

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TAWNY TAYLOR

*Burning  
Hunger*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Burning Hunger

ISBN # 9781419910548

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Burning Hunger Copyright© 2007 Tawny Taylor

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication: April 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

## **Content Advisory:**

**S - ENSUOUS**

**E - ROTIC**

**X - TREME**

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

*S-ensuous* love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

*E-rotic* love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

# ***BURNING HUNGER***

**Tawny Taylor**

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Absolut: V&S Vin & Sprit Aktiebolag

Beavis and Butthead: Viacom International Inc.

Betty Crocker: General Mills, Inc.

Big Boy: Big Boy Restaurants International

Blockbuster: Blockbuster Inc.

Bloomies: Bloomingdale's, Inc. Visa

Budweiser: Anheuser-Busch, Incorporated

Buffy: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

Buick: General Motors Corporation

Chippendales: Chippendales USA, LLC.

Cracker Barrel: CBOCS Properties, Inc

Dell: Dell Inc.

Detroit Lions: Detroit Lions, Inc.

Diet Coke: Coca-Cola Company

Discovery Channel: Discovery Communications, Inc.

Egg McMuffin: McDonald's Corporation

Excedrin: Bristol-Myers Squibb Company

Ford: Ford Motor Co.

Gold's Gym: Gold's Gym Enterprises, Inc.

Google: Google Inc.

Hummer: General Motors Corporation

Kate Spade: Kate Spade LLC

K-Mart: Kmart of Michigan, Inc.

Maxwell House: General Food Corporation

Meijer: Meijer, Inc.

Mr. Coffee: Sunbeam Products Inc.

Nike: Nike, Inc.

Outback: OS Asset, Inc.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Pop-tart: Kellogg Company

Q-tips: Chesebrough-Pond's Inc.

Radio Shack: Technology Properties, Inc.

Raisinets: Ward-Johnston, Inc.

Serta: Serta, Inc.

Shelby: Carroll Hall Shelby Trust

Starbucks: Starbucks U.S. Brands, LLC

The Body Shop: The Body Shop International

Uzi: Israel Weapons Industries Ltd.

Van Helsing: Universal City Studios LLLP USI-UCS Holdings LLC

Xanax: Upjohn Company

## **The Cytherean Guard**

*We are the protectors of our king, a secret brotherhood of warriors.  
We are strong, loyal and dedicated, the sworn keepers of the Secrets.  
We are defenders of justice, guardians of the Sons of the Twilight.  
We show no mercy to the enemy.*

## Chapter One

*Oh yes, she'll be perfect.*

Marek Setara stood in the shadows and watched as the woman unfolded her lush form, stepped out of her vehicle and sashayed up the front walk. The way she moved. Smelled. Looked. He was ready to take her then and there. But he couldn't. All he could do was watch and wait.

Soon. Very soon she would be his.

Petite yet strong, her body was the picture of feminine perfection. Curvy and compact. Full breasts. Wide hips. Shapely legs. He couldn't wait to feel her satin skin, sweat-slicked and sweet-scented, glide against his. To hear her moan in ecstasy. To taste her.

Raw, burning hunger seared his insides when her scent, carried on a gust, teased his nostrils. As she stepped onto her front porch, she lifted a hand and pulled the clip out of her hair, letting the golden-brown tresses fall in a moonlit cascade of lilac and woman-scented glory. Did she have any idea how seductive she was? How her every movement stirred his lust? She would. Soon. Very soon. He forced himself to leave, to search out a willing female for one more night. Tonight, he hunted for mere sustenance.

Tomorrow, he would have rapture.

\* \* \* \* \*

After nearly five hundred years of taking certain things for granted, Dayne Garrott knew time had run out.

So much to do. So little time to do it.

Skydiving. Sun-worshipping on the beaches of Maui. Climbing to the peak of Mt. Everest...serving up a cold but well-deserved dish of revenge to his enemies.

Granted, he'd never be able to do most of those things since, being a vampire, he had a slight issue with being in direct sunlight for more than a half-hour. But he still wasn't ready to call it quits and take a permanent dirt nap, if only for the vengeance thing.

But damn if the fates hadn't just thrown a friggin' mountain in his way. Or rather Marek Setara's older brother, who happened to be King of Sons of the Twilight.

He crossed his arms over his chest and glanced at Marek, the former target of his quest for revenge. His mortal enemy. They'd met at an underground—*literally*—vampire hangout called Carpe Nocturne over a year ago. He'd spent the last twelve months preparing to kill Marek. He was ready. His plan had been put into action.

And just like that, he'd been thrown back to square one. By royal effing decree he would join with his enemy in a blood-bond before the new moon. A vampire couldn't kill another vampire if they shared a blood-bond.

Although he hadn't yet completed the binding, he had no choice. At least not if he didn't want to die.

"I have a few ideas where to go." Still in bed, Marek stretched, his thickly muscled arms flexing, and gave Dayne a lazy smile. "I'm so tired. Wish we could wait one more day."

"Yeah. Me too." Dayne was so lethargic he felt like his body weighed at least a hundred times more than it did. The signs were all there. Second death was imminent if they didn't start the binding within the next few hours. "But if we put it off another day, we'll both be too weak."

"Yeah." Visibly weary, Marek rolled off the bed and dragged his heavy body to the closet. He pulled out the pre-selected garments, identical to the ones Dayne was wearing. "We only need one human woman. I did some thinking last night and made up a list where to find one fast. Places where there are hundreds of human females." He dressed as Dayne stood in the doorway, waiting.

"Good." Dayne nodded. "But what if we pick one and she won't come with us?"



Marek reached into the closet, gripped a duffle full of supplies and smiled. He lifted a roll of duct tape. "We'll make her." He dropped the tape in the canvas bag emblazoned with a huge white Nike "swoosh" on one side and went back to dressing.

"And what if she refuses to stay?"

"We'll convince her?" Marek shrugged, tying a shoe. "Can't be too hard." Now fully dressed in head-to-toe black, he strode toward Dayne, the black bag in one fist. "If not..."

They both knew the consequences. Neither could say it aloud.

Dayne followed Marek out of the house they were now forced to share, his gaze fixed on his enemy's back, wishing he could simply plunge a stake through the bastard's heart.

It was what he deserved.

This was a major setback but Dayne was determined. His family would have justice. His mother, father, and sister, who'd only been a child when the motherfuckers had slaughtered her. Dayne knew it was him—Marek's brother, then a high-ranking officer in the military and now king—who'd ordered the assassination. He'd been hidden inside a kitchen cabinet, watching the whole thing, too horrified to move. To scream. To forget.

To forgive.

The reigning king at the time had denied Dayne's family the justice they deserved. After all, that would require His Majesty to order the death of his son, and at the time the sole successor to crown. To have his only son put to death, His Majesty risked the crown falling into the hands of a longtime rival. Politics always took precedence over justice.

So it was up to Dayne. His family's death would be avenged.

He would not fail.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea Maguire died on Friday the thirteenth.

That was, she died Friday, September thirteenth, 1996, in a white-water rafting accident. Obviously, by some miracle, she'd found her way back from the "other side". Regardless, that day changed her life forever.

The minute she woke up from her three-month-long snooze, she vowed to avoid doing, eating or even thinking about anything dangerous, especially on a Friday the thirteenth.

The day was bad, bad, bad luck.

Take today, for instance. The neighbor's backfiring Buick rudely interrupted the best dream of her life. Unfortunately, she was supposed to wake up two hours earlier to attend a vitally important meeting with her new boss. Not the best way to begin a new job, especially a new job that had taken her six months to find.

That was just the start of things. She discovered her "fat days" pair of black all-purpose pants had mysteriously acquired a hole in the ass while at the drycleaners. Her Mr. Coffee was spitting gnarly, foul-smelling gook instead of *Good-to-the-Last-Drop* Maxwell House Vanilla. And her cat Princess had kindly deposited a slimy hairball on her last run-free pair of nylons.

If Brea had been given any choice in the matter, she'd have opted to stay home and ride this one out in the relative safety of her Queen Serta. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before. She'd have Princess, an assortment of safe comfort foods and the Discovery Channel for company. Twenty-four hours would go by in no time.

But thanks to a threatening message from her angry employer, Uncle Andy—who wasn't really a blood relative but rather a lifelong friend of her deceased father's—she had no choice. She'd have to risk life and limb to brave the big, bad, dangerous world...or rather, dangerous metropolitan Detroit.

He had no idea what he was asking.

Uncle Andy didn't believe in superstitions. He regularly tempted fate by not just walking but dancing under ladders...while holding black cats. He also broke mirrors

just for kicks. Spilled salt. The list went on. Yet the man had the most sickening good luck of any human being on the planet.

Life was so unfair.

After a hair-raising drive down I-275 in her black Shelby Cobra, and a blustery lecture from her Uncle Andy, which thankfully quickly segued into a brief discussion of her first case, Brea was free to go about her business. Since the past couple of hours had gone relatively okay, she opted to make a pit stop at the mall to pick up a few essentials.

Tomorrow, she'd depart for her first trip as a private investigator, a quick trip to Nebraska to follow up a lead. She had to be prepared. Uncle Andy had told her a good PI knew how to become invisible, to blend into her surroundings. With her vintage mink-trimmed suit, he'd pointed out, that wasn't going to happen. In New York, maybe. But probably not in a place like Broken Bow.

She had to agree. Didn't hurt that he'd given her a company credit card and carte blanche to buy whatever she needed.

A girl simply could not launch a new career as one of Charlie's-lost-Angels without the proper accoutrements. There was the always-fashionable black trench coat. The classic fedora. Oh and the Audrey Hepburn sunglasses. Besides, a to-die-for pair of Kate Spades was on sale at Bloomies. She simply had to have them. She hadn't spent a penny on shoes since she'd been fired from her last job.

Uncle Andy's Visa card burning a hole in her pocket, she pulled up to the mall's valet station, shifted her car into park and stepped out, glaring at the pimply teenager eyeballing her '66 Cobra with gape-mouthed awe.

"If there's a scratch on my daddy's baby when I get back, I'll have your ass. He's the City of Detroit's prosecuting attorney," she lied with a cheery smile as she stepped around the front of the car. She leaned closer and added, "If you happen to have any...unfortunate secrets...you'll want to be extra careful."

The kid visibly gulped then gently lowered himself into the driver's seat, reluctantly wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel and pulled the door shut.

She gave him an approving nod then headed inside.

At least she'd be relatively safe at this mall. In the heart of the 'burbs, and at the center of one of Michigan's highest-rent districts, its high-end designer stores didn't attract the troublemaking kind of clientele some of the other malls did. It was a fair gamble for a Friday the thirteenth.

Or so she thought. About twenty seconds later, she knew she'd made a terrible mistake.

This enormous man dressed head-to-toe in black jumped out from a narrow corridor between the Cracker Barrel and The Body Shop, wrapped an iron fist around her wrist and yanked her off her feet. Before she was able to belt out a scream for help, he had a palm pressed tightly over her mouth and an arm snaked around her waist.

It took one, two, three heartbeats before she fully realized what was happening. And by then it was too late to do anything to stop it. She tried to fight herself free but the guy was so incredibly strong his grip didn't shake loose. Not even a smidge. Nor did he let go when she kicked his shins hard enough to make the average guy howl like a wounded hound.

Powerless to stop him, and worn out from the struggling that had gotten her nowhere, she concentrated on catching her breath as he hauled her through an emergency exit. Hopefully, she'd have one last chance to get away when he put her in his car/truck/whatever.

One of those plain white delivery vans pulled up to the curb, the kind you see in the movies carting around bad guys or hauling stolen automobile parts or illegal Uzis. The tires skidded on wet pavement when the driver punched the breaks, bringing it to an abrupt stop. Another guy, dressed identically to the one holding her hostage, jumped out of the driver's seat and ran to the vehicle's rear doors. He gave her a quick up-and-down look as Kidnapper Number One dragged her to the van.

"She's strong. Secure her extra tight."

She sent Kidnapper Number Two, who was now wrapping duct tape around her wrists, a dose of mean eyes that should've made him question whether trussing her up like a Thanksgiving turkey was such a good idea.

Her hands secured, he worked at her feet while she tried to shout, kick or otherwise cause some kind of scene. This wasn't supposed to happen! Not here in the middle of Birmingham! In broad daylight!

Where the heck was mall security when a girl needed them? Not that an unarmed security guard could've stopped these guys. It looked like they'd planned this carefully, which made her wonder what the heck they were kidnapping her for.

Was it somehow related to her case? Or were they hoping for a ransom? If so, they were in for a surprise.

Once they had her legs bound at the ankles and knees, and her mouth taped shut, they tossed her into the van's lumpy, cold cargo area—they couldn't at least throw a mattress or something on the sheet metal floor?—slammed the doors and headed for the driver's compartment.

The van sped off.

Her heart sank.

A steel grid gate separated the cargo section from the driver's. Not soundproof, so she was able to overhear bits and pieces of their conversation as she bounced around the back of the van.

"...she should do..."

"...I told you she was...a good choice..."

"...hope she doesn't have any..."

Hardly any decent clues in those little snippets. She tried to heave a weary sigh but the duct tape over her mouth made it impossible. A sigh through the nose was simply not as satisfying.

They drove and drove and drove...and drove some more. She bounced and slid and bounced. And bounced some more.

Didn't they have shocks on this heap? And where were they taking her, Timbuktu?

After at least a couple hours—or so she guessed—the vehicle's lulling motion stopped. The doors opened, revealing inky blackness outside.

It was nighttime? Wow. She'd headed to the mall at about two. It got dark around six at this time of year. That meant she'd been riding in the back of that delivery van for as many as...four hours? Four hours!

That was so not right! These guys were animals, making a girl ride on that cold, hard metal for that long. Not stopping to get her something to eat. Or letting her use the bathroom. Neanderthals!

Outside, they bent forward, grabbed her by the feet and dragged her toward the gaping set of rear doors. She tried to fight but it was no use. The tape was doing its job.

As she slid forward, she realized the darkness was not because of a lack of sunlight but because they were parked inside an unlit garage. A garage attached to a home. And a garage that was empty, save the white van.

So maybe it wasn't six o'clock? And maybe they hadn't made her lie in the back of that van for four hours. Maybe they hadn't starved her. Or made her risk a bladder infection.

That didn't raise her opinion of them much. They were still kidnappers, though perhaps not quite as inhumane.

They cradled her body between their bulky frames as they carried her through the doorway that bridged the house and the attached garage. She was surprised by how gentle they were as they worked their way through the narrow kitchen, wove around the dining room table, shuffled between a couch and coffee table in the living room and clomped up a set of narrow steps. They even lowered her onto the massive king-sized, four-poster bed with unexpected care.

Obviously, they didn't want to hurt her. At least not yet.

What did they want from her?

Her stomach growled loudly and two sets of dark-as-night eyes settled on her body in the general vicinity of the sound. One of them scrunched up his face in disgust.

Well, what did he expect? Starve a girl, and he's going to hear some unpleasant noises. She was tempted to let him hear a couple more—from a different part of her anatomy.

"What's that?" the one with the scrunched-up face murmured.

"She needs to feed."

Disgust gave way to wide-eyed shock. "Oh no."

"They have to feed at least three times a day. I read about it in the Book of Secrets."

What was all this talk of "feeding"? As if she was a baby...or the whole idea of eating was foreign to them. And what was with the Great Big Book of Secrets? Was it a rule book of some kind? Were they frat boys playing some kind of game?

Or aliens? She'd read about alien abductions in *The Globe*.

She gave them a closer look, just to make sure.

No weird, buggy eyes or extra appendages. No scales, antennae or other glaring signs. And so far they weren't threatening to shove a metal probe up her ass.

She'd give them this though—they were larger than any of the human males she'd personally known. Huge. As near as she could tell, around seven feet tall. Granted, guys that size were probably a dime a dozen in the NBA.

They were fairly solidly built too. Wide shoulders. Broad chests. Thick arms and narrow waists. The kind of physique a guy got by spending all his free time pumping iron in Gold's Gym.

She took another good, long look. Chest to toe then back up, toe to chest. Nope, nothing alien about them. She had to admit, they had drool-worthy bods for a couple of cold-hearted, non-alien kidnappers.

She let her gaze wander higher, to the first kidnapper's face.

Wow.

Since she'd spent the bulk of their intimate together-time in the mall facing away from Kidnapper Number One, and she'd been too busy trying to bust loose when he'd put her in the van, she hadn't noticed how gorgeous he was.

Chiseled features that were masculine but not severe. Dark mocha skin—obviously he had a membership to a tanning salon—and black wavy hair that skimmed the collar of his snug black t-shirt and fell in seductive layers around his face.

She stole a glance at the other guy. His features were equally breathtaking, although his hair was more a golden-brown than inky black.

Two gorgeous human men.

Had she been kidnapped by a couple of Chippendales?

Why? Was this some insane person's idea of a gift...or a joke?

Uncle Andy?

A distinct possibility. He had a weird sense of humor, had played dozens of pranks on her father. Exploding salt shakers and fake cops. If she believed the stories, there'd been countless, half of them taking place when they'd roomed together in college. Her father had always warned her not to trust Uncle Andy.

Hmmm. Uncle Andy gave her the credit card, knowing she'd head straight for the mall. Yes, this made sense.

Chippendale Number One—yes, a new moniker was in order now that she knew the truth—reached forward and gingerly picked at the tape covering her mouth. The glue held, which made the process pretty damn painful. But on the bright side, she wasn't going to need an upper-lip wax for the next several decades. Or a chemical peel. Damn stuff took off a few layers of skin too.

On the bad side, she'd need some antibiotics pronto. And some painkillers.



"Ow! Owwwwwww!" she said, once her mouth was finally uncovered. "That was so not nice, putting tape on my mouth."

Chippendale Number One removed the inch or so of tape still stuck to her cheek with a quick jerk, balled it up and lobbed it across the room. "It was necessary."

"Says you. I say this whole kidnapping thing was totally unnecessary. What's wrong with you two? Who doesn't know kidnapping's illegal? Duh." She paused mid-rant to stretch her facial muscles. Thanks to the remains of adhesive, her skin felt funny when she talked. "So prank's over. Why don't you go ahead and get rid of the rest of the tape and we can talk about how you're going to take me home?"

The Chippendales looked at each other and then turned their collective gazes at her.

"We can't let you go yet," Chippendale Number Two said, not sounding the least bit apologetic.

Urgh! Another fucked-up Friday the thirteenth!

*Should have gone home.* She should've known something was up when he'd given her that credit card. "Uh, why would that be?" she challenged.

"Because we can't," Chippendale Number One answered evasively.

Based on that ambiguous answer, she decided he must be an attorney by day and moonlight as a dancer. Probably had some hefty law school loan payments to make.

"I see a career in politics for you." Fuming, she turned her meanest glare on the quieter Chippendale standing behind him, the expression she reserved for anyone who dared to cut in front of her at the grocery store. Or Starbucks. "This joke's gone too far. You do know that kidnapping is a federal crime? I think it's even punishable by death."

Chippendale Number Two burst into a belly-busting guffaw.

What the heck was so funny? "I will press charges."

Chippendale Number One joined the doubled-over Number Two, laughing his ass off as well.

"You laugh now but I promise you'll be sorry."

Yeah, yeah, she knew that was tough talk coming from a chick who at the moment couldn't scratch her nose. But she had to get her point across. This was an issue of personal liberty. And more importantly, it was an issue of safety. Trussed up like a pig headed for slaughter, she was defenseless. What if there was a fire? Or tornado? Or tidal wave?

With her luck on Friday the thirteenth, any or all of those were possible, regardless of the fact that they were currently a bazillion miles from the ocean and the forecast didn't even include a drizzle of rain.

"You won't get away with this."

After enduring several more minutes of their snorting and chuckling like Beavis and Butthead, it became clear the Chippendales were not going to take her threats seriously. Too bad for them. She pulled out her ace, "My daddy's the prosecuting attorney for Detroit."

More annoying laughter.

Cads!

Jerks!

Egotistical assholes.

There was one surefire way to take these guys down a notch. "I bet you stuff your shorts. And your weenie is limp because of all the 'roids you shoot into those over-inflated muscles of yours."

The laughter ceased. The room fell into an eerie silence. And two egotistical assholes shot death daggers at her with their eyes.

Maybe that hadn't been such a good idea.

She'd wanted to annoy them, to let them know she wasn't playing along with the joke, assuming that was what was going on. But more than anything, she needed to show them she wasn't scared. Just in case this was for real.

She'd taken self-defense. Three times. All three teachers had told her that it was important to not show fear.

Chippendale Number One ripped his t-shirt off with the muscle-bunching yumminess that only male strippers possessed. "She called our muscles overinflated."

Awwwww. She'd wounded his fragile ego. Poor baby. Not!

"Should we show her what our muscles are capable of?" Number One grumbled.

She heaved the first satisfyingly heavy sigh she'd enjoyed in quite some time. "Listen, I really don't get what's going on here. Whether you're trying to charm me...or whether Uncle Andy hired you as a joke...or whether a recording of this whole insane thing is headed to Hollywood for some reality television show. But I'm not game. So kindly quit with the flexing," she said and nodded toward Chippendale Number One, shirtless and tensing his pecs and abs. The sight of bulging, rippling muscles under smooth, tan skin was uber distracting. She set her face in a scowl. "If you're trying to scare me, it's not working. Nor are you impressing me."

Number One leaned toward Number Two. "I thought these females were supposed to fall all over us when we did this?"

Number Two shrugged. "First time for me too."

Number One's shoulders sagged. "Great."

"Oh, isn't this fun? I've been kidnapped by two clueless first-timers. Swell. Peachy. Just my luck. Let me go."

