turned her off more than the sex scenes had turned her on. She saw the attraction, but it wasn't for her. Looking around at real people having sex in public was quite different. Watching the two men had gotten her juices flowing. Seeing the girl being screwed on the cross, or the naked blonde having wax dripped on her, she couldn't help but imagine it was her. What would the wax feel like? Would all the doms here expect her to be willing to be naked and vulnerable in front of everyone? *If so, they'll be disappointed.*

The woman being whipped screamed. Now that didn't appeal to her one bit. She strode across the room intending to give the dom a piece of her mind, but stopped. The woman may have been in anguish, but she was also clearly deliberately sticking her bottom out to be lashed again by the multitailed whip in her dom's hand. She didn't say *danger*, Selena reminded herself, so she probably wasn't in any.

She came to a stop in the middle of the room, not far from the waxing table. The woman on the table made a noise too, something like a little yelp, followed by a moan. As far as Selena could tell, it was a moan of pleasure. She doubted it came from the wax. Both men were alternating waxing and touching, one of them stroking her breasts, the other slipping his hand between her legs. Selena turned red. She suddenly felt like everyone was watching not only the exhibitionists, but watching her watching them. She was the one who stuck out. Plenty of people were naked, but no one else was wearing a cotton dress.

She saw the door that said EXIT over it, and she headed for it, wanting to get away. *I'll go back later. Right now I need a little fresh air, a chance to get my breath back.*

Things were a little calmer outdoors, but not much. She'd hoped to feel more in her element in the woods not far from the park where she once worked. A petite black-haired Asian woman knelt in front of a very medieval-looking stocks. The wood was worn and unpainted, and the woman's hands were so small it looked to Selena like she could easily get out of her predicament if she wanted to. Apparently she didn't want to. Where her dom or domme was, Selena didn't know. She didn't care much for the idea of being left out in public like that, but if she was, she knew she'd want her dom to be close by.

Another woman, dark-haired with hints of henna in her hair, was whaling away with a variety of implements at a male sub. He was naked, a bit on the short side, his body blocky but muscular, and his head shaved. He appeared to be singing—something from *Oklahoma*, Selena thought. *How strange.* The domme was switching between a flogger, a belt, a cane, and a riding crop. He was a good singer, his strong, true voice carrying even outdoors, but he had a hard time staying on pitch when his domme got him with the cane or the crop. The fact that she then proceeded to proclaim the next few blows as punishment for the brief squeak in his voice didn't seem very fair to Selena, but they seemed to be having a fun time. There were other people around, most of them paying at least half their attention to the musical duo. Nobody approached her.

She heard a pleased squeal coming from within the trees and caught a flash of red hair. Curious, she moved off that way, trying to find a good angle where the trees weren't blocking what was going on, yet where she could maintain her distance. She caught a good view of the redheaded woman squealing. *She looks a lot like me, actually. More curves than lines, and quite a bit shorter, but—well, maybe not quite like me.* She was tied with her back to a tree, her hands secured around its trunk. Her breasts were covered with a black bra, and she still wore a short leather



skirt. Her dom was toying with her senses, pinching her nipples through the fabric lightly, moving his hands around, never lingering in one place. *Looks like fun.* She shifted positions again, interested to see a scene that at least seemed to preserve a little modesty, if only a little, and didn't involve much pain.

Then she recognized the dom. *James Culver. Well, I guess I really was his type: redheads with padding.* Her first impulse was to walk up to him and slap him for leaving her in the hotel room without a kiss good-bye or even a note, but none of that was the fault of the woman he was with. She wanted to be with him again, so badly, and here he was with someone else. So close yet so far. She couldn't stand to stay and watch. She'd talk to him later.

He looked up at the sound of the leaves crackling beneath her as she shifted her feet. He blinked, clearly startled, and his jaw dropped open.

*Or maybe I won't talk to him at all.*

Selena twirled and walked quickly away, emotions swirling within her. At the sight of him, her nipples had hardened with anticipation, and she hated it. She was jealous of the other woman. Angry at him all over again. In any other circumstance she would have been overjoyed to see him there. She needed distance. This place was too overwhelming, too much, too fast.

She opened the door and crossed the dungeon area with long strides, back straight. She hardly noticed the scenes of sex and bondage going on around her as her eyes fogged. *I won't cry. He's not worth it. He was just a one-night stand anyway.*

Selena headed up the stairs to her room. She wiped her eyes once and sat down on the bed. She resolved to be an adult about it all. He had given her a very nice night, after all, and she usually remembered the evening fondly. She knew she had no claim on him. She should shake his hand, tell him it was good to see him again. *Sometime when I'm not interrupting him with another woman.*

## Chapter Four

James didn't think this redhead was the one. Carolyn, that was her name. She was a fun-loving little thing, a bit of an airhead, and he couldn't imagine her plotting murder—or getting away with one. None of the murdered doms had been seen doing a scene with any redheads at the clubs they'd been to, anyway. While Carolyn had pulled him deeper in the woods, it hadn't been hard to persuade her to come play. He doubted she was strong enough to have inflicted some of the wounds inflicted on the bodies.

Of course, just because Randall Corwin had been planning to see a redhead the night he was off didn't mean the redhead killed him. It didn't even mean there was a redhead—he might have been making up stories to make himself look macho. But since it was his only lead, James was going to follow it up.

He'd seen one other, a freckled lady who went by the name of Ginger, and she was an outside possibility. She came with a dom, but she wasn't well-known by the others. He hadn't seen her away from her dom. If he did, he'd ask her to play, even though it would be a breach of etiquette to muscle in on another dom's pet.

All these redheads made it a lot harder for him to avoid thinking about Selena. It had only been one night, but it had stuck with him. Every time he had touched her that night, he'd gotten the feeling it was exactly right. Subs tended to like what he did to them, but never before or after as much as Selena seemed to. He'd thought about her off and on, ever since, and had been tempted to use his position to try to find her. Shouldn't be too difficult in theory, since he knew she'd gotten a divorce that day. In a moment of weakness he'd looked, but no one with a first name of Selena was in court that day for anything. She'd fed him the wrong name, simple

enough. She didn't want to be found, and he wasn't going to violate her trust by trying any further, no matter how much he wanted to.

He heard a rustling in the leaves and looked up from Carolyn for a moment. After all, there was quite possibly a murderer around, and while he preferred to give all his attention to the woman he was playing with, he owed it to both of them to be aware of his surroundings.

He did a double take. The woman looked like Selena. *No. That woman is Selena.* He wanted to run to her. He'd found her, at last. He'd dreamed of meeting her again, but not like this. He knew she'd seen what he was doing with Carolyn.

He'd intended to take his time teasing Carolyn and give her every chance to try to set up an assignation, but that seemed of less importance now. He was almost certain Carolyn wasn't the murderer. His practiced fingers worked on automatic pilot. Carolyn didn't seem to mind, if her moaning was any indication.

Then his blood ran cold. Could Selena be the killer?

He didn't want to think about it, but he forced himself to go over the facts. The killings had all started after he met Selena at the courthouse, but maybe he was the intended first victim. That didn't seem very likely, since she'd been bound almost the whole time and hadn't made any attempt on him. In fact, he was convinced she was genuinely asleep. So no, he wasn't the first victim. But he was the first dom she'd met who'd played with her and left her to be woken up by the hotel staff. One never knew what might unhinge an unstable mind.

The police notion all along had been the perpetrator had something against doms or possibly anyone in the scene. It couldn't be personal, since none of them had a common, regular acquaintance. If Selena was the killer, there was a very good chance he had been the one who set everything in motion. *If so, I'm responsible. I have to talk to her.*

"I'm afraid someone might see," said Carolyn. "Can we go a little farther..."

James shook his head. He forced an easy smile. "Hey, this isn't working out real well between us," he said. Actually, he was pretty convinced he'd have her

coming in a couple of minutes, if he'd wanted to. It was hard to see how that would help the investigation.

That was what he told himself when he let her go. She pouted. He had a job to do, but he wasn't entirely sure the job was what drove him. He'd spent a long year thinking about Selena, and he wasn't about to pass up a chance for another meeting. He hoped to God she wasn't a murderess.

\* \* \*

He knocked on the door. He could hear her rustling about inside, the sound of her footsteps—probably bare—as she walked toward the door. His brain was trying to tell him this was an investigation. The beating in his chest told him otherwise.

Her jaw dropped open when she saw him standing there.

“Hello, Selena.”

“James.” Her voice was cool, and her hand stayed on the door. She didn't invite him in by either words or body language. But her eyes were the eyes of a trapped animal, and her breathing wasn't right either. Her shoes weren't together—kicked off, most likely. There was a paperback romance spread open facedown on the bed.

“May I come in?” He could have slid past her. There was room. Especially if he didn't mind making a little contact. He tried not to think of how her breasts would give against his body. He had found her at last.

“What for?” She sounded skeptical. No, accusing. But she was already backing up, giving him room.

“I wanted to talk.” Between disarming bombs and comforting subs, he was used to keeping his voice calm when things were at their most frantic. She wasn't going to put him on the defensive.

“Did you let her know you were leaving? Or did she fall asleep, exhausted from your lovemaking, and you spotted your chance to move on to another conquest?”

He tensed, despite all his training. Why a few sharp words from her jolted him more than a bomb that might explode if he made the wrong move, he didn't know.

She knew it too. He made himself look deep in her eyes. "I had an emergency call, Selena. Sorry for leaving you like that. I actually tried to find you later to apologize. Pity you didn't give me your real name."

"I didn't what?" She glared at him.

"No one with a first name of Selena was in divorce court that day, hon."

The flash of anger faded from her eyes. "It's my middle name. It's what I go by. I didn't make anything up, although maybe I should have." She took another step back and waved him in.

"Thanks," said James wryly.

"So what was your big emergency?"

If he had called her months ago like he had wanted to, he would have told the truth. But right now he couldn't. "Work. A chemical spill."

She looked skeptical. He'd taken too long to answer; a real undercover officer would have all his story straight. But he hadn't expected to see Selena. If he'd thought she came to places like this, he would have been haunting the clubs and events looking for her. "What do you do?"

*Who would handle a chemical spill?* "I'm a chemical engineer."

"Okay." She shrugged, and he wasn't at all sure she'd bought it.

"How've you been?" he asked.

"Getting by." Her voice defrosted. "Better now that you're here. I think."

I'm not going to get anywhere this way, thought James. Clearly, she had been pissed off by how he left. And the story about Selena being her middle name would be easy enough to check out. Her anger at him after a year made her more of a suspect. It also meant he'd gotten to her as much as she'd gotten to him. He still wanted to hold her tight, to feel her breasts pushing against his chest. That wasn't going to make the investigation any easier. On the other hand, maybe seducing her was the best way to find out what he wanted to know. He could hardly ask, "Where

were you on the night of August third,” or any of the traditional questions, without spooking her.

Of course if his instincts told him she was a serial killer, he wouldn't be so eager to jump her bones. Instead, they told her she was a soft, vulnerable, desirable woman. Usually, he trusted his instincts. They'd kept him alive several times. This time he worried his hormones were giving his instincts a bit too much of a push. He couldn't cross her off the list, not yet. But he wanted to.

“I've thought about you a lot,” he said.

“I've thought about you now and then too,” she said. She moved a few inches closer. It wasn't an answer, but it brought her lips nearer.

He kissed her, pulling her close to him. She came willingly, sliding her arms behind his neck, their tongues slipping and sliding together. She felt as sweet against him as he remembered. In fact, she was perfect.

He felt her hands grab his T-shirt, trying to lift it up over his head. He lifted his arms to help her, and when it was off, he went to work on the round black buttons of her dress. Why she'd decided to wear such an innocent-looking dress to a place like this was beyond him, but it suited her—but not as much as having it off would. He'd found her again, after all this time. He couldn't believe his luck.

“Well, hello,” sang out a cheerful voice from the doorway. Both of them turned to look.

Valerie. Oh, great, Selena was rooming with Valerie. She'd hennaed her hair, he noticed. Suddenly his luck had become a bit more believable.

“Don't mind me,” Valerie said. “I'll give you guys privacy in a second.” She went over and grabbed a number of things from her suitcase—a flogger, some clamps, and a nasty-looking tawse.

“I'm Valerie,” said the woman. “You must be Selena. I just needed to get some new toys with which to play my 'instrument.' I don't suppose either of you sing?”

James shook his head no. He could sing, a little, but he didn't want to get caught up in Valerie's scene.

"Not, um...no," said Selena.

"Pity. Well, feel free to come down and listen to the concert. We're outside, so we don't disturb anyone. He's got to sing 'Waiting for a Girl like You' till I get back! I'll give you two an hour to yourselves." She looked at her watch but didn't really slow down. "See ya! Don't do anything to her I wouldn't do to her, James. Feel free to use my toys!" With that she left, closing the door behind her.

"She's certainly a whirlwind," said Selena. She hadn't rebuttoned her dress. Her lacy black bra was more than half visible, as were the creamy lightly freckled breasts half spilling out of it.

"In more ways than one," agreed James, too interested in Selena to want to talk about Valerie.

"You know one another?" Was that jealousy he detected?

He tried to avoid looking smug. "She knows everyone in the scene. Anywhere on the east coast, pretty much. Always looking for something new and always getting it, as far as I can tell. Although this latest fetish of hers is a bit bizarre."

"Glad I'm not the only one who thinks so. Her sub is a good singer, though."

"He is indeed." James inwardly damned the fact that he was here as a cop. He didn't want to talk about Valerie. He just wanted to hold Selena and not let her go. "So how have you avoided meeting Valerie before now?"

"Hmm? Why would I have?"

"Well, to get sent an invitation to this place you have to have known someone in the bondage scene, gotten a recommendation, something."

"I spotted the flyer in a friend of mine's mail."

He raised his eyebrows. Did she make a point of snooping in other people's mail?

"By accident," she clarified.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Laera.”

“Unusual name,” James observed. “I haven’t met her though.”

Selena frowned. “I think her boyfriend got her into this sort of thing. A guy named Bruce, if that helps.”

James smiled. He knew a Bruce who probably came here. “Not such an unusual name. Tall guy, dark hair, likes to talk about impermanence and other depressing topics?”

“Tall and dark, yeah. He didn’t seem too depressing to me. But yes, impermanence—I did hear him use the word once. Such an odd word.”

“He’s a good dom. I’d heard a rumor he finally settled on a sub. So you’ve never met anyone else involved in BDSM besides me, and your friend Laera and her dom, Bruce?” James watched her intently, alert for any attempt to dissemble.

“Yeah. Any particular reason why you’re giving me the third degree?” She sounded annoyed, and he couldn’t say he blamed her. Her hand moved to cover up her cleavage, holding the two sides of the dress together.

Her annoyance was genuine, the emotion of someone who had nothing to hide, not of someone who was trying to cover something up. He’d spent years learning to read subs, and he was certain. Which meant he didn’t need to hold back anymore.

He bent down, and kissed her neck softly, with a hint of wetness from the tip of his tongue. “I’m sorry about all the questions, pet. It’s a horrible habit of mine.”



## Chapter Five

His lips sent a delicious chill down her spine, and she let go of both her annoyance and her dress to run her hands over his back, feeling the hard muscles there. In a few moments James had taken care of the rest of the buttons. Only the pressing of their bodies kept the dress up. “You know what I want from you,” he said.

*Anything. But don't leave again.* “What?”

“Your submission,” he told her.

*That's what I've wanted to give.* “Yes,” she said breathlessly.

He pulled away, and the dress fell to the floor, revealing her body, her laciest bra, and her one and only thong.

She needn't have bothered. She wished now she was naked already. She undid the back clasp of her bra and shrugged it off her shoulders. She pulled the panties down and stepped out of them when they pooled at her feet. Without a word from him, she knelt on the floor like she had in her fantasies. It was almost too good to believe that he was finally there in front of her.

The wooden floor was harder than it had been in her imagination. She knew she couldn't stay there very long, but for the moment, it was exactly where she wanted to be. Just like in her hottest fantasy.

He grabbed a pillow from her bed and put it on the ground. “Get this under you. It'll be much more comfortable,” he told her. She shifted onto the pillow, a little slower than she would have been if she'd gotten up and knelt again, but she didn't want to get up. Not yet.

“Thank you, Master,” she said. She knew it was crazy, trying to give herself so completely to a man she barely knew. She wanted one more chance to live out her fantasy. *Maybe he’ll make me suck his cock.* She felt her pussy moisten at the idea of it.

“Spread your legs, my lovely. Hide nothing from me.”

She moved her knees apart, as far as they would go and still keep her balanced. He could see her glisten, she knew. She kept her eyes on him, smiling inwardly as his eyes ran over her body and his upturned mouth spoke to his pleasure.

“Raise your arms above you and hold your wrists together.”

She did as she was told, feeling her torso stretch. He took a step away and picked up a couple of black cuffs from Valerie’s open suitcase. He put each band around her wrists and then clipped them together. “Keep them there.”

He went to Valerie’s suitcase again and came back with a black leather flogger, its tails wide and straight. Her eyes widened, and it was all she could do to keep her arms raised and not cross them over her for protection.

“Trust me, pet,” he said. She nodded. He grabbed the heavy metal clip holding her wrists. “Stand.”

She scrambled to her feet. His strong arms helped lift her. He twisted his hand, and like a dancer, she twirled until her back was to him.

The flogger caressed her shoulder, almost ticklishly light. She let out a breath she hadn’t been aware she was holding. She had wondered how it would feel, and she expected him to strike her hard with it right away. He didn’t. She guessed he would use it, use her, harder than that first stroke, but they would build to it.

“What’s your safe word, love? Do you remember?”

“Mikado,” she said.

“Very good. Don’t hesitate to use it.”

