Notes for DMs about Rope Scenes

Having just gone through the DM class for the Sanctuary, and with the increase in rope play in our community, there are a few additional notes I want to make about identifying risk in rope scenes. As you DM, please keep the following in mind:

1. The overwhelming majority of all significant injury occurs in full and partial suspension, with full suspension tending to be more risky than partial suspension. If you see someone you're not familiar with setting up a hard point, it may make sense to quickly (and politely) discuss with them what their plan is and what their experience level and their bottom's experience level is. Asking if they both know what wrist drop is would be a great way to be sure they know the risks.
2. If someone in a full (or partial) suspension is in trouble, the first action you want to take in nearly every circumstance is to support the bottom - at the hips and chest if possible. DO NOT CUT THE ROPE until the bottom is supported. If you cut the suspension lines, the bottom will fall.
3. The Box Tie (Takate-kote, or TK) is a very common Japanese tie used for suspension. It binds the arms together behind the small of the back, forming an L shape in the elbows. This is a minor stress position. A strong, flexible bottom may be able to hold this position for up to an hour, but most people will feel some level of discomfort within 30 minutes. The primary problem with the box tie tends to be the radial nerve, which controls the thumb, index, and middle fingers. You will see experienced bottoms checking for sensation in their fingers by pinching the thumb and index finger together, or by running their index finger over the nail of their thumb. Bottoms who are doing this are familiar with the risk of the tie and know what to look for.
4. The Strappado tie is less common than the box tie, but still very popular. This tie binds the arms together behind the back, but keeps the arms straight, and somewhat parallel. The primary concern with strappado ties is the ulnar nerve which controls sensation to the third and pinky fingers. Again, look for bottoms doing self-checks, but the loss of sensation due to nerve compression is very strong so the bottom usually knows right away.
5. If asked to help in a situation where nerve compression is happening, understand that the scene is over. The best case scenario is to move the rope immediately. Try to move it onto the largest nearby muscle (shoulder or triceps usually). With bottom and top working together, it is usually possible to avoid cutting the rope. However, don't be afraid to do this if the bottom needs out immediately. Localized loss of sensation means nerve damage is actively happening.
6. Wrist drop. If you see someone in a box tie who looks like they have lost all motor control in their wrist and it is hanging limp in the tie, this is cause for great concern. In all likelihood, the bottom has been injured and may not know it. Get the house manager and recommend stopping the scene and untying immediately.
7. Hard Point Attachment. There are a couple of common ways to attach a suspension ring or carabiner to a hard point.

⇒ The best is an overhand knot with a fowled bight (the working end of the rope running through the bight so that the knot cannot collapse).

⇒ The most common is a larks head around the ring. This isn't as strong as the overhand with the fowled bight, but it is generally seen as acceptable in the community, especially if the rope is returned for a second pass around the ring or if climbing webbing is used.

⇒ Watch out for people who tie the ring with any kind of knot without a fowled bight. This is unusual and potentially very dangerous. If you witness someone setting up a hard point in this manner and the scene has not started, have a conversation with the rigger (preferably with the bottom present so all understand the risk) to try to better understand their approach and experience. Consider recommending a different setup.

8. Suspension Lines. The suspension lines to worry about are the ones supporting the main body. Suspension lines contain three critical elements: The attachment to the body, the attachment at the ring/suspension point, and tie-off. The latter two are too subjective to evaluate without understanding the tie as a whole. For the attachment at the body, the rope is usually tied to the harness in a way that it leaves a bight. Check to see if the bight is fowled. This is usually done by taking the line to the ring, and returning the rope through the bight. This can also be done by running the rope through the bight on the first run up to the ring. If you do not see a bight, it likely (but not always) means that the tie has been designed so that the bight has been "pre-collapsed" which is very safe. Some riggers will use bowline knots which are reasonably safe. It is generally accepted that bowline knots do not need to have their bight fowled, but it is near impossible to identify a bowline knot without close inspection and experience. Bottom line: in general, if you see someone tying with an unfowled bight on a suspension line supporting the hips or the chest, this is a dangerous situation. Get the house manager and talk it over.
9. Suspension lines supporting limbs will hurt the bottom if they fail, but they will not cause catastrophic injury. Skilled riggers usually, but not always, fowl these bights as well. If you see an unfowled bight supporting limbs (arms, legs) but failure will not cause the chest/hips/head to hit the ground, my recommendation is to mark the scene for elevated risk.
10. Discoloration. Discoloration of a limbs is common in rope bondage, particularly suspension bondage. Various leg ties and ties that bind the arms may result in discoloration of limbs. The discoloration means that blood is pooling behind the rope. This is not generally a problem.
11. There are exceptions to this, but they are difficult to identify without inspecting the tie physically. Discoloration, particularly in the arms, may be a sign that the arm is going to sleep and the bottom may experience a pins-and-needles sensation.
12. Restricted blood flow may result in loss of sensation, i.e. the limb "going to sleep." This is not dangerous in and of itself; the problem is that it can mask nerve compression injuries. If the entire limb is going to sleep, odds are that it is a blood circulation issue. If the loss of sensation is localized to a couple of fingers, this indicates nerve injury. Safety-conscious rope tops address circulation issue and nerve issues in the same way - usually removing the tie around the part of the body that is experiencing the symptom. This does not necessarily need to end a scene. As a DM, there is little you will be able to do to identify these issues from observation. This information is included in case you ever get asked about it as nerve compression is the most common injury in rope.
13. Passing out or losing consciousness in rope is not an emergency but should be handled expediently. Safely lowering the bottom to the ground, flat on their side is the priority. This allows the body to "reset" and typically once they get to this position they will wake up in a few seconds. Unless the uplines are jammed or unable to be used, cutting rope is not recommended. If they not regained consciousness after being lowered and removing the rope, it is an emergency. I haven't seen this happen yet.
14. Only rated carabiners should be used. Anything that looks like it came from the Home Depot chain section is not rated. The packaging on these specifically says that they are not for overhead lifting.