"Can't."

"Must," she shot back.

Number Two shook his head. "Must not."

This was going nowhere. And as long as that was the case, neither was she—going anywhere, that was. Time for a new tactic.

Think. Think... "I have to pee."

Number Two groaned.

Number One grimaced.

“Come on, guys. Do you know what holding it does to a woman? Ever pissed hydrochloric acid? It’s no fun, let me tell you.”

Number Two blanched. “Maybe we should take this one back?”

“Oh yes! That’s a great idea. Take me back to the mall. I have personal issues you don’t want to know about. Infections, personality disorders—”

Number One glared at her with those wicked-cool dark eyes. “No. There’s no time. She’ll have to do.”

Damn. “Speaking of haves. I have to pee.”

“Yes, fine.” Looking like she’d asked him to get his testicles waxed, Number One started unwrapping the tape from her wrists.

Number Two went to work on her legs.

The second she was free, she scooted off the bed and made a break for the exit.

They didn’t even attempt to stop her.

She learned why in exactly three seconds.

The effing door was locked! Bastards. She turned around. “Unlock. Now.”

“The bathroom’s that way,” Number Two said from behind her.

She yelped in surprise. How the heck had he crossed the room without her seeing him? She looked at him then at the spot where he’d been standing less than a second ago. And then back at him again.

He smiled like there was nothing weird about a guy magically transporting across a room. “There. Bathroom.” He pointed at a second door, on the other side of the room.

“How’d you do that?”

He looked genuinely confused. “Do what?”

Bold-faced liar! “You’re messing with me. Funny. Ha. Ha. I’d rather use this door.”

Number One's mouth pulled into a lopsided grin, flashing a dimple. He crossed his arms over his yummy chest. "Sorry. Can't let you. At least not yet."

"Can I ask why? Why are you kidnapping me? Of all people? If Uncle Andy paid you, what'll it take to hire you to go kidnap him instead?"

"Who's Uncle Andy?" Number Two asked.

Uh-oh. "Andy O'Byrne?"

Two Chippendales shook their heads.

Oh shit. Were they lying? "I have no bank account to speak of. No rich relatives. You're not going to get a penny in ransom if that's what you're after."

Number One slanted one ebony eyebrow. "It's not. Didn't you have an urgent matter to take care of?"

"Is this about my case then? Are you trying to stop me from solving it?"

"What case would that be?" Number Two asked as he muscled her toward the bathroom.

"So that's it! You're going to hold me here until the Sacred Triad can be sold on the black market."

"The Sacred Triad? The sculpture?" Number One said, magically appearing at her side.

Once again, she screeched in surprise. How the heck did these guys do that trick? Magical Chippendale kidnappers? "Who hired you?"

"No one," Number One answered. "Why are you looking for the Sacred Triad?"

"Duh. You know why. Because it's my job."

An extremely unsettling smile crept across Number One's face. It did all kinds of things to her insides, like simultaneously chilling and searing them. He crossed his thick arms over his chest.

"I have a proposition for you," Number Two offered.

"A proposition involving letting me go?"

"Yes."

"I'm all ears."

"You stay here with us for seven nights and...serve us...and we'll give you a clue each night. By the seventh, you'll know exactly where the stolen sculpture is."

Was this for real? She narrowed her eyes and gave him an intimidating stare. "You're not playing me?"

"No, not at all."

Sounded sincere.

Wow, this was a weird turn of events. But it did raise a few compelling questions. The first being, "Why help me if you kidnapped me to stop me from finding the statue in the first place?" she asked, trying to sort it out. Nothing about this made any sense.

"We didn't kidnap you to stop you."

"Then why did you kidnap me?"

"Because we need you," Number One said.

She recalled Number Two's so-called proposition. What was the word he'd used? Serve? "What exactly do you need me to do over the next seven nights? I'll warn you, I don't like surprises. So you'd better give it to me straight."

Was she really thinking of going along with these guys?

Was she insane?

Then again, did she have any other choice? Other than perhaps lock herself in the bathroom until she starved to death?

Even if she were to escape, every day's delay meant the trail for the stolen artifact would grow colder. Once it was sold on the black market, she knew the chances of finding it were nil.

"Serve us," Number Two stated.

"Serve you what? Food? 'Cause I have to tell you, I'm not the best waitress in the world. In fact, I'm a really, really bad one. My last boss would testify to that. But if that's what you want, a personal waitress for a week, I might be willing—"

"Waitress?" Number One said, a slow smile drawing his lips back. "No, that's not exactly what we had in mind."

His smile widened, revealing a set of chompers straight out of *Van Helsing*.

Gasping, she spun around and ran smack dab into Number Two, also sporting a set of fangs that made her blood run cold. She did a quick one-eighty and smashed into Number One. She stumbled back a step.

"So what do you say?" Number One said, his fists wrapped around her upper arms, the glint in his eyes making her feel small and defenseless. "Serve us and you'll solve your case."

"Oh my God," she mumbled, too terrified to put together a more appropriate response.

"We promise you'll enjoy every minute," Number Two said, pressing against her back.

"Wake up!" she yelled, wincing as Number Two pulled her hair to one side. "This is just a dream—correction, a nightmare. Wake up! I-I've just watched too many *Buffy* reruns. They've come back to bite me—"

"We thought you'd never ask!" Evidently taking her last words as an invitation, Number Two spun her around, dragged her body against his, lowered his mouth to her neck...and bit.

White-hot pain blasted through her body like a nuke exploding in her head.

*Oh my God, this is one nightmare I'm not going to wake up from. The worst Friday the thirteenth ever.*

The most unexpected sensation followed the breath-stealing pain—sexual hunger. Raw, unbridled lust. It sizzled and sparked like currents of electricity, charging up and down Brea's limbs and swirling between her legs like a gathering summer storm.

Her thoughts and fears raced from her mind, swept away by a tsunami of need so powerful there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Questions vanished. Only one thought remained.

*Correction. This is the best Friday the thirteenth ever!*



## **Chapter Two**

Hot, sweet blood streamed down Marek's throat, sending pulsing waves of raw energy through his tired body and urgent need to his groin. He jerked the woman closer, eager to take his fill of both her blood and her body. Yet no matter how firmly her softening form molded to his, and no matter how eagerly he drank, he could not get his fill of either.

More!

He drew in another mouthful of her blood. The unfamiliar sound of his heartbeat, slow and wavering but growing steadier, thumped in his ears. Strength returned to his arms and legs. The overwhelming weariness that had nearly overtaken him slowly lifted.

More!

He pulled in a third mouthful of energizing blood. She whimpered, lifted her arms and draped them over his shoulders. Her legs straddled one of his and her hips ground into his thigh as his heat burned into her.

"Ohhh..." she said on a sigh.

More, more, more!

Dayne's growl of protest stopped him from taking what his body demanded. He would kill her if he didn't stop now. They had seven nights to get their fill. Although he craved complete and immediate satisfaction, he knew receiving it would come at a great price. To all three of them.

Meeting Dayne's gaze, Marek gently pushed the flushed, dazed woman toward him, encouraging Dayne to take what he needed. She cried out, visibly disappointed by his apparent rejection. But when Dayne eased her around, swept her hair aside and sank his fangs into her porcelain skin, her expression turned wanton once more.

Agonizing lust simmered in his veins as he watched his new blood-mate drink. The expression in Dayne's eyes turned fierce, erotic, as he pulled in a second mouthful of the woman's blood, stirring Marek's lust to even more painful heights.

Driven by his need, he ripped the back of the woman's shirt down the center, revealing a stripe of silky skin marred by an ugly black strap.

He groaned.

The woman whispered, "Oh yessss..."

He unfastened her bra and gently lowered her arms, pressing his length against her back. His hips rocked as he removed her clothing from her upper body, driven by a different kind of hunger surging through his system. A sexual hunger.

Dayne lifted his head, releasing her neck. The bloodstained mark on her skin vanished instantly. His tongue swept over his lips, an invitation.

It was done. Dayne was now bound to him, and he to Dayne. For the first time in his life, he was overcome by sexual hunger for another man.

Driven by instinct, Marek hooked a hand behind Dayne's head and with the woman's writhing body between them, claimed his mouth. Their tongues battled, stabbing, stroking while the woman's soft derriere pillowed his cock and balls, the scent of fresh spring air and delicate flowers teased his nostrils and her feminine whimpers and sighs filled his ears.

The agony and ecstasy.

Senses that had slowly faded over the centuries were suddenly painfully sharp, a contrast so severe it nearly drove him mad. He could hear the gusting of air as she exhaled. Could smell the musk of her need. Could feel the cool silk of Dayne's hair twining around his fingers.

He broke the kiss, instead turning his attention to the woman who'd given him so much. By the simple act of being there, submitting to their needs, she'd given both of them a chance at another five hundred years of life. She would get her reward.

The clue she wanted. The dominant lovers she craved. And the release she demanded.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Oh my God! They're kissing each other? They're bi? That is so hot.*

Brea's body was burning up. She was the meat in a Chippendale sandwich and God help her, she was loving it! Smooshed between two hot, impossibly sexy bodies, her shirt gone, her bared nipples teased to aching erection by the delicious friction against Number One's shirt. Two sets of hands were exploring each other then her body, easing her out of the rest of her clothes, smoothing up her arms and down her sides. Two mouths were tickling her neck and shoulders with teasing kisses and soft nips.

Two voices murmured seductive promises.

Who would have thought it was possible? To be so lost? To experience such overwhelming need?

Before she fully realized it, she was unclothed and so were they.

Two perfect bodies. Toned, tanned and both possessing a latent power that stole the oxygen from her lungs.

Their expressions mirrored each other's, both dark with desire. It was their looks, the heat she saw simmering in their eyes that drove her backward, until the back of her legs struck what she quickly realized was the bed.

That was one enormous adult playground.

Number One caught her hands in his fist and lifted her arms over her head. He stepped closer until his huge frame completely invaded her personal space, both driving her crazy with desire and making her feel slightly uncomfortable at the same time.

It was a bizarrely thrilling combination – discomfort and desire.

"I can smell your arousal," he murmured, his eyes searing her skin as his gaze swept over her face. "The fear intensifies your reaction."

Did it ever!

Was that why she wasn't screaming for her life? Was that why she wasn't kicking him in the gonads or at least begging him to stop? She'd never had sex with a complete stranger, let alone two. She didn't even know their names.

God, how bad was that?

"You have been secretly yearning for this for a long time." He pulled slightly, forcing her hands higher in the air. Her biceps sandwiched her head, pressing against her ears and muffling sounds, his voice. Her racing heartbeat pounded in her head. "You want a man to take control in the bedroom."

She did. She really, really did.

No. This was so wrong! Control? Absolutely not. Sleeping with men she didn't know. Kidnappers. Bad men. They were bad.

But they looked soooooo good. And felt soooo amazing.

He gathered both of her wrists into one fist and twisted, forcing her to turn her body to the side, where Number Two was kneeling.

"Spread your legs," Number Two demanded.

No doubt what would happen next. A gush of heat pulsed to her core as she met his gaze. A split second later, a spike of guilt stabbed her insides. She was crazy if she did anything with these guys. A shameless hussy. She hadn't been raised like this—to fuck the first kidnapping Chippendale she stumbled upon...or first pair of kidnapping Chippendales.

Time to reclaim some of her scruples, to recover her brain out of the thick fog that had somehow enveloped it.

How had she gotten to this point anyway?

One minute she'd been talking about a job as a personal waitress...or something like that. And then what?

She looked down at her clothes, lying in a heap on the floor. How'd her shirt get ripped? Why couldn't she remember? Was there anything to remember? Of course there was.

Her neck tingled, burned like she'd scratched it. After Number One released her wrists, she pressed her fingertips to the sore spot, the chill easing the pain.

As she struggled to gather her thoughts, she lifted her chin, an intentional show of defiance. "No."

Number One's formerly charming smile turned wicked and a little threatening, utterly sexy. "But you've given us so much. Don't you wish to receive your reward?"

"Given you what?" Why did she feel like she'd missed something important? Like she'd stepped out of a movie theater to buy some Raisinets, seconds before the Big Murder Scene and returned seconds after it was over?

"We'd like to show our gratitude," Number Two said, his eyes telling her exactly how he intended to say "thank you".

"Gratitude for what?"

Number One ran one hand down her arm and along her side. She flinched when his fingertips brushed the side of her breast. "Serving us. You promised. Remember?"

"Ummmm...not sure." She could remember what had occurred after she'd backed into the bed clearly enough. But before that...she remembered the van ride. Being carried into the bedroom. And she recalled trying to escape. Had something else happened between then and now?

How had her clothes gotten torn?

Her thoughts were cloudy, like she'd just woken from anesthesia. She glanced at the clock. The last time she'd looked it had been around four-thirty. It was after five now. A half hour had passed? She could swear they'd only been here a few minutes.

Oh. My. God. Had they drugged her? That had to be it.

Did they rape her? Her pussy, wet and ready, clenched around aching emptiness. No, she was pretty positive there'd been no penetration. At least not yet.

What was going on? She jerked sideways, tripping over Number Two's knee.

Space. She needed space. She needed to think. To try to sort through the scrambled pieces of the puzzle she wasn't quite able to see clearly. "Stop it! What's happening? What'd you do to me?"

Before she could blink, she was flat on her back, on the floor, Number Two on top of her. His hips were resting between her legs, his rigid cock grinding against her clit.

"Why are you fighting us?" Number Two asked, his mouth so close to hers his breath gusted her lips with sweet, warm air. "We know you want us."

"I-It's wrong," she stuttered.

"What's wrong?" Number Two shifted his hips, making that rigid erection of his rub her pussy in a slow, erotic rhythm. "Is this wrong?"

"Uh." No. "Yes." Her eyelids fell closed, shutting out the sight of the gorgeous man on top of her. She'd never had a guy who looked that good want her. Was he blind? She was plain old Brea. Nothing special to look at. Nothing special to talk to. Nothing special, period. "I don't even know your names," she heard herself say.

"I'm Marek," Number Two whispered in her ear. "And that's Dayne."

She shivered when his breath tickled her ear. "Marek. Dayne. Unusual names." She felt someone's hands on her ankles, pushing them up, forcing her knees to bend. Marek angled his hips down until the head of his cock was prodding at her slit.

They were going to rape her.

Was it technically rape if she secretly, kind of—correction, *really, really*—wanted it?

"Wait!" She forced her eyelids open and shoved his chest. "Ohhhh!" His cock inched inside her, and she screeched. A ripple of lust pulsed through her body. "Noooo...ooooohhhh! Yes!"

What was she saying?

"Ohmygod. Wait!" She tried to scoot up, to keep him from fully penetrating her, but he thrust his hips, seating himself to the root.

Her blood turned to liquid fire. Wild, wicked lust raged through her body, flaring along her nerve endings like TNT blasts. Her senses amplified, the sounds of her own breathing and Marek's guttural moan. His scent burned her nostrils, sweet and tangy and intoxicating. His skin, hot and smooth, gliding against hers.

For the first time in almost ten years, she felt fully alive.

"Oooooohhh." She rocked her hips back then forward, clenching her inner muscles and taking him deeper. Her fingertips clawed at his chest. Her heavy eyelids fell, closing her in a black world of aching, powerful need and breath-stealing sensations.

"Yes. Accept what's yours," Marek murmured. He slowly withdrew then slammed deep inside again.

She cried out in gratitude and agony. It was beyond words. Beyond understanding, the sensations he stirred. The sexy slap of skin striking skin as he fucked her. The erotic feeling of his heavy balls bouncing against her ass.

Someone was holding her knees, pulling them out and back. She was losing control—no, relinquishing control. It was a willful surrender.

*Yes, take me! Take control. Deeper! Harder!*

For once in her life, she had no choice. She could no more resist following her impulses than she could resist sucking in her next breath. The nagging voice in her head screamed dire warnings. But for the first time in nine years, she tuned it out.

The last nuggets of her guilt squashed like ants trapped under an elephant's foot, she submitted fully, allowing the sensations battering her body to carry her away. Marek sat back, his body perpendicular to hers, lifting her hips to line up with his groin. The position both intensified his intimate strokes against the super-sensitive upper wall of her vagina and left her entire upper body exposed to both Marek and Dayne. Men's hands explored her breasts, her stomach, her face. One mouth teased a nipple until she was almost crazy with need. Another plundered her mouth. A tongue thrust in and out,

tasting and taking and mimicking the movements of Marek's cock gliding in and out of her slick pussy. Her juices ran between her ass cheeks, scenting the air musky sweet.

Dayne teased her clit, drawing slow circles, round and round with a finger. Quivering with pent-up tension, she moaned her answer, "Yessssss..." and shuddered. The combination of Marek's thrusts, the strokes to her clit, launched her toward a powerful climax. Her body shook as spasms pulsed through her muscles. She reached up, wrapped her arms around Marek's neck and clung to him. Her breasts flattened against his sweat-slicked chest. Strong arms circled her, pulling her into a tight embrace. Deep, masculine moans filled her ears. He log-rolled, taking her place on the floor and pulling her on top of him.

Thanks to her change in position, Marek's thrusts deepened, lengthening the pleasure of her climax. Sensing he teetered on the brink of release as well, she angled her body up and rocked her hips back and forth, riding him hard and fast. She felt the muscles of his thighs trembling, his shoulders quaking. A second male body, Dayne's, crushed against her from behind. His mouth grazed the back of her neck, birthing a coat of gooseflesh over her upper body. His hands slid around her sides and flattened against her breasts. He pinched her nipples hard. The bite of pain mingled with the ecstasy of Marek's intimate strokes, bringing her to a swift second climax.

Riding the waves of bliss as Marek growled his release, she tossed her head back onto Dayne's shoulder. "Oh, yes!" She felt Marek's hot cum shooting inside her, welcomed it with rough, desperate, grinding motions that forced him deep inside her.

Dayne released her nipples. The pain was gone instantly. The pleasure took longer to fade, thankfully. She flopped forward, buried her head in the crook of Marek's neck and relaxed, soothed by the warmth of two hard male bodies and deep, rumbling voices cooing promises of more pleasure for the next six nights.

When she tired of being in the same position, her muscles screaming in protest, legs aching to be stretched out, she started to squirm. Marek's now limp cock slipped out. He grumbled something she didn't quite comprehend.



Dayne helped her stand.

Her legs were as wobbly as a newborn foal's. She teetered to the bed and let the Chippendales tuck her in.

Smooth, cool cotton sheets. Pillows that felt like clouds. And covers that cocooned her exhausted body in warmth. She knew she was smiling like a goon as she drifted off to sleep but she couldn't help it.

That had been the most amazing, mind-blowing sex ever.

"That's it," Marek said. She felt the mattress sink as he sat beside her. He caressed her cheek. "Sleep now. You need rest. Your clue will be here when you wake." He bent down and gave her a sweet, soft kiss on the cheek.

Despite her determination to stay awake and see the clue, she was asleep before they walked out of the room. The last thing she saw were her two Chippendales looking down upon her, satisfied smiles on their faces, their arms crossed over broad, tanned chests, muscles bulging and bunching and flexing.

Now that was a dream!

## Chapter Three

The end is only the beginning.

What kind of clue was that? Sounded more like a bit of worthless wisdom she might find inside a fortune cookie from her fave Chinese restaurant.

Brea wadded the scrap of paper into a ball and lobbed it across the room. She should've known they wouldn't keep their word. Kidnappers? Moral? What had made her think they'd help her solve her case? After all, they'd stooped to breaking the law to bring her here. And damn near raped her too.

Why did they bring her here? She had to believe it was because of her case. That was the only explanation that made any sense.

Although that didn't explain why all that other *stuff* had happened. The naughty but kind-of-yummy stuff. Surely there was no need to seduce her if they were merely trying to keep her from her case until the artifact could be sold on the black market.

Or was there?

God, she felt used. Dirty. Ashamed. Just like she had years ago, when she'd been drunk and asked her best friend Steve to blindfold and tie her up. Just for fun. It had been naughty and exciting. At first. He tickled her. Teased her. Kissed her. But then something happened. The teasing and laughter stopped. He told her only sluts liked that kind of thing. He ripped her clothes. Climbed on top of her. Forced her to do things she hadn't been ready to do yet. Thanks to the bindings, she'd been powerless to stop him.

Her first time. The loss of her virginity.

Even though she'd enjoyed parts of the experience, she'd called it rape because she couldn't accept the alternative. He'd called it something else. The immediate effect—

their friendship was over. The long-lasting effect—she had very mixed feelings about herself, her desires and her curiosity about being dominated, seduced, forced.

Her body tended to take a full-steam-ahead attitude. Her brain tended to put on the brakes. Like now. All the tingly, achy parts were pretty happy with what had occurred. But her mind wanted to deny all that *stuff* had even happened. God, what had she done? She grimaced as she scooted to the edge of the enormous mattress and wobbled across the room on rubbery legs to the bathroom.

Her issues with sex aside, this was all so unlike her. Since she'd drowned in that icy river those many years ago, she'd lived a life of caution, determined to never again put herself in harm's way. Yet contrary to what some people said, her fears did not rule her life. Those people just didn't understand. Once you die, nothing's the same.

So why had she acted so out of character earlier? Sex with a stranger? No rubbers? Talk about putting oneself in harm's way. She'd willfully walked into a swirling whirlpool of potential disaster. There's no way she'd do that if she'd been in her right mind.

They had to have drugged her.

She took a quick shower, scouring away the odors of man and sex. The guilt didn't wash away as easily.