He held her away from him, at arm's length. The flogger fell on the other shoulder, a little harder than the first, still more caress than blow. It made a swish as the tails flew through the air. The next stroke ran from her upper right thigh onto her ass, and the fourth along the other side.

She'd expected it to be unpleasant, painful, something she'd bear for the sake of being submissive. Instead it made her skin feel alive and want to be touched, like the exhilaration of a hot shower.

It took a tall, strong man with long arms to hold her like that, she realized. Nothing else would do. She glanced about for something he could have attached her to, and there was only the rod that held white gossamer curtains up in front of the window. It wouldn't have held her weight. The flogger swished again, landing leather caresses on her back and her bottom, and the details of the room no longer impinged on her consciousness. All she felt was his strong arm holding her wrists and the light strokes of the lash. Her body heated, telling her it wanted the blows to be harder, to sting more. She spread her feet on the floor, seeking both stability and exposure.

A blow wrapped lightly around her side, the tips of the flogger stinging her sensitive breast, making her nipples tingle and sending sparks of anticipation to her pussy. A second wrap around on the other side showed it was no accident, but that he was in total control of himself, the flogger, and her. Another and another, the broad tails softly caressing her side but delivering a sharp brief set of stings to her tits.

She was almost getting used to it when there was a pause, and then she felt the tails between her legs, coiling against her pussy lips, jolting her clit. She wiggled, instinctively trying to get away, but his grip on her wrists held her firm, and only her lower half moved. She knew if she fell to the floor, there was no way he could hold her up, not with all the force of gravity against him. But she didn't want to get away. Instead she spread her legs a little wider, wiggling her hips in invitation. She hadn't felt anything quite like that before, and she wanted to feel it

again so she could decide whether she loved it or hated it. It was one of the two, she was sure.

He obliged. It was half fire, half soothing soft leather, as it wrapped around to her mound. A pause, and another. Her thighs were damp with moisture seeping from her pussy.

He bent her forward suddenly, moving to her side. He tucked the handle of the flogger into one pocket and pulled out a green condom wrapper from the other. He held it up to her mouth. It took her a moment, and then she realized with one of his hands occupied it was probably hard for him to get the foil package open. Her pussy ached to be filled; the least she could do was help. She bit the wrapper. He ripped it, retrieving the condom from inside.

He led her to the bed, pulling her to sit at his side. With one deft hand he unclipped one wrist from the other and brought it down behind her back. She moved the other one to join it, eager to be restrained again, and he clipped them together. He unzipped his pants, freeing his oversize cock. He wasn't wearing any underwear, it seemed.

"Turn around and sit on my chest," he told her, spreading his magnificent body out on the bed. "And suck it."

She moved as directed, a little awkwardly without her hands. Her pussy complained it wanted attention. That would have to wait. She opened her mouth over his crown, sliding her lips down his shaft to take in as much of him as she could. It was strange not to have her hands to play with him too, to help give him pleasure and to regulate how far into her mouth he could go. If he pushed on the back of her head and lifted his hips, she'd have to take him as best she could. *Why does that excite me so much?*

He pulled her hips back. Something smooth and hard entered her pussy, making her quiver. The whip handle, she realized. He was fucking her with the handle of the whip, covered with the condom. She sucked him harder. He lifted her,

his tongue toying with her clit. The tresses of the flogger brushed against her thighs as he pushed it in and out of her.

*Master.*

Her mouth was too full to say it out loud. She tasted his precum, warm and salty. Giving head had never been one of her favorite tasks, but now she found herself wanting it all.

She let the tip of his cock tickle deep down her throat, wanting as much of him as she could have. Only when she felt like she was choking did she raise her head. She could feel his hand on the back of her skull, reminding her he was in control, but he didn't push.

She felt a wet finger toy with her anus, and she wanted that too. She shoved back against him, driving the whip handle farther into her pussy.

He pushed a little bit of his finger into her ass, slowly. Too slowly. She growled around his cock, which had swelled further. He got the message and pushed his finger all the way in. That was all it took to set her off. Her whole body shook, shuddering and clenching around whip handle and finger. She tried to take all of his cock down her throat but only succeeded in gagging, none of her muscles quite in control. Her orgasm cascaded over her, leaving her feeling light-headed. She couldn't process the signals of all the different nerves screaming in pleasure.

"I'm going to come," he told her, his voice hoarse with lust. She sucked at him harder, not pulling back. She wanted to experience everything about him.

Hot, salty liquid flooded her mouth, and she struggled to swallow it. I made him come, she thought, and then suddenly she came again, an aftershock of pleasure better than the main event the few times she'd had sex in the last year. *The last ten years.* She moaned, letting his cock slip messily out of her mouth, and gulped in air.

James slowly pulled the makeshift dildo out of her, along with his finger. She wiggled to lay her head against his thigh, and watched him. He was lost somewhere

in thought, and she wished she knew why. She waited for him to look at her, then licked a spot of cum off her lips.

That distracted him. He bent forward to kiss her, which was about the last thing she expected. *He thinks I'm still kissable, even when I taste so much of him?* She didn't complain but kissed him back, amazed as touching lips progressed to swirling tongues.

"Oh wow," she said when he let her speak again.

"Yeah. Wow. You're amazing, Selena." He unclipped her hands and pulled her against him, snuggling her head close against his chest. All the years she'd spent married, and she wasn't used to actually being cuddled after sex. *Wasn't this the roll-over-and-go-to-sleep moment? No, I did that to him, last time.*

She wasn't going to fall asleep this time, even though she felt tired, and it was already past her bedtime. "So you come to this place often?" she asked. *Okay, lame, but it's a start. Not my fault my brain's turned to mush.*

"No. It's not really my scene." He smiled at her. "I'm not into playing in public—I'd much rather have my sub's undivided attention and give her mine."

She nuzzled against his furry chest. "Well. I don't think any sub could complain about that." *I'm not going to be jealous. I'm not. Oh hell.* He was playing in public with that other girl. And—well, she guessed the other redhead hadn't exactly had his undivided attention, since he'd noticed her. He'd left the other girl quickly to come to her. She was sure he hadn't told her the whole truth about the reason he'd left her in the hotel either. Was he running off to another girl? But then again, a lot of people around that area couldn't talk about their jobs because they worked for the NSA or some other hush-hush agency. She wasn't going to figure it out, so she asked the question that mattered now. "You're not going to run off this time, are you?" She didn't think she could bear it if he did.

"I think the odds of another, er, chemical spill are very low out here."

She shook her head. He was a horrible liar. But the more she thought about it, he must have had some kind of reason to leave her in the hotel room beyond

another chance to roll in the hay with someone else. He'd set himself up for trouble if she hadn't made that phone call. He hadn't been planning to leave, so it had been some kind of emergency. He couldn't—or wouldn't—tell her what it really was.

She was still pondering when Valerie came back, grinning from ear to ear. She'd breezed on in, not knocking first. "I've never laughed so hard in my life," Valerie said without waiting for Selena to even say hello. "No orgasms, but oh, my sides hurt. I packed the boy up for the evening, though. We'll play some more tomorrow! He'll have to do 'Singing in the Rain' if the weather turns bad as predicted."

James pulled the covers up over her quickly, until only her shoulders were bare.

Selena stared at her roommate. Was she expected to respond? "Uh, glad you had a good time."

"I bet you did too." Valerie eyed them both speculatively. "I've never done James myself, but I hear he's pretty good. How was it?"

"Um, I'm right here," said James. Selena caught his eye for a moment, and then James turned back to look at Valerie. "Give her a little space, Valerie," he said in a voice Selena knew she would obey instantly.

To her surprise, so did Valerie, who retreated back to her own bed. As much as Selena wanted her to leave the room entirely, it was as much Valerie's room as her own. That still didn't make her feel comfortable.

There was a knock on the door. *What the hell is this, Grand Central station?* "Busy," she and James both called out, at the same time Valerie yelled, "Come in, it's unlatched!"

Apparently Valerie yelled more clearly, because in came Laera, with her boyfriend Bruce. Bruce was normally enough dressed, in black jeans and a white dress shirt. Laera wore a short black vinyl dress that hugged her every curve, stockings that didn't quite reach the hem of the dress, high heels, and a black

leather collar. She looked fabulous, but it was something of a surprise to see Laera in such an outfit.

“Um, oops!” said Laera. She backed up, and so did Bruce, and then they were outside the room, with the door shut behind them.

Selena was sure by this time her face was bright red. It felt like it was on fire. And James’s hot gaze on her really didn’t change that. She felt like she was being studied.

“I better get going,” he said at last. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

She wanted him to stay. But after the interruptions, and with Valerie right there, she couldn’t have been more self-conscious if she had suddenly awoken naked on the pitcher’s mound at Camden Yards. “Um, yeah. In the morning,” was all she managed to get out. “Good idea.”

James slipped out of bed, keeping the sheets over her but without any sign of modesty for himself. “Thank you for the use of your toys, Valerie. Do you want me to clean them, or do you prefer to do it yourself?”

“Nah, I got it. Anytime.” Valerie grinned, taking them back. She was staring at him. “Thanks for the view!”

*Not too bad from this angle either.* Selena admired his nicely muscled butt and powerful legs and back. For a moment she thought of calling him back to bed, but Valerie’s presence made it seem like it would be rude as well as embarrassing. She watched as he buttoned his pants and pulled the T-shirt back over his torso.

He turned to her and knelt down. “I’ll see you soon. Don’t go off with anyone”—he paused for a moment and took a breath—“that isn’t vouched for by people you trust. Not that I wouldn’t rather keep you all to myself. But promise me you’ll at least be careful.”

*As if the place didn’t already give me the jitters. He wants to keep me for himself?* “I promise,” she said.



“Good girl.” He kissed her lightly, straightened, and left the room, leading her to wonder why such simple words made her feel so very good inside.

But with him gone, the rest of the world flooded back. Hopefully Thom was having a good time with his grandmother, although Selena couldn't help but be a little anxious. She looked at her watch. They'd both be fast asleep by now, most likely, unless Thom had managed to find a flashlight to sneak to bed to read by. She smiled, remembering when she'd been caught doing the very same thing.

In any case, she wasn't likely to get much sleep until she found Laera and resolved the awkwardness she now felt. She got up, dressed in black jeans and a black tank top, and headed out in search of her friend.

## Chapter Six

James had gone straight to his room after leaving Selena. His roommate was out, thankfully. Otherwise he'd have had to go outside to get some privacy. As a man, he was sure Selena wasn't the killer. As a cop, he had to check up on her like he would anyone else.

Valerie's henna could be what the one victim had been talking about. No one would mistake her for a real redhead, as the henna just gave her dark hair red highlights, but the quality of information in an Internet post wasn't necessarily high. He didn't really like the idea, but he had to check it out. He couldn't picture Valerie as a killer, but it was better than the idea of Selena as one. He pulled out his phone.

"Rowcliff here," said the voice. *Lucy Rowcliff. Good.* He was glad he got someone he got along well with.

"This is Culver. Could you do me a big favor? Totally off the record. Please don't tell anyone you're working on it for me."

"Well, if it's short," said Lucy doubtfully.

"I think it will be. Two people to check up on. Valerie Holmes, very well-known in the BDSM scene. She's not really a redhead, but she hennas her hair. She might be in the report on the so-called bondage murders. I need to know if she's been cleared or not."

"Okay, that I can do." Lucy said. "I'll run a search. I'll let you know if she has an alibi."

"Finally, someone who got divorced at the Frederick County Courthouse last August nineteenth, middle name Selena." He hesitated. Was he really doing due

diligence on a suspect, or was he gathering information on a sub who fascinated him? “Just check that there is such a person, and if you happen to see what she lists as her occupation, I’d be interested in knowing that too.”

“Court records are easy-peasy too,” said Lucy. “The rest, well, I’ll see, but...”

“I know.”

“I’ll get back to you. Is the morning good enough?”

That meant Lucy intended to keep working past her usual hours on it, or she’d call him when she got off shift around ten. He appreciated it. “Morning is fine.”

“You owe me.”

“I know.”

There was a knock on his door. *Selena*? He got up and opened it. Bruce Merrick stood there, his face impassive.

“Hey, Bruce.” He smiled at the man. He genuinely liked the dom some called the Zen Master, and they’d had some good conversations in the past. But Bruce knew Selena, and he doubted Bruce’s appearance was a social call.

“Hi, James. Mind if I come in?”

James gestured him in with a sweep of his arm, starting to regret the whole undercover idea. Yes, he had the perfect cover—the only problem was the cover was his true self, and what he did here would have lasting implications. He lacked the detachment a regular undercover cop would have, and that could bite him in the ass. Worse, a few people in the scene knew he worked for the police. He had stopped telling people in the scene a long time ago because it made them nervous, but Bruce was one of the few who knew.

“It’s good to see you,” Bruce said. “But I’m sort of surprised. I wouldn’t have thought this was your scene.”

James nodded. “Well, I have to get out and be social sometimes.”

Bruce grinned. “Well, we’re honored by your presence. Laera and Selena are girl-talking, so I thought I’d drop by. I think Laera wanted me to warn you to treat

Selena tenderly, but I don't think you need my warning. She doesn't know much about the scene—are you going to be the one to show her around?"

Right to the heart of it. Someone would be her guide, and he couldn't stand the idea of it being someone else. If he could cross Valerie off the list, well, he'd have to keep his eyes open, but there really wasn't much more for him to do here. He wasn't supposed to be investigating, anyway. He decided to sidestep the question. "She's a really nice girl. How'd she end up here?"

"She read a flyer at Laera's—the woman I was with, she's my submissive. My fiancée, in fact."

"I look forward to meeting her."

Bruce nodded. James pressed on. "She's from Philadelphia, then?"

"Selena or Laera? Either way the answer's the same: they both live around DC. Like you."

James forced a laugh. "You're not playing matchmaker, are you?"

"She could do a lot worse. And so could you. I don't know if it's my place to tell you this, but she's got a young son, and she works full-time to put bread on the table for him. Her mother babysits her son once a week on Friday nights so she can get some time for herself. To have a whole weekend is pretty special for her. And I get the impression from Laera she's been treated pretty badly by men in the past. But in any case, this weekend she needs someone she can trust to show her the ropes."

James barely quirked a smile at the old play on words. "You know I'm more of a chains person myself." He liked the feel of metal. Nice, thick metal. You didn't have to worry about it fraying, and it didn't chafe like rope could. He'd had the rope-versus-chains argument with Bruce before. Bruce was passionate about his ropes.

Bruce didn't rise to the occasion. "You're dodging the point. Not that you owe me an answer."

James nodded. “No, I don’t. And I do owe it to Selena not to make assumptions.” *But if she’ll let me, yeah, I’ll be the one to show her around. Because I sure as hell ain’t going to watch her with someone else if I can help it.*

\* \* \*

The next morning James looked out the window at the mountains and sighed. Lucy had really come through for him, but she’d woke him up at six doing so. Felicia Selena Kinnison worked for the Park Service in DC, was divorced on the right day in the right place, and had a nine-year-old boy then who would be ten now. She’d been shooting straight with him after all. *A lot straighter than I have with her.* Someday, hopefully, he’d get a chance to explain. Everything about her story checked out, and if her only contact with the BDSM community was Laera and Bruce, she couldn’t be the killer. Especially because none of the murders had taken place on a Friday night, which according to Bruce was the only time she’d have an opportunity.

Valerie was also clear. She’d been routinely questioned after one of the crimes and had an airtight alibi, having been seen naked by fifty or so of her closest friends at the time. From anyone else it would have made James suspect setup; some alibis were too good. For Valerie it was probably the usual Friday night. If you didn’t mind some driving, you could usually find some BDSM event in the northeast corridor every weekend night.

His roommate, a guy he’d never met before named Victor, let out a particularly loud snore and rolled over, still asleep.

He might be able to get some more information on Carolyn and Ginger if he flashed a badge at the Allisons. Then again, they might tell him to get the hell out of their retreat, which would stop him from investigating and separate him from Selena. He didn’t think it likely they’d react that way, but their dedication to confidentiality was legendary, and he had a harder time getting a read on them than on most. He’d go downstairs, check the living room and the dungeon, and see if he could find Selena as soon as she’d actually be likely to get up. One thing he

remembered from the one time he'd been to Bondage Ranch years ago—no one got up at six in the morning.

He looked out the window for one last view of the mountains. Dark clouds were moving in from the south, but it was still clear over the ranch. In the trees closer to the building he noticed a flash of red hair. *Selena*. She didn't seem in any particular hurry, despite not having a jacket on a rather cold day. She was heading deeper into the woods. He watched until she disappeared. She'd get wet if she stayed out there long. He had a vision of what she'd look like in a white blouse soaked through by the rain, her nipples hard against the wet cloth.

Hell, he wasn't going to be able to get her out of his head. He'd leave investigating murders to the experts. Bondage Ranch was probably a dead end anyway—and if it wasn't, a girl walking alone in the woods was a target. *Shit*. He grabbed his shirt, shrugging it over his shoulders as he hustled down the stairs and buttoning a couple of buttons as he ran down the hall. It was jacket weather, but he didn't want to waste the time.

He had it buttoned by the time he got to the dungeon. There were a couple of dommes in the dungeon using their male subs for footrests and drinking lattes. He supposed he made quite a scene running through at top speed when most people were still in bed.

\* \* \*

The sounds of chirping birds serenaded Selena as she walked deeper into the woods. She had to clear her mind a little bit, and the outdoors was always where she found her clarity. Her plan had been to not get too emotionally involved and explore the way submission made her feel. If she was completely honest with herself, she was hoping to get it well and truly out of her head—she was almost hoping to have a bad time.

But James had changed all that.