A half hour later, she was clean and wet but still full of regret. Wrapped in a fluffy white lilac-scented towel, she checked the clock as she padded barefoot into the bedroom. It was a little after five a.m. The Sacred Triad had been stolen over twenty-four hours ago. Instead of goofing off here, playing hide-the-sausage with a couple of conniving kidnappers, she should've been at home, doing research, preparing for her trip. If she didn't get cracking, the case would be stone cold before she'd even gotten started.

She rummaged in the closet for some clothes that fit her reasonably well—meaning they didn't fall off. She then eased into the cozy wingback chair parked in front of a round table to pull on some socks. As she stuffed her feet into the socks, she eyed the

silver tray on the table. A covered plate of something that smelled scrumptious sat in its center. In addition, several glasses of liquids, plus a can of Diet Coke and a small container of milk, crowded the upper edge of the dish, competing for real estate with several covered glass bowls.

She'd been starving hours ago, when her captors had first brought her here. So she was grateful for the food. But evidently her kidnappers expected her to be thirsty as well. Way thirstier than normal. Probably a side effect of the drug they'd given her.

Bastards.

Out of nowhere, a little frisson of desire sizzled up her spine.

Where the heck did that come from? She'd had so few lovers in her life she could count them on two fingers. And not once had they affected her like those two snorting, overmuscled lawbreakers. What was her deal?

She'd paid weekly visits to her counselor, Bob, since she'd gone home from the hospital after the accident. After nine years of picking her brain and scrutinizing her every thought under a microscope, he figured he knew her inside and out. She'd love to hear his take on this. Knowing him, he'd suggest it was some kind of subconscious reaction to the many years she'd played things safe.

Shrinks. Everything was a subconscious something-or-other. Penis envy. Whatever.

Her take—it was simply a moment of insanity brought on by stress. Yeah. That made sense.

Or maybe they'd given her that date-rape drug?

That made even more sense, considering the little jolts of erotic heat buzzing and zapping through her system hours afterward, and despite the guilt and regret and anger.

It had been quite a long time, over twelve hours since they'd kidnapped her from the mall. Twelve hours was a long time for a drug to stay in a girl's system. Still, all in all, out of the three explanations that one made the most sense.

Suddenly aware of how ravenous she was, her mouth flooding with saliva, she lifted the metal lid off the plate. She'd need her strength if she was going to escape.

But what if they'd seasoned the food with Xanax? Or worse? Shoot, she was so hungry she was dizzy. Wouldn't hurt to take a look. Right?

Steak. Baked potato with the works and string beans smothered in butter. Oh, she was in heaven! Who needed eggs and toast for breakfast?

She checked the bowls circling the plate, lifting little paper covers. A tossed salad with ranch dressing. A second bowl cradled steamed veggies. And lastly, a brownie topped with chocolate ice cream, the whole thing smothered in chocolate syrup, sat in a third bowl.

She saw no traces of white powder, sensed no suspicious smells. She dipped the tip of her finger in the sour cream and took a tentative taste.

No funny flavor. Tasted like sour cream.

She picked up her fork and knife and cut a piece of the meat. She chewed slowly, moving the meat around in her mouth, alert to every nuance of the flavor, texture and smell. Again, no red flags.

Giving herself the *All Clear*, she dug in.

So this was how a girl "served" the Chippendales? Sleep, eat like there was no tomorrow and...and play?

If she could convince them to one, give her some useful clues, and two, leave out the sex part, it might be tempting go along with their plan.

Drugs, a subconscious rebellion or simple madness, she wondered what it might be like to spend some more time with her kidnapping Chippendales, Dayne and Marek.

Wouldn't Bob her therapist have some fun delving into her subconscious now?

Savoring a mouthful of vegetables, she shook away those silly thoughts. Time to get serious. She couldn't afford to sit around this place, playing Queen of the Chippendales while some thief was out there trying to sell her statue – or rather, her client's statue.

This was one job she needed to keep for a while.

She scampered across the room, uncrumpled the wadded clue and plopped in her seat. While consuming a steak more tasty and tender than the Outback's very best filet, she pondered the puzzling clue.

*The end is only the beginning.*

Uhhhhh... Would that imply the converse—the beginning is the end?

Ack. What did it mean?

The end. The beginning.

She was so NOT into riddles. The classic *What's black and white and red all over?* still stumped her.

Naturally, a job solving cases—a.k.a. following clues and riddles—was far from a logical choice for a girl who couldn't solve her way out of a paper bag to save her life. But she was far from stupid. And after having lost her last job, and starving through close to six months of unemployment, she had no other choice. The economy was tight these days. Jobs were hard to come by. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

Heck, she'd even been turned down by all the local fast-food joints. Seemed she was overqualified to nuke frozen hamburgers. Underqualified for the better jobs, like nurse anesthetist or certified public accountant. She was kicking herself now for not listening to her grandmother and going to nursing school.

Which left her back at square one—a job she needed.

And beginnings and endings.

As far as her case went, what was the end? She knew what she'd like to see in the end. The statue would be returned to the owner and everyone would live happily ever after.

What was the beginning? The crime? The statue was stolen from the client's home. Did this clue mean the owner had the statue? Or the owner was the thief? Or...what?

Okay, if her client had stolen the statue, why would he make a police report?

Insurance?

A distinct possibility. It wasn't like that had never been done before. Definitely worth checking out.

But why hire a private investigator if he'd faked the whole thing? He was risking being caught. In her book, hiring a private investigator to solve a crime you'd committed had to be one of the top three stupidest things to do. If she'd stolen her own statue for insurance money, the last thing she'd consider doing is hiring someone to poke around. She'd rather rely on the overburdened police department to fail, and merrily skip to the bank with the insurance check.

That was it. She needed access to a computer. She needed a phone. And she needed to get the heck outta here.

By the time she'd polished off the last bite of the ice cream and brownie sin, she'd determined her hosts owed her another clue and her freedom. They'd give her both, or something unpleasant was going to hit the fan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Smiling to himself, Marek shut down his laptop and scribbled down the second clue on a piece of paper.

As he'd hoped, Brea would serve more than one vital purpose. His plan, which had involved a call in to her employer and a morning tailing her, waiting for the perfect opportunity—while keeping the truth from Dayne—had gone exactly as he'd hoped. She'd prolong his life, and she'd lead him to the Sacred Triad, thereby helping him save his brother's life.

If only he had some better clues to give her! Whoever was feeding his security team these vague bits of evidence needed to give them something useful. That riddle—found by the relic's last know owner, scrawled on a scrap of paper left in the artifact's storage case—was hardly the smoking gun he was hoping for. But Marek's brother Kaden had been absolutely certain it would somehow lead them to the Triad.

This was going to take some time.

He only hoped the thief didn't know the true power of the Triad.

If he did, all Immortals were in danger, especially the brother he loved more than life itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dayne punched the power button, cutting off the call.

He would have his revenge. A new plan was in motion and by the gods, this one wouldn't fail. His family's death would be avenged. He'd give his own life if necessary.

Fortunately, it didn't look like that would be needed.

He grimaced as he adjusted the front of his pants. No one had warned him about the secondary effects of the blood-bind, the overwhelming erotic hunger. Insatiable and relentless. He could barely think of anything else. Marek. Brea. He wanted them both. Now.

If only he'd known.

What an ironic and annoying twist. The focus of his hatred was now the object of overwhelming desire. For the first time in his life he longed for a man. And not just any man. His enemy. He could do nothing to ease the desperate craving but surrender to it.

He had a new appreciation for Marek's earlier struggles. He'd fed so urgently, he'd nearly killed the woman. And then he'd nearly taken her sexually before she was ready.

No doubt about it—Marek had been powerless to stop himself.

Dayne was about to lose control himself. His erection strained against the confines of his clothes, testing the seams of his athletic boxers and cotton pants. His cock burned. His balls felt like heavy, hard boulders. He needed relief, however he could get it.

He unzipped his pants, shoved his hands down his shorts and made another adjustment. His cock throbbed hot and hard in his hand. Could he ease the burn himself?



He tried. Slow strokes, fast, gentle and hard. Nothing reduced the agonizing need. He needed a tight ass. Marek's hard body. Unfortunately, he'd left. To see that bastard brother of his.

Hmmm. Earlier, as Dayne had fed from Brea, he'd sensed a latent need in her. A suppressed longing. He briefly thought of stripping nude and paying her an impromptu visit but quickly dismissed the thought. Without the benefit of his venom coursing through her veins, making her soft and willing and compliant, she'd resist.

How glorious it would be to introduce Brea to her true nature. To liberate her from the invisible shackles holding her captive to her fears. The vision of her lying on the bed—arms and legs bound, her face flushed, her hair a golden-brown tangled halo around her head—flashed in his mind. He grimaced as another surge of lust ripped through his body.

Fuck it. Marek had received his relief. Dayne had denied himself. He couldn't wait any longer. Didn't matter how she fought. He would have her. He would seduce her. And he would make certain she'd be ready and willing the next time he needed her.

He found her in the bedroom, drowning in a pair of his sweatpants and t-shirt. She looked small and vulnerable, with the exception of the determined glare in her eyes.

Hunger pulsed through him, spiking in painful bursts, the intensity aggravated by the overwhelming impulse to hunt, subdue and conquer racing through his system. His muscles were tight knots. His heart pounding an erratic rhythm. His senses focused and intensifying.

She rushed past him toward the door. But he slammed it closed and locked it seconds before she reached it. He had to admit his speed put him at a distinct advantage. He didn't feel guilty for it.

Although she seemed nonplussed, the fire in her eyes didn't dim. A stubborn temptress, she narrowed them at him in challenge. "I need to go home. Now."

He knew words were useless. He had no interest in arguing with the woman. Body language was much more effective. He intentionally crowded her, forcing her to back away from the door.

"This isn't going to work," she blustered as she shuffled backward. "You aren't going to rape me again."

"I have no reason to rape you." He continued to drive her back toward the bed, like a shepherd guiding a lost lamb.

"Good. Then you'll do the right thing and let me go home." Her backside struck the bed and she flinched.

He stepped forward until the tip of her nose brushed the center of his chest. Her sweet scent, masked somewhat by the cloying scents of soap and shampoo, teased his nostrils. He inhaled, drawing it deeper.

"Helloooo! I'm talking to you." Her lips pursed, she waved a dainty hand in his face.

He resisted the urge to chuckle, knowing it would make it that much harder to break down her barriers. But she was so strong and sassy. Adorable. Sexy. Hot. The perfect package. Marek had chosen well, no doubt better than he would have. "I heard what you said but I figured you didn't want to hear my answer."

"Yeah, well, doesn't matter. Because I'm not going to fall for your nonsense again. I have a job to do, and I'm going to do it. I have to do it."

"Or?"

"Or I'll have no job. Not that I expect you to care."

It was unfortunate to hear this. It didn't make him feel particularly guilty for what he was about to do, but then again, he'd never been the kind to let something like remorse get in the way of important matters. Nor people.

No scrap of a woman was going to stop him, that was for sure.

He'd make it worth her while in one way, even if it meant she'd be out of a job by the time he was ready to let her go. She'd get another job. He had no idea what was involved in finding a job but already he could see she was an intelligent, capable young woman. How difficult could it be?

She lifted her chin a fraction higher and narrowed her eyes a little more. "Like I said, I don't expect you to care about my problems. I just expect you to let me go."

"It's not that I don't care," he assured, reaching for her hand.

She knocked it away. "Don't fucking touch me." Her bottom lip quivered as she narrowed her watery gaze at him.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I only wish to give you pleasure."

"Then let me go." Her unsteady voice, a low, breathy husk, raked his frayed nerves. "Please. You want to give me pleasure? That would give me heaps of pleasure."

He reached for her hand again. This time she flinched when his fingers twined between hers but she didn't snatch it away. "Did Marek give you the clue he promised?"

"Yes." A deep inhalation pushed her breasts out, the fullness pressing against the white cotton t-shirt she wore. For the briefest of moments as he stared down, he could make out the delicate pattern of her lace bra underneath. She heaved a sigh, sweet-scented and sexy, and licked her lips before answering. "But it makes no sense."

"Is that so?" he asked, his gaze fixed on her ruby lips, plump and tempting. Did she know what she did to him? How much he wanted her right now?

"Yes. So couldn't you at least give me something useful to go on?" After pulling her hand from his, she flattened both palms on his chest and pushed gently. "And back off, would you? Both you guys are way too pushy and it's pissing me off. Haven't you two heard of a girl's personal space bubble? Or are you from Europe? I hear European people aren't as aware of those kinds of things as Americans are."

"Europe? Could be." He didn't budge. He liked the effect his nearness was having on her. Whether she would admit it or not, he knew she was getting aroused. The proof was everywhere. In the air around them. In her eyes. In the slight waver of her voice. And the way her fingertips moved over his chest.

She blinked. "You're not moving."

"No."

She stood mute for a moment, her gaze down around his bellybutton region, or maybe lower. "I'll move then." She started shimmying sideways, wiggling out from the cozy spot he'd backed her into.

He stopped her progress by gripping her hips. Feral hunger racked him, tightening his chest, his throat. "No."

"Oh no. Not again." A blaze flashed in her eyes. She hissed, "Dammit, let me go."

His fingertips digging into the soft swell of her hips, he tipped his head and lowered it to claim the kiss she was offering with those luscious pursed lips.

She struggled for no more than a second before relinquishing with a quiver. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth and she parted them, inviting him to taste, take, plunder.

His body trembled, the need building so quickly he fought to maintain even the slightest trace of the humanity that remained within him. He could easily succumb to the temptation to become the hunter, the beast.

His tongue stroked hers while his hands pulled her flush to him. She softened, molding her curves against his hard angles, and whimpered.

When he broke the kiss, her eyes were glassy, her eyelids droopy, her cheeks rosy.

"I...I..." she stammered. "Not again. Please. Don't rape me. I just want to go home."

"No one has raped you. No one is going to rape you. This way." He gently pushed her back. She resisted, kicking, pounding her little fists against his chest. Her fingers closed around his wrists as he forced her onto her back.

"No," she murmured while scooting away from him. "Don't. Please. Why don't you find Marek? You're gay, bi, whatever. You can take it either way. Just let me go."

"I'm sorry, I can't." He crawled over her on his hands and knees. His mouth watered at the sight of the slender column of her neck. Couldn't he take a small taste? Just a little? What he'd had earlier was no more than a tease. How could he wait even a single hour?

"Oh God." When she reached the opposite edge of the bed, something flashed in her eyes. "Why can't I think? What kind of drugs are you giving me?"

"We haven't drugged you." He had her trapped now, beneath him. He straightened, dropping his lower body on top of hers and pinning her down with his weight.

"You have to be." Her lips rounded into a delicate O.

"No, no drugs. We would poison ourselves if we did something that foolish." Bending his elbows, he lowered his upper body until his chest hovered within a fraction of an inch from her breasts and his mouth almost touched hers. "It's the blood-bind. You can't resist and neither can I."

"Blood-bind?" she whispered. "I don't understand."

"No need to understand. Just accept it. That's all we can do." He kissed her again, the intimate dance of their tongues unleashing the pent-up desire coursing through his body. His hips rocked back and forth, rubbing the length of his erection against her legs. His hands twisted, freeing his wrists from her grip. While his tongue stroked and thrust her into willful surrender, his hands caught hers and forced them out to the sides.

He could feel her relinquishing control, her resistance fading away. Her quivering submission stoked the blaze raging within him. She moaned into their joined mouths.

He broke the kiss, but only long enough to free himself from the confines of his clothes. To his surprise and pleasure, she sat up and eagerly grappled for the garments as he struggled to shed them, clawing, pulling, ripping. The sound of tearing fabric, punctuated by Brea's gasps, filled the room.

Next it was her turn. But he forced himself to undress her slowly, kissing every inch of skin as it was exposed to him. Stomach, breasts, neck, face, then he forced her onto her back and worked his way down, hips, legs, knees, feet.

She lurched and shrieked when he forced her legs apart, hooked his finger inside the crotch of her sodden panties and pulled, tearing the dainty garment away. "Oh God," she murmured over and over. Head rocking from side to side, full lips parted, eyes closed.

"Yes, that's it." He slid a finger into her slick depths, bending it at the knuckle to increase her torment. Meanwhile, his mouth ravaged her breasts, taut nipples, pink and perfect and delightfully sensitive. She arched her back, thrusting them higher in the air.

What a beautiful sight. He'd never seen anything as glorious. Her slick folds were swollen, wet with her fragrant juices, ready for him. Her body was trembling and tight, ready for the release he wasn't prepared to give her yet. He reclaimed his hand from between her legs and sat back, just drinking in the vision before him for a moment, relishing the moment as if it would be his last.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she lifted her eyelids. She made a sweet mewling sound and replaced his hand with her own. Her slender index finger traced slow circles over her clit.

Damn.

He nearly shoved her hand away and buried himself inside her.

No, he wanted this to be for her pleasure. He would get what he needed soon enough. He had to give her what she needed first.

He would help her overcome the uncertainties he'd sensed earlier. It might bring them closer, not just strengthen their physical bond but the emotional one as well. He ached to not only possess her but to know her, to be a part of her.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged. He lifted her knees and pushed them back, until her pussy was wide open to his feasting eyes. "Damn, you're perfect."

"I want you inside me," she pleaded. Her other hand smoothed down her flat stomach, over her trimmed mound to join the other one. She pushed two fingers inside, shivering as she pulled them out.

He ached to lick away the juices coating her delicate fingers, to feast on her sodden pussy until she'd come a dozen times.

But first, he knew what he needed to do. "Trust me."

A deep red flush crept up over her chest to her face. Her legs were trembling, her hips rocking back and forth. She was about to come. She was lost in her pleasure.

He pulled her hands away and forced them back out to her sides. "No. There's not a more beautiful sight than you like this, Brea. Touching yourself for me. But it's too soon."

"I'm dying."

"Trust me."

She snapped her knees together and steadied her swimmy gaze on his face. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No. I don't want this to be like any other time." He eased her knees apart again. Her leg muscles tightened, resisting his efforts to position her. "Like it's been with any other man." His own words surprised him. Not because he was attracted to Brea and wanted to have sex with her. But because he'd allowed himself to become so hardened by the hatred he'd carried for so many years, he was shocked by how much he cared for Brea. How he wanted to reach her, touch her heart.

"But—"

“I can give you more pleasure than you’ve ever dreamed of. But only if you’re brave enough to let go. Fully. Do you have the courage to do that?”

Her eyes widened. Her face went pale. He braced himself for the answer he feared she would give him, instead of the answer he wished for. The one that would set her free from whatever fears were shackling her. He didn’t know what they were, but he could sense them.



## **Chapter Four**

"Our plan is working, Your Highness. However, I haven't been able to locate the Sacred Triad yet." Marek knelt before his king, bending until his forehead rested on the polished stone floor.

"Rise, Marek," his brother said irritably. "You know I can't stand it when you kneel before me like some peasant. You're blood, for the goddess' sake."

That was true. But respect and humility was the king's due, and it was Marek's obligation—not to mention pleasure—as his younger sibling, to show the man respect who'd raised him from infancy. Not to mention gratitude. Since taking their father's place, His Sovereign had given Marek a great deal over the many years. As he had all his loyal followers.

Which was why the Rebellion made so little sense.

If there was anything Marek had learned, being the second in line to a royal dynasty, it was that politics was rarely about justice, who deserved to serve.

No, more often it was about greed. Deceit. Selfishness.

He'd never admit it but he'd gladly surrender his life for his brother. After all, Kaden had saved his life on more than one occasion.

Besides, he wanted Kaden to stay in power. He would rather face an eternity of suffering than reign as king. But if fate saw to put him in power someday, he would lead his people as his brother had—justly, and with heart.

"If I don't show my respect for you, how can you expect the rest of your people to?" he reminded Kaden, "especially with the Rebellion—"

"Fine. You've done enough groveling at my feet." His brother patted the empty throne beside him, the one that would soon be inhabited by the new queen. Although

Kaden had yet to marry, he had chosen a bride. His chosen, Lena, would spend the next moon's cycle preparing for her nuptials as most women did—by emptying her betrothed's pockets. "Come, sit and tell me about your first blood-bind."

Marek slumped into the queen's throne. "It's nothing like I imagined."

His brother's expression soured almost imperceptibly. "How so?"

"No one told me about the hunger."

Kaden's eyes brightened. "Oh yes. The hunger. I'd like to say I'd forgotten about that minor issue but I'd be lying."

"So why not warn a guy? You love me, remember? It would've been nice to know...so I could prepare."

"Yeah, I love you, but that's beside the point." Kaden shrugged. "But really, there's no way to prepare for the hunger. Besides, it's kind of a tradition, let the newly bound mates find out for themselves."

"Some tradition." Marek rose to his feet and raised his fists in mock threat. "Speaking of traditions, are you in the mood for a little sport? I recall a tradition where a certain younger brother kicks his big brother's ass. It's been awhile. Come on, you're itching for a beatin'—"

Voice unsteady with laughter, Kaden caught Marek square in the chest, sending him staggering backward. "Hey, what happened to respect?"

"I'll still respect you after I kick your ass. I owe you a pounding or two...or ten." Marek led with a right jab that hit nothing but air next to Kaden's ear and then followed up with a left hook that almost caught him in the belly.

"For what?" Nearly doubled over with laughter, Kaden shook his head. "Look at you. I haven't seen you like this in centuries. It's the bloodlust talking. Want me to call your mates to you so you can release some of that excess energy before you hurt someone? Like yourself."

Sobering, Marek grumbled, "Don't bother. I'll be heading home soon...well, I will as soon as you tell me why you called me here."

"Just wanted to check on you, see how you're doing."

A lie?

Kaden was never too busy to see Marek when he came to ask for advice, but he never summoned him. "How kind of you. Now tell me the truth."

"Honest. That's it."

So Kaden wasn't going to level with him? That was a first. Kaden had never lied to Marek, at least not that he'd known. Why now?

"Is something wrong?" Marek asked, probing for some clue.

"Nothing that you don't already know about. There's talk the rebels have the Triad. But I think that's a rumor. If they did, why haven't they used it yet?"

"Because they're spreading false rumors for some reason."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe to gain more supporters?" Marek narrowed his eyes, focusing on the center of Kaden's forehead. What was that? A red smudge spoiled his brother's otherwise picture-perfect face. "What happened there? Get some of your lunch on yourself? Really, ever hear of a napkin?"

"What are you talking about?"

Marek motioned at the spot on Kaden's face. "There's something red..." He touched the spot and a bolt of searing heat blazed up his arm. Without thinking, he jerked backward, nearly throwing himself off balance. "What the fuck?"

The color instantly washed out of Kaden's face. "It's begun."

"What's begun?"

Kaden raised a trembling hand to his forehead, his fingertips exploring the red mark, which seemed to be growing before Marek's eyes. "We have our answer now."

The rebels aren't spreading false rumors. They have the Triad. Which means we have until the new moon to get it from them."

Only six nights? The heart that had only recently begun beating, thanks to the blood-bond with Brea and Dayne, dropped to Marek's toes. He was staring his worst fear in the eyes. His brother would suffer an agonizing death, just as their father had so many centuries ago. Their only hope, Kaden's only hope—the Triad. "No."

Gone was the laughter. Kaden's voice was low, husky and heavy with fear. "It's up to you. No one else has been able to find it."

"I won't let you down." Marek charged from the throne room. "I'll get it. If it kills me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea's insides were tangled into painful knots of agonizing need. Her head was foggy, like her brain had soaked in a vat of Absolut for a week.

Gone was the rage, the anger, the guilt, the frustration. In their place—desperate lust.

So what if Marek had all but raped her earlier? So what if both Dayne and Marek had kidnapped her? So what if she was about to lose her job?

She wanted Dayne to fuck her. She wanted him so bad her whole body ached, even her teeth.

Made it mighty tough to say "no" to his question. Did she have the courage to let go of her fears? At this point, with her pussy burning to be filled, her nipples hardened points and her skin practically blistering under Dayne's fierce, nuclear-fusion-hot gaze, she was almost willing to do something crazy, like dance upon the shards of a broken mirror while holding a black cat.

"You've been waiting for a long time," he mumbled, his face buried in the crook of her neck. The tickle of his breath produced a coat of gooseflesh over one side of her upper body. His teeth grazed her skin.

Hot and cold at the same time, and shivering from both the emotions and sensations pummeling her insides, she sucked in a gulp of air. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

His response was not spoken, yet it drove his point home and silenced any arguments she might have thought to raise within the next few hours.

He smoothed a flattened hand down her torso and cupped her sodden labia. His fingers left a trail of musk-scented dampness up her abdomen as he drew a line up to her bellybutton. Lifting his head and drilling her with a gaze that left her insides as soft as marshmallows sitting in the desert sun at high noon, he placed those very same fingers on her lips. "I could eat you all day you taste so good." His tongue slicked a damp trail over his adorable lower lip.

She mirrored him, tasting his fingers and the lingering flavor of her arousal. She parted her lips, pulling his fingertip into her mouth and swirling her tongue around its tip.

His mouth lifted into a seductive smile. "There's no crime in being a sensual woman, in knowing what you want and asking your lovers to give it to you."

Made sense to her, in her current pseudo-intoxicated state. Never before had she been basically rendered brain dead by sexual overload, but there she was. Dead in the brain, oh yes. Her neurons were withering by the millions.

"Don't you agree?" he prodded when she didn't respond to his last statement. He punctuated his question with a little pinch of her nipple.

It hurt but in a good way, a very good way. Her back tensed, thrusting her breasts high in the air.

His eyes glittering, he smiled at her and pinched again. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

She was incapable of correcting him, since her tongue was sort of glued to the roof of her mouth. No sense in trying anyway. It was complicated. He was right in a sense—there was nothing wrong with a woman knowing what she wanted and asking for it.

But—and this was a big but—there was something wrong with a woman doing so with a virtual stranger who'd kidnapped her and was holding her hostage.

Now if only her body would get with the program and quit reacting to his every look, touch and word!

Lust was surging through her body in relentless waves, the crests growing closer and closer like the waters of a storm-tossed Pacific. The man was just so freaking gorgeous! It wasn't fair! Why oh why did things have to be like this? Why couldn't they have bumped into each other at the library or Blockbuster Movies? Strike up a conversation about the second *Pirates of the Caribbean* and then head over to Starbucks to stare into each other's eyes and stumble through awkward first-date type of conversation over mocha lattes?

She'd known everything about her former lovers before they'd seen her naked. That was, until today. Until Marek had taken advantage of her altered state and seduced her out of her clothes somehow.

She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she let Dayne do the same thing. Two new lovers? In the span of a few hours? Ack!

She rooted around deep inside herself, desperate to find a morsel of her self-control. Gathering her strength and willpower, she started squirming beneath him again. Unfortunately, her efforts failed to produce the effect she'd expected.

Dayne's heavy breathing gusted her face. His neck, ears, cheeks turned a deep raspberry color. It would have been kind of cute, if she hadn't been painfully aware of the reason for his color change.

The reason was the suddenly hard, thick bump resting against her thigh.

As if she needed a clue, he blinked and growled.

The growl thing was also sexy. Was there anything the man did that wasn't sexy? He blinked sexy. He smiled super-sexy. He moved sexy, muscles bulging and stretching.

She decided closing her eyes was a good idea. "Please get off me."

"I will if you can make me," he taunted playfully.

Ugh. He sounded like a silly schoolboy who'd just tackled her on the playground. Charming and mischievous.

Her insides melted even more. It was official now, she was going to get him off her or she was going to die trying. She ignored the fact that her insides were the consistency of soup and her willpower was almost completely pulverized as she struggled to worm out from under the two hundred plus pounds of drool-worthy male positioned above her.

Her breasts rubbed against his chest as she moved. The friction was delicious and decadent and sensual. The sensation produced some interesting effects between her legs.

A deep rumble vibrated from Dayne's chest. She felt it inside. In her stomach. Her empty pussy.

Would he just let her up?

Time for desperate measures, unfortunately.

She really did not relish what she was about to do.

She jerked, bending her knee so she'd catch him in the delicates. No man could take a direct shot in the testicles without being incapacitated for at least a few seconds. A well-placed kick could send even three hundred pounds of pure muscle to the ground for even longer.

As it turned out, Dayne was no exception.

The second her knee made contact, the air from his lungs gusted her face. He yelped then curled to the side, rolling off her.

Freedom. She did a log roll to the edge of the bed, but just as she was about to leap to the floor, a steely grip caught her wrist. He yanked her back roughly then positioned himself so she couldn't get a second shot, pinning her on the bed again.

"That. Wasn't. Nice."

"Neither is kidnapping someone, holding them hostage and forcing yourself on them with some kind of crazy mojo—"

"I wasn't forcing anything on you. And as far as Marek goes, he didn't either."

"I said 'no'. I said 'wait, stop'. Which makes what happened force in my book."

"What book is that?"

"The Brea Maguire book of law."

"Well then how about telling me what crime this qualifies for in the Brea Maguire book of law?" Still holding her to the bed with his knee, he bent down and whispered, "You said 'yes' after you said 'no'. And then you said a lot of other things. Would you like me to repeat them?"

Cool air caressed her skin but it did nothing to chill the lust and the rage welling up inside her.

How dare he throw her own words back in her face! Clearly, they were doing something to her to make her react this way, and he knew it. If it wasn't drugs they were using, it was something else—hypnotism? Subliminal messages? Mind control? This wasn't like her. Period.

"Bastard!" She fought with every bit of her strength, but he dodged her strikes so easily, she felt like she was a furious toddler attacking a world champ boxer. Within seconds she was worn out, not to mention so friggin' turned on she was tempted to spread her legs and beg him to quit playing and end her suffering.

A girl under the influence of hypnotism/mind control/whatever could only take so much teasing.

Yet the cautious side of her would never let her actually give in. No way!

"I have the perfect punishment. You won't be able to move a muscle when I'm through with you. Not even to blink an eye." He gathered her wrists in one of his fists and lifted his weight off her, moving carefully to restrict her range of movement while



positioning her as he wanted – flat on her stomach, arms positioned in a wide vee, legs stretched apart. He produced black straps from somewhere and secured her wrists to the two massive posts at the head of the bed without breaking a sweat. And, despite her kicking, did the same with her ankles.

Oh God, her lumpy, cottage-cheesy ass was out there front and center in a fully illuminated room! Could she just die now?

She tried to see what the bastard was about to do next, but since he'd left the room, she could only guess. She supposed it would be stupid to think he was going to perhaps get himself a snack, maybe take a nap...or drop dead. Yeah, that was stupid all right.

She heard his footfalls within seconds as he stomped back into the room.

Every muscle in her body tensed. Her heart thumped against her breastbone so hard it hurt.

He stopped at the foot of the bed. "It's a shame you can't see what you're doing to yourself."

What the heck was he talking about?

Something landed on her head, blocking out all traces of light. Dark. Smothering. Terrifying.

Something else touched the sole of her foot. She tried to jerk it away but she couldn't. Tears of frustration and confusion burned her eyes. Not since that night with Steve had she felt so out of control. Sure, she could breathe okay. She could speak. But otherwise, he had her under his complete control. She couldn't scratch her nose if she wanted to.

Anger quickly morphed to irrational panic. In her head, she knew she was in no immediate physical danger. But that didn't stop her heart rate from kicking into supersonic speed, and her stomach from roiling like Mt. Vesuvius on a bad day. "Let me loose. Now."

"You're in no position to make any demands," he pointed out coolly.

Arggh! She tossed her head back, trying to knock away the cover, and clamped her eyes closed. Bile burned her throat. Hot tears seeped from her eyes, running in salty rivulets down the sides of her nose. Damn it, she was through being tough. She was scared. Fucking terrified.

Why were these guys doing this to her? She didn't ask for it this time. She didn't deserve this!

"Please."

He walked around the side of the bed and inched the blanket down, uncovering her head.

Light. Air. She gulped several deep breaths.

"What are you feeling? Does the danger thrill you like I thought it would?"

She turned her head, letting him see with his own eyes what her answer was.

His expression remained firm, yet his eyes softened a tiny bit.

Did he feel guilty?

"What are you feeling?" he repeated gently.

She narrowed her eyes at him. He knew the answer. Why ask? What kind of game was he playing? "What is this?" Her voice wavered, punctuating the effect of her watery eyes and sniffly nose.

His brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

She sniffled and rubbed away a fat teardrop hanging on the tip of her nose on the bed. "You know exactly what I'm feeling. Why are you pushing me for an answer?"

"Because I think you need to hear the answer."

That made no sense. "If I answer will you let me loose?"

"Perhaps."

Awkward, heavy silence hung in the air between them. Her heartbeat slammed in her ears, easing the silence but not the tension. For some reason, she didn't want to answer him. Maybe he'd use her fears against her somehow. Who knew? But the need

to escape the awful, unrelenting panic crashing through her body overruled her fear of the unknown. "I'm scared."

"Scared? Why? Have I done anything to hurt you?"

"No."

"You could breathe, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"Then what are you scared of?"

"I don't know. It's hard to explain."

The mattress sank a bit as he sat beside her. He rested one of his hands on her back. It was warm, and the touch was undemanding. Reassuring. "I'd like to know."

"What do you care? Why do you and your pal need to play games with me? What do you expect to gain from this? Do you think I'm easy? That I want this?"

He shook his head. "You're not getting any answers from me until you answer my question first."

She bit back a scream of frustration. She hated head games! She hated people dissecting her thoughts and feelings. They were hers. Private. Off limits. Even sometimes to her stupid shrink. But this guy wasn't going to let her get away with sidestepping his questions. That was clear. Her stomach convulsed again and she swallowed the steak and potatoes she'd eaten earlier for the second time.

Oh God, she just needed to be let loose! To be able to move around freely.

"I'm just scared. That's all."

"That's not good enough."

Frustrated and in the iron grip of nauseating panic, she screamed, "Why the fuck not? This isn't funny. It isn't a game. You're fucking with my head, and damn it, I don't like it!"

"Why not?" he asked in a tone so smooth and calm, she'd swear they were chitchatting about the weather.

His calmness acted like gasoline on a bonfire. She could see herself going berserk but she couldn't stop it. She was at her limit. Only one thing mattered—freedom. She yanked at the bindings, kicked, thrashed. Tears ran unchecked from her eyes.

To hell with trying to guess what this fucker was up to.

To hell with trying to talk him into letting her go.

To hell with everything but escape.

Her wrists hurt like hell. The bindings bit into her skin and ground into her bones but she didn't stop trying to break loose.

"I need out."

"Why?"

"Fuck you!"

He sandwiched her face between his hands and drilled her with his gaze. "I'm not hurting you. Do you hear me? I'm not going to hurt you."

"But I can't move. I can't want...you have control. Just like Steve, you're going to think..." She couldn't breathe. It was like an invisible elephant was sitting on her back, pressing her into the mattress. She gulped frantically at the thin air.

"Yes, I do have control, but that's not a bad thing."

"It's always a bad thing. I can't deal with it." A sob burst from her throat. "I didn't ask for this."

"Yet you crave a lover who will take control."

"No, I don't. You're wrong. Bondage games aren't for people like me."

He sighed heavily, stood and walked to the foot of the bed. "You would be happier if you could learn to deal with these issues." He released one ankle and she nearly wept in gratitude. When he unfastened the second restraint and went around to the head of the bed to free her wrists, her heartbeat slowed.

As soon as he had the second wrist was loose, she curled her body into a tight ball, wrapped her arms around her legs and clenched her chattering teeth.

"Brea." He stood beside the bed, looking confused. "I thought...I sensed you needed..."

"I needed you to let me loose. That's all. And I made that perfectly clear. So don't talk about what you thought I needed."

## **Chapter Five**

"What happened?" Marek stormed into the room, dragging a gust of crisp, fresh air with him. His mouth pulled into a taut line, and his eyebrows drawn together, he rushed to the bed. "What's wrong?" His gaze hopped back and forth between Dayne and Brea, who was still struggling to get a grip on herself and the bastard who'd caused her to lose it in the first place.

"She's a little shaken," Dayne offered the lame explanation.

"A little?"

"He tied me up," she added, in a teeth-chattering, wavering, watery voice.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea she'd react this way. I thought..." His voice low, Dayne let the rest of his words trail off.

No way was she going to let him get off with some lame excuse and a mumbled apology. "He sat there while I was freaking out and refused to let me loose. Fucking bastard!"

Marek sent Dayne some death daggers with his eyes. He sat beside her on the bed, pulled the blanket up around her still-shaking form. "I'm very sorry about this."

"Yeah, so let me go home," she demanded. "This has gone on long enough."

"I can't."

"Why the fuck not? You have each other. What the hell do you need me for? I don't understand what's happening to me. You practically raped me..."

"Rape? I didn't rape you."

"Yeah, yeah. I asked for it. Don't remind me. I don't care what you say, I'm not to blame. I'm not thinking straight. And this asshole scared the shit out of me by tying me

up and somehow messing with my mind. I can't take any m-m-m-m-more." She started bawling again, which only pissed her off more.

"But we do need you." He pulled her against him, wrapping strong arms around her body and enveloping her in his scent and strength. "More than you know."

She was too worn out to fight her way out of his hug. She closed her eyes and relaxed into his embrace, letting his warmth, the slow, steady sound of his breathing and heartbeat slowly soothe her. After an eon, maybe two, the sobs stopped. The river of tears stopped. And she settled into a weird sort of peace, like the quiet after a wicked summer storm.

"It's more than needing you," Dayne said, dragging a chair across the room. He positioned it directly in front of her and sat. "We aren't just after cheap thrills. Or a lost statue. Or a piece of ass. We want to get closer to you. Know you. Understand you. Help you. There's something holding you back. I can sense it. And that was why —"

"Why you what?" she spat. "You guys kidnapped me for some reason I have yet to understand. And now you want to understand me? Help me? Like a friend? Please. I'm not that stupid. Or gullible. You tied me up like one of those chicks on the 'net. I'm not like them."

"Do you hear what you're saying? Women who like to be tied up aren't 'chicks'. They're women who know what they want, what they need. And they've accepted themselves." Dayne captured her face between his flattened hands and stared into her eyes. "I want to help you. Can't you sense the truth? Don't you feel it, the connection between us? I realize it's hard to believe but I genuinely care about you."

That was just it. She did sense a connection between them. Which made this whole thing that much more confusing. She pulled on his fingers, easing his hands from her face. "I...I...don't like that stuff."

"Dayne's telling the truth. We both care about you. And there's nothing we won't do to make things right between us." Marek used an index finger under her chin to force her to meet his gaze. "What happened between you and Dayne?"

"I didn't hurt her."

"I was scared, that's all."

"Of what?" Marek prodded. He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. Such a gentle, sweet gesture.

*Of myself?*

"You feel it too, don't you, Marek? She craves a little excitement and danger in the bedroom, a dominant lover who'll test her boundaries."

"Yeah. I do." Marek nodded. "What were you scared of, Brea?"

"Sense how? You two talk like you can read my mind or something." Her eyes still burning and nose still sniffly, she sat, conflicted over the compulsion to keep her secrets to herself and the urge to finally deal with the fallout from that night with her former best friend, the confusion, guilt and frustration that had basically left sex as little more than an empty physical exercise. But why did it have to be these guys? What kind of future could she expect to have with a couple of guys who kidnapped women to supposedly make friends? "You don't know me."

"Maybe we're pushing too hard, too fast?" Dayne asked.

Marek looked askance. "Brea?"

"Yeah, like he said, it's happening too fast. That's all. Especially the bondage stuff." That was partially true. True enough. "And the head games."

"We'll slow down then." Dayne cradled one of her hands in his. "I'm sorry, Brea. I swear I'll do anything to make things right between us."

Strange, but a part of her believed him.

"Feel better now?" Marek asked as he ran a hand down her back in slow, repetitive strokes.

"A little."

"Good. Because I need to ask you for something else."

Her shoulders tensed. "Ask me what?"



"Have you had any luck solving the first clue?" Marek asked, trying hard not to let on both how much he hoped to hear good news and how urgently he hungered for a taste of the delightful spitfire of a woman sitting before him. Pounding heat pulsed through his body, sent to all parts by the heart she had kick-started. His cock, however, got the bulk of it.

Narrowing her eyes, she spat, "You want to talk about that? Now?"

"Well..."

"That worthless bit of nonsense you left for me?"

Not the answer he had been hoping for. "I take that as a 'no'?" He'd hoped to leave the second clue for later, to buy him another taste of the sweet blood coursing through her veins, but with his brother's illness progressing so quickly, could he afford to wait? Could he afford to think about his needs? Or even hers? "I have another clue."

She leaned closer, her position making the blanket gape. He had a clear view of the tempting swell of two firm breasts. Two perfect, pink-tipped, firm breasts. "Fork it over, pal. That first one wasn't even close to helpful." As if to add to his already monumental agony, she thrust those breasts forward, an unintentional invitation, no doubt.

Rendered dumbstruck, he handed her the scrap of paper and waited, his breath caught in his throat. Between the worry about his brother and the unwelcome heat of the hunger, he felt like he might literally implode.

She read the clue then planted her hands on her delightfully curvy hips and glowered. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"It's no game," he said to her breasts. He tried to lift his gaze but darn it all, what guy in the grips of the hunger could resist staring at those?

Still completely unaware of how much skin was showing, she shifted, making the cover slide even farther down. Oh the agony.

She waved her arms in the air. "If you're serious, and not trying to mess with me, why dole out little bits of worthless information? What are you hoping to gain from all this?"

A whole lot! "Then you don't know what either clue means?"

"No. How could I?" She dropped her gaze to the paper, still in her fist and read, "It's critical to walk in the Secrets?" She shook it in front of his face. "How can you walk in secrets? It makes no sense. Where'd you get this? From a fortune cookie?"

She was so charming when she was frustrated. "Not exactly."

Shaking her head, she dropped the paper on the bed. "It's meaningless, just like the first one."

"But it's all I have. Whoever sent them must expect me to solve them...or find someone who can solve them for me."

"Or maybe not?" she asked, her expression softening a little. "Maybe they don't want me to figure them out at all?"

"Then why bother giving them to me in the first place?" he asked. Perhaps someone was feeding his brother these clues to keep him from locating the Triad.

Was he being sent on a wild-goose chase? Or maybe just being distracted. He hadn't thought of either of those possibilities until now. It was entirely possible.

Yet the optimist in him refused to believe it.

"Who's giving you the clues?" She scowled. "I'm getting the vibe you're after the Triad for yourself. Do you want it for something?"

"No. I just want to help you."

"Hmmm... Why do I get the impression you're keeping something important from me?"

"Let me see," Dayne offered, hand outstretched. "Maybe I can help?"

"You'd be willing to help me too?" she asked, still sounding skeptical. Her expression was a mixture of wariness and gratitude.

"Sure." Dayne encouraged her to give him the paper by curling the fingers of his outstretched hand.

"Then maybe—just maybe!—you're no worse a man than Mr. Tight-lipped," she said, punctuating her statement with an audible harrumph. She motioned at Marek. "He's messing with me, and if you ask me, he owes me better than this." She glowered at Dayne, shaking a finger at him. "But I'm still not letting you off the hook yet. Terrifying a girl like that. It's inexcusable, apology or not. You're both on my shit list right now. I don't get what you two are up to, but I know there's something going on." She rolled off the bed, taking the blanket with her and wrapping it around her body.