She breathed in the clean forest air. It was different out here, different not only from the inside air but from the way the outside air was in DC. It wasn't just

clean, oxygenated air from the trees—you could get a little of that in Rock Creek Park. There was an earthy smell from mushrooms, trees allowed to rot, and animals. It was distinctly real to Selena, without the artifice or betrayal of human beings. Out in the woods she could be herself, not what others wanted her to be. Not her boss, not her mother, not James, not the whole Bondage Ranch crowd, not even Thom. She had no regrets about being a mother. Thom was her greatest joy, but it was nice to be away from the responsibility of being an adult for a little while.

She scooped up some leaves and tossed them into the air, laughing. She sang unconsciously, with no one there to hear her, and discovered one could segue from the *Mickey Mouse Club* theme song to “Amazing Grace” rather easily. Then she remembered a friend telling her you could sing “Stairway to Heaven” to the tune of “Amazing Grace,” and tried that out for a few stanzas, before trying “Amazing Grace” to the *Gilligan’s Island* theme. The notion of calling herself a wretch had always made her balk a bit, but the lighter tune took some of the sting out of it.

She’d been singing very softly when she heard voices up ahead. She closed her mouth, her feet carrying her a few steps forward as she remembered how much she’d hated being walked in on when she was with James. She’d give whoever it was a wide berth; no doubt they’d come out here at this hour to be alone, like she had.

“No. No. Please no,” said a male voice.

“You’re going to get what’s coming to you,” said a different, raspier voice, also male. *What the hell?*

A loud female giggle followed, the sort of cruel laughter she remembered from high school. She’d never been fond of that kind of laugh, but she found it vaguely reassuring in this situation. Maybe at least someone was having a good time.

Someone screamed, and she couldn’t tell whether it was a male falsetto or a woman. Her first instinct was to put her hand near the gun she’d be carrying if she was on duty—except she didn’t have her gun on—and start running toward the scream. She got two more steps forward when she stopped. She’d read the rules.

Don't interrupt a scene. Yell "Danger" if you're in real trouble. That was a scene up ahead she was hearing.

"That's just for starters," said the raspy man. She heard a slap, the crack of flesh on flesh, and pictured the woman striking someone.

No one was yelling "Danger," although someone was whimpering, and she could make out the word, "Please." She wished she had someone who knew a bit more about BDSM with her. She didn't want to leave someone in trouble or barge in on people having more intense fun than she wanted for herself. Some of the things she'd seen in the dungeon were pretty extreme too. *It's only a scene. I'm not in charge here, and this isn't my park to patrol.* Still, her sense of peaceful nature had been disturbed. Conflicted, she turned around and walked back toward the ranch. As she got out of earshot of the people she'd left behind, she saw James Culver.

"Hey darlin'," he called out, and her heart melted at the way his eyes lit up at the sight of her. He reached out his arm, and she hurried her step so she could place her hand in his.

"You're an early riser," he remarked.

She hadn't always been. But getting up in time for the school bus every day had changed her sleep schedule. "So are you, it seems." She tried to tone down the smile on her face. No reason he should know she was *that* happy to see him.

"Got an early-morning phone call." He put his hand up before the here-we-go-again feeling could fully form inside her. "But no emergency to run to. Not this time. I thought, if your dance card isn't fully booked, I'd spend the day with you."

"My dance card isn't booked at all."

"Glad to hear it." He turned around and led her back toward the main building. "With your permission, then?"

She felt a few drops on her shoulder and looked at the sky. "Uh-huh. James, do subs sometimes sound really convincing when they ask for something to stop, even though they really want it to continue?"



He looked at her oddly. “Yeah, I guess some do.”

“But they’d call a safe word, if they were really in trouble.”

“Yeah. Well, usually. Some subs have a tendency to forget to use it or overlook their own body’s signs of distress. So a dom can’t count on that. But yes, most of the time they’d use a safe word. Most clubs like this have a safe word—but couples often have their own—”

“Like Mikado.”

“Like Mikado. People usually choose something that will not be used in ordinary conversation, so it’s crystal clear when a safe word is being used. Why do you ask?”

“Just a scene I encountered,” she said. “I think we better make a run for it.”

“Unless we want to get all muddy, yeah.”

The drops were coming quickly now, and the sky was rumbling. He let go of her hand, and she took off. She was a pretty good runner, had been on the cross-country team in high school, and her job required keeping herself fit. But James was better and looked like he was almost jogging as he kept pace.

By the time they got to the door, they were both laughing. The rain was exhilarating, and running together was lots of fun. One could either cry at getting wet or choose to enjoy it, and she chose to enjoy it. The people in the dungeon looked at them like they were both crazy, which was fine. She suspected the same about some of them but was reserving judgment for now.

She followed James’s gaze. She was soaked. Her bra was showing through her baby blue T-shirt, and it wasn’t a very thick bra either. Her nipples made two very sharply defined points in the fabric.

“I better go change, huh?”

“You don’t need to on my account. You could even just peel that right off.” He grinned at her.

She wouldn't be the only topless person in the dungeon; a few more people had gathered, and one of them was a completely naked submissive blonde.

"Tell you what, we can compromise. I'll go to my room and change...but I'll let you watch."

"You wouldn't rather I stand guard outside the door?"

She laughed. "Maybe sneak in quietly. I think Valerie is still asleep."

He smiled. "Ordinarily, if I ask a sub to take her clothes off, I'm not much for compromise. But I think you made me an offer I can't refuse."

## Chapter Seven

The curves of her body mesmerized him. She was tall and leggy, with softness in all the right places. But from the way she angled away from him, he had a sense she wasn't comfortable with her body, didn't realize how beautiful it was. He'd have to teach her, let her know with his eyes and his actions until she knew she was lovely.

Valerie had stayed asleep, which was good. Neither he nor Selena had any need for an audience. He didn't fault those who enjoyed showing off; one could learn a lot from watching, after all, and he'd gone to a lot of clubs when he first got into BDSM. That was where you met potential play partners, those and the munches, get-togethers of kinky folks that usually took place in restaurants. He was a part of the community and always would be, but he realized Selena's wanting to go back to her room to change had struck a chord in him. She was more like him than he was like everyone else. Valerie certainly wouldn't have hesitated to peel off the moment she'd walked in there. Most subs here might have done the cute lip-quiver thing and asked if stripping was an order, but they'd have been hoping he'd say yes. But as far as he was concerned, Selena's offer to strip for only him wasn't really a compromise—it was an improvement.

He pulled her into his arms the moment she dropped her bra and kissed her deeply. Her lips were cold from the rain, but as he kissed her, they started to warm up. The feel of her tongue sliding and slipping against his was heavenly. And her nipples, still hard, poking into his chest—well, he didn't mind that one bit.

He felt her thigh nudge against his hard-on, and he was pretty sure from the smirk on her face the reason for her motion was precisely to check him out. *Oh, yes, pet, I'm very turned on by you.*

"I was supposed to get clothes back on after I took the wet ones off, remember?"

"You haven't gotten all the wet ones off."

"The jeans aren't that wet. They'll stay"

He moved his knee between her thighs and saw her eyes open in surprise as he rubbed her the right way. "I know how to make them wetter."

"It'll take you a long time. Unlike some people, I wear underwear."

He laughed. "Horrible habit, that. Maybe I'll help you get over it."

"You've a few horrible habits of your own," she replied, her eyes sparkling. "Sir."

"Such as?"

"Such as always finding a way to get my clothes off."

"That's not a horrible habit. That's all part of the service. I intend to nurture that habit."

"I thought I was supposed to be serving you. Sir."

"How could I forget?" He grinned, his hands sliding down to her jeans, and undoing the button over the zipper. "I'll give you some practice. This is where you say 'may I do that for you, Sir?'"

Her body went very still for a moment before she replied. She bowed her head. "May I do that for you, Sir?"

"Certainly."

Her face scrunched up a little, but it didn't stop her from zipping down the jeans and shucking them. She wore plain pink cotton panties underneath. "Sorry," she said. "I don't have the knack of this fetish-wear thing."

“No problem. Bare skin is always better anyway. Some people are here for the costumes, but that’s not me. The only reason to wear latex and leather is if you feel beautiful in them.”

“I don’t suppose I could convince you I have a fetish for pink cotton?” She glanced over to Valerie, but the other girl was still quite still on her bed.

James grinned. “No, I don’t find that very convincing, pet.” His hands slipped inside her panties, but it wasn’t time to push them down yet. Instead he slid his hands around, so one was cupping her round ass and the other nestled in the soft red curls of her mound.

He could see her face battle, torn between modesty and desire. His job was to make sure desire won. “Am...am I supposed to ask to help you again?” she asked.

*So sweet.* Her innocence wouldn’t last, but such bravery should be rewarded. “No, love, I’ve got it this time.” He kissed her softly on the lips. “Offer appreciated, though.” He kissed her again, and his hand slid down, stretching the elastic of her panties in the process. She shivered as his finger glided over her nether lips, the moisture there smoothing his way. His voice dropped to a whisper. “You’re wet. I like that.”

“I-I...like what you’re doing to me.” He’d found her clit, and that was enough to make her stutter. Her nipples had contracted into sharp peaks, and he sucked one into his mouth. Her face was pink too, a healthy blush.

He heard Valerie move and took a glance out of the corner of his eye, seeing the other woman’s eyes flutter open for a moment and a smile appear on her face that quickly disappeared. She was faking. He could go on; he didn’t think Selena had noticed. He wanted to. God knew his cock wanted to. *Dammit.*

Her eyes went wide when he straightened up, pulling his hands out of her panties at the same time. He moved to shield her nakedness. “What is it?” she asked.

“Valerie’s up,” he whispered.

She glanced over his shoulder. “No she’s not. She’s still sleeping.” She pressed her body up against him, her eyes begging him to continue. She squirmed, making sure she made contact with the bulge in his jeans, intensifying the aching need he felt.

*I warned her; I did my duty.* He hesitated a moment, and then his voice came out low and husky. “Good. Because I want you so badly.” With one easy motion he pulled her panties down past her hips, letting them fall the rest of the way.

“I’m yours.”

He helped her onto the bed and stripped off his jeans. His cock stuck straight out, looking a little red. A hint of precum glistened at its purplish tip. She was staring at it, and slowly, deliberately, she spread her legs in invitation.

Fortunately he’d kept his head enough to rip open a condom wrapper and quickly roll the latex sheath over his cock.

He knelt on the bed, his gaze fixed on her. Such lush breasts. A big enough body that he didn’t have to worry about her being too fragile. Her pussy glistened with her juices, and he had to know what they tasted like. He dipped his head, his tongue flicking right over her clit. She let out a little squeak, almost coming at his touch. He was surprised she didn’t look over at Valerie to see if it woke her up. *I’ve got her full attention now.* He grinned.

He licked lazily along her pussy, down and up again, before softly running over her pearl of pleasure, sending a shock deep into her core. She bit her lip, trying not to say anything, not to make any noise. Her hips lifted toward him. He could read the need on her face. *Lovely.*

His tongue dipped into her opening, getting the full taste of her sweet tang, and he hummed his pleasure. His cock was so hard; he was going to start humping her leg for relief if he didn’t get inside her soon. And she felt so wet and ready.

He moved forward, covering her body. With his first thrust he lodged himself inside her. She was very wet and very tight. Definitely wet enough for what he had in mind. He pushed into her forcefully to fill her completely. His lips pressed

against her mouth, muffling her sighs, her chest against his as he drove forward with his powerful hips. She matched his rhythm, her hips bruising his each time he penetrated her fully, but he didn't mind. Best place to get a bruise, he thought. The bed shook and rattled, but at least it didn't squeak. Not that he cared anymore about the noise.

Suddenly her pussy contracted hard around him. She started to scream and then turned her head away, away from his eyes and away from Valerie, as she gritted her teeth to choke it off.

"No, pet," he murmured. "I want to see every moment of your pleasure." He took hold of her chin and turned her face to look at him again. And in his hands she relaxed. She stared up at him with those beautiful big green eyes.

He could get her to come again, he was sure. He plucked at one nipple and planted a kiss on the other. Content she'd keep her gaze on him, he moved his hand under her, changing the angle they joined at so he'd hit her clit more directly with his pubic bone each time he thrust inside her. He held on, willing his own explosion back, wanting to watch her pleasure first. From the crazy look in her eyes and frantic breathing, he knew he was close.

Two more hard thrusts, and he sent her over. She was still gritting her teeth against crying out, tears forming in her eyes from the force with which pleasure took her. Then he joined her, his face contorting as he too battled to keep quiet. His cock throbbed inside her, pulsing again and again as her squeezing pussy milked all the cum out of him.

The look on her face was one of pure contentment.

*So this is what it means to be satisfied.*

Selena's reverie was interrupted by a sound a bit like a spanking, and without thinking about it she glanced in the direction of the sound. Valerie was there, eyes open, clapping, her covers in a disarray that left one breast almost completely bare. Selena felt the fire in her cheeks.

“I told you she was awake,” said James.

Valerie smiled. “Chill, Selena. Birds do it, bees do it, why can’t we do it—” She broke off her singing.

*Okay, the song is about sex, but isn’t the next line “let’s fall in love?” Is that what’s going on?*

James had rolled off her, pulling the sheets over her in the process and coming to rest sitting on the edge of the bed. She kept the sheets clutched to her chest—she wasn’t shy about her body, really, and they’d both seen it, but she wasn’t going to make a spectacle of herself either—and sat next to him. He’d managed to dispose of the condom somehow, and his cock was still half-erect. The idea flashed through her mind of sucking it back to hardness, but there was no way she was going to do that with Valerie there.

She hadn’t come to Bondage Ranch to fall in love or find a new mate. She thought maybe she’d be turned off and be able to write off the whole fling with James in the hotel as an aberration, or maybe she’d hook up with someone for an evening and it would be her dark little secret source of fun. It wasn’t supposed to be serious. *I’ve got a kid at home. A full-time job. I don’t have room for a master in my life.*

“Something wrong, pet?”

She shook her head. She thought if she said no, he’d know for sure she was lying. Besides, she’d be all right as soon as she found her balance. “Do you mind waiting outside while I get dressed? And then maybe we could meet in the dungeon and watch for a while?”

James nodded slowly. “Sure. Like I said, it’s a good way to learn. I’ll see you in the dungeon.”

“I’ll find you.”

He smiled. “Good girl,” he told her, and she fought to stop her heart from warming at his words. He pulled on his jeans, nodded to Valerie, and slipped out the door, blowing her a kiss as he closed it behind him.



“There’s lots of boys here to play with,” Valerie said the moment he was gone. “I can hook you up with some of them, if you like. I’m in domme mode at the moment, but I’ve subbed to half the doms in this place. I know that look in a man’s eye, and James has it—where he decides you’re *the one* and he wants to own you. If you want to shake him, you’re going to have to move fast.”

*Own me.* That was exactly what she wanted and didn’t want, all at the same time. But the idea of playing with someone else, now that it was in the forefront of her mind, didn’t appeal at all. Even if she imagined a dom who looked like Christian Bale, it still wouldn’t be James. *Damn.*

“Hey, girl, you okay? We’re roomies. We’ll take care of each other, okay?”

She managed a sort of weak smile up at Valerie. *Why did I say I needed space when it would have been easier, even in front of an audience, to kneel at his feet?* It was nice of Valerie to offer instant sisterhood, but really she didn’t know her at all, and what she saw made her think they were about as different as women could be. Valerie’s easy attitude was attractive in a way, but it wasn’t for her.

“Thanks.”

The moment threatened to grow awkward, and Valerie bounced up and walked over to her other suitcase, the one that had the clothes. “Hey, you wanna borrow something to wear?”

Tempting. But she wasn’t sure Valerie’s clothes would fit her. Besides, she remembered what James had said earlier about his taste in clothing. Better to just be herself. “No, but thank you,” she said. The two women got dressed in silence, Valerie in a tight leather top she almost spilled out of and a leather skirt slit to the hip, and Selena in a tank top and snug black jeans.

To her surprise, Laera was waiting in the hall as she left the room. It was nice to see that something other than black was acceptable—Laera was dressed in a creamy satin bustier and a flirty blue skirt that left most of her legs bare. A collar made of white braided leather graced her neck. She was definitely looking good.

Laera grinned. “Hey! Was debating whether to knock and see if you were awake. I’ve got some people I want you to meet!”

Meeting people would be good. But she had agreed to see James. “Um, I agreed to meet someone already, but—where?”

“Oh, we’re all gathered in the dungeon.”

A man wearing nothing but a G-string and pouch stumbled into Laera. He was obviously in something of a hurry. “Sorry,” he said to Laera, and then he turned to bow to Selena. “I’m sorry for bumping into your slave, Mistress.”

Selena raised her eyebrows. “Um, she’s not my slave.” She took the moment to enjoy the view. The man was pretty well built and might have been handsome if he quit hunching his shoulders.

“That’s all right,” Laera said at the same time.

“Sorry, Mistress.” The man bowed again and backed up. There seemed to be something stirring in the pouch of his.

“I belong to Master Bruce,” Laera said.

“And I’m not a mistress,” Selena added.

The man scurried off.

“Some subs really take it too far,” Laera said, “and you can see them shrink into themselves. Others, it’s like a butterfly coming out of chrysalis, and they never feel more free or more confident than when they are able to surrender.”

Selena wondered if everyone was going to be making the assumption the man in the hall had made. “Do I really look that much like a *domme*?”

Laera shrugged. “Well...maybe a little. Don’t worry about it. Most of the best *doms* seem to have a way of knowing who is submissive anyway. Ready to go?”

“I guess so. I’ve agreed to meet up with James, but—he can join us too, right?”

“That hunky *dom* you were with? Sure!”