Such a shame, to have all those delectable curves hidden.

Her hair was tousled, giving her the delicious post-sex, rumped look he adored. As she scurried across the room, one slender leg cut through a gap in the blanket, giving both Dayne and him a glimpse of one shapely thigh and calf.

They swapped hungry glances.

His cock stirred to life once again, letting him know how neglected it was feeling.

She plucked the first clue from the table, shuffled back across the room and thrust it at Dayne. One side of the blanket drooped, exposing her left shoulder and the top of her breast. "Here. Maybe you can make sense of this. If your friend here isn't playing with me, then these are two of the most impossible, ambiguous clues ever."

"Where did they come from?"

"The first was found at the sight of the theft," Marek explained, again forcing his gaze from the perfection that was her breast.

"Really?" Dayne asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

"Really?" echoed Brea, also sounding surprised. "Let me see them again," she demanded, motioning to Dayne. "There was no mention of anything like this in the police report."

"Yeah, well that's because the police didn't see them," Marek admitted.

"How'd you get this?" Brea challenged, eyebrows lowered.

"I—I'm not at liberty to explain right now."

Dayne handed them back and cleared his throat. "I think they're meaningless. Planted. Someone's trying to steer you wrong."

Brea studied both papers carefully before speaking. "Dayne could be right. But together they do seem to make a little more sense. See here?" She spread them both on the bed then pointed at the second clue. "One of my favorite movies ever was *National Treasure*. Either of you seen it?" She gave them each a questioning glance and at their shaking heads, continued, "Great movie but that's not the point. The hero has to follow a series of clues to find the treasure. One of them was a rhyme. In that rhyme, a word was capitalized to indicate it was a proper name. So if we apply that to this clue, that means Secrets is a proper name. Does it mean anything to you guys?"

"No," Dayne said. "I don't know anyone nicknamed Secret or Secrets. Nor do I know of a place called Secret. Do you?" he asked, looking at Marek.

"What about the Book of Secrets?" Marek suggested, still trying to get a grip on the lust churning through his system.

Dayne's jaw dropped. "Shit, I hadn't thought of that. The Book of Secrets. Sure. But what's it mean?"

"What's this Book of Secrets?" Brea asked, her gaze ping-ponging back and forth between them.

"It's our people's sacred text," Marek explained, inching closer to Brea. Her shoulder was so lovely. Smooth. Soft.

"Your people's?" she echoed, turning her body toward him. Once again the blanket around her started sliding south. She caught it and tugged it up. "Are you in some kind of cult or something?"

"Not exactly," Marek answered, his mouth flooded with saliva. "It contains our laws, beliefs and—of course—secrets." His cock was hard as concrete and his balls

heavy as lead. He moved another few inches closer. The scent of her skin teased his nostrils.

"Yes, that has to be it." Her eyes widened. "Where is it? Is there more than one copy? Is it far away? We need to take a look immediately." She spat the questions machine-gun style, in quick succession as she rushed across the room toward the closet.

"It isn't far." Marek dogged her. "It's kept in the *Zal Halirgi*, our most sacred place. But we can't just walk in there uninvited. We're going to need to make some calls first. And —"

"Fine. You make the calls and I'll try to figure out the rest of these clues." Brea waved him away with one hand while snatching up the first clue. She chewed on her lower lip while studying the piece of paper, flipping it over in her hands. Powerless to stop himself, he stared at her plump lip, wishing he could nibble it. "The end. The beginning. Maybe we need to read the book backward?" When she finally realized he hadn't left yet, she sent him a questioning glance. "What?" She dragged an impatient hand through her silken hair and the blanket dropped another inch, hovering just above a pert nipple.

A frantic wave of desire blasted through his body, nearly knocking him to his knees.

"There won't be anyone to take our call until sundown," Dayne said, answering her before Marek could find his tongue. "We have to wait."

"Oh, phoo!" she cursed, pursing her lips. She plopped on the mattress. "Are you sure?"

Dayne nodded. "Absolutely positive."

She glanced at the clock. "That's hours from now. It's barely morning. I need to find the Triad right away."

*So do I.*

Marek sat next to her and rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Her eyes widened as she lifted them to his face. "We'll go as soon as we can. In the meantime..." He swapped a second hungry look with Dayne. "There are some other issues we need to address."

"I-Issues?" she stuttered. An attractive pink flush spread over her face and upper chest. She fumbled with the blanket as her gaze dropped to his lap. "What issues might those be?" She sucked in an audible gasp.

His fangs lengthened with the all-too-familiar burn. "We're hungry. I kept my end of the bargain. Now it's your turn to keep yours."

She visibly swallowed then whimpered. "Oh. No."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea could not believe what she was seeing. Both Marek and Dayne had fangs! *A la* Dracula. What was up with that?

The scariest part was that those chompers could not be the fakes people donned at Halloween. One second they hadn't been there. The next they were. Neither guy had fiddled with his mouth. Their hands had been nowhere near their heads.

So she had to believe one of two things. Either she was hallucinating or vampires really did exist.

She couldn't say which she preferred. She jumped to her feet and made a beeline for the bathroom.

"Look at me," Marek demanded in a firm voice.

Damn if she could resist obeying the command. She stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to face him. Her gaze shifted to the right. It landed on his neck then climbed up over an adorably clefted chin to a set of tempting lips. Then it inched farther north, following the line of his narrow, straight nose to his eyes.

Dark eyes glittering with erotic promise.

She remembered to breathe just before she keeled over.

"You don't remember yesterday, do you?" he asked, stalking closer.

"Yesterday?" she echoed, struggling to remember what had happened thirty seconds ago.

"I'll take that as a no. Don't worry." At her side now, Marek swept aside the strands of hair tumbling over her shoulder. "We'll be gentle."

She stood frozen, suddenly overcome by desperate desire. Marek tipped his head to graze the side of her neck with his teeth. At the same moment, Dayne approached her from the other side. His body so close she could feel the heat radiating from it, he laved her shoulder with his tongue.

A thick coat of goose bumps covered her entire torso. Shivering, she clutched the blanket still loosely wrapped around her body in a fist and let her head drop back.

Firm but gentle hands guided her toward the bed. She plopped on the mattress, aware of little but the feel of Dayne's tongue blazing a slick trail of liquid fire over one shoulder, and Marek's lips, tongue and teeth doing equal damage to the right side of her neck.

Her breathing deepened to meet the increasingly desperate demand of her body, which was slowly heating up from the inside out.

And then the first shocking bolt of pain blasted up her neck. Out of reflex, she jerked to one side, only to have a second hit her on the opposite shoulder.

Sharp pain morphed into pounding agony...and then desperate desire.

Afraid to move and break whatever magical connections were responsible for the pulsing heat surging up and down her spine, she dropped the blanket and blindly reached out. She clawed at the first body her hands came into contact with.

Need, so urgent it made the soles of her feet cramp, overwhelmed her senses. She could no longer hear, touch or see. All she could do was let the mounting passion carry her away, like a wild, thrashing river.

Sometime later, she realized she was on her back. Two sets of tormenting hands were stroking her to oblivion. One was inching up her thigh, promising to reach her heated center in no time. The other was heading north from her bellybutton. She was pretty certain one of those devious limbs was about to reach her breast in one, two, threeeeeee...

*Ahhhhhh.*

A fingertip traced the seam of her nether lips, dragging hot juices up and down from clit to anus. Another tormented her nipple, stroking it into a tight, hard pebble.

Her buttocks clenched, the burn adding to the ecstasy whooshing through her body in intensifying waves. She couldn't remember another time when she'd been so aroused, so desperate for release.

These guys had magic hands. Magic!

She finally accepted the fact that all that pulsing heat and instant lust she read in romance novels could actually be for real. Until now, she'd always assumed it was a fantasy.

Her shrink was going to get an earful whenever she went back to him. If she went back to him. The idea of sticking with her two magicians had its merits.

She wanted to see them, to watch their glorious bodies, corded muscles and tight sinew, as they stroked and kissed her to heaven. Two of them! She was going to be with two men at the same time. If someone had told her this would happen a couple days ago, she would've called them insane.

Now she was the one about to go insane—though not in a bad way. The gorgeous guys, one dragging his tongue over her nipple, the other weaving a trail of kisses and nips up her inner thigh, were about to drive her completely crazy.

Hot. Tight. Trembling. Desperate.

"Mmmm..." Dayne purred, his voice thick with male satisfaction. "I love the way you taste."



She loved the way he tasted her!

Both men were nude, one kneeling on the bed beside her, the other standing between her parted thighs. Marek lifted one of her ankles and planted a tickly kiss on the inside. Dayne pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it to increase her pleasure.

Her head sloshing around in a deepening pool of desire, she admired the way the roped muscles of Dayne's shoulders bulged and stretched as he moved. He smiled when her gaze met his. "It's so hard to wait. You make it hard." He lowered the hand not busy tormenting her breast to his cock. Circling his fingers around the thick shaft, he pumped up and back. A droplet of moisture glistened on the tip.

She wanted to taste it. More than she wanted her next breath. "Dayne," she said on a sigh. Her arms felt heavy, like she'd overdosed on downers. She lifted one and pointed at his rod. "Please."

He growled, the sound feral and wicked and thoroughly erotic. "You want this?"

"Not yet." Marek flickered his tongue over the sensitive spot on the back of her knees, and a delicious tension wound up her leg to the base of her spine. She arched her back and gasped. Her pussy was burning to be filled.

Of course, being the heartless bastard that he was, Dayne decided that while she was about ready to die, he'd add to her misery by pinching both nipples until the biting pleasure-pain made her whimper and plead for mercy.

And then, not to be outdone, Marek sped up his progress on his way north to her pussy. She both sighed with relief and cried out in agony the instant his hot mouth closed over her slick folds, sending searing bolts of heat up her back.

Relief! She needed it now.

While she thrashed her head from side to side, Dayne straddled her head and bent over, offering a delectable view of his round, muscular ass, smooth-shaven balls and cock.

She licked her lips and opened her mouth to take him in. Salty-sweet. That's how he tasted. Unable to do anything but, she sucked him hard, lifting her hands and using one to cup his balls and the other to stroke up and down his shaft.

He trembled over top of her, his outstretched thigh muscles tensing into sexy, roped bulges.

She tensed when Marek parted her labia to expose her uber-sensitive clit. She knew the first swipe would likely steal her breath.

And did it ever!

"Ohhhhhh," she murmured around a mouthful of delicious man. Could it get any better than this? Seriously? Two men who looked like gods were touching her, looking at her like she was the most desirable woman on earth.

"That's it. Suck my cock, baby. Oh yeah," Dayne mumbled as he slowly pushed his hips forward and back, fucking her mouth.

Between hard sucks and light flickers of his tongue, Marek chanted, "Yes, let me taste your cream. Damn you're sweet. Give me all of it."

"Oooohh." She could feel climax prowling ever closer, like a wild animal creeping up on its prey. She both ached for release and burned to hold it off. Why couldn't this last forever? The bliss.

"You will come for us." As if to ensure his demand be met, regardless of her wishes, he thrust two fingers inside her pussy, bending them to stroke the special place inside.

She tightened her grip on Dayne's cock and sucked him deep into her mouth while consciously gripping Marek's fingers with her inner muscles.

Dayne withdrew from her, turning around to close his mouth over a nipple. His touch branded her skin as Marek's intimate strokes pushed her over the edge. Sanity fled as the first of a million pounding contractions blasted through her body in what was the most amazing climax of her life. It was beyond words. Beyond everything. And the second it was over, she hungered for another.

Marek lapped at the juices seeping from her pussy, murmuring words she couldn't quite comprehend. Then, as she felt the heat of a second orgasm gather in her stomach, he stopped. "Can we both take you?"

She blinked open her eyes, briefly wondering when she'd closed them. "Both? Is that possible?" She really hoped it was. Then she realized the only way it could possibly happen. One was going to have to fuck her ass. A quiver of anxiety shimmied up her spine. "Ohhhh. I don't know." She looked at Marek's cock. It was long and thick. She looked at Dayne's. It was at least as large as Marek's. Both were well hung.

Her untried anus puckered.

"That's gotta hurt like hell," she said with a shudder. *What am I thinking?*

"Not so much that you won't enjoy it." Marek lifted his index finger to his mouth and then, his eyes focused on hers, sucked the digit into his mouth. He withdrew it with a pop and glancing down, pressed gently at the orifice. The skin burned. She sucked in a gasp and tightened her legs, stomach and buttocks.

Dayne rolled off the bed. As she was in the midst of a fairly uncomfortable — albeit surprisingly sexy — experience, she lost track of him. He reappeared next to Marek a few seconds later, produced a bottle of lube and when Marek lifted his hand, flipped the lid and squirted the clear substance on Marek's fingers.

Marek smoothed the cool liquid on her burning perineum, concentrating his gentle touches to the area surrounding her anus. "Relax, baby. We want to make it good for you." Dayne left Marek to return to her side on the bed. He lifted her shoulders and slid underneath her. While Marek slowly breached her anus, he worked his hips under her bottom, moving inch by inch. His sweat-slicked torso glided against her back.

She tipped her hips down and clawed at the bed. More. She wanted to feel their cocks driving into her, stroking her into another orgasm. Her ass easily accommodated Marek's finger. The slow, gentle thrusts stoked the blaze building in her belly.

She cried out when he withdrew it, leaving her painfully empty.

She wasn't left to suffer long.

She felt him smooth more lube over her ass and pussy then felt the invasion of two cocks – one in her ass, one in her pussy.

Oh, good God almighty! The two men synchronized their motions. Innnn. Outttt. Innnn. Outttt.

She was going to die.

Marek added perfectly applied circles to her clit to the other incredible sensations and she quickly relinquished, letting the pulsing heat of another climax shimmy through her body.

Both men groaned as her pussy and ass rhythmically sucked them to release. On the wake of their guttural cries, they spilled their scorching seed into her pussy and ass, slowly thrusting in and out to drive it farther inside.

And when they'd all stopped twitching and pulsing and quaking and shaking, they slid out from inside her, gently positioned her between them on the bed and encircled her in their arms.

Her fanny rested against Marek's groin. His breath heated her nape. And Dayne's knee was wedged between her legs, one arm under her head, the other resting protectively on her hip.

This was heaven.

How'd she get so lucky, to end up with two to-die-for Chippendales?

## Chapter Six

"What do you mean I can't go with you?" Brea demanded, sure they were once again pulling a quick one on her. Two-timing, scheming, lying kidnappers! She'd been such a fool. Of course they weren't going to help her. Why would they?

The clues had been a ruse to delay her. And she'd bought their lies.

"Not just anyone can storm into our most sacred place and start riffling through the pages of the Book of Secrets," Dayne reasoned.

"That's right," Marek piped in as he worked his bod into a snug black t-shirt and pair of worn jeans. The soft blue cotton did wonders for the man's backside, she noted begrudgingly. "No outsider has stepped foot inside the *Zal Halirgi*. Ever. It's simply forbidden."

"But I need to see the book. How do I know if you two will look for the right thing?" *Or if you'll lie and claim you found nothing?*

"You don't." Dressed in a white ribbed pullover and black pants, Dayne looked like he'd stepped out of a magazine spread. His GQ-ish hunk-next-door good looks were nearly the mirror opposite of Marek's more rough and raw, bad-boy qualities.

They both suited her just fine, despite the fact that they were both a couple of lying wieners.

"I give my word," Marek vowed, "we'll do whatever you tell us to. With these," he added, handing her a cell phone, "we can keep in contact the entire time we're there."

"It's hardly the same. How am I going to know what to look for if I can't see anything?"

Marek shrugged. "It's the best we can do." He dragged a familiar duffle bag from the closet and tossed in some supplies. Then he gathered the clues, tucked them into an envelope. "Guess we're ready to go."

"I had a thought." Brea pointed at the envelope. "We didn't check those clues for invisible ink. What good is the Book of Secrets if we don't know yet what message we're decoding?"

Dayne nodded. "Hmmm. She has a point."

"Invisible ink?" Marek sounded skeptical. "I thought we were looking for the code in the Book of Secrets."

"See?" Brea shook her head and tsked. "You are going to be worthless to me until you get your hands on a copy of *National Treasure*."

"Worthless?" Dayne asked, an evil grin splitting his face and making her nether regions warm.

She plucked the envelope from Marek's hand and pulled the papers from it. "You guys have any lemon juice?"

"Lemon juice?" they repeated in unison.

She heaved a sigh of the weary. "Yes, of course. It was in the movie. I'll need some lemons, a hair drier and some Q-tips."

"I'll see what I can find," Marek grumbled, heading for the door.

"Thank you." She turned to Dayne. "And a laptop with internet access would come in mighty handy right now."

"That won't be a problem."

As Dayne brushed past Marek at the doorway, Marek mumbled, "Sure, you get the easy one."

Dayne simply grinned and shrugged. He returned long before Marek did, set a snazzy laptop with more bells and whistles than Dell's latest offering on the table and sat in a nearby chair to watch.

She set to work right away, Googling every keyword she could think of that might relate to the Triad, including the former owner's name, the Book of Secrets and the *Zal Halirgi*. The former, she found. The latter two, nothing, outside of a couple websites dedicated to online fantasy games and some obscure religious cult.

Interesting.

Both Chippendales had talked about the *Zal Halirgi* and book as if they were real. Were they members of that bizarre underground cult? Did they believe Christ would make his second coming in a spaceship and beam them aboard for a millennium of bliss, while rocketing through the universe?

As she surfed the 'net, she rubbed a couple of sore spots on her neck and shoulder. They were tender, achy and bruised but she couldn't remember having hurt herself.

As soon as Marek returned, a bowl of lemons in one hand, a box of Q-Tips in the other, and a hair drier wedged between one thick bicep and his rib cage, she attacked the first clue. She flipped the scrap of paper over, rubbed lemon juice all over it and then dried it to a crisp.

Nothing. No code. No secret message. No map.

She flipped it over and did the same to the front.

Again, nothing.

Frustrated and feeling time slipping away, she did a rush job on the second clue.

Nothing.

Now what? Were the clues fake? Was she using the wrong stuff to read the invisible ink? Or was the secret code somewhere else?

The tangy scent of lemons clinging to her fingers, she went back to the computer and typed *invisible ink* into the search field. She clicked on the first site, an online encyclopedia.

What was this? The writers of *National Treasure* had it wrong? Lemon juice didn't work as a reagent? She could hardly believe it! Didn't those movie scriptwriters research stuff?

"UV light?" She went to the fluorescent desk lamp and held the paper in front of the bulb. A series of dim, shadowed figures appeared on the back of the paper. "A-ha! There it is. Black light. I bet that'll work." A smile of relief pulling at her cheeks, she turned to Dayne. "I don't suppose you have one of those funky black lights sitting around?"

"Uh...?" Dayne said.

She glanced at the clock. It was a little after seven. "You can buy one just about anywhere, K-Mart, Meijers, Radio Shack. Do you know where one of those stores are?"

"Yes," Marek said when Dayne gave her a blank stare. "If you had any doubt I was willing to help, you shouldn't anymore. I'll be back in a bit."

She caught his wrist as he turned toward the door, and tugged. When he glanced over his shoulder, she said, "Thank you."

A gentle smile warmed his features. "You're welcome."

While he was gone, Dayne kept her from climbing the walls by chitchatting about his family, the history between him and Marek—she sensed he hadn't given her the whole story there—and his computer programming company. She intentionally kept her distance from him, since it seemed that the minute he got within five feet of her, her hormones started surging through her body and thoughts of a carnal nature flooded her brain. At least if she kept a good seven to ten feet between them, she could think about more than how adorable his butt looked in his pants or how the pure white of his shirt complimented his tanned complexion.

The internet was all but useless, so her hands were figuratively tied. When there was a lull in the conversation, she set a course around the room. Bed, door, bathroom, desk then back to the bed again. "How much longer do you think he'll be?"



"Hard saying. If he doesn't get back here soon, we'll be waiting until tomorrow to go to the *Zal Halirgi*."

"Why's that?"

"They'll be closed."

"Closed? That's worse than banker's hours. I thought you said they were opening at about six. What is this place anyway? *Zal Halirgi*? Is it like...a church of some kind?"

"A church? Not hardly," he said around a rumbling chuckle. Little quivers of sensual awareness rippled through her body. "The most sacred place doesn't have a lot of traffic, since its only purpose is to hold our most treasured documents. For that reason, it's only open to visitors for an hour a day."

"So how much time, exactly, do we have?"

He studied the clock. "About twenty minutes."

"Shit!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Marek stared at the green glowing numbers on the van's digital clock. Time was running out and he was stuck cooling his heels in gridlock, thanks to a multi-car pile-up.

Stupid humans who didn't know how to drive on wet roads. You'd think they'd be more careful, since they were mortal.

He finally broke clear of the snarl and lead-footed his way home. The *Zal Halirgi* would be closed in twelve minutes.

If the light didn't work, they would lose a whole night. If only they'd thought to tackle this earlier. Then again, he wouldn't have been able to go to the store until after twilight anyway. The Sons of the Twilight received only one dose of the medication that allowed them to walk in sunlight each year. It was carefully controlled by the Council to avoid the kind of abuses they'd seen in centuries past.

Of course, since he'd known he'd have to find a blood-mate this year, he'd chosen to reserve that precious dose for that day.

Home. At last. With no time to waste.

The black-light bulb in a white plastic bag, he raced inside, ran up the stairs and rushed into the room.

This had to work.

"Here you are," he said, breathless from running, from worry and from the erotic hunger that blasted him in the gut like a well-placed sucker-punch. Would the hunger ever ease?

Brea snatched the bag and, hesitating for a moment, turned and dashed toward the nearest table lamp, simultaneously unwrapping the bulb.

Clearly Dayne had warned her time was short.

She unscrewed the bulb and replaced it with the black light, switched on the light then instructed Dayne to cut all the other lights in the room. Instantly, they were enveloped in an eerie blue glow.

Dayne's white shirt shone brightly, as did his teeth when he opened his mouth to speak, "How's this supposed to do anything?"

Brea lifted the first scrap of paper up to the light and even from a distance, Marek could read the series of numbers scrawled over the entire surface. She'd done it, figured out how to read the code. He had to admire her sharp mind. "There we go! I can read them. Pen! I need a pen and paper. Anything."

"Desk drawer," Marek said.

"Of course." The drawer opened with a scrape of wood against wood. The sound of pencils and pens clattered in the plastic tray as she sifted through them. "Got it. God, I hope you can read this. I'm writing so fast," she said as she alternated between reading numbers and recording them on a fresh piece of paper. Finally, she jumped to her feet, thrust the paper at him and shooed them both toward the door, "Go, go, go!"

"We'll be back soon," Marek said over his shoulder. He held his cell phone and the code in one hand, fished for the van's keys in the other. Dayne loped along behind him, silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea fingered Marek's spare cell phone as she stared at the door, shut behind the guys after they'd left. Her nerves were tied into tight knots. Anxiety rushed up and down her spine. She couldn't sit still. Couldn't stand still either.

Ack! Waiting was agony.

She beat a permanent path from the bed to the door as she paced. Back and forth. Back and forth. After some two hundred round-trips, she decided to try the door, just for kicks. No doubt it would be locked.

Unlocked.

Unlocked? Hot damn!

She tossed the cell phone on the bed, threw open the door and dashed into the hallway. Down the stairs. Through a foyer to the front door.

Was this some kind of trap? Did they have the front door rigged to keep her inside? That was stupid. Of course not. They hadn't had time.

Whoo hoo! They'd forgotten to lock her door. She was free! Freeeeeeee!

She yanked open the front door and dashed outside. The crisp night air felt wonderful. It smelled wonderful too, of wet grass and flowers and nature. Freedom!

Ahhhhhh.

She stood in the middle of the huge, immaculately manicured front lawn. Her Chippendales either spent *beaucoup* hours working on their lawn or paid a service to handle it for them. Not a twig was out of place on the shrubs, the lawn was so lush and thick it looked like a carpet and the flower beds, lit with a row of adorable copper lanterns, were overflowing with gorgeous blooms. The crabapple tree standing sentry at

the driveway's end was covered with white blossoms that seemed to glow in the moonlight.

Enough admiring the landscaping. Now that she was free, how was she going to get home? She had no idea where she was. Plans whirring through her mind, she hiked about halfway down the loooong gravel driveway before she stopped.

Was she making a big mistake by leaving now? If Marek wasn't pulling a quick one on her, and there really was a *Zal Halirgi*, and they really were following a bona fide clue, she'd be an idiot to walk away now.

What to do?

She wandered slowly down the rest of the drive, which opened up onto a rural road cutting through thick forest. Looked pretty remote. She could be walking for miles before she ran across a neighbor.

Better head back.

She did a one-eighty and trudged back to the house. Luckily, she realized as she tromped across the porch, she hadn't locked herself out. She let herself in the building but refused to head back up to her room. She'd spent way too many hours cooped up in there already. Besides, her new freedom provided the perfect opportunity to snoop.

After walking around the living room, opening the drapes and windows to let some of that wonderful fresh air inside, she started inspecting her surroundings more closely. If she couldn't leave then she'd keep herself occupied. Maybe she'd learn something handy about her captors, even discover some information she could use later.

She headed for the dark walnut bookcases lining the living room wall first. There were a few books—James Rollins, Dan Brown...Anne Rice?

Her Chippendales liked vampire novels?

A hazy image flashed through her mind—of eyes dark with hunger. White teeth, sharp and elongated, like a dog's canines glittering in dim light.

Weird.

The achy spots on her neck and shoulder throbbed. Wincing, she rubbed at the pain. A shiver snaked up her spine.

Was that image some kind of memory? From a dream maybe? Or a movie she'd watched a long time ago?

Cold. She wrapped her arms around herself and hurried to the window. The chilly, damp air wafting through the windows, stirring the drapes wasn't helping. Window closed, she headed back to the bookshelf.

Further over were some more books, nonfiction. Again, the subject matter was vampires. Ick. Vampire movies seriously creeped her out. She'd barely managed to sit through *Interview with a Vampire* the one and only time she'd tried to watch it.

Another chill charged up her spine. The hairs on her nape stood on end. She scrunched up her shoulders and tightened her arms around herself. She was getting a serious case of the willies. Time to move on.

The kitchen. That had to be a vampire-free zone.

As it turned out, it was not only a vampire-free zone but also a food-free zone.

And then she remembered what they'd said immediately after kidnapping her—talking about her need to “feed” as if it was a foreign thing to them.

Maybe eating wasn't entirely strange to the Chippendales, but storing and preparing food at home most certainly was. She searched the fridge and every cupboard and didn't find so much as a breadcrumb or bottle of beer. Her old college boyfriend hadn't been anywhere close to Mr. Betty Crocker but he usually had a bag of chips and some Budweisers on hand. This was bizarre.

The hairs on her arms decided to stand on end too.

Rubbing a shudder away, she headed toward the foyer, passing though a dark-paneled office housing a gorgeous desk and more matching bookcases. She poked around the uber-tidy room. There wasn't a scrap of paper to be found, not a utility bill or even piece of forgotten junk mail. The trash bin was empty. The desktop, polished to

a gloss, was empty. She didn't find a single photograph or family memento. It was completely devoid of life.

Who were these guys? And where'd they come from? She climbed the stairs, her hand tracing the top of the mahogany stair rail. Time to check out their bedrooms.

People didn't just materialize out of nowhere. They had pasts, families, parents, siblings, jobs and childhoods. Somewhere in this house there had to be some hints into who her captors were. And she was determined to ferret them out.

For some reason, it mattered to her.

But just as she shuffled into the first room, flipped on the light switch and swept up the one and only photograph she'd found thus far in the house, the shrill ring of the cell phone caught her ear.

Marek? Had to be.

Did he have news? Had they solved the code?

The mystery of her abductors forgotten, she raced back to her room, eager to catch the call.

## Chapter Seven

It couldn't be!

It was impossible.

She was dead.

Long dead. Slaughtered decades ago.

Dayne's eyes tracked the Watcher as the robed, hooded figure trotted down the corridor in the opposite direction from where they were headed. Her galloping gait was eerily familiar, an unsettling reminder of his sister.

It was the lively bounce in her step, so unusual a trait in a Watcher, even a young one.

But Rane couldn't be a Watcher. Life-long servants of The Keeper, they were chosen before birth, raised from infancy in seclusion and taught the sacred rituals before they could speak. Before they could know life outside of the *Zal Halirgi*.

Up until her death, Rane had enjoyed a normal life as the pampered second child, the youngest of two.

"This way," their guide, The Keeper, murmured, pushing a heavy door open and motioning with his hand for Dayne to pass through the portal ahead of him.

Dayne stepped past with care, fearful of stepping on The Keeper's golden garment. Resembling a medieval robe, complete with the huge sleeves that dragged on the floor as he walked, it conveyed the importance of the man's station far more clearly than his withered and wasting form did.

"We're sorry for coming so late," Marek said, following behind. "We were held up—"

“No need to apologize.” The Keeper waved a heavily wrinkled hand, motioning Marek past before following them. Pulling the door closed behind them, he stopped a mere footstep inside the inner sanctum, the room where the Book of Secrets was displayed. “It isn’t the first time. I will remain with you until your task is complete.” The Keeper urged them forward, toward the crystal pedestal sitting in the middle of the room. A single shaft of pure white light from some unseen lamp overhead cut a blade through the oppressive darkness. The floor, ceiling and walls, black as pitch, seemed to vanish into endless shadows.

Dayne’s heart raced as he watched Marek gently lift the gilt cover off the Book of Secrets, revealing the black and red tome underneath.

What were these clues? How had Marek found them? And who was sending them?

Was there a traitor within the Rebellion or was this treasure hunt a ruse? While Marek was preoccupied upon their arrival, explaining the nature of their visit to a Watcher, Dayne had stepped away to contact his most trusted allies. None had claimed responsibility for the cryptic messages. Nor did they know who might have sent them.

If by some chance the clues were real and did lead Marek to the Triad, his allies—his dearest friends—might be discovered. They could be sentenced to death.

That was one risk he couldn’t live with.

With thoughts of his sister clouding his mind, and Marek beside him, searching the Book of Secrets for the key to the Rebellion’s failure, he planned his next move.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nothing. He could find nothing tying the Book of Secrets to the numeric code Brea had transcribed for him. Not in the beginning. Nor at the end.

Was she mistaken? Were they looking in the wrong place? The book was too heavy to lift so searching the platform it lay upon was impossible. His hope faltering, he looked at Dayne, who looked as puzzled as he felt.



There was nothing to be seen on the walls. At least, not without perhaps that special light.

He hadn't thought to bring it along.

He tried the cell phone again. He'd tried to contact Brea just after they'd arrived, but she hadn't answered.

It rang once, twice, three times. She wasn't going to catch it before it switched over to voice mail.

Where was she?

He punched the button, cutting off the call and handed the phone to Dayne.

"I'll keep trying," he promised.

"Thanks." He stared at the numbers, written in looping, feminine handwriting. She'd seemed so sure about this. Seemed so sure he'd be able to solve it.

She'd looked at him like he was her savior.

He didn't want to fail her. But hell, what did she expect? He was no one's savior. Case in point—he was about to let Kaden down too.

"Still no answer. Perhaps she's in the bathroom. I'll try again in a few minutes." Dayne pocketed the phone and tipped his head, indicating the paper with the code. "Maybe it was just a prank?"

He refused to believe that. No one but he and Kaden knew the Triad's curse had been activated. He and Kaden...and of course, whoever was responsible for the curse.

Could Dayne be the culprit?

A huge weight landed in his gut.

There'd never been any question about Dayne's feelings for Marek's family. It started so many years ago, during the raid. Dayne's parents had been involved with a fringe political group who'd wanted to expose the Sons of the Twilight to the human political powers, thinking they'd gain financially.

It had been a terrible day. A day no Son of the Twilight would ever forget, now that it had been recorded in the Book of Secrets. No doubt Dayne hadn't forgotten either. Or forgiven.

But surely he knew what a catastrophe it would be for Kaden to die.

Marek narrowed his gaze to the paper. They were columns of numbers, three numbers in each series, separated by dashes.

Could they be page numbers?

The first one was one thousand forty-three. He gently turned the pages, stopping on the designated page. He searched the page for a sign, a symbol, a clue.

Just lots of words.

He skimmed the page. It was a chapter about the laws of the humans. Nothing about the Triad or the curse.

He closed the book and shook his head. To think he was this close—inches from the answer—and yet he lacked the brainpower to see it. He had never felt so helpless.

He looked at the column again. If the first was a page number, what could the second one be? He looked down at the book, willing it to declare its secrets.

There were page numbers. Paragraphs. Lines. Letters.

The second number was twenty-eight. He counted down to the twenty-eighth line then over.

Shoot! Not enough letters in the line.

He went backwards. Last number as the page. Second number as the line. Third number as the letter.

The result—B.

He did the same with the second line of numbers. Then the third.

B. T. R.

Wasn't making much sense yet. He tried a few more.

H. U. P.

Damn.

He kept going, hoping if he took it back to Brea, she'd be able to figure out what it meant.

T. W. E. I. N. B. C. P. Y. I...

No use trying to read it. Obviously the letters were shuffled. Or he'd done something wrong.

Dayne was standing next to The Keeper, by the door. Their conversation, carried out in hushed whispers, didn't quite reach his ears. Dayne was nodding, his expression dark, his eyes cast down. His hands were balled into fists and tucked behind his back.

A trickle of concern wormed its way through Marek's insides. Could he trust Dayne?

Seeming to sense Marek's gaze on him, Dayne looked his way. Their gazes tangled and held, and an invisible current of energy charged between them. Dayne's lips parted then the corners lifted into a semi-smile. "Are we finished here?"

"I guess." Marek crossed the room, headed for the door. He wasn't convinced he'd solved the code but what else could the numbers mean? "I'm sorry to keep you so late," he said to The Keeper who stood sentry, bent and brittle as a dried twig, a notable contrast to Dayne's youthful strength and vitality.

"It was no trouble." The Keeper's eyes, the shade of morning fog, met his. "You found your answer?"

"I hope so."

"As I said, you may stay as long as you need."

Marek stopped walking. Why was he in such a hurry to leave? If the Keeper was in no hurry to chase them out, he needed to take his time. This was his only chance to solve the clue. The paper crackled as he unfolded it again to take one last look at the code. What else could the numbers mean?

The end is just the beginning.

*Unless...*

Could it be?

"I think I'll go back and take one last look." Marek rushed back to the book and, starting at the last page instead of the first, looked up the first letter. The second. The third, fourth and fifth.

T. O. T. H. E.

Tothe? To the? Words! They'd made words. Relief rushed through his body in soothing waves, sweeping his sagging spirits up from the murky depths they'd sunk to.

He'd done it! He'd found the answer. Maybe his brother wouldn't suffer the same end as their father.

If only the Triad had been destroyed as it was supposed to have been. He'd learned only days before Kaden was struck ill that the Triad had not only survived the last attempt to destroy it but had been tracked down by the Rebellion and stolen.

"I'll be just a few minutes more," he said over his shoulder.

The Keeper nodded, his lined face brightening. "Time is nothing to me. It has far greater value to you, Son of the Twilight."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea checked the cell phone for the hundredth time in the last hour. The phone had rung only once and when she'd tried to call the number back, her call was switched immediately to voice mail. Either Marek was on his phone or it was turned off.

Left to fret and worry and suffer, she'd gone back to snooping. She'd discovered the house was Dayne's and that Marek was only a guest, not a resident as she'd first assumed. She'd found only one photograph in the entire house, the picture of a beautiful woman, enclosed in a beautiful carved frame and sitting in the place of honor in Dayne's bedroom—on top of his dresser.

Every girl knew that spot was reserved for only one woman—the one he loved, girlfriend, wife, ex-whatever.

Niggling jealousy skittered through her nerves, warming her cheeks.

Who cared if Dayne loved another woman?

Who cared if she was fricking perfect, with the cutest nose and the most amazing eyes...and lips that had to have seen more than their share of collagen injections.

It was so easy to hate a woman who looked that good. Probably not a hint of cellulite on her butt either. Some women were so lucky.

God, to think he'd seen that woman naked, and then her. He most likely had compared their bodies, that woman's smooth perfection to her own lumpy, bumpy imperfection. Was enough to make a girl sick. Or give her a whopping headache.

She went to the bathroom in search of pain relief.

Outside of a couple toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste, the medicine cabinet was as empty as the refrigerator. No shaving cream or razors. No hair products or clippers or tweezers or combs. No cold medicines or Q-tips.

And no pain relief.

What was with these guys?

Her head was going to explode. She got a headache after having sex with these guys? Weird. Her pounding cranium squeezed between her palms, she dragged her stressed and weary body down the hall to her room. But just as she turned the corner, she heard the rattle of the front door's lock, followed by the wonderful sound of two Chippendale's voices.

Her head be damned, she had to hear what happened!

## **Chapter Eight**

Hours later, spent scouring the web for sites on ciphers and codes, then huddled over scrambled strings of numbers and letters, they had the code decoded and the riddle solved. Well, Marek said he thought he might have the riddle solved. Brea, who still suffered from a wicked migraine despite the Excedrin Dayne had so sweetly volunteered to buy, had no idea what the riddle meant. Where the heck did the sun always shine?

It was the wee hours by the time they'd wrapped up the night's work. The wannabe private investigator in her screamed to head out immediately to find the next clue but her body refused to budge. She was beyond exhausted. Her eyes felt like they'd been sandblasted—dry and itchy. Her eyelids refused to lift fully between loooong blinks. She could swear lead weights were tied to her arms. And her back was tight and stiff.

Yet when she finally allowed herself to go to bed, her mind refused to shut down. Thoughts of the past couple of days kept the gears whirring along at top speed. The fact that she was sandwiched between two stunning, naked men made it that much more difficult for her to apply the brakes.

Two men who had kept their word. Thanks to them, she was one enormous step closer to finding the Triad.

With a sigh, she flopped onto her back.

Dayne—either trying to make nice since that little tying-up fiasco or genuinely a sensitive man—rolled onto his side and smiled at her. He stroked her arm, light touches, soothing. Sweet. “What’s wrong?” He lifted her hand and flattened it between his. Then, twining their fingers, lifted it to place a kiss on each fingertip.

His eyes never left hers.

“Can’t fall asleep.”

“Really?”

She knew what was happening. It was in the way he pursed his lips and the way his eyes glittered.

She was all for it. Fuck her into a coma. She wouldn't complain. In fact, she might thank him in the morning after enjoying several hours of sound sleep.

“I can think of a way to help you fall asleep,” Dayne offered, smoothing a hand up her arm.

“Sleeping pills?” she asked, letting her eyelids shutter out the distraction of sight so she could focus on the simple pleasure found in his slow, sensual touches.

“Something better,” he whispered in her ear. His breath tickled the sensitive skin under her earlobe, making her shudder and sigh.

“Uh...” It was so hard to be cute and clever when her brain was melting like ice cream in a blast furnace.

She whimpered as a second set of hands got into the action. The guys undressed her then eased her onto her stomach. One performed magic on her neck and shoulders, rubbing out the kinks with the skill of a professional masseur while the other rubbed the soles of her feet.

It didn't take long before she was feeling soft and girly and oh-so hot. She shuddered at the memory of both of them fucking her, one powerful body beneath her, the other over top. Never in a million years had she ever imagined herself wanting to be with two men, now she was wondering if it would be a downer going back to having only one lover.

There were definite benefits to an extra set of hands...and a second mouth...and other extra parts.

Marek eased her knees apart and teased her slit with fingers and tongue while Dayne tormented her breasts. Together, the sensations, the pleasure, the heat, the

tension coiling in her belly, nearly drove her to madness. She was too worn out to be patient. She just wanted release and she wanted it now.

“Fuck me,” she demanded. “Fuck me now.”

Marek pushed her legs back, spreading them wide, and claimed her with one stroke. Strong hands squeezed, pushed, dominated. Hips pistoned his thick cock in and out.

A moan of pure bliss broke through her pursed lips.

Now positioned somewhere at the foot of the bed – watching? – Dayne echoed her, with a deep, rumbling groan.

Marek’s intimate strokes settled into a perfectly delicious pace, neither too slow nor too fast. She blinked open her eyes to watch his beautiful body work, knowing what a glorious sight those flexing muscles would make.

Then she realized what she was seeing and gasped, shocked into a powerful orgasm. For an instant, the image of Dayne’s hands cupping Marek’s shoulders as he drove into him from behind seemed burned into her mind like a photograph on film. It seemed to feed the heat pulsing through her body in wild waves. She opened her eyes again. She had to see. She had to watch. She’d never seen anything like it. Marek’s cock was still gliding in and out of her, slowly, lubricated by the juices scenting the air musky sweet. Behind him, Dayne knelt on one knee, the other knee bent so his thigh pressed against the side of Marek’s hip. From her vantage, she couldn’t see Dayne’s cock as it fucked Marek’s ass, but she could hear the slap, slap of skin striking skin.

And she could plainly see the rapture on both their faces. That was one vision she never wanted to forget. And luckily for her—after all, how many girls saw such things?—the sight of two male faces lost in erotic bliss was the last thing she saw that night before she finally fell into a deep slumber.

\* \* \* \* \*



It was hard to be mad at her Chippendales the next morning, given the activities of the night before, but she was pretty close to furious. Furious and tingly. Furious and giddy.

"I am so tired of you two telling me how I can't do anything." She stood in the middle of the bedroom, totally naked—she was past the point of caring about her cottage-cheese thighs—hands on hips, eyes narrowed to little slits and a menacing glare focused on Marek's ear. It was the only part of his anatomy she could look at without softening.

She was so damn weak!

They were still lying in bed. Marek's leg was thrown over Dayne's hip. The rumpled sheet barely covered Marek's adorable ass then wound in a twisted bunch between their bodies and up over Dayne's torso.

Eye. Candy. Yum.

"Would you two wake up?" she shouted, annoyed by their tired act. She was up and ready to go—well, not exactly ready to go—but she was vertical. It was almost eleven. Time was a-wastin'. They had clues to find. And unlike her nocturnal Chippendales, she worked better in daylight.

When they continued to ignore her, she stomped into the bathroom. She'd give them another twenty minutes. Then they were getting up or she was going to physically remove them from the bed.

How the hell would she do that?

She cranked on the shower. A bath in cold water. That would do the trick.

As long as she didn't mind sleeping in a wet bed tonight. *If* she was still there tonight.

What if she found the Triad today? Then what? She'd be able to leave, return to her safe and peaceful former life.

She'd have to take the Triad back to its owner. And then she'd go to her apartment. She had plants to water. Dust bunnies to slay.

Wow. Her life seemed so...lame.

Suddenly less enthusiastic about the day's possibilities, she showered then toweled dry. The temptation to climb back into that warm and cozy spot between her Chippendales was almost too much for her. But she resisted. She went to the closet and found herself yet another pair of huge sweatpants that almost fell off. She inhaled Marek's scent as she pulled on a Detroit Lions t-shirt.