It turned out James was already in the gaggle of people Laera was heading for. She recognized Frank as well. A slender woman with straight jet-black hair,

wearing a shiny vinyl black T-shirt and a matching black midlength skirt, stood next to him holding a leash attached to his collar. *That must be Mistress Sue.*

A dark-haired muscular man wearing only snug jeans and boots had his arm wrapped around a lithe blonde whose skirt was very short and whose top was a contraption of shiny chrome chains and leather that didn't really cover anything at all.

James put his arm around Selena the moment she got there. It fit perfectly, and she shifted a little closer. *That should stop anyone from hitting on me.*

"This is Sue." Laera gestured to the mistress. "She really took me under her wing when I was lost. And Frank, her sub. Bruce you know. And then Arthur." She indicated the muscular man and then the blonde. "And Sam. All good people. Everyone, this is my friend Selena from way back in high school."

"Pleased to meet you." Selena's sentiment was chorused by all assembled.

"Laera, this is James," said Bruce. James had to remove his arm from her waist a moment to shake Laera's hand.

"Are you a *domme*?" Sue asked Selena, eagerness shining in her eyes.

Sue's enthusiasm was so infectious she almost wished she was. Was it just her form of dress, or did she have the air of someone who was used to being in charge? *Best to be polite.* "No, thank you."

"Aww." Sue didn't look too disappointed by the answer, at least. "Well, if you change your mind, let me know. We've got a group that meets once a month."

It would be fun to be a fly on the wall of one of those sometime, thought Selena, but she had enough responsibility in her life, and she'd much rather be looked after than have to order someone around.

James put his arm around her again.

"I think Selena is just exploring right now," Laera said.

"So she's still corruptible," said Sue.

Laera laughed. "It didn't work with me, did it?"

“No, you went and stole our Bruce away from us.” Sue mock-pouted, then smiled.

Laera laughed again. *Like a butterfly*. Selena had always thought of her friend as maybe a little mousy, her emotions guarded closely. She was like a different person—or more like the same person with a weight lifted from her. *Is that what I'm like? Does everyone see a weight on my shoulders, something that holds the laughter back?*

“Don't let Sue intimidate you,” said Arthur. “She's really quite nice. And there's a tendency around here to categorize everyone—gay, straight, dom, sub. The labels don't exactly work for everyone. One doesn't always have to choose.”

Sam gave him a squeeze. “You chose.”

“I chose you,” Arthur said. Their eyes met, and they held each other's gaze, smiling. *Did I ever look at Al that way?* There was a wedding picture of her and Al, and while they were even in height, it was sort of similar. It was also posed.

“Do some people do both?” Selena was curious, but she was also suffering from an attack of jealousy. Better to talk than watch the lovebirds.

“Oh, yes,” Laera said. “Those people are called ‘switches.’ But Arthur's right. Real people, real relationships, don't always tuck tidily into labels.”

“Sometimes you have to tie them down first.” Sue looked completely serious. It took Selena a few moments to catch the little smile with it and realize she was joking.

“You've met Valerie,” said James. “She's a switch. And proud of it. But I'll join the chorus of agreement with Arthur. Labels may be good shorthand in conversation, but they don't always reflect reality.”

“I wonder,” said Sue a moment later, “if one could have a nice scene with one of those old label makers that put white raised letters onto colored tape? I don't think sticky notes would adhere very well to skin.”

“Those labels wouldn’t either,” said Arthur. “But you could always wrap your sub in some saran wrap first, at least wherever you wanted labels.”

Sue grinned. “I haven’t done plastic-wrap bondage for ages. Thanks for the reminder. That was fun.”

*I think I have some idea what they talk about at those once-a-month domme meetings now.* Sam and Frank were exchanging glances and rolling their eyes. Not really part of the plastic-wrap conversation, Selena found her gaze drifting.

A handsome man leaning naked against an X-frame was being struck by a massive flogger with thick long tails. Each blow from his dom seemed to shake him and the frame. He wasn’t tied or chained, just leaning on it for support.

Selena cringed. “Ouch. That’s gotta hurt.”

“Well, a little,” James said. “I bet not as much as you think. Size is misleading. The thicker the tails, the less the ouch, because they don’t feel as sharp. And the ends of that one are rounded, so they don’t cut in either—no corners. The length of the flogger means it’s absorbed over a large area, like a baseball glove spreads the force of the ball, even when it hits dead on your palm.”

“And the broad tails have more wind resistance too,” added Arthur.

“Size isn’t everything,” Laera said.

“Oh, but it definitely doesn’t hurt.” Sue grinned as her hand moved, a little sharply Selena thought, to the crotch of Frank’s jeans and gave a squeeze. Then she giggled, still looking at the scene. “But now he’s in for it.”

All Selena could see was that the big flogger had been tossed back in the dom’s oversize black sports bag, and he had taken out some leather cuffs. “Why do you say that?”

Sue smiled at her. “Because his dom thought he could take the big whip without being tied up but is too worried he’ll squirm now.”

“Believe me,” Sam said, “it’s a blessing. If things are intense, you want something to pull against. Or bite. Something.”

Selena considered for a moment and decided it made sense. The dom pulled out a little black whip, with tails about as wide as shoelaces. It didn't look like much, and it didn't sound like much when it hit the sub's back, either. But the pink lines it left and the wincing it extracted from the sub suggested something else.

"They're just getting started," said Sue. "Those two play very hard. They're working their way up to it."

"Yep." Arthur pointed across the room at a woman wearing nothing but a collar, her hands tied behind her back. Her dom was fucking her mouth. "Ken and Josie over there are on the other end of the spectrum. For them, it's all about the dominance and submission and not directly about pain at all."

Selena could see Josie's cheeks hollow in rhythm with Ken's thrusts, the motion barely visible at a distance. Other than that her head did not move. All control was in the hands of her dom.

Her cheeks turned red. Not only was she watching someone giving a blowjob, but everyone was watching *her* being a voyeur. James's light kiss on her cheek didn't soothe the fire she felt in her face.

Fortunately Sue came to the rescue, pressing something into her hand. It was a flogger, a lightweight one like the one James had used on her. Selena looked over at Sue quizzically.

Sue smiled back at her. "Try a few swings. I'll loan you a target if you like, or just try in the air."

*Target. Does that mean Frank?* "The air then." Selena swung it a few times, hearing the *swoosh* of it.

Frank had stuck his arm out in front of him, holding it up with his other hand, offering her something to swing at if she wanted without being pushy about it. She looked at him and then at Sue.

"Try it," Sue urged.

“Go ahead,” James encouraged. “Or use your own arm. It doesn’t make you a *domme*. But it might give you an idea what it’s like.”

Frank nodded at her, looking perfectly willing and totally unafraid.

She swung the flogger lightly at his arm, trying to make the tails barely touch, but she missed. She tried again, and this time the tails wrapped around the other side. It wasn’t the easiest thing to control, and it took her several tries to get it just right. She kept looking at Frank, and he kept nodding patiently as if this was a perfectly ordinary thing to be doing.

She handed the flogger back to Sue. It didn’t do much for her to swing it, even with a handsome man on the receiving end. *A little more of my education. I’m definitely not a domme.*

Bruce approached them.

Laera curtsied. “Master.”

A smile appeared on Bruce’s previously noncommittal face. “Slave girl.” Their lip-sucking openmouthed kiss looked every bit as intimate as the oral sex she’d been watching earlier, and she turned away only to find herself looking right into James’s eyes.

“My roommate just showed up with a girl,” James said, “and he’s tying her to the other X-frame.”

Selena looked, curious. There wasn’t anything particularly special she could see about them, especially compared to the other things going on around them. They were both fully dressed, and it was taking the dom quite a while to fumble with getting the cuffs on her wrists and ankles. “So?”

“So they’re going to be here for a while. And that means my room is free.”

*Oh!*

“Excuse us,” said James to the others. His hand closed around hers. “Playtime.”

Arthur laughed. “Of course.”

*He could have asked me. But then again, maybe it's hotter he didn't.* The hand holding her was insistent, and she preferred walking to being dragged, so she hurried to keep up.

“So what are you going to do to me, Sir?” Selena asked when they got to his room.

He grinned at her. “Make your skin come alive.”

His room wasn't much different from hers: a couple of simple beds, a couple of suitcases. His answer unnerved her, and when a moment of silence followed, she needed to fill the space. “A little while earlier, some guy assumed I was a *domme*.”

“Oh?” He took a step back, as if trying to get the perfect distance on a fine painting, and looked at her. “I can see that. You're tall, strong-looking, and you're dressed like some *domme*'s dress—comfortable clothing, a fair amount of coverage. At events like this, most of the subs don't wear a lot. A lot of masters want them to show off their assets.”

“And you?” She worried he was unhappy with the way she looked, but she didn't know what option she had. She wasn't going to walk around in her underwear.

“I want you naked.”

“All the time?”

He laughed. “No. Not all the time. I don't get my kicks off of showing off my sub. Unless that's a fantasy for you, in which case I'm glad to oblige. But I want you naked right now. Strip.”

She stared at him for a moment, but she knew she was going to do it. “Yes, Sir,” she said and kicked her shoes off before pulling her tank top over her head.

“I don't mean that all the *doms* are showing off their trophies, although I'm sure that's the case for a few. Some of them are making sure they get to look at what they want to look at, and some of the subs are genuine exhibitionists who like to be ordered to dress in ways they wouldn't otherwise dare. And some of them don't



need to be ordered—a few subs come here without a dom, hoping to hook up with one or several, and they want to look available. People can be very frank about what they want here, and that’s why a lot of people like this place. Keep going.”

She had paused when she got to her undies. She blushed and unhooked her bra.

“Still shy around me?” He grinned. “That’s kind of cute.”

*Cute* wasn’t a word she was used to hearing. She was too big for cute. But James was enough bigger than her that she almost felt petite around him. *Is that why I like him?* It was one of the reasons, she decided, but there were others. She peeled her panties off.

“Lovely.” He crouched to open his suitcase, its contents shielded from her even when she tried to discreetly peer around.

“You’re a curious one,” he said, spotting her even though he hadn’t turned his head. He had something small and black in his hand. She caught a glimpse of something shiny before he straightened and turned to face her. “Close your eyes.”

She closed her eyes, wondering what he was going to do. The knowledge he might touch her anywhere made her skin tingle, especially at the peaks of her breasts.

She felt something being wrapped around her head, and it got even darker. A blindfold. She was standing naked in front of a man she couldn’t even see, and he could do anything and she’d not know in time to defend herself. She tried to fight down the panic. If she ran, she couldn’t see where she was going. She reached up to pull the blindfold off, and he caught her wrists. She couldn’t get free. She was trapped.

“Easy there, love. Do you need to say your safe word? It’s Mikado, if you’ve forgotten.” His voice was calm, soothing.

She took a breath, and then another. *I’m okay. I’m with James.*

“No,” she said. “No, Sir. I trust you.”

“Good girl. Take a few breaths. I didn’t expect that reaction, but maybe I should have. You were more scared of not being able to see than you are of being restrained.”

She smiled, still a little shaky. “Yes. Silly of me, wasn’t it? I’m okay now.”

He let her hands go and held her around the waist, holding her close to his big strong body until she was breathing easy again. “I’m going to restrain you,” he said when he finally let go. “Just cuffs on your wrists. Are you going to be okay with that?”

“I’m fine, Sir, really. Don’t worry about me.” She held her wrists in front of her, offering them to him.

“I will always worry about you, Selena. I *like* worrying about you. And I’ll always take care to keep you safe. It isn’t only physical safety. Emotional safety matters too.” His hands were around her wrists, massaging them. “That doesn’t mean you can’t be a little on edge. That can actually add to the sensations and help me get you on the edge of something more pleasurable. But you looked like you might be more than on edge for a moment there.”

*He knew, even though I didn’t say anything.* “I’m fine, Sir.”

“Good girl.” He let go of her hands. She heard the *clink* of metal. His cuffs didn’t feel quite like Valerie’s. They were fuzzier against her skin, but they didn’t give as much.

“Nothing much to attach you to in here that I’d trust. So I’m going to have to put these behind your back.”

She let him move her hands backward and heard a little *click* before he let go. She tried to pull her hands forward. She could get them apart, but she couldn’t quite bring them around. Trying made cold metal touch her back. She shivered.

She let him turn her. “Back up and lean against the wall, love. You don’t want to lose your balance because you get distracted.”

“Why don’t I lie down?” There was silence while she realized her mistake. Would he be angry with her?

“Because that’s not what we’re doing right now,” he said in the same tone of voice. He didn’t sound angry. He didn’t sound as if he was going budge either. His voice was like his cuffs: not much give, but somehow soft.

“Yes, Sir,” was all she wanted to say in return. She felt for the wall with her hands and leaned back into it. The wall was cool against her shoulders, but not too startling. It was white, if she remembered right. Her mind kept wanting to see, even though her eyes couldn’t. She imagined what he was doing. Was he searching his suitcase for a flogger, about to lash her undefended breasts? Nipple clamps? She shivered. Maybe he had a vibrator for her.

Instead, she felt his hands running down her side, right where she was ticklish. If he’d been poking her ribs, she would have burst into less than happy giggles, but as it was the touch made her shiver.

On the way back up from her hips, he brushed the sides of her breasts. Then down again, a little more toward the center, having to make a detour to avoid touching her rapidly stiffening nipples. The pattern ended as he reached her mound, and then his fingers started to move randomly. Unable to see, she couldn’t anticipate—a touch on her belly, on the undersides of her breasts, on the inner edge of her thigh, on her neck, in the middle of her cleavage. Her skin was coming alive, as he promised. Why wouldn’t he touch her where it would do the most good?

She felt a rush of warm air on her nipples—his breath, she realized. She could hear him blowing on her. Then he drifted lower, down her belly. She shifted and spread her legs, hoping for his breath to caress her pussy.

Instead she felt a sting, right between in the middle of her chest, drawing down in a line. She breathed in sharply. It was just a fingernail, she decided, as what must have been the side of his hand brushed her breast. The finger withdrew, and then there were two, one on each side of her, tracing from her side to beneath her tits. She squirmed.

His finger touched her lips. “Not a word, love, unless you need to say your safe word. And stay still.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. The very fact she had been told not to speak made her want to open her mouth and say something, even if it was just “Yes, Sir.” But she didn’t.

His next touches were soft, just above where he’d been scraping, moving along the soft smooth skin of her breasts, circling in toward her peaks. He brushed against the crinkled skin around them, making them tighten even more, and then his fingers left her. A scrape along her belly, a pinch at her side, a soft touch along her collarbone. A breath rustled the short hairs on her mound, the sting of a fingernail on her thigh, fleeting touches at the very tips of her nipples.

The kiss on her lips was unexpected, and she opened her mouth reflexively in response, receiving his tongue. She melted into it, feeling his tongue and hers; his lips pressed insistent against her own. I could kiss like this forever, she thought, but at that moment he withdrew, the back of his hand brushing against her cheek as if to say good-bye.

For a moment, there was nothing, no touch, no sight, no noise. And then it began again, his fingers tracing curves on her body. He started over with the same pattern, but this time he didn’t avoid the center of her breasts. His fingers slid inside the slick lips of her pussy before they continued upward. When they came back down again, he penetrated her. He was such a tease. She wanted to feel him deep, to rock her hips against the thrusts of his fingers. But she figured they’d be gone soon enough, and she didn’t want to help him increase her frustration.

But his fingers didn’t leave—although she expected it each time he half withdrew them. They plunged back into her, curving to slide along her G-spot. Only one hand roamed her body now. He pushed her right breast upward, his fingers dividing as they moved over her peak, creating the lightest pinching sensation as her nipple rolled between them.

*More.* But she didn't dare say it. She absorbed herself in the rhythm of his fingers as they thrust deep within her, building the heat in her core. She didn't move, even though she wanted to. He'd said no.

His hand left her breasts, but she barely noticed. How could mere fingers feel so good? She was going to come in a few more thrusts. She let out a low moan, and then he pulled his fingers suddenly out of her. She had to bite her lip to stop from talking, the pain almost enough to blind her to the ache she felt from being so close.

His hands cupped her ass and lifted her with no apparently effort. She felt something at her pussy again—fingers?—and then it filled her, too thick and long to be fingers, too warm to be anything plastic. His hipbones pushed against her as he pressed her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling at him, urging him farther inside. She didn't think he could—she didn't have any room he hadn't filled—but she was feeling greedy.

Each thrust shook the wall behind her in a low rumble. Something wet found her left breast—his mouth—and sucked her in, the sensation sending sparks straight to her groin.

She hit the back of her head against the wall. It didn't hurt, but it made a thump, and immediately his hand was at the back of her head, cushioning her against a second collision. It caused a slight pause in the rhythm of his thrusting, but it warmed her heart. *Cared for. Desired. And fucked, all at the same time.*

Unable to continue to obey his orders not to move, her hips matched his rhythm as he sped up again. Her skin felt alive, but it was all centered now at that spot where their bodies met. Her body twitched, lights appearing before her shrouded eyes as she screamed out her pleasure. Her pussy felt totally out of control as it squeezed his cock. Their movements combined to stretch her breast as he pulled back a little, still maintaining the suction of his mouth on her peak.

*Oh my God, that was me screaming.* She felt his cock swell within her. His thrusts slowed, each one hitting her deep. His breath came in short gasps.

“Yes, come in me,” she told him. “Come in me now.”

His body shuddered against hers. She milked him with her pussy. Another thrust, a squeeze, and another. He moaned, low and sexy.

“Yes.” Realizing she had given him a command by mistake a moment earlier, she murmured, “Yes, Sir.”

“Couldn’t have held back if I wanted to,” he said to her.

*Wow.*

He pulled out of her and picked her up, carrying her—somewhere—and set her someplace soft. His bed. He cuddled her close, holding her tight.

All her defenses were down. “Was I a good girl?” she asked.

“You were the best girl. You *are* the best girl.” His hands ran through her hair, so gentle, so loving, like the fingers of her mother getting out the snarls when she was little.

She had left Thom in good hands. But she was in good hands too. She laid her head on the furry chest he’d made so available. She thought of asking him to remove the blindfold, but she felt too perfect to want any change at all. Even though it was daytime, she felt like a little nap. It had been a long time since she’d had a daytime nap. Years—no, one year. That last time he had been next to her too. Then he’d left.

Well, he’d better not leave this time.

He was still there when she woke up. She didn’t know how long it had been. Maybe he’d slept too. She squirmed against him because he felt so good against her.

He removed her blindfold, shading her eyes with his hands. She still wore the cuffs, but she could move her hands. He must have already removed the chain connecting them. She brought them up to look at. Polished gray metal, lined with white fur or some synthetic equivalent. Each cuff featured strong-looking D-rings; no doubt the chain had attached there.

“Good afternoon, love.”

“Oh! Good afternoon.”

“I’ve been lying here, wanting to know more about the beautiful woman in my arms.”

She pretended to look around. “Where is she? I’ll gouge her eyes out.”

He laughed. “Very funny. But I have a strict rule, love. No self-deprecating remarks. You have to take my compliments directly as given, or the floggings will begin.”

That didn’t sound bad to her right then. “Promises, promises.”

“Oh, trust me, love, some floggers can get very nasty.”

The look on his face sold her. Although even the nasty ones sounded kind of interesting. Still, of all the things to be strict about, a rule against bashing herself was sweet. She decided to cooperate. “Sorry, Sir.”

“Tell me about yourself.”

She opened her mouth to comply, and then shut it again. The lame story about the chemical spill still grated on her, and the closeness she’d felt faded with every moment. She sat up, drawing back from him.

He raised an eyebrow, watching her.

She wondered if he’d be mad at her for not believing him. But she didn’t, not at all. She wanted to grab her clothes and get dressed and run away, but she’d never been a coward. Best to force the issue here and now and make the break clean if a break happened.

“You’re not really a chemical engineer,” she said. “Are you?”

His eyes went blank, and his face was an unreadable mask. It was worse than his silence. *Here it comes.* She waited a second longer and then got up from the bed. Her clothes were several feet away, near the door. She wished she had them on now, rather than having to get dressed first, but she wasn’t going out into the hall naked.

“No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m a cop.”

She turned to face him, trying to see if he was telling the truth from reading his eyes. But she couldn't. She wasn't sure.

"I had to respond to an emergency call that night a year ago, but it wasn't a chemical spill. I work for the state police department."

"Then why didn't you tell me that?" She put her hand over her mouth. "Oh! Are you investigating this place? Because I don't think these people are doing anything wrong, even if some bunch of legislators decided to look all moral by making something going on here illegal. I—"

He moved so fast she didn't have time to react, then pulled her against him. "Shh. No. I was investigating something, but it wasn't the normal goings-on at Bondage Ranch. I don't think it has anything to do with this place." She saw a shadow pass over his face as he said that, as if he felt less than certain.

"You thought I was lying to you about my name. That I had something to do with it. And now you're asking questions about me." She didn't feel like snuggling, but she wasn't quite ready to pull away either.

"Yes and yes and yes. But the questions are for a different reason. Whoever I was looking for—I had reason to think it was someone with red hair. But it's not you, and I don't think it's anyone here."

"Is that why you were fucking that girl? Because you were 'investigating'?"

"I wasn't fucking her. And yes. But she's not—" He took a deep breath. "I'm on leave, taking my vacation. The crime in question is homicide, and I'm on the bomb squad. I'm not supposed to be 'interfering' in the investigation. So when I saw you, I stopped. I didn't see any signs of anything strange going on here, and it was a long shot anyway. Whereas you—probably also a long shot. But I've been thinking about you for a year. I tried to find you, but I didn't succeed, because I was looking for someone named Selena in the court records. I don't know how many times I've jerked off to the idea of meeting you again. Of touching these breasts. Of holding these hips. Of pulling you against me."



He demonstrated exactly what he meant. He sure wasn't lying about everything—he was rock hard again, and she didn't think she'd slept very long. *Good endurance, long and thick, nice recovery time, all in one package.* But she couldn't let her hormones do her thinking for her. Homicide. Thank goodness he didn't think it was anyone at Bondage Ranch. But he'd given her a story before, and while this one sounded right, she wondered. "Are you telling me the whole truth?"

"There's always more to tell." He smiled. "But I'm not avoiding telling you anything. Your given name is Felicia. You have one son. You work as a park ranger." He shrugged. "I investigated you because I thought I had a duty not to let my hormones do my thinking for me."

She laughed at how close his thoughts had been to hers. And if there was anything he'd be smart to conceal, it's that he was checking up on her. She reached down and stroked his hard, thick cock. "Oh, you're allowed to think with your other head," she said.

"If you're thinking I'm going to say 'thank you, Mistress,' you've got the wrong guy."

*Thank God.* She was surprised at the depth of her reaction. *What do I want?* An image of being pushed down until she knelt on the floor, sucking his cock, flashed through her head and turned her insides liquid.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to get an answer to my first request, even if it kills me. And it very well might, because being next to you makes me instantly hard and aching. Tell me about yourself, Felicia Selena Kinnison."

"Oh!" The thought of him hard and aching was almost too much for her. "Not much to tell, really. I'm an ordinary woman. Divorced—you knew that. Um...I like Enya. I was a geography major in college. I used to work as a ranger in the state park that adjoins this land. I guess that's part of why I had the courage and curiosity to come here. I play a mean game of Scrabble. You don't really want to know all that stuff. I'm boring."

He reached around her and swatted her ass, hard, driving her against him. She didn't expect he could get much leverage from that position, but it stung and kept stinging. "The woman I'm falling in love with is *not* boring," he told her.

"No, Sir," she said. And then with a smirk, she added, "She's a fascinating woman of mystery."

"Fascinating, yes. Mysterious, well, only until I find out everything about her."

The swat had distracted her, but then it sank in. *He said falling in love.* And even if her bottom still stung—even if he made her bottom sting again and again, she knew the truth.

*I'm falling in love too.*

## Chapter Eight

James woke up to a light knocking on his door. Selena didn't stir. They'd stayed up late talking, listening to the rain, and doing other things. In fact, her mouth had been too full to talk when Victor had come by with his girl late that afternoon. Victor had made a quiet exit, and he didn't think Selena even knew he'd been there. It was nice of him to knock now—it was, after all, as much Victor's room as his.

He slipped away from Selena, and she made a little mumbling sound but didn't wake up. He pulled the white cotton sheet to cover her up. The knock came slightly louder this time. He shrugged on some jeans quickly and answered the door.

It wasn't Victor standing there; it was Bruce. Bruce inclined his head toward the hall. James nodded, closing the door softly behind him.

"What's up?"

"Sorry to disturb your morning, but we have a problem. You know Gordon, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he's missing. No one has seen him, including his roommate, for over twenty-four hours."

James felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. Gordon was a dom, as were the homicide victims. But there was no sense in jumping to conclusions when there were other explanations. "Maybe he wasn't having fun and went home?"

"Called his home. He's not there."

"Met a girl, went home with her?"

“Nobody else has gone. Sam, who used to play with Gordon a fair amount, wanted to file a missing persons report, which Dylan was trying to talk her out of. But it’s a moot point, as we couldn’t get cell phone reception and the regular phone lines are down. Lot of trees have fallen out there too. The rain and wind got really bad last night.”

“I’ll bet. So since you couldn’t get the police, you thought of me.”

“Of course.” Bruce grinned. “I told Sam you had some expertise so she wouldn’t freak out quite so much. She doesn’t even like Gordon anymore, avoids him whenever she can, but people have been keeping an eye out for each other lately, since some of our own have been killed.”

No one had mentioned the killings while he’d been at Bondage Ranch. But it made sense that it was on people’s minds. The festivities at Bondage Ranch kept going; people who liked playing with strangers were much safer doing it with an audience.

“Can you show me his room?”

Bruce nodded. For a moment, James thought of leaving Selena a note, but he’d probably be back before she woke up, and in any case, he wouldn’t be far away.

He recognized Gordon’s roommate as Valerie’s sub for the weekend, the bald man with the magnificent voice. Away from Valerie, the man looked anything but submissive; he had bulging muscles and a commanding presence, and the tight black T-shirt and jeans he wore emphasized that musculature.

“Steve,” said the man and offered his hand. James shook it firmly. “Be a shame if this were a fuss over nothing, but better safe than sorry.”

“Agreed.”

“So why’d they call *you* in?”

The simplest thing to do would be to tell the truth. He had decided when he saw Selena to drop the investigation, so there was no big harm in letting people know, was there? But if Gordon—well, if Gordon was somehow the victim of foul

play, as unlikely as that seemed, he didn't want to out himself. So he shrugged in response.

"You're a cop, then," said Steve.

*Dammit.*

He didn't find anything unusual in Gordon's stuff. There were several changes of clothes, including one woman's dress—maybe he was hoping to find a woman to put in it, because it didn't look like it was Gordon's size. There were a few toys of the softer variety: a deerskin flogger, Velcro cuffs, and a blindfold. No diary, no computer. He wasn't going to find a last message on the Internet from Gordon. "You said Samantha used to play with him, Bruce? Could you bring her here? I imagine Arthur won't be overjoyed by it, but I need to ask her a couple questions."

Bruce shrugged, a bit of a smile playing on his face. "I think Arthur feels quite secure about her, actually. I'll go get them."

"What are you thinking?" asked Steve.

"Nothing yet."

Steve grinned. "Yeah. Right."

Samantha and Arthur turned up together, as James expected. He could shoo Arthur out of the room, he supposed, but he didn't think it would be constructive. "Sam, you used to play with Gordon?"

"Yeah. A few times."

"Do you think you know what kind of toys he carried with him?"

Sam nodded. "Yes."

James gestured to the collection in Gordon's suitcase. "Would this be all of it?"

Sam shook her head. "No." She bit her lip and closed her eyes for a moment, and then pulled herself together. "He wanted to be a much edgier player than that. He always had a crop and a cane and alligator clamps. Metal police handcuffs. I actually got—well, that's neither here nor there. No. He has other toys, and he carries them with him in a gym bag. I think."

He'd been thinking of Gordon as a possible victim, but maybe that was wrong. "Anything else you know about the guy?"

Samantha sighed. "Where to start? He could be really nice sometimes. He was awfully sure of himself, and that can be attractive to a girl. He didn't always know what he was doing, though, if he hadn't read up on it, and he wasn't much for being shown how to do things. He liked to figure them out himself. He liked to push—ever seeking something a little bit more extreme. I think in some ways he was pushing himself."

"Do you think he would eventually push into something as extreme as murder?"

Samantha blinked. "You think he killed someone? That he's the one the police are looking for?"

"No, I don't. I'm just asking."

Samantha thought about it. "I don't think so. No."

"But you're not sure?"

"There's only one person in the world I'm one hundred percent sure about." She smiled up at Arthur, and James realized exactly why Arthur might be so secure, as Bruce had put it. He couldn't help but smile at the couple.

"Thanks. One more thing. Maybe you would know, Steve. Did Gordon have a jacket with him? Anyone see him with a jacket?"

"He usually did," said Samantha.

"He had a windbreaker," Steve said, certain and steady.

"It's not here now." *Took his toys, went outside, and never came back.* He remembered Selena asking about safe words when she met him in the woods before it started raining. Had she stumbled across something?

"Thanks," said James. "Thanks, all of you. I'll find you if I need anything else."

He signaled for Bruce to come with him and then stand outside the door to his room while he went inside. He had to wake up Selena and ask her some questions.

He hated to disturb her. She looked like she was sleeping so peacefully, her breathing soft and her titian hair spread out on the pillow. He knew he was about to disturb that peace, and he hoped he wouldn't freak her out too badly.

He shook her shoulder, gently at first. Her skin was soft and cool to his touch. All she did was mumble and move her head to rest against his arm. Reluctantly he shook a little harder.

Her eyes opened. "Hey." She smiled sleepily at him.

"Sorry honey. I need to ask you some questions."

"You're half dressed already." She pouted.

"Yeah." He wished he wasn't and didn't need her as a witness right now rather than as a lover. "When you were in the woods and heard that scene, did you hear anyone yell no or stop? Did you hear anything that sounded like a safe word, some word that just seemed out of place?"

"Nothing like a safe word. Just no. 'Please no,' I think he said."

That made sense. If you already knew the people you were with weren't playing, and you didn't think anyone could hear you, why would you waste time yelling safe words? Maybe the man had already tried. James buttoned his shirt while he talked to her and strapped on his gun.

"Where were you when this happened exactly?"

"A little past where you met me." She described the spot where she stopped.

She was wide-awake now. And naked, holding the sheets in front of her as if he hadn't seen her in her full glory already several times. He tried to shut his awareness of her body out of his brain. "You say the one man had a raspy voice?"

"Yeah. The guy who was the dom, or so I thought at the time. I'd recognize that voice anywhere. And I met Gordon—it wasn't his voice, although the voice of the man pleading no might have been. You think something bad happened?"

"Maybe," he said.

"Wait a minute. I'll come with you."

He shook his head. He didn't want her to come to any harm. "Can't wait," he said, although minutes wouldn't make much difference.

"I can help you find where I was."

"I think I have a pretty good description. And I don't want anyone knowing you witnessed anything, or you could be a target. It's already probably out that I'm investigating. Gordon's roomie already pegged me for a cop."

She stood up, letting the sheets fall from her body. "I'm not some helpless little thing, James. I know how to take care of myself, especially in the woods. Especially in these woods." She crossed the floor without any sign of embarrassment, despite her early coyness, and picked up her clothes.

He couldn't be mesmerized by her body, or she'd be dressed and he wouldn't be able to get away. As a dom, he wanted to protect his sub. As a policeman, he had to keep a civilian out of a criminal investigation. "You're staying, and that's final," he said and walked out.

He shut the door behind him. "Keep her safe, and don't let her go anyplace alone," he said to Bruce. Bruce nodded, not asking questions. He sensed his old friend was relying on him as the expert.

It was raining hard outside. Even wearing a jacket, he was going to get totally soaked. Oh well. He wasn't sure what he hoped to find, but at least he had good directions as to where to find it. Maybe he should have taken Selena with him. She sure looked furious at him. He shrugged and kept walking at a brisk pace along the muddy path he'd met Selena on the morning before.

The rain had made a mess of the ground. He wasn't sure what he expected to find. A jacket, a button, anything. In the end, he found it almost by accident after an hour and a half of searching in the rain.

The ground gave way beneath him, and he fell in the mud. Water had gathered and pooled in a round indentation about four feet in diameter. He stood and shook off the muddy water and noticed the mud was a slightly different shade on one side



of the puddle. In a few days, perhaps it would have all blended in, and no one would have noticed.

He clawed at the mud, shoving it aside in great globs. The darker area was about six feet long, perhaps two feet wide. He had a sickening idea what he might find there. Soon he knew he was right. First he found a hand. It took him a long ten minutes before he could see a face. With the mud and in the rain, he wasn't sure he'd recognize it even if it were his own brother. The fact that it had been cut multiple times with a knife didn't help. The cuts were characteristic of the killings. Like the other victims, this one was male.

A little more digging turned up a gym bag. That was enough; he'd leave the rest of the excavation to the crime-scene folks. The seclusion of the Allison's home was prized by people in the scene. Apparently it had also been enough to tempt the killers away from their usual *modus operandi* when a chance for murder had presented itself.

He pulled out his cell phone. Still no bars. He wondered if the landline was still dead. He had to check. And he had to tell the Allison's that no one would be allowed to leave until the regular police could be informed. If there weren't any phones, he'd have to send someone into town to get the police. They wouldn't be happy he'd messed up their crime scene, but either the criminals had left already—in which case they'd have a nice narrow suspect pool to look at because almost everyone who came for Bondage Ranch was still there—or they hadn't, and the best time to find out who did it was with them all here, and time was of the essence. Especially if Selena was right about being able to recognize the one man's voice.

\* \* \*

James looked around the room and headed straight for Bruce, who was talking to Dylan Allison.

“There you are. You're looking a bit soggy, old chap.” Dylan was using a mock British accent that seemed like it belonged with his ruffled shirt and velvet frock coat.

“Oh, very funny. Nice ruffles.” James had shaken himself off as best he could and had taken his shoes and socks off in the foyer. At least he wasn’t dripping on Dylan’s carpet.

Dylan bowed low. “Thank you. I’ll fix you up with my tailor, if you like.”

Bruce was looking at him thoughtfully, not saying anything.

James ignored Dylan’s offer. “Where’s Selena?”

“She went to the dungeon,” replied Dylan.

“Alone?”

“Laera’s with her. And it’s pretty crowded,” said Bruce.

“All right. Someone should be with her at all times.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “Laera’s sticking close.”

“I need you to go into town.” He hesitated, but he’d need Dylan’s cooperation eventually. “Tell them that—”

“There’s no use in heading down the road, James,” Dylan interrupted. “It’s flooded out. Carl and Ginger barely made it back—have you met them? She was rather annoyed at him for taking the risk of running his truck through, and apparently it’s gotten worse since. Sue tried to go into town for breakfast, and she said there’s no way even a truck could get through anymore.”

He felt like he was banging his head into a wall. No phones, no road. “Where were Carl and Ginger?” Ginger was the redhead he hadn’t had a chance to get to know, and that was a slim reason to make her suspect number one. He’d go with a slim reason until he had a better one.

“At breakfast,” said Alex, joining them. “They must have been out there early. The road was probably already bad by then.”

“Did you see them leave?”