Would he miss this old shirt? Wasn't like the Lions were good or anything.

She plopped onto the bed to pull on some socks, taking a second to rub away the ache in her neck and the knot in her left calf. Must be lack of sleep. She'd had the weirdest aches and pains the last few days.

"Guys. I'm hungry. I need to eat." Understatement. She was starved.

Two low growling rumbles came from the bed. One of them said something like, "Should have bought more last night..." and the other came back with, "It was your turn. I was trying to solve that damn clue."

"I checked the kitchen. There's not so much as a Pop-Tart in this joint. What do you two eat?" Come to think of it, she had yet to see either of them consume anything, not even a glass of water or a protein bar. "Is someone going to go buy me an Egg McMuffin or something? Dayne?"

His head poked up from under the sheet and he looked at her with tired, blood-shot eyes. "Can't, babe. Sorry. But I'll call in an order frooooooom..." A yawn dragged out the last part of the word before he continued, "The restaurant down the street. They deliver." And then his head fell back down, dead weight.

Good grief. If the guy was that worn out, then she could go get her own food. She'd lived alone for years. She could take care of herself.

She searched both their pants pockets for car keys and money. Feeling optimistic, she took the clue with her. Then, not exactly thrilled with the prospect of being seen in public dressed as she was, she scurried around, hunting down her own clothing and shoes. She found everything but her shirt in Dayne's bedroom closet.

Really. Had it been necessary to hide the rest of her stuff all this time? She wasn't so vain that some poorly fitting sweats would've stopped her from escaping if she'd had the chance. Grumbling about kidnappers who underestimated their captives, she gave up the sweats, opting for her jeans, pulled on her shoes and headed out to the garage.

It felt so good to be out among the real world again. She drove the enormous white van to Big Boy's for some breakfast. While she scarfed down an absolutely scrumptious omelet, she studied the clue, every word.

What did it mean?

*To the place go thee where the sun never sets,*

*Past worlds that guard a rival's darkest secrets.*

*A twist to the left brings thine treasure in sight.*

*But a wrong turn and darkness defeats Twilight.*

There was obviously a theme of astronomy—the sun, worlds or planets. She could think of at least two places where there might be some kind of model of the solar system, both of them science museums that were open to the public. But why would anyone risk hiding something that valuable where it might be found by anyone—a fifth-grader on a school field trip, a tourist from Timbuktu, a group of suburban moms dragging hyperactive toddlers through the museum to gain a few moments of peace.

But if it wasn't a public place, something the average girl would know about, how could the person who'd supplied the clue think she'd solve it? She couldn't possibly know if somebody had a solar system painted on a bedroom wall in some subdivision off Canton Center Road. It was feasible. But impossible for her to know about. She had to assume the clue's writer knew this.

After paying her check, she drove to the closest science museum, about twenty minutes away. She parked down the street in the public parking structure, tromped the block and a half to the museum, forked over the eight-dollar entry fee and wound through rooms full of themed science exhibits. Weather. Machines. Chemistry. The space exhibit was on the third floor, housed in a room with glow-in-the-dark stars painted on black walls. A huge model of the solar system hung about ten feet over her head, suspended several feet below the ceiling by cables.

Okay. So if this was the place, where was she supposed to look? A twist to the left? From what point?

She did a three-sixty, looking for a hint, a symbol, a sign. The walls were full of hands-on exhibits, meant to be manipulated by children with sticky fingers. No one in their right mind would hide a valuable treasure in one of those.

Besides the door through which she'd entered, there was only one other door. Depending upon which direction she was facing when she stood under the planets, the door could be on her left.

It was worth a try.

Locked.

Why did that not surprise her?

She had no tools. No credit cards, not that the old card-in-the-crack trick worked for her anyway. She hadn't been able to get herself in her own front door when she'd accidentally locked herself out last winter. She'd have to use her brain.

She had an idea.

She went back down to the information desk and informed the elderly woman posted there she'd accidentally lost her wedding ring under the door.

The woman was all too happy to call the manager to open the door.

Success!

Brea followed the manager back up to the solar system room, filling every moment they were together with profuse apologies and stories of the last time she'd lost her non-existent wedding ring.

Politely listening, he nodded, pushed the key into the door's lock and opened the door.

It led to the tiniest closet that had ever existed. Tiny and most definitely empty.

Still not ready to give up, she dropped on hands and knees—lost-treasure hunting was not for the vain or easily embarrassed—and searched the floor with her hands. Was there a loose floorboard? A trap door? "I can't believe it isn't in here. It must've fallen in a crack or rolled further back," she explained, as she ran her hands over every inch of the floor. "I'm so sorry. Am I keeping you from something important?" She forced a tear to her eye before looking over her shoulder. A little sympathy could come in handy.

He twisted his mouth into a semi-snarl. "If you'll kindly close the door when you're through, I'll come back later to lock it."

Yes! That was exactly what she'd hoped he do. Didn't want to look too happy though. Her eyes stinging as she forced more tears, she nodded, "Absolutely. Thank you."

As soon as she was alone, she set about searching every inch of the closet's walls, floor and sloping ceiling.

Nothing. Shoot!

Was she at the wrong place? The wrong room? The wrong building? Thankfully, the museum wasn't hosting any school groups and the solar system room, being at the very top of the building, was empty except for her. It gave her plenty of time to search the room.

Over an hour later, defeated and frustrated, she left.

Where to next? Back to the house? Back to her place? The clue playing through her head like a stuck song, she walked back to the car. The multi-storied, concrete and steel garage was quiet and dark, save the murky yellow light oozing from the fixtures dotting the cement walls at regular intervals, and the occasional distant squeal of tires or blast of a horn from the nearby road. Her senses alert, she hurried down the narrow alley toward the stairs, housed in a closed section in one corner. She clambered up the metal staircase then pushed through the door marked with a huge three. Third level above ground.

She never felt safe in these garages. They were creepy. Dark. She was alone. Surrounded by thick concrete walls and thousands of empty cars. How easy would it be for someone to knock her in the head and have their way with her?

Jittery and chilled from both nerves and the cool, damp air, she rushed toward the van. Had to be parked on the far end, opposite the stairs, of course.

She had a funny tingly feeling between her shoulder blades. Was someone following her? She whipped around and listened, figuring if someone were following she'd either see or hear them try to duck behind a car.

Nothing. Okay, she was just being paranoid.

A little less petrified, she continued walking. A heavy sigh of relief slipped through her lips when she reached the van and hooked her fingers under the door's handle.

Something flew past her ear, something tiny and fast. She ducked out of instinct. An instant later, when a hole the size of a bullet punched through the windshield, she knew what that something had been.

Someone was shooting a gun? At her? Why?

In full panic mode, she dragged open the door and hurried into the vehicle. Staying low, and praying like she had never prayed before, she fumbled with the keys, stuffing them into the ignition. The passenger side window exploded, the pebbled safety glass showering down on her. Another bullet whirled through the air and hit the windshield from the rear, creating a second ring of shattered glass next to the first.

She couldn't move.

She couldn't breathe.

It was over. She was dead meat.

Was this how it was going to end for her? Had she spent all those years hiding in her apartment to be shot and killed in a parking garage?

Hell no!

Her chest on the passenger seat, she scooted toward the driver's side, working her legs down under the dash. The second she found the pedals, she hit the gas and jammed the vehicle into reverse. The vehicle jolted backward, striking something hard that went thump.

Ha! Had she hit the son-of-a-bitch? Knocked him out? She hoped so! She changed positions, allowing herself to sit up so she could steer as she continued backing out of the parking spot. Using the driver's side mirror as a guide, she cranked the wheel to the left, turning the vehicle to the right and punched the gas. The right side of the van raised then fell, first the rear then the front. Bump, bump.

Her insides surged up her throat. She stomped on the brakes. The van wasn't traveling fast, so it lurched to a sudden stop. "Please tell me I didn't just run over a human being." Sure, she hadn't been sorry for knocking the would-be killer out, but killing them...oh no. She was not a killer.

She sat very still, eyes straight ahead, fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly her hands were numb. She listened, not sure whether she wanted to hear someone moving outside or not. For sure, she didn't want to hear any more gunfire.

What to do? Drive away, saving her hide but possibly leaving a human being lying near death on the ground? Or check and see if she'd indeed run over someone?

God, she didn't want to get out. Either way, she figured she wasn't going to like what she saw. If she were watching this scene on television right now, she'd be screaming at the stupid heroine, calling her too stupid to live for even thinking about

getting out of the vehicle. In the movies, the chick who did that got the ax. Quite literally.

But in real life, it was different. She wasn't an animal. If she hurt someone, the human being in her demanded she at least call for help.

She took a few deep breaths and twisted around in her seat, sneaking a glance at the passenger-side mirror. She saw nothing but the reflected image of a bank of parked cars and a concrete wall. No crazy murderer with a hockey mask and a weapon in each hand.

She inched higher, trying to see a few more inches of the ground in the mirror. Nothing. She lifted her foot off the brake, shifted into drive and let the vehicle roll forward a few feet, her gaze bouncing back and forth between the view out the shot-out windshield and the reflection in the mirror.

There was something on the ground. Something dark. That looked a lot like a person.

Oh God.

She turned around in her seat, adjusted the angle of the mirror, and while staring at the form lying sprawled on the ground, hit the horn. It, he, whatever, didn't move. Didn't twitch. Didn't jump. No human being was that good at playing dead.

She fumbled for the phone in her pocket, checked to make sure it was powered up. She even dialed 9-1-1, although she didn't put the call through yet. She wanted to make sure she hadn't just run over a bag of clothes or something first. She shifted the vehicle into park.

The phone at ready, she inched open the driver's side door, stepped out onto the running board and dropped her head, looking under the vehicle for feet.

It appeared no one was hiding around the back of the van. She placed one foot then the other on the ground and slowly, cautiously, left the safety of the vehicle.



"I-I have a gun," she lied, knowing it was probably pointless. "Don't move or I'll shoot." She took one, two, three steps forward and stopped.

It was a woman.

Still holding the gun. Sort of.

Her face was ashen.

Her eyes were staring straight ahead. Sightless. One pupil huge, the other a pinpoint.

Dead.

The air thinned. The world whirled around her head, making her feel like she was on a runaway carnival ride. For some reason, all she could think to do was snap a picture of the dead killer with the phone's digital camera. Then, sitting in the van, she called the police, "Hello, I'd like to report an accident," she told the dispatcher with a shaking voice. "I h-hit someone. I think she's dead."

## **Chapter Nine**

"It can't be her." Marek stared blindly at the wall, the phone resting in his palm. "W-Why?"

"Who is it?" Dayne asked, first looking at Marek and then at Brea when he didn't respond.

Brea shrugged. "I don't know. The police wouldn't tell me anything. They just asked me the same questions over and over, and left me sitting there for ages, wondering if they were going to arrest me for vehicular manslaughter or something. All I know is that she is dead. I ran her over, but thankfully the authorities decided it wasn't intentional. I've never had an accident before. I've never killed someone before either." She placed her hand on Marek's arm. He was still looking dazed. Confused. "Marek?"

Staring straight ahead, he slowly shook his head and extended his arm toward Dayne. "It makes no sense."

Dayne took the phone and lifted it to view the photograph captured on the tiny screen. "Ohhhh..."

"What makes no sense? Who is she?" Brea urged. "She shot at me. No one has ever shot at me before. She almost killed me. Why?"

Her words seemed to finally jolt Marek out of the spell he'd fallen under. His expression cleared, the confusion lifting. "My brother's fiancée Lena. Our future queen."

"Queen?" Brea repeated. There were no queens in the United States. Were her Chippendales legal citizens of some other country? "Queen of what?"

"Sons of the Twilight," Dayne explained, handing the phone back to Marek. "I agree. This makes no sense—"

"Sons of what?"

"The Twilight," Marek repeated, nodding to Dayne. "Must be some mistake. Maybe she picked up the gun when the real shooter dropped it."

"Sons of the Twilight," Brea echoed over the guys' conversation. "Is that some kind of secret society? Like the Masons?"

"Kind of," Marek said.

"Not really," Dayne said, nodding. "Yes. Now that makes sense. She must have picked up the gun after the shooter ran. And of course, Brea wouldn't know that since she was ducking low to avoid being shot."

"Yeah," Marek agreed distantly. He picked up the phone again and studied the grainy photograph. "Maybe if we printed a copy, we could see the detail a little better."

"Doubt it. These old phones don't take the best quality pictures. They're less than one megapixel."

"Damn. I'd like to know for sure. I should tell Kaden about this."

Suddenly feeling like a third wheel, Brea watched the guys talk about the photograph, the woman, what they should do next.

"Are you sure you weren't hurt?" Marek asked, his gaze sweeping up and down her body. "You shouldn't have left by yourself. You have no idea how dangerous that was."

"I tried to wake you two up but you wouldn't budge. It was late. Broad daylight. And you two were dead to the world. What are you? Nocturnal or something?"

The two guys swapped sidelong glances.

"What?"

They both shook their heads.

"I was starving but neither of you could be bothered with getting me some food." She continued, her rant gaining momentum, "What did you expect? And why the hell don't you have anything to eat in this place?"

Frowning, Dayne crossed his arms over his chest. "I told you to order some carry-out—"

"Correction," she interrupted. "You said you'd order carry-out. Besides, I'm tired of that place. That's all I've had since you brought me here. A girl likes a little variety, you know. And while you two were getting some beauty sleep, I thought I'd solve the clue. I didn't expect anyone to chase after me with guns blazing."

Marek sighed. "We should've told her everything sooner," he said to Dayne.

Dayne shrugged his shoulders and murmured, "I think you're making a mistake."

"Everything? What everything?"

"It's a little complicated." Marek looked down at the phone in his hand then set it on the table and stood.

"Complicated? Imagine that. So what's the big secret? There's something really strange going on here. I'm not stupid." She poked an index finger at Dayne. "You never eat." Then she pointed her other index finger at Marek. "You sleep during the day. You both are obviously hiding things from me. People are chasing me. Are you two government agents or something?"

"No," Dayne answered, positioning himself beside Marek. "We're...vampires."

She started to laugh but the guys' serious-as-death expressions made her guffaw lodge itself in her throat. However, her constricting windpipe didn't stop a chuckle from escaping her lips. "Vampires?"

They both nodded.

"Real-life, blood-sucking vampires?"

They nodded again.

"Can't-go-out-in-the-sunlight vampires?"

They nodded a third time.

"Ha! I got you there. You kidnapped me in the middle of the afternoon. Explain that one to me."

"We are given a special pill once a year," Marek reasoned coolly, "to enable us to go out in the sunlight. It only lasts for a few hours though."

"A pill? Uh..." Wow, what's a girl to say when her lovers drop a bomb like that on her? "Are you two trying to scare me off with this crazy story? 'Cause I'll gladly leave on my own. I'm not in love with you or anything." Not in love, but up until now, she'd been mighty close to falling in serious like with her Chippendales. "I mean, you guys kidnapped me. Not the other way around."

Marek stepped forward. "We needed you. We still do."

"Why? For the Triad?"

Marek's gaze shifted to Dayne.

"That's it? You kidnapped me to help you find the Triad? You weren't going to help me? I was right all along?"

To think she'd started to believe they were working together. The three musketeers.

How stupid was she?

A million emotions blasted through her all at one time. Anger and hurt were the biggest. She felt used. Worthless. Manipulated. Once again, she'd trusted the wrong male—males.

"I'm so out of here." She rushed to the door but Marek caught her arm. "Let me go, dammit. I'm not going to help you."

"We still need you."

"Fuck off and die."

This time it was Dayne who spoke, "If you leave before sunset tomorrow night, that's exactly what will happen. To both of us."

"Did you know about this too? About the Triad?" she asked him, hot tears blurring her vision, even as wild, wicked desire pulsed through her body. Now was so not the time to get horny.

"No. I swear I didn't know."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe either of you. Not a word you say. You're both a couple of lying creeps. Then again, why would I even consider trusting a couple of guys who stoop to kidnapping women? Hello?" She yanked her arm free from Marek's grasp and knocked on her skull. "Is anybody home? I'm such an idiot." She wrapped her fist around the doorknob and pulled but Marek slammed the door shut and blocked her path. "Move out of my way," she growled.

"Not until you hear everything."

"I've heard enough."

"My brother is dying."

"So sad for you."

"I need the Triad to cure him. The Rebellion stole it from your client, to use it against my brother. It activates an ancient curse."

"This sounds like the plot from some low-budget movie." She shoved him, using her weight to try to knock him out of her way. Of course, he didn't even twitch. It really pissed her off that she was so weak.

Marek gripped her upper arms in his fists. "I need your help."

"I'm already on a case. Hire your own private detective."

He shook her, not exactly gently but not hard enough to cause brain damage either. It was enough to make her meet his gaze. His eyes were teary and red, full of genuine pain, desperation. "Have you ever lost someone you loved?"

She tipped her head to leer at him. "Yes. I have."

"Could you have stopped it?"

"No. But if I could have, I would've done anything—"

"That's just it. I can do something. With your help." A single tear slipped from the inner corner of his eye and ran along the side of his nose. "Only with your help."

That little droplet of water doused her anger. She'd never been able to resist a man who was vulnerable. "You're not lying?"

"No."

"You're really a vampire?"

"We've both bitten you several times but you don't remember. Our venom acts as an amnesiac."

That explained some things. "Is that why I hurt here...why my body reacts the way it does?"

"It's the blood-bond. It causes what we call the hunger."

"The hunger?" she echoed, trying to wrap her brain around the fact that vampires really existed.

"The hunger is the byproduct of a chemical change in your body. It makes you desire us. And vice versa, us desire you. And each other."

Then her desire for them was...artificial? At least she didn't have to feel guilty for falling in instant lust with them.

She looked to Dayne for reassurance. It came in the form of a simple nod...and a fangy sneer.

"I knew there was something weird about you two." She shrugged away from Marek, shuffling back a couple of steps to get a long look at her Chippendales. "It's pretty creepy, you know. You guys have been snacking on me all this time and I don't remember a thing. Anything else I've forgotten?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Marek answered, chuckling. "We've done our best to make sure everything else has been quite memorable."

"Ohmygosh! Oh. My. Effing. God! Am I a vampire too? Did you turn me? Am I going to have to drink blood? Oh, I hate blood."

Laughter glittering in his eyes, Dayne took a single step closer. "Humans can't be 'turned'. The movies have that all wrong. They have a lot of things wrong."

She huffed a huge sigh of relief. "Is that so? What else do they have wrong?"

They sandwiched her between them, fangs bared.

The air thinned and heated. Her skin started tingling, first at her nape then her chest, stomach, lower. "Is this how it goes?" Being carried away by the erotic heat swirling through her body, she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, baring her throat. Crazy impulses flashed through her mind. She wanted to explore the dark side of her desire, to experience firsthand what it felt like to submit, to be conquered and controlled. "You use me and abuse me?"

"I don't know," Marek said, laving her shoulder with his tongue. "I kind of think you'll come to like that part." When his fangs pierced her skin, a powerful orgasm pulsed through her body. She surrendered on a moan.

"Are you ready now? Ready to give this another try?" Dayne held a set of restraints in his fists. "No one is forcing you. It's your choice. Your decision, yes or no. We'll do as you wish."

She looked at her Chippendales, the two men who'd proven to be a whole lot more than a couple of sexy, manipulative kidnappers. They hadn't always done what she'd wanted. But in the end she had to be grateful for that fact. Because by pushing her, stripping away her defenses, they'd helped her see how she'd allowed her fears to hold her prisoner. Issues with trust, of taking risks – with her life, body, secrets and heart.

She wanted to be freed. From all her fears. Her Chippendales hadn't raped her. She'd seen it as rape because of her feelings about bondage, or more specifically accepting her desires as a woman. What had happened with Steven had been terrible, but a combination of things had contributed to that night, some her fault, some his, and some nobody's. To say that night didn't matter anymore wasn't fair. Because the experience had left her scarred, unable to accept herself. To say that those scars had completely and miraculously healed wasn't realistic either.

But thanks to Dayne and Marek, she was ready to take the first step. She slowly peeled away her clothes then, standing before them completely undressed, said, "Yes, I think I'm ready now." This time, when Dayne secured the restraints around her wrists, she trembled with nervous anticipation instead of cold terror.



"Will you tell us what happened?" Marek sat on the bed and pulled her onto his lap. "What secret have you been hiding?"

Her gaze swept over his face before settling on his eyes. Kind eyes, full of genuine concern. She started slowly. Each word stuck in her throat. It took effort to pry them loose, one at a time. "I had a friend. A dear friend. I trusted him. I needed him. I was away from home. Unsure. Maybe I was foolish when I let him tie me up. But he'd never done anything, said anything, that made me feel it wouldn't be okay. We were playing, just experimenting." Hot tears ran from her eyes, blurring her vision. She did a lot of blinking, sniffing, as the memories of that night swept through her mind. Marek thumbed away a droplet dribbling over her cheek and for a short time, she just sat there, letting his gentle touches and watery eyes touch her heart. A soothing peace spread through her, giving her strength to continue, "And then it went wrong, and I couldn't stop him. And afterward I blamed myself. I felt guilty, since I'd been the one to suggest he tie me up. It couldn't be normal, my obsession with bondage. Only prostitutes liked that kind of thing, right? Prostitutes and mentally ill people. So I shut it all out, my sex life, my desires. They were dirty and abnormal. Wrong."