“I didn’t see them,” said Dylan, “but I’m not what you would call an early riser.”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

Dylan smiled and spread his hands, which were half covered in a froth of lace. “That, *Monsieur gendarme*, is beyond my ken.”

French and Scottish in one sentence, thought James. Damn fop. So maybe Carl and Ginger were returning from breakfast—but maybe they’d tried to make a run for it too, and when that didn’t work, they decided to cover it up with a story.

“When’s the last time you checked to see if the phone was working?”

“Thirty minutes ago,” said Alex.

“Let me try again.”

Alex led him to the kitchen, and Bruce and Dylan tagged along. But the line was still dead. It probably would stay that way until they could get work crews up the road. So it was all on him.

“We can’t call the police, so I’m going to have to ask for your cooperation instead.”

Alex still didn’t look horribly cooperative. He’d always thought she was the reasonable one, but her hands were still on her hips, and she looked like she was about to make an argument. Dylan shrugged. “She doesn’t know, old chap.”

“Oh.” He got out his wallet and flashed his badge. “I found a body half-buried in the woods. Its face was pretty cut up, but it was fresh—only a day or so old—and the body shape and build were right for Gordon. No one is allowed to leave, and Dylan, I’ll want you stationed at the front door to make sure of it. Alex, you’re good at getting people moving. Clear the dorms, and tell everyone to go into the dungeon. Lock the door back into the dorms from the dungeon, and keep an eye on the ones to the outside. Get everyone into the dungeon room, and make sure that everyone includes Carl and Ginger. That will get people talking, I imagine.”

*And if people talk, Selena can listen. Hopefully she can spot that voice.*

“It’ll take quite a bit of effort to get everyone going,” said Alex. “People seem to be sticking to their rooms more this weekend. Because of the kill—is this connected?”

“Probably.”

“And you suspect Carl and Ginger?”

James was already walking toward the dungeon. “Make sure you get them there. I’ll double back to help you clear people, but I don’t want to flash my badge yet, so your authority is what will have to move people. I’ll just be around for the appearance of muscle. While they’re in the dungeon, I’ll want to search their room. And since it’s your property, I don’t need a warrant for that if you let me in.”

## Chapter Nine

The mood in the huge ballroom that served as the dungeon of Bondage Ranch was getting tense. Selena could hear it in the voices she'd been listening to. People had made plans to drive into town for dinner, or to walk in the woods, or perhaps to play outside. The rain had spoiled it all. So they crammed into the dungeon, which, according to those who seemed to have some experience with such events, felt more crowded than it had in years past.

She'd been walking the room with Laera, listening for Mr. Raspy. She might not be a cop, but she wasn't incapable either, and she wasn't going to act it. She'd let Valerie lend her a very short, very tight black dress, and what was short on Valerie was a micromini on her. She figured it would make men more likely to talk to her, and she was right.

It was either that or stew about James not taking her along on his search. *I could have been helpful, dammit.* And he still wasn't back yet. So far, though, she hadn't heard anyone whose voice sounded quite like the man in the woods had sounded.

She did hear a submissive brunette who called herself Desiree complain she had been stood up by a dom named Gordon. *That's the name of the missing person James was looking for.* No harm in doing a little detective work.

She insinuated herself into the conversation, squeezing in between a couple big doms. "When was he supposed to meet you?"

"Noon yesterday." Desiree's shrug threatened to make her breasts spill completely out of her corset.

"And haven't seen him since?"

“Nope.”

*Well, that didn't amount to much. Still, better to know something than not.*

“Having a fun time?” she asked the two men, ignoring Desiree’s look of annoyance. She’d have Mr. Raspy served up on a platter for James by the time he deigned to ask for her help.

“Yeah,” said the lanky one.

“Absolutely. Your name is?” asked the big muscled one.

“Selena.” Neither one sounded like Mr. Raspy, although she’d have to get the lanky one to talk a little more to really be sure.

But then she spotted James, and he was headed straight for her at a quick pace.

“We need to talk, Selena.” James glanced around at everyone. “Privately.”

“I don’t know what you’ve got to say...” she started, still nursing a grudge.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her unresisting to the door near the parking lot. “Quick. Outside, before the wrong people see us.”

Selena waved with her free hand at her friends old and new and then hurried to keep up with James. He hustled her outside. There was an overhang, and the wind had died down a little, so the rain wasn’t hitting them, but it was still cold. She shivered but quickly got control of herself. She’d been outdoors in worse. The dress provided little protection against the elements.

He noticed and responded by holding her close.

She melted into his warmth. He felt so good.

He grabbed her and kissed her, hard. *God, his lips feel good. Dammit.*

She broke it off. “I don’t know what you have to say, but I know what I’ve got. I may enjoy following orders and being tied up in bed, but I’m not a fragile flower to be protected from walking around in the mud. And these woods are practically a second home to me.”

He nodded. “I fucked up.”

“Yes, you did.” She glared at him.

“You can blast me later. Listen, please. What you heard in the woods wasn’t a scene, Selena. It was a murder. I found the body.”

She didn’t know what to say. When she heard the sounds, she’d thought something was wrong, and if she’d followed her instinct and investigated, one less person might be dead. *Or one more probably, since I didn’t have a gun. There’s no sense blaming myself but, my God. Murder.*

“Unless I miss my guess, it’s the fifth person who the murderer, or murderers, have killed. From what you say it sounds like they were two. You’re the only thing close to a witness to any of it. I didn’t take you with me, because I didn’t want anyone to know you were a witness, and the longer we’re out here, the more likely they are to come to that conclusion. They probably have heard I’m a cop. If all my guesses are right, they already tried to leave once because of it.”

“Oh.” She was dying to ask more questions, and she still wasn’t 100 percent happy with his explanation. But murder trumped all of those concerns. She held her questions and listened.

“There will be people coming into the dungeon. One of them is named Ginger. She has red hair a little lighter than yours, with tight curls, and she has what I think is an Australian accent. With her is a tall slender man named Carl. Listen to Carl if you can. Decide if he sounds like the man who attacked you, and be ready to tell me when I get back. Make damn sure you’re not obvious about it, because they may be armed, and we don’t want to pressure them into going off the deep end.” His voice was low, his mouth right next to her ear. “Got it?”

“I understand. I’ll be careful. Why won’t you be there?”

“Because I’ll be searching their room.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be there as fast as I can. Remember, don’t take chances. I may have already gotten the evidence I need by the time I’m back.”

Selena nodded and then realized he couldn't see her. She didn't want to get out of those arms of his any sooner than she had to. "Yes. I'll be safe. I have a son to get back to. As to Gordon..."

"Hmm?"

She feared he'd be mad at her for investigating, but she shared the information anyway. "I heard someone complain he hadn't showed up for an assignation at noon yesterday. So I guess it is him."

"Sure looks that way. Nice work." He grinned at her briefly before his face turned grim again. "Okay, you go back in through the door, and I'll run around to the front one more time. I'll see you soon."

"Soon."

He took off at a run.

Several minutes later she spotted the tall dom and the curly redheaded girl when they entered the room. They headed straight for an X-frame. The dom, who she presumed was Carl, was dressed from head to toe in black leather. He was even wearing leather gloves. The gloves had little shiny silver points that caught the light.

Ginger shed her clothes quickly at Carl's command. She didn't seem to be taking in the audience and enjoying the exhibitionism. Nor did she seem to be nervous. It was simple. He commanded; she obeyed. Just like she had felt with James.

Carl strapped her to the X-Frame. His hands ran over her, as if caressing her body lightly, but Ginger was squirming and moaning as if it was all much more intense. Selena noticed the pink lines on Ginger's body where Carl's hands had been and realized the little silver points in his gloves were leaving them.

She moved closer, trying to hear them talk, but Carl spoke to his sub in a soft voice that was drowned out by the sounds of the dungeon and by Ginger's moans. Selena didn't dare advance any farther, or she'd be very obvious. She remembered James's warning.



James was back. He caught her eye from across the room, and she shook her head to tell him she wasn't able to hear anything.

"No luck?" he whispered as he drew up alongside her.

"No. You?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Which may mean they still have the knife or whatever they used to cut Gordon with them."

"I can't hear them from here," she whispered.

He looked around. The equipment wasn't seeing a lot of use given how many people were there. Most people were talking, not playing. "Trust me?" he asked.

"I already answered that," she told him. She wasn't sure if she should, but she most definitely did.

"Play along, then." He grabbed her wrist and raised his voice to normal. Ginger and Carl could certainly hear it, although they didn't seem to be paying any attention to anything outside each other. "You're in for a spanking."

He pulled her toward a spanking bench less than a dozen feet from Ginger and Carl. He was going to spank her. In front of everyone. But she understood exactly why. Would he be doing something like that if they weren't trying to get closer to Carl and Ginger? She didn't know, but she followed him, pretending a token resistance.

The spanking bench was built kind of like a sawhorse, with thick padding over the top and shiny red leather to hold the padding in.

She was surprised when he abruptly pulled the hem of her dress up to her waist. *All these people watching.* Her heart beat hard. She knew her cheeks were bright red, and she also knew she'd be less conspicuous if she looked like she was playing along. He pushed her down. She let him guide her until she was straddling the bench, her ass in the air, her body pressed against its length, her head off the far end. She was wearing a black thong at least. She hadn't intended it to be seen by the world, but she wasn't going without panties with a dress that short.

He was so strong when he moved her. He could put her wherever he wanted to. *I'd let him, gladly.* She'd rather it be in private, but if he wanted it all here, now, she'd let him. She wanted to surrender.

Then she remembered the job she was there to do. She couldn't believe she'd lost track of it for a moment. They were playacting, and she'd been swept away by it.

He leaned over her. "Focus on what you're doing and pay as little attention as possible to me," he whispered. "I'm making it all look real and natural."

*Easy for him to say. His ass isn't the one being rubbed by a warm, caring hand.* At least he was nice enough to avoid her most sensitive nerves. She saw Bruce walk over and hand him the cloth bag he'd pulled rope out of earlier. Laera was still wearing those ropes. She'd lost her dress again. *My friend, the exhibitionist.*

*Focus.*

Carl said something, but it was so low and she was so distracted she couldn't make out his voice well enough. It wasn't only her exposure or the hand. The sounds of floggers and moans were hard to ignore. A shriek pierced the air. The conversation was louder too. People were complaining. She could see naked bodies, lovely exposed bodies, fucking, sucking, whipping, squirming. Everything in the room other than the kvetching was about sex and pain and submission, and she was leaning over a spanking bench with the dom of her choice touching her naked bottom.

*Focus.*

He put a blindfold over her eyes. *Thank you.* That cut out some of the distraction. She closed her eyes beneath it and listened. He wasn't touching her ass anymore either, although he was doing something with her wrists. He pulled her hands so they were almost touching the floor, but it was less distracting than having him feel her up in public. He was very gentle with her left arm.

All there was now was the feel of the leather top and the rope, and the sounds. Slaps. Swishes. A yelp, a groan. And voices. She made out one. "That's it, Ginger," said the voice. "Go with it, feel it."

She wiggled her arm to get James's attention. It was tied to something at the base of the bench, so she wasn't able to wiggle it far. But he noticed. He leaned next to her face.

"It's not Carl. He's not the right voice," she whispered. The whole charade had all been for nothing.

"She looks good over there, huh?" said a male voice. She'd heard it before. It belonged to someone she'd met while she'd been talking up everyone. James's roommate, Victor. "Blushing like that, you'd think it was her first time. Nice ass."

*He's talking about me.* She felt the heat rushing to her face.

"It probably is," came the response. Short, clipped. Raspy. It was him. The voice chilled her to the bone. She wiggled her arm again, frantically.

She felt James's cheek against hers.

"Two guys," she murmured. "Watching me, talking. The one who said 'It probably is.'" She knew that probably wasn't enough.

"Got it," he said, with a touch of victory in his voice. Her heart jumped. He'd heard them too. "Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Maybe he'll bare her tits. She's got nice ones. I saw them earlier," said the first voice.

"If you like 'em big," said the raspy-voiced one, sounding irritated or disgusted or both.

"I'm sure," she said and repeated what the man said so James would know who it was. "He's the one I heard in the woods."

## Chapter Ten

James knew exactly who she was talking about. One of the men talking was his roommate, Victor. The other was a tall man in his thirties. He looked strong enough to have committed all the murders, certainly. He was dressed all in black: black jeans, a black shirt with light brown buttons, black boots.

Selena, in her excitement, had raised her voice.

The man met his eyes for a moment, and then his gaze danced away, first left, then right. James had seen the reaction before. *Fight or flight. He heard her, all right.*

He couldn't shoot the man, not in a crowd, so there was no point in pulling his gun. Every instinct he had as a top told him to untie Selena. One didn't leave one's sub tied up in a situation like this. Every instinct he had as a cop told him not to take his eyes off the guy for a moment. He'd have to subdue him physically—he wasn't going to go easy—and he couldn't take the time to get Selena.

The culprit met his eyes once more, his own eyes widening. Then he bolted for the back door.

Bruce was ten yards away. "Bruce! Take care of Selena!" James said, hoping she'd forgive him. He ran after the raspy-voiced man.

If Carl wasn't the man, then Ginger wasn't the redhead. Which meant whoever she was, he was leaving Selena in a room with the murderer's accomplice. She might have any color hair at this point, in theory, but there was still one redhead he hadn't cleared.

Carolyn.

He remembered how she had tried to get him to go deeper into the woods when he was with her. He should have made the connection and found out then what she wanted. At least he would have had a fighting chance against an ambush.

It didn't take a lot of mental work to remember Carolyn, because she was standing right near the door the man had pushed open.

She stuck out her foot. James went sprawling. It wasn't quite a confession, but it was close.

The man was headed into the woods. James wanted badly to give chase, but it wasn't really an option, not when it meant leaving one of the killers free behind him. This was where he needed a partner. He got up. Carolyn had an innocent "who, me?" look that would have done any professional basketball player called for a foul proud.

He didn't like manhandling women unless they were going to enjoy it. He grabbed her anyway and twisted her around. He pulled handcuffs out of his pocket and snapped them on her wrists.

"You're under arrest for conspiracy to murder. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney, and if you cannot afford one, an attorney will be appointed for you free of charge. Do you understand?"

"They deserved to die, every one of them." She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, the pretense dropped. Her eyes were wild. There was nothing of the airhead he'd briefly played with in the woods, nor even the woman who tried to look innocent after tripping him. "If you cops kept the perverts off the street, we wouldn't have to do your work for you."

"I'll take that as a yes," he said drily. She wasn't going anywhere.

"He'll kill again without me." Carolyn's voice rose as she looked around the room. "He'll kill you all."

Visions of the man spraying a crowd with an automatic rifle or pouring gasoline on the Allison's home, then setting it alight played in James's head. He couldn't let the man go. He had to give chase.

Most of the crowd was backing away from the crazy woman and the cop, forming a clear semicircle. Into that clear area stepped Arthur and Selena.

Arthur put out his hand. "We'll take care of her for you. I think we can safely immobilize her. We'll come up with something safe, sane, and non-consensual."

James nodded and handed her wrists over to Arthur. "Don't be too imaginative. Just keep her still, and don't let her bite or kick anyone. Anything beyond that, and there will be hell to pay."

Arthur grinned. "That was what I meant by the sane part."

He opened the door. The man was nowhere in sight. It had to be pretty rough going in the mud, but he'd made good time. He'd also left a good deep pair of tracks.

"I'll pay for your dress," Selena yelled behind him after he'd taken a step. She wasn't talking to him, obviously, so he kept walking. He wasn't sure running would get him there any faster, not with the likelihood of slipping on the mud.

A few steps later he realized Selena was following him.

"You're not exactly dressed for this," he pointed out, still running.

"Once he hits the woods, he won't be so easy to follow," she told him. "The ground will be drier in places, protected by the canopy. The leaves on the ground will protect the earth. He won't leave such obvious tracks. Are you good at tracking people through the woods?"

"I'm on the bomb squad. Never tried." He grinned. "I could do worse than a park ranger for a partner. Keep up."

"I'm an expert tracker. And I'm not letting this guy get away."

It certainly broke every rule to take her along with him. It wasn't what the police manual directed, and it wasn't being a good, protective dom either. He didn't

just want a sub, though. He wanted a partner. And he wasn't going to let the killer get away either. "Stay behind me until your skills are needed."

He drew his Browning semi-automatic.

They passed by where he'd found the body and kept going. The mud took footprints easily, and it didn't require an expert or slowing down to follow them. He was glad for Selena's sake the tracks didn't lead past the body. It had been gruesome enough for him, and he'd seen murder scenes before. The woods got thicker as they pushed onward.

Selena was right. It was harder to track him once they'd gotten to the woods. Reluctantly, he had to let her go first. That was what people did when they were a team, leading when they needed to, following when needed. He walked behind her, keeping his eyes and ears open. After half an hour of her leading, he cleared his throat. "He doesn't have to stop and look for tracks all the time. He's getting a better lead on us."

"No, he isn't." She sounded certain.

"Hmm?"

"He's stopping and resting every once in a while. He's tired, and he thinks he's ditched us. He doesn't know where he's going. He's lost."

"You can tell that from the tracks?"

"I can guess that from the tracks, yes. I can explain, or I can keep the pace. I'm for keeping the pace."

They were in the part of the forest she knew well. She'd been here before. They were well off the Allisons' property and into the state park where she had worked. If he made the campground loop, he'd be a lot harder to find, but they were still a long way from that. And they were gaining ground, since not much rain had pooled yet in the boot prints she had seen. Mostly his trail was marked by crushed leaves and broken sticks.

The trees were closer together and older. The brush was much thicker too. They were following a game trail worn by deer and foxes and only a few people. There weren't too many ways to turn off it, so Selena could move more quickly here. James was right behind her. Their quarry seemed to be having trouble making out the path, because at times he made missteps off of it, only to backtrack to it when going through the brush got too rough.

"Shh." She watched where she stepped, taking care not to break twigs or otherwise make extra noise. He caught on and did the same. She smiled. She liked smart men.

She walked past a tree, and strong arms grabbed her. They weren't James's arms. A cold blade pressed at her throat, not quite cutting. A raspy voice spoke. "One more step, and I slice her pretty throat. Drop the gun."

A look of horror crossed James's face, but only for a moment. Then it was blank, impossible to read. That calm face was her only comfort. She knew she'd be dead in an instant if she made a move. She'd probably be dead anyway. She never had a chance to tell him she loved him. It might be her last chance, but it still wasn't the time.

*Thom.* The idea of her son losing her made her shudder in a way that simply contemplating her own death didn't. She had to get back for Thom.

Time seemed to slow down. She heard each loud heartbeat and the space between them. Felt the sweat form on her palms.

"She's..." said the man with the knife. Heartbeat. Breath. James brought the gun down.

"...just..." Her hands clenched. Her elbow moved inward toward him, ready to jab him hard.

"...a lousy..." She felt the knife edge cut into her. Pain. Heartbeat. James lowered the gun partway.

"...pervert." Breath. Knife deeper, more pain. *I'm going to die.* The gun came back up.



*Bang.* Muzzle flash. Blood spraying. Her elbow made contact with his ribs. The knife fell. She twisted and fell out of his grasp.

*Bang.*

The mud was soft. James knelt down beside her, his hand warm on her neck where the blood was coming from. The other man had fallen into the mud as well. There was blood on the tree he'd been hiding behind.

"Only a little wound," he said to her. "Thank God, only a little wound."

"You could have hit me." She didn't mean it as an accusation. She meant it as admiration for his accuracy, but it didn't come out that way.

"He would have killed you if I hadn't done something." His face was grim, but the voice was calm, caring. She put her hand on his chest. His heart was beating fast, whatever his voice sounded like.

She turned to look at the other man, but he wasn't moving.

"He's dead." James kept his eyes on her.

She ought to feel something, she thought, at the death of another human being. James did. She could hear it in his voice. But she didn't feel anything except relief. Relief that his knife wasn't at her throat, relief that he couldn't touch any of the people they'd left behind at Bondage Ranch. Her friend, Laera. Bruce, even Valerie. Above all, she was going to get to see Thom again, and her mom.

James helped her to her feet. She had indeed made a complete and total mess out of Valerie's dress. She wondered how much it cost. She dabbed at her throat and came back with blood on her hand. It really was just a shallow wound.

He bent over to search the body and found a wallet. "Hinter, Patrick William." He pulled a card out. "One of the victims. We never found his driver's license. Now we have. He looks a little like this guy." He pulled another card out. "Looks like his real name is Robert Stout. The whole time, he's been carrying virtual proof he was the murderer. All I would have had to do to find him was check Dylan and Alex's records of who signed up to be here, because I'm betting he used Hinter's name."

“You can’t blame yourself,” Selena said, her hand on his shoulder.

“I didn’t even think of it.”

“No one would, James. You did your best.”

“You can find our way back to Bondage Ranch?” James asked.

“Yes.”

“And back again, later?”

“Yes.”

“Is this near where anyone’s likely to wander from the park?”

“No.”

James nodded, satisfied. “Then we’ll leave it so the regular police can find it as it is. Let’s go back. It’s going to be a long night. I wish I could tell you I’d hold you for all of it.”

Selena smiled. “I wish you could too. I’d even hold you back.”

They retraced their steps, saying little. By the time they were close to the building, it had stopped raining. They had reached an area where the brush had been cleared and they could walk side by side. James reached out for her hand. She clasped his hand back, smiling.

Dylan met them at the door. “The police are on their way, if they can get past the road. The landline is still out, but I have a cell phone signal again.”

## Chapter Eleven

“So,” James said. “Robert and Margie Stout were a married couple living outside Philly. Margie would go to bondage clubs and try to find guys who looked like they didn’t know anyone. She wouldn’t do anything with them, but she would get their addresses and make arrangements for a meeting. She was always very insistent her victim shouldn’t tell anyone about it; in case her husband found out.”

They were sitting in the Allison’s living room. It was late Sunday afternoon, and most of the crowd had left already. Selena remained, along with Bruce and Laera, Arthur and Samantha, and Sue and Frank. Most everyone was dressed casually, in their traveling clothes, but the subs were still kneeling in front of their dom or domme, save Samantha who was perched on Arthur’s lap. And herself. She didn’t doubt now that she was a submissive. She still felt like standing. Kneeling in front of James while he paced about would have been awkward, and she wasn’t sure quite what the relationship was between them. He’d been busy since Saturday night on the phone, talking to colleagues and getting things organized. She’d gotten stitches and answered a lot of questions, but she had still had time for sleep. Valerie had offered to help alleviate her boredom, but she declined. She wasn’t exactly bored—more recovering from the excitement.

James went on. “None of them did tell anyone except for the one entry on a social networking site. We’re going to be flashing Margie’s picture around, though, and I think we’re going to find a number of people who refused to play with her. Most doms I know aren’t going to play with a sub who is cheating on her husband.”

“And the guy Robert Stout was pretending to be?” asked Arthur.

“Found dead in his basement four days ago. We were lucky to find him, and they probably thought we wouldn’t for a while. He lived alone, in a rural area, but he had another date later in the week, and she called the police when she couldn’t get in touch with him.

“They took a risk using his ID, if someone had known him here. We’re still working on that one. My guess is Hinter told them, or told Margie, that he didn’t expect anyone to know him who was coming to Bondage Ranch. He’d registered several weeks before, and maybe he was trying to convince Margie to go with him.

“Margie didn’t actually have an ID, of course. But because she said she was Hinter’s wife Carolyn and Hinter vouched for her, the Allison’s let her in.” James frowned over in Dylan’s direction.

Dylan frowned right back. “Look, James, we’re the only place that even takes names. The bondage clubs up and down the East Coast don’t. They may check IDs if you look close to eighteen or twenty-one, but you’re anonymous once you cross the threshold. You’re lucky you have any useful information at all from us.”

“Why do you take names anyway?” asked Selena.

“So we can weed out the jerks,” Alex replied. “We’ve a list of people we won’t let in.”

“Believe me, there are some doozies out there,” said Samantha, with feeling.

Laera turned her head, looking over her shoulder. “That’s for sure.”

“What often happens with criminals is as they get success, they start to get a little full of themselves and they get bolder. They’d escaped detection for several killings. They came here with the same plan, more or less; use Carolyn, or Margie rather, as bait, and get doms to give her their phone number. She’d set up the dates later. Robert decided after a few hours here he’d try to work the same trick on dommes, but that wasn’t originally part of the plan. We know of at least two men who fell for Margie’s act, but none of the dommes fell for Robert. Every single one insisted on having Robert’s phone number and said they’d call him.”

Sue stroked Frank's head. "See, women are smarter. Men just need a guiding hand now and then. Isn't that right, honey?"

Frank looked up. "I'm happy to have your guiding hand, Mistress." Selena smiled at the slight evasion.

"So what about your own time, playing with Carolyn?"

If James felt defensive about that, he didn't show it. "She tried to draw me deeper in the woods. She didn't want to be seen with me. I don't know if the plan was to murder me right there, although she claims it wasn't, and Robert denies knowing anything about it. Actually playing was not part of their plan, as far as we can tell. Margie claims she got carried away."

Selena raised her eyebrows. "You think you're that seductive." She couldn't say he was wrong.

James grinned.

"Well, nothing lacking in his opinion of himself," remarked Bruce. "Although ego is something of an illusion, really."

"Well, his illusion is in good shape," quipped Arthur.

James grinned some more. "I think it may have been a mixture of things. One is, since I wasn't carrying a whip or clamps or anything like that, Margie wasn't sure I deserved to die, and maybe she was testing me. She didn't even try to get my phone number, which seems to have been standard for her at the clubs. I was trying my best to string her along, in any case, because I wanted to know more about her. In the end it was a draw. She didn't get my phone number, and I didn't figure out she was one of the killers. I also think she was having a hell of a good time." He paused to take a drink from his water glass and then continued. "The only person in a better position to tell than me is her. Of course, she might have been that good an actress, while she was secretly plotting my death."

Selena smiled sweetly at him. "You'll pay for that," she said.

James rolled his eyes. "You're sounding like Sue."

“Want to borrow my toys?” asked Sue brightly. “I think he’d look cute in a cock cage.”

Selena cringed. *I’ve got better uses for that cock.* “No, thank you. I’m not really turned on by the idea of dominating men. I’ve met a few I’d like to slug, mind you, but the ones who I’d enjoy inflicting pain on aren’t the ones I’d want to have sex with.”

James cleared his throat. “I don’t think you can trust what Margie says on the matter, at any event. She’s been saying whatever she thinks will get her the lightest sentence for the last several hours. To hear her tell it, everything was Robert’s idea. Might even be true. My impression of her is she isn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, and the police who’ve been questioning her seem to agree. Both the Stouts are quite conservative religiously in terms of thinking a wife’s job is to obey her husband, which is kind of ironic given their attitude about dominant men. Although they seem to have had a very loose interpretation of ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

He shrugged. “The real turning point came because of Selena. If she hadn’t been so very brave, even letting me put her on a spanking bench in front of total strangers to try to see if one suspect might be the one we wanted—well, they’d still be free, I think. We’d catch them eventually, but more people would have died first.”

Dylan raised his glass, and everyone started clapping. Selena blushed, proud and sort of wishing people would move on, all at the same time. “I am never doing that again.”

“It’s not so bad, once you get used to it,” Samantha said.

Selena shook her head. “It’s not for me.” She looked at James, expecting to see disappointment.

He smiled at her. “Nor for me either. But in private, sometime.” He reached out for her hand, and she gave it to him.

Alex stood. “Speaking of which, I’m about to shoo you all out so Dylan and I can have some private time. Thank you for humoring us and telling us what was going on, James.”

“No problem.”

Alex looked between James and Selena. “In fact, thank you, both of you. And actually, I’ve changed my mind. If it’s okay with my master, I’d like to give the two of you, Master James and Selena, free run of the dungeon till midnight. We’ll lock the doors, and you’ll have complete privacy.”

“Sure,” said Dylan. “They’ve earned it.”

James looked over to her.

It sounded lovely. But she couldn’t. “I’d love to, Alex, and thank you so much for the offer, but my son is probably starting to wonder where his mother is, and his grandmother is probably looking for some relief too.”

Alex nodded. “I understand.”

“And so do I,” James said. “Mind if I escort you to your car?”

Selena smiled at him. “Please.”

Everyone else except for Dylan and Alex left. Selena collected hugs from everyone and watched them all drive off. The Allison’s had their cars in the garage—all that was left was her own small car and a motorcycle.

James handed her a business card he’d pulled out of his wallet. “Selena. I promised you some time at some point.” He’d written a phone number on the back.

She took the card, trying to make her voice sound light. “If it’s only because you promised, then I won’t hold you to it.”

He smiled. “Let me start again. May I see you again soon? For dinner if you’d like, and then afterward for some nice private fun?”

Selena grinned back. “Nothing I’d like better, Sir. My usual night free is Friday. That’s when Mom has Thom.”

James grinned. “Friday night would be perfect. Someday I’d like to meet your son. When you feel comfortable. I can pick you up, if you like.”

Selena looked over at the cycle and considered it. It was still drizzling a little. But on a dry day she thought it would feel quite nice to be riding behind him, the

wind blowing through her hair, her legs straddling the seat and his backside. “Sure. You’d end up meeting Mom, too, if you come pick me up.”

“I have very good manners,” James promised her.

“That and your other talents will get you everywhere.” Selena leaned in for a kiss.

He kissed her long and hard. “Mmm.”

They broke off the kiss at last. She really did need to get on the road. She wished she could stay with him, but she missed Thom too. “Bye, for now.”

“I’ll see you Friday.”



## Chapter Twelve

### *Friday night*

James smiled. “You came,” he said, as if he was surprised. They’d spoken on the phone an hour before. It was raining, so Selena had decided she’d rather drive herself. He moved to the side, out of the doorway. “Come in, please.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t?” asked Selena lightly as she stepped across the threshold into the small town house.

James shook his head. “I hoped very much you would.”

The inside was far from the bachelor pad she’d imagined. Maybe he’d cleaned it up for her. Either way, she was pleasantly surprised. A black leather couch looked inviting; a teak coffee table had a couple magazines on it, but it wasn’t piled high with junk. She peeked at the titles. *Law Enforcement News* and *Police Magazine*. Probably not laid out for her benefit, then. She thought of herself as a pretty neat person, but apparently James had her beat. She could live with that. Maybe it wasn’t fair to the man to be sizing him up as potential husband material, but she couldn’t really help but have thoughts in that direction. Thom would benefit from a father figure. She’d benefit from someone in her bed. Neither role was going to be filled by just anyone.

“So.” She turned back to James, folding her hands in front of her and then unfolding them when she decided it made her look like an anxious schoolgirl.

James chuckled and closed the distance between them. He reached out for her hands, taking one in each hand. His grip was light. “Just us this time, Selena. No one else to worry about, no time limits.”

“Well, my mom does expect me back in the morning to pick up Thom,” Selena said. “So, a bit of a time limit.” She smiled, enjoying the feeling of the warmth of his hands.

“I can live with that,” James said. “Would you like anything to eat or drink?”

“My mom fed me pretty well, actually. I had to refuse thirds, or I’d be storing food in my cheeks like a chipmunk.”

“Drink, then?”

Selena grinned. “Should I be taking drinks from strange men?”

“I *am* stranger than most,” James admitted. “But I promise to make it in front of you.”

Selena shook her head. “That’s okay. I trust you. I think I’ll probably end up having to trust you more before the night is over.”

James nodded. “I did indeed have something like that on the agenda.”

“Coke, if you have it,” said Selena. Feeling adventurous, she added, “If you put a wee bit of rum in it, that’s fine too.”

James’s eyes twinkled. “Have a little anxiety you’re looking to dull the edge of?”

“Some, perhaps,” admitted Selena. Okay, so her heart had been beating fast ever since she’d gotten out of the car. Him telling her—ordering her!—over the phone that he didn’t want her touching herself sexually after Tuesday hadn’t helped either. Especially since her imagination kept conjuring images of his muscular chest or his firm hands. Or his thick cock.

He let go her hands and moved farther in to the kitchen, where he proceeded to make her the drink she requested. She followed, past some stairs leading down into darkness. She admired how nicely tight leather jeans showed off his ass.

“Here you go.” He turned, drink in hand. She jerked her gaze upward, pretty sure she’d been caught ogling. But he smiled, not saying anything about it.

She took the drink from his hand and took a sip. *Not too bad. Pretty much like Coke.* “So what’s downstairs, your own private dungeon?” She tried to say it off-hand, but for all she knew, that was exactly what was downstairs. Visions of X-frames and racks filled her head. *He wouldn’t have a rack, though.*

“No, actually. Utility room, laundry. It’s still pretty much unfinished down there, although that will change someday. I’m afraid I don’t have a dungeon.”

Selena didn’t know whether to be disappointed or not. James laughed at the expression on her face. “You were hoping?”

“Well...”

“Come,” he said. “Upstairs, not down”

She followed him through the living room again. The view from behind him on the stairs was even better than in the kitchen. *Yummy.*

“Bathroom,” he said, pointing to the right, “Office,” to the left, and “Bedroom,” straight ahead. He opened the bedroom door.

There was a nice queen-size bed, a dresser, a nightstand, some plant hooks for hanging pots. Pretty normal stuff. Deep green satin sheets on the bed—*that* was probably for her benefit. She’d tried sleeping in satin on a regular basis, back when she was first married. It looked lovely but had an annoying way of catching on things. Besides, the sheets were in perfect condition, which implied they were new.

“I thought your red hair would look lovely against the green,” he said, confirming her suspicions.

“You thought you’d get me in your bed?” She looked at him with innocent eyes.

“Yes, because I’m tired of settling for jacking off thinking of you.”

She felt a blush coming to her face and probably the rest of her body as well. She was glad that at least now he could only see her face and a little bit of cleavage. She’d gone for a dark brown jersey dress that hugged all her curves and came to midhigh. “Can’t have that,” she said.

His arm went around her waist, his hand coming to settle on her hip. “You know, I think if you’d worn this to Bondage Ranch, you’d have had men falling all over you.”

“Maybe,” said Selena. “But I didn’t have it then.” She wasn’t going to say she’d bought it just for him. His ego seemed healthy enough all on its own. “I’m glad no one was falling over me. I’d hate to think I’d have fallen back. Things would have turned out very differently then, wouldn’t they have?”

“I would have called you later anyway. I’d have found a way.”

“I’d have hung up on you, I think.” She set her half-finished drink on the nightstand and undid the clip binding her hair. Then she turned and let herself fall backward onto the bed. “So...do I look as good here as you imagined?”

His face told her all she needed to know. “You look even better than I imagined.” He stared at her for a few moments before continuing. “Now you were asking about a dungeon. See those plant hooks above you? They’re secured into the ceiling, will hold about four hundred pounds each.”

Selena blinked and noticed that in addition to the two near the window at the head of the bed, there were two at the foot as well, spaced four feet apart or so. “I’m not that heavy.”

“I know. I like playing it very safe. If I know they’ll hold that much, I don’t have to worry about whether they’ll hold you. There’s a few attachment points concealed under the bed too.”

Selena smiled, fighting back a sudden surge of jealousy. “You do this sort of thing all the time, don’t you?”

James sat down on the bed and stroked her shoulder. “The only person I have in my life that I want to do this with now is you. If you want no attachments, no strings, well, I’m not sure I’ll be able to do that with you. I’d try, because some of you is better than nothing, but...” He shrugged.

“I can take it as it comes, James.” She grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. “And I guess this isn’t so very much. It’s not like you have one of those big X-frame thingies they had at Bondage Ranch set up in your bedroom.”

James shook his head, a twinkle in his eyes. “No. It folds up under the bed. I can set it up over there”—he gestured to an empty corner—“but it would take me ten or fifteen minutes or so to set up, check all the screws to make sure they’re tight, and all.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Afraid not. I’m not very good at doing things by halves.”

“Well,” said Selena. “Hmm. Let’s see how that applies to kissing.”

His lips met hers almost the moment the word was out of her mouth. He nibbled gently until she let his tongue in to slide against her own. When they parted, she was breathless, wanting more.

“Well?” He smiled at her. He was almost smug enough to be irritating, but not quite. His confidence, she knew, came with a certain amount of justification to it.

“You’ll do nicely, Sir.”

He planted a row of kisses along her jawline. “Now that’s the kind of sweet talk a man like me wants to hear.”

“And what kind of man is that?” she asked. She was amazed at how much fun he was to banter with. The kisses were wonderful too.

“One who likes being in charge in the bedroom,” he whispered into her ear between nibbles.

“Ooh, I think that might be my kind of man!” she exclaimed, suppressing a shiver. He was hitting all the right nerves in her ear, sending little impulses of pleasure over her body that went right to her pussy.

“You think?” he said. “I know.”

“Prove it,” Selena said teasingly.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He pulled her down to the bed and rolled her over so he could get at the zipper in the back of the dress.

“Why do I always end up the first one with my clothes off?” asked Selena in mock outrage as the zipper came down.

“Because I like it that way.”

“Mmm. That’s a good reason.” *And since good things seem to happen around you when I’m naked, I don’t mind a bit.*

He rolled her back onto her back and peeled the dress off, taking his time about it. His hungry gaze took in her body as he revealed her breasts. The look stayed as he rolled it off her tummy. Despite Selena’s lifelong desire to trim some inches from her waist, under his gaze she felt too sexy to regret a single pound. By the time he was pulling the dress off her legs, she had a smile on her face. He loved her body. She wiggled on the bed, conscious of how she might look to him, and parted her knees a few inches. She looked at his crotch. *All that hardness, for me?*

“Rowwwrrrr,” she said and then almost laughed because she felt so good.

“You’re also the one who gets tied up first.”

“I’m the only one who gets tied up, as far as I know,” she retorted, laughing.

“Exactly.”

He pulled cuffs out of the lowest drawer in his dresser and attached them around her wrists and ankles. They were soft on the inside, almost as soft as her jersey dress, but the Velcro attaching them was reinforced by a buckle of steel and leather. A large O-shaped ring of steel dangled from each one. He took his time, fastening each until he was happy with exactly how tight it was. It was strange, being completely naked while someone stared intently at her wrists and ankles.

He smiled at her. “Thank you for not being impatient.”

She grinned back. “I’m enjoying the attention. But...I’m not completely patient. Are you doing that to tease me or being picky?”

“A little of both,” he said. “But I like anything that affects safety to be exactly right—and then a little better than that—when I can.”

She chuckled.

He didn't take quite as much time when he clipped chains to her cuffs, but she noticed the clips he used were actually mountain-climbing carabiners that looked like they'd probably hold a whole crew of climbers if needed.

He pulled her left arm to the side, attached the chain leading from it to something under the bed, and then moved to the other side of the bed to do the same thing on the right. He moved smoothly. *He's confident. Not some adventurous date playing with bondage, but someone who knows exactly what he's doing.* She couldn't stretch her arms much farther without it starting to hurt, but she couldn't pull them in because of the chains, either.

The thought that she couldn't move them at all made her nipples tighten. At the touch of his hands cradling her ankle, she tingled all the way up her legs until her pussy started aching as well. He was going to spread her legs as much as he had her arms, and then she would be helpless in his hands. It wasn't scary anymore. He was in complete control of the situation here. *A walk in the park compared to some of what we've been through. I trust him.*

He nodded toward the ceiling. “I'd like to chain your legs up. But if you'd feel more comfortable having them down, for now, we can work our way up to that.”

“I want to be chained the way you want me chained, Master.”

“A beautiful answer.” He was tall enough he could reach the ceiling without standing on anything. Up went her leg and swiftly attached to the sturdy hook above with another carabiner. The other leg joined it, almost straight up in the air. She was still wearing her high-heeled sandals too. *My, doesn't that look slutty? But he's seen my pussy before.*

She tried to calm down. It didn't work. She was so exposed. *So helpless.* This wasn't like the other times, when she could have freed herself from the pantyhose, or when Valerie would have been back to rescue her in an hour. She could barely

wiggle. She pulled on her wrist cuffs, hard. They didn't weaken or even budge much. On the other hand, there was no fear of anyone barging in on them either.

He looked satisfied. "Good. Try to get free. See how it all feels, Selena. Experience everything I have for you."

Obediently, she pulled with her feet too. She managed to get the bed to shift a little, but she wasn't getting out of his cuffs and chains.

He smiled. "I guess you're staying."

She grinned back. "I guess I am,"

"You remember your safe word?"

"Mikado."

"Good. Would you like a blindfold, Selena? It can enhance your ability to pay attention to your other senses, as you know."

Selena smiled. "Maybe later. Right now, I'm enjoying watching you too much. And, well, maybe I've had enough of blindfolds for a while."

James nodded. "That's why I asked, instead of deciding for you." He felt her fingers and then her toes. She tried to kick at him because he hit a ticklish spot, and failed. She really couldn't move. "Good nerves," he remarked. "And good circulation. If at any time you notice anything start to feel numb, tell me, or say your safe word."

"You sexy talker, you."

"Your safety is more important to me than your state of arousal. And trust me, telling me when you have problems will keep things sexier than not telling me will."

Selena smiled. "Actually, I feel very, very safe with you and very protected. And that really is sexy. I also feel, er—" She turned red.

"On display?"

"Exactly."

"Good." He walked over to the dresser again.

*Good, he says.*



He came back with a variety of strange things, which he laid out on the bed in a place she couldn't even squirm to if she tried. She could turn her head and look, though. There was a mass of what looked like white fur, a little wheel on a handle device with vicious-looking sharp points, a black piece of rubber she suspected was a butt plug, and a bottle of lube.

"Um, all that for me?"

He smiled. "Yep."

The butt plug she wasn't sure about, but it couldn't be too bad. And the white fur looked like it would feel pretty good. "Um, that pinwheel thing looks really scary."

"Doesn't it, though?" He pulled up his sleeve and rolled it along his arm, letting her watch. It didn't leave a mark. "I'm not going to do anything scary to you, Selena. If you need me to put this away, I will. But I think you'll be interested to see how it feels. And... I didn't want to make things too complicated, because—"

"Because?" Selena prompted.

"Because I've got a massive hard-on, love, and I want to get to fuck you before I explode."

Selena laughed. "Okay, that works." She licked her lips. "You sure about that? I mean, I could suck you off to help you last."

"That will come later. We have all night. Now, no blindfold, and if you feel you need to open your eyes, please do, but try closing your eyes for a little bit."

"Yes, Sir," she said. She closed her eyes and took a breath. She hadn't realized how much she'd been waiting for an order to follow, but it felt so right to do exactly as he asked.

She felt what had to be the fur, slowly rubbing up her arm. Delicious. It woke up her nerves as it slid over her shoulder, across her upper chest, tickling her neck and then moving lower.

He missed her breasts, skipping down her cleavage to her tummy, the part of her she always thought of as the least sexy. But when he rolled the fur across it, her tummy didn't feel unsexy at all. Every time he dipped low, she realized how close the fur was to her pussy, and every time it went high, she craved its touch on her breasts. It was so soft.

He stroked it along her thighs, each one in turn, outer, inner, so close she thought she felt the edge of it caress her lips below. Then upward again over her tummy and on her breasts in circular motions, narrowing in on the tender tip before finally brushing across her nipple. She moaned. She'd expected intensity from him, and what she got instead was this wonderful, caring light touch that felt so very good—and somehow managed to feel intense at the same time.

Lower, she thought at him, and she was startled to feel a touch on her bottom almost immediately. Rubbing turned to stroking with a finger, touching lightly right around her rear entrance. Her eyes flipped open, and he was right there, of course, one hand spreading soothing fur over her breasts, the other not quite visible. She forced herself to close them.

"You can watch if you want to, my little sub, or take in the feelings of it all. Have you ever been fucked here before?"

*My.* He called her "my," and it felt so good. No one had ever called her little before either, but then, most men weren't quite as tall as James. *But My. My my my.* She kept her eyes closed. She'd barely noticed the rest of what he said.

"Yours."

He chuckled. "That doesn't quite answer my question."

"Once, tried, long time ago, didn't work," she said, remembering a bad bout of fumbling with her ex. She wasn't able to focus on it. She didn't even want to, not with his fingers and the fur—it all felt so wonderful. "But you know what you're doing, don't you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but he answered anyway. "I know exactly what I'm doing, Selena."

The finger withdrew, and she heard something being rubbed, and then the finger returned. It was slick now, but not as cold as lube could be. He'd warmed it up. His finger pushed inside her anus slowly, taking her a millimeter at a time. More lube was added, cooler, but it didn't feel as shocking as a sudden touch. She felt herself relax, knowing she was under his protection and control, and she took him in.

He took off the fur. She wasn't really focusing on it anyway. The finger withdrew, and she moaned in protest of its absence for a moment, before he replaced it with something slicker, wider.

"Yes," she moaned.

"Like that, do you?"

"It's strange and—like you are strange—and yes, I like it." *If I open my eyes now, I'll blush even more.* She squeezed them tightly shut.

It was in and staying there. His hands moved on, massaging her, feeling warm and strong. Then, without warning, she felt a line of tiny pricks along the inside of her thigh. "Oh my God, that's intense," she yelled, not quite able to control her volume.

It wasn't any less intense on the other thigh, but at least she had some expectation he'd stop before that fiendish thing rolled over her pussy. It moved, quickly, across a breast. Up her side. Over her shoulder. Touching a nipple. And every wiggle she made seemed to make her push the butt plug in a bit deeper and press her clit harder against his thumb—when did that get there? There was lube on his thumb, and it slid easily against her most sensitive spot. *He won't need any for my pussy. Oh!*

The wheel rolled to the outside of her labia and onto the other side. Every nerve she had seemed to light on fire, even the ones deep inside. She didn't know whether it was pain or an excess of pleasure, but she didn't regret any of it, and she didn't know if she could take any more. She gasped. *It's not my choice. He's in control.*

At that exact moment he slid into her, his whole length burying itself deep inside her channel in one smooth, slow stroke.

“Fuck me,” she yelled. It wasn’t his slow withdrawal that made her say more or even any fear he might not. She yearned to say it again and sink deeper into submission. “Fuck me please. Fuck me, Sir. Fuck me, Master. Please, please.”

He thrust back in on each “please.” Each stroke lifted her from the bed, held up by his strong body and the chains, and each withdrawal made her settle back, the bed forcing the rubber intruder in her ass farther inside again. His strength, his body was crashing into her, and she opened her eyes to watch him.

She didn’t know when he’d managed to get his clothes off, but he was naked, his muscular chest shining with a thin sheen of sweat, his six-pack abs on display each time he withdrew. “I’m yours, Master,” she told him and drank in his pleasure at the words. She watched his powerful body drive him inside. *All his. All mine!*

He pinched her nipples and tugged on them. I hate that, she thought, but she realized she didn’t hate it at all right now, not when it was his fingers doing the pinching and pulling. It felt perfect. She could only move herself an inch, but she pulled back, feeling her nipples stretch, greedy to feel everything. His cock filled her, pressing against the sides of her channel. He stretched her there as well, sending her into overdrive, overloading her senses.

“Yes!” she screamed as she came, her pussy and ass clutching at his cock and the plug. She’d been saving it up for days, waiting for this moment of blessed release, and she came with a rattling of chains and a shaking bed. She felt it all the way up to her toes, stretching out in pleasure.

He was coming too, she noticed through her haze, grunting, gasping, moaning along with her. His cock swelled and let loose inside her. *I did that.* She watched his face contort. *I turned him on just by being.* She squeezed around his cock, milking him of every drop she could.

“Yum,” she said, at last, grinning. It didn’t half cover it, but it’d have to do. Whatever part of her did words was temporarily offline. She closed her eyes, breathless, wanting to recover and yet wanting more.

“A nice appetizer, don’t you think?” He slid out of her.

She pouted at his withdrawal. “Appetizer?”

He grinned. “Oh, you didn’t think that was the main course, did you? We’ve got more fucking to do. And you promised me some sucking too, and I’m not going to pass that up. I’ve got tons of things for you to feel all over your body. I’m not a pain person. I do *textures*. And I’m pretty sure you can fit something larger up your ass than that little plug.”

“No way are you fitting that huge thing of yours inside—” Selena stopped because she felt like a cliché. “I mean, I’m sure you could, but—”

“I’m willing to bet you I can, without you saying your safe word even.”

“That’s a silly bet. I mean, I could win just by saying Mi—the word.”

James smiled confidently. “So I must be pretty sure you’ll not want to, hmm?”

Selena breathed and let go tension she hadn’t even known she had. She was in the right place. “No bet. I have a feeling that what my master wants, my master is going to get. And I’m going to love giving it to him.”

He grinned again, that boyish, confident grin she’d come to love. “I’m going to enjoy giving it to you too.”

“Mmm,” was all Selena could think of to say.

\* \* \*

*Months later...*

“So,” asked Thom. “You’re really a cop?”

“Yep,” replied James, spreading the mustard thick on the baloney, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. He was sitting at a stool next to the kitchen counter with Thom

on the seat next to him. There were only two places to sit there. He slid the sandwich over to Thom. "I'm really a policeman."

"What do you do?"

"Usually? I run around the state, responding to bomb threats."

"Why?" Thom took a bite of his sandwich, but it didn't stop him from talking.

"Because I know how to dismantle the bombs, if they're real."

Thom's eyes grew large. "Is that how you met my mom? Was there a bomb? A real one?"

"No, there wasn't precisely a bomb." He glanced back at Selena, who was watching from the doorway. "That was something else entirely."

"What was it?"

"I'll let her decide what details to fill you in on."

"It sounds really exciting," Thom informed him in the tone of someone who has decided how it is. "But I don't want you to get blown up."

"Don't worry. I'm very, very careful."

Selena thought about the way he checked her circulation when he chained her up, the way he tested every bolt with a weight heavier than her before he trusted it to support her. Yes, he was careful. Her mind went to how much fun it was to make love suspended from the ceiling by all four chains, swinging with each thrust. She colored and returned her thoughts to the kitchen. Thom was looking at her. "He is, dear," she assured him. "He's very, very careful."

Thom had wolfed down the entire sandwich by then, so he hopped off the stool. "You should become my dad." He ran out the kitchen door for the backyard before anyone could respond to him.

Selena watched the kitchen door, not quite sure she wanted to meet James's gaze. *Kids say the darnedest things sometimes. I wonder if I was like that. I bet I was.*

"Selena," he said.

“Yes, James?” She kept her eyes on the door, avoiding his eyes. Master was for the bedroom, mostly. She couldn’t be submissive and a mother at the same time; it would wear at her too much. One of the best things about James was that he not only understood; he approved.

“I’ve been thinking. And I thought I’d save it, but since Thom brought it up...”

“Yes, James?” The door had stopped swinging. She peeked out of the corner of her eye, aware he had gotten off the stool.

“Look at me.”

“Yes, Master.” She looked into his eyes.

“You know how I like everything to be safe, secure, double-checked, triple-checked?”

She grinned. “I have indeed noticed.”

“Seems some things you have to take as they come, take a risk, and dive in.” He pulled a small velvet box out from his pocket and opened it to display a shimmering diamond ring. “Will you marry me, Selena?”

She hesitated. She’d been down this road before. If she married anyone, ever, she was sure it would be James. He had Thom’s approval obviously. “Marriage has a way of changing people,” she said slowly. “I love what we are. How we are in bed. How we are out of bed. I love you. I just...I’m scared. I probably always will be.”

James nodded. “I could get down on my knee,” he said. “And I definitely would be happy to ask you again on some starlit night after a wonderful dinner.”

Selena’s heart felt like it was melting. “Oh James. Please don’t get down on one knee, or two. If someone does the kneeling, well, I’ll do that part. I’ll take you up on the dinner. And the starlit night.”

James smiled and put the box back in his pocket. “Sorry, timing. It seemed like an awkward moment—”

Selena laughed. “Needed to be more awkward?” She realized she already knew what she was going to say, and she was torturing him by making him ask again. It

was tempting to keep it going for a while, but he didn't deserve that. He was exactly what she needed, someone stable and calm and strong. A rock. The fact that he was a wonderful master and dynamite in bed was icing on the cake. "Yes, James. I will marry you. But I still want the dinner and the starlit night."

"Good. Me too." He held her and kissed her, hard, and she kissed back, wrapping her arms around him. Somehow, by the time they finished kissing, he'd gotten the ring on her finger.

"Hey," said Thom. "No kissing." He was at the door again.

Selena looked back at him. "That was quick. And I think we'll kiss if we want to." She grabbed a quick one from James's lips.

"Adults!" Thom said, exasperated. Then he spotted the diamond winking on her finger and leaned in to look closer.

"Well," he said, heading off toward his room, "I'm glad you got *that* straightened out."

Selena and James looked at each other for a long moment and then both burst out laughing at the same time, holding each other tightly.

☪ THE END ☪



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## 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.