"They're not dirty or wrong. Hell, the psychologists dropped S-and-M from their list of mental illnesses." Her face caught between his hands, Marek kissed her cheeks, her nose, her forehead. "You're not obsessed. You're curious. That's completely okay. Your friend was wrong. Very wrong. You know that now, right?"

"I'm starting to see that."

Marek nodded. "Then you're ready."

"With us, you have all the power, Brea, regardless of the restraints," Dayne said as he eased her onto her back and slid his hand between her thighs. "I promise, if you say the word, we'll stop."

"What word?"

Standing and unzipping his pants, Marek donned a fangy grin. "How about Van Helsing?"

“How very appropriate.” She couldn’t help smiling. Yes, this was what she had always craved, what she’d been missing in her physical relationships in the past. Sex would never again simply be a physical exercise. The joining of male parts to female parts. It was as much mental as physical. She wasn’t abnormal or sick just because she was curious about domination and submission. She wasn’t asking to be raped. She wasn’t dirty. There was no reason to feel guilty for asking for certain things. No longer would sex be just about reaching the finish line, the Big O. It would be about power, submission. Surrender. Discovery. Experimentation. She had her Chippendales to thank for that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marek’s words wouldn’t leave Dayne’s head. They played through his mind, over and over, in that trembly voice. Neither would the image of his blood-mate’s pain-filled eyes.

Was it the blood-bind? Did it make his heart soften to his enemy’s pain? Or was it something else? Did it matter?

He wasn’t sure he could go through with his plan anymore. Not when he looked into Marek’s eyes. He felt Marek’s pain. Deep in his gut. It took the form of a cold, hard weight that sapped his strength and left him feeling empty and lost. How could he destroy Marek? Sure, he no longer sought to kill him. But he knew now what Kaden’s death would do to him. Marek would never be the same man.

But what about his commitment to the Rebellion? To the friends who had backed him all these years? They’d sacrificed so much. How could he just turn his back on them now?

He was between hell and Hades. He had to make a choice. But which one? Who would he betray?

\* \* \* \* \*

"I only checked one science museum before she stopped me." Brea was dressed, but Marek could barely resist the urge to strip her clothes and make sweet love to her all over again. The more he had of her, the more he wanted her. He could still taste her honey on his lips. Could still smell her special scent clinging to his fingertips.

He watched her pull a brush through her hair. How he ached to run his fingers through the satin strands again, to pull. And taste. Skin, juices, kiss.

It was the hunger. The fucking hunger!

Angry and frustrated, he forced himself to move farther away. Her scent followed him. And the memory of her cries of pleasure played through his head. He went to his weapons closet. What to take with him? Gun? Dagger? Sword?

He lifted the saber off its mount and weighed the weapon in his hands. Guns were effective enough for humans. But he would need a silver blade. Sons of the Twilight could only be killed with a blade forged from silver.

How fitting, he thought wryly. He'd use a gift from his father to defend his brother's claim to the throne, and his life.

"Can you think of another place with a model of the solar system? Or a sun and planets?" Brea asked.

Marek's addled mind slowly caught up with the conversation. Brea was sitting on the bed, looking up at him with expectation.

"Honestly no," he answered. "That's where I thought we'd search first."

She stood, her jaw set. "Okay. Well, you two can't go outside until after dark. That's hours from now. It's up to me. I'll hit the science center in Bloomfield Hills next—"

Dayne interrupted, "No, you can't leave. It's too risky."

"I'll be extra careful."

Dayne wasn't going to give in. His posture reflected his attitude. "No. Absolutely not. We'll wait until dark and go together."

Brea tossed her hands in the air. "But if the museums are closed, how will we get in? If we have to break in somehow, we'll run out of time. What if the first couple of places are the wrong places?"

Marek traced the swirling engravings in his sword's hilt, his mind lost in his worries and doubts. "We just have to make sure we're going to the right place first."

"How will we do that?"

"I don't know."

Was there any hope that they could save his brother's life? He looked at the clock on the nightstand. The second hand measured Kaden's final hours with racing tick-tocks. Yet they were still no closer to finding the Triad than they were this morning.

He needed a miracle. Just one little miracle.

His heart heavy, he set down his sword, crossed back to the desk and hit the power button on the computer. Until sundown, the only searching they could do was on the web.

## Chapter Ten

Brea set the stack of maps printed off the computer on the car's dashboard and slid into the passenger seat. Dayne had kindly volunteered his car for this road trip, since Marek's van was not exactly roadworthy with two shot-out windows and a shattered windshield.

Beside her, in the driver's seat, Dayne started the car and shifted it into gear.

"If we follow the route I mapped out," Marek said from the backseat, "we should have enough time to search at least two of the museums before sunrise. Unless we're caught trying to break into one of them."

Silent, Dayne steered the vehicle onto the winding dirt road.

Brea pulled the first map off the dash and studied it. "We need to head north on I-275."

"Okay," Dayne responded distantly.

Brea stiffened, again wondering what was up with Dayne. All afternoon, while Marek and she had been scouring the internet for clues, he'd been withdrawn, quiet, detached. She'd asked him several times what was wrong, but being a man, he simply said "nothing".

But his eyes couldn't lie. Not to her. He was struggling with something. A very difficult decision of some kind. She couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with the Triad.

Ten minutes later, she learned her suspicions weren't silly paranoid thoughts to be shrugged off.

They were at the entry of the freeway...rolling past the ramp to northbound I-275.

"Uh, you missed the turn," she said as she pointed out the window. "Dayne?"

He didn't respond.

She twisted in her seat and glanced back at Marek. They traded worried looks. Obviously, Marek was as surprised as she was.

He shifted forward on the seat. "Hey, Dayne? What's up? Change of plans?"

"Yeah," Dayne snapped, looking over his shoulder. "What's wrong? Don't trust me?"

Marek and Brea traded a second worried look.

And then everything went blurry and Brea lurched forward. She caught herself on outstretched arms less than a second before her head struck the dash. "Dayne!" she shrieked, when her brain registered the red brake lights ahead.

"Dammit!" Dayne shouted, counter-steering the car out of a skid.

"Wha – ?!" Marek barked from the back.

The car's tires gained traction on the asphalt none too soon. The car screeched to a stop so close to the Ford in front of them Brea could see the driver's panicked gaze in the rearview mirror.

Arms still out, palms pressed against the dash, Brea dragged in a lungful of air. She could hear both Marek and Dayne doing the same. She looked to her left, studying Dayne's profile.

His face had gone white. His knuckles too. "Everyone okay?" he mumbled.

"Yeah," she answered, her voice shaky.

"I'm okay too," Marek muttered.

"Good." Dayne didn't say another word. He didn't turn his head. He didn't loosen his grip on the steering wheel. And neither Brea nor Marek dared ask him any more questions. Brea figured they'd have their answers soon enough – assuming they made it to their destination alive.

About forty minutes after their close call, the car rolled to a smooth stop behind a building that looked like some kind of church. Dayne shifted the vehicle into park,

motioned to Brea to stay put then twisted in his seat to talk to Marek. "I don't know if there'll be anyone here waiting for us or not. But I'm almost positive this is the right place."

"What is it?" Brea asked. It didn't look like the kind of place one would expect to find a model of the solar system.

"Holy Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Better take some weapons," Dayne warned.

The two men gave her a warning glance before getting out of the car.

Marek opened her door and poked his head inside. "Stay here. And keep your eyes open," he whispered. "If things get bad, drive away. Save yourself."

She hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Wouldn't it be safer for me to come with you?" She scooted into the driver's seat and opened the window.

The two guys traded questioning looks over the car then said, "No," in unison.

Of course not. Why did she know they'd say that? "Be careful. Please."

Marek ducked down again and whispered, "There's a dagger in the trunk. As soon as we're inside, get it. Keep it with you. Stay safe. I'm not sure what's going on here. Something isn't right."

"I'm scared."

"I love you." He palmed her cheek gently.

She pressed her hand to the back of his. "Marek."

Slowly he moved away, his eyes heavy with worry. "Stay safe," he repeated.

Her heart doing its best to bust through her rib cage, she watched her Chippendales head inside then popped the trunk and snatched the leather-sheathed dagger. Shaking, she returned to the relative safety of the car, locked the doors and stared at the building's entry.

She doubted she'd be able to take another breath until both her Chippendales were back with her, safe. Ironical, but she couldn't care less anymore about the stupid Triad. Her case, her job simply didn't matter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marek held his sword drawn. There wasn't a muscle in his body not tensed, ready. His senses were alert—sight, hearing, smell. His nerves jangled. He stopped in the center of what had probably been the church's sanctuary, a massive room, empty now, topped with a glass dome. The walls were covered in painted tiles, the mural a clear representation of the solar system.

"The clue?" Dayne, standing at the opposite end of the room, pointed at a section of the wall next to him. "What did it say again?"

Marek switched his sword to his left hand and stuffed his right into his pocket. He retrieved the folded piece of paper and smoothed it against his chest. "To the place go thee where the sun never sets, past worlds that guard a rival's darkest secrets." Shifting his sword back to his dominant hand, he hurried across the empty space. His footsteps echoed off the walls, ceiling and floor. "What do you see?"

He followed the direction of Dayne's pointed index finger to a swirling symbol stamped in one of the clay tiles. The identical symbol graced the base of his sword's polished blade. "The symbol of the Sons of Twilight?" He traced the curling lines with his fingertip. "This has to be it. How'd you know to come here?" He used his fingers to search the lumpy surface of the tiles for some kind of button, switch or knob.

"I...had a suspicion."

Clearly Dayne wasn't telling him everything. Should he press for more? Or trust his former enemy? "The rest of the clue reads, 'A twist to the left brings thine treasure in sight. But a wrong turn and darkness defeats Twilight'. See anything that turns or twists?"

Dayne stood beside him, mirroring his position, one fist gripping a silver-bladed sword, the other hand flattened against the wall, skimming over its surface. "Not yet. But there is an interesting hole here...shit!"

Marek swung around just in time to see Dayne lift his sword high over his head. Operating on pure reflex, he ducked and lunged out of the path of Dayne's blade,



curling into a ball. He somersaulted on the floor and leapt to his feet, spinning on one foot at the clang of metal striking metal.

He scooped his dropped sword up and stood frozen in shock. Dayne shuffled backward, just escaping a blow to his shoulder. His assailant's small, compact body, clothed head-to-toe in black, moved quickly, taking advantage of Dayne's position. He'd backed himself against the wall but he was doing okay defending himself.

Marek was about to come to his aid when Dayne glanced Marek's way and shouted, "Look out!"

Marek simultaneously lifted his weapon and turned, swinging it in a wide arc. The blade sliced into the assailant behind him, dragging a red gaping wound across his torso. The masked attacker staggered backward then stumbled and crumpled to the ground.

A rush of similarly dressed men fell upon him. The deafening clang of silver striking silver filled the room. Marek didn't have time to think, only act. And react. Attack. Defend. Parry. Block. Over time, the blows came less frequently as the number of his attackers decreased.

And then it was done. He stood in the middle of the carnage. Mangled black-clothed bodies strewn about his feet. Dayne was about twenty feet away, also standing. His clothes were stained red, splattered with their enemy's blood.

Marek looked down at the closest body. They were all so small. He ripped the knit mask away, finding the face of...a woman. "What is this?" he murmured, not expecting an answer.

Stepping up beside him, Dayne answered, "It's really quite clever. Since the Sons of Twilight cannot be exposed to sunlight, having all female warriors means they have a tactical advantage."

"Did you know?"

"What? That they were women?" At Marek's nod, he whispered, "Yes."

Marek dropped on one knee. "I've never slain a woman. Women shouldn't be warriors. They shouldn't be facing this kind of danger. What made them want to do such a thing? And what about their husbands? Their fathers? Their brothers? Did they know?"

Dayne offered a hand of support on Marek's shoulder. A simple touch, yet it spoke volumes. Marek brushed a golden lock of hair from the dead woman's face and gently forced her eyelids closed. From the neck up, she looked like she was napping. The ugly gouge across her stomach ruined the façade.

Dayne gave Marek's shoulder a couple of pats. "We should get going. Before they send in another unit."

"There are more?"

"Plenty. They'll be here in about," Dayne glanced down at his watch, "four minutes."

"Was this a trap?"

"Not exactly." Dayne rushed toward the wall they'd been inspecting before the attack and extended an arm back to Marek. "Let me see your sword."

Marek felt his forehead wrinkle in confusion. He hesitated, not sure if he could trust Dayne or not. He'd more or less confessed to knowingly leading them into an ambush. What was next? For all he knew, his sword might be the only thing keeping him alive. Who was his enemy? His ally?

As if he sensed Marek's suspicion, Dayne turned to face him fully. "We're running out of time."

"You say," Marek shot back.

"Yes, I say we're running out of time. What are *you* trying to say?"

"For all I know, you brought me here to have me slaughtered. And now that Plan A has failed, you're going to disarm me so you can kill me yourself."

"Why would I bother warning you before that first blow if that was the case?"

"Maybe you decided you wanted the satisfaction of killing me yourself?"

"And kill myself in the process?"

"Maybe revenge is worth it to you. After all, there was a time when you would've done just about anything to be in this position. I know that."

"You're right. I did want revenge, and I had planned on killing you. But not anymore." Dayne looked past Marek to the dead bodies strewn about the floor. "Nothing's worth all this."

His suspicions easing, Marek moved closer to his bound mate. "I want to believe you. But you spent so many years hating me. My brother. Blaming us."

"Let's just say I've been enlightened." He thrust his hand forward and yanked Marek's sword from his loose grasp. Instinctively, Marek turned and leaped, landing in a roll about ten feet away.

Dayne spun around and, holding the sword by the blade, thrust the handle of Marek's weapon into the hole carved into the tile. "The engraving. Your sword is the key." He twisted it ninety degrees to the left. There was a groan of stone grinding against stone. An opening appeared in the wall.

Illuminated from a single shaft of light from above and, about fifteen feet within the otherwise pitch-black room, sat a single crystal pedestal not unlike the one holding the Book of Secrets. Atop the pedestal was the Triad.

"We have less than two minutes," Dayne reminded him. "Trust me now?" Turning, he rushed into the dark room.

"Wait!" Marek called after him. "Remember the rest of the clue?"

Dayne slammed into something invisible and stumbled backward.

"We take a wrong turn and we're done." Hurrying to Dayne's side, Marek felt the surface in front of them then looked down. It seemed that the walls were made of some kind of transparent substance, a lot like glass. "It's a maze." He looked down at the floor.

The darkness beneath their feet was strange. It had depth, rather than looking flat, like tile. He stomped a foot. The answering sound was hollow. "I get it. We take a wrong turn and we'll fall down there."

"No pressure," Dayne said dryly. "We don't even know where the corners are."

The pounding of dozens of running feet made them both look back. A crush of warriors were headed their way, swords raised.

"Shit!" Using one hand on the slick wall as a guide, Marek led the way at a fast jog. He dragged his sword out of the scabbard and the blade caught a shaft of light from somewhere. Pinpoints of light glittered off the reflective surface of the walls. "This way!" he shouted, recognizing a black area to the right as a doorway. Similarly, black gaps large enough for a grown man to fall through on the floor indicated wrong turns.

Dayne dogged his heels as he ran, also tipping his sword to flash stars on the floors and walls, a celestial guide through the blackness.

The screams of their pursuers as they took wrong turns and tumbled into the abyss chilled Marek's blood and caused him to falter twice. He wanted to stop, to beg them to turn back, but he knew they would no sooner believe his warning than he'd trusted Dayne.

Both of them reached the Triad at the same time. Dayne looked askance before reaching for it.

Marek nodded. "I trust you."

Dayne cradled the relic that would save their king's life in his arms as if his own life depended upon it. "Wonder if there's another way out?" He pointed behind Marek, to the handful of warriors who had managed to make their way safely through the maze.

"I really don't want to kill another woman."

Dayne took a long look around them then nodded his head, as if he'd made a decision. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

Dayne moved around the side of the pedestal, to the last gap in the floor that they'd avoided. He held the Triad over the hole. "Stop!"

Marek's heart climbed up his throat.

"You will throw down your weapons and retreat or the Triad will be destroyed."

The warriors halted, set down their swords and started shuffling backward.

Dayne motioned for Marek to go ahead. "I'll follow but not until you're safe."

It was one of the most difficult tests of trust Marek had ever faced but he did as Dayne said. Even after he was safely outside the maze, he didn't take his eyes off Dayne. He couldn't. Not until he too had passed the final gap in the floor.

The warriors retreated, seeming to accept the defeat too easily. It made him edgy as they walked out of the building, the Triad in hand.

When they reached their car, he realized why the warriors hadn't attacked.

Two warriors dragged Brea around the side of a black van, the silver blade of her dagger pressed to her throat.

"The Triad," one of them demanded, releasing Brea's arm to thrust an upturned palm toward Dayne.

They'd gotten this close, only to lose it? Marek could see Brea was pleading for them not to hand the relic to the warrior. But he had to. He knew that neither he nor Dayne could stand by and watch the warriors kill her.

Even if it meant the death of his brother.

Unless...what if they destroyed it before the curse was lifted? What would happen? Would the curse be broken? Or would Kaden die?

Damn it. He faced an impossible decision.

At least in death, Kaden would be spared the agony of the curse. But that was an extremely small comfort. He was Marek's only remaining family.

"There's no hope of escape." The warrior holding Brea jerked the dagger, causing the blade to bite into the skin of her neck. A rivulet of blood dribbled down from the wound, yet Brea remained silent, defiant.

Fuck! There was precious little time to decide. What would Kaden wish? For him to hand over the Triad and save their own butts, thereby sealing his doom? Or to possibly assure no king after him would endure the agony of the curse?

He took another look around. They were grossly outnumbered, and since a half dozen warriors surrounded their car, even if he was able to get Brea free from the one holding her, they'd have to escape on foot. How likely was that?

"Let her go, and you can have it," Dayne demanded, pulling the relic tucked in his jacket out into view.

Marek's body tensed. He'd have to time it just right, push Brea clear of the warriors' reach and then kick the Triad out of their hands. He hoped the impact as it fell would destroy it. History dictated the ancient artifact was not easily damaged.

But if he were successful, and the Triad destroyed, the warriors would leave. They'd no longer have any reason to pursue them.

And his brother...he only hoped he'd be given the chance to explain. And say goodbye. At least his suffering would be over.

Dayne stepped in front of Marek, the Triad held at arm's length in front of him. One of the warriors pushed Brea forward, using her as a shield.

Marek moved silently and slowly.

"Release her," Dayne demanded again.

"Not until we have the Triad."

"You won't get it until she's released."

"Then we can kill her." The warrior pushed the dagger's tip deeper into Brea's neck. Another crimson droplet formed at the wound. Brea gasped but she didn't speak,

didn't beg, didn't cry. "Once she's dead, her blood-mates will die. Then we will have the Triad."

Dayne lifted his hand higher and lunged forward.

Now!

Time slowed to a tenth its normal speed as Marek threw himself forward, knocking Brea to the ground. He leapt to his feet and, spinning, kicked the Triad out of Dayne's hand. It flew about twenty feet and landed with a heavy crunch on the pavement.

There was a moment of shocked silence before Dayne and the two warriors dashed for the fallen relic. Marek turned to Brea and helped her back to her feet.

"Are you okay?" He gave her a quick up-and-down as she staggered to her feet.

"I think so." Grimacing, Brea rubbed her backside. "Those were chicks. Women bad-guys. Did you know that? Bitches!"

"Yeah." Marek swallowed a chuckle at Brea's expression. "We found out inside."

"You wouldn't believe how much I wanted to kick their asses. But they took my knife. I'm glad you didn't give them the Triad. They were going to kill us all anyway." A strand of hair fluttered across her face, carried by the breeze.

He gently tucked it behind her ear and pulled her trembling body against his for warmth and support. "I figured as much. Let's get you back to the car. You're looking a little shaky."

"I'm fine...okay, not really," she admitted, tucking herself under his arm. "I've spent the past nine years hiding from danger and the last few days facing more risks than Indiana Jones."

"It's destroyed," Dayne said, running up to them. He handed the broken pieces to Brea then they both looked at Marek.

Brea was the one to ask what they all three wanted to know, "What's this mean for your brother?"

Marek pulled open the passenger side door for her. "I guess I'll find out soon. If the gods are with us, the curse will be broken. If not..."



## **Chapter Eleven**

"You destroyed the Triad?" Kaden said by way of a greeting.

Marek's mood darkened instantly, all traces of hope completely obliterated. Eyes burning, heart heavy, he dropped to his knee, setting the relic's fractured pieces on the floor. "We had no choice. I'm sorry we failed you. I failed you. After everything you've been through lately, Lena's death...if I could take your place and suffer the curse myself, I would."

"I know." His brother pushed himself up from his chair, the strain of his exertion etched into his features. The curse had progressed quickly. His body was visibly frail, withered like The Keeper's. "You did well, my brother. As well as I could hope." Kaden reached a hand down. "Stand."

Marek refused to accept his brother's aid as he stood. He was, after all, well and strong. His brother was dying. Who should be helping whom?

Kaden swept him into a tight embrace and smacked him on the back heartily. "I owe you my life, baby brother. And you," he said, releasing Marek and pulling a stiff-limbed Dayne into an equally enthusiastic hug, "I owe you even more."

"Your life?" Marek asked, bewildered. "What does this mean?"

"I—I—" Dayne stuttered as Kaden released him to turn toward the wall behind his throne.

Kaden patted Marek's cheek as he shuffled past him, scooping up the shattered relic. "It means, little brother, that the curse can still be lifted. I will recover. You made the right choice." To Dayne, he said, "I asked Marek if he would agree to the blood-bond with you, Dayne, both of us knowing what you felt about our family. You have some powerful allies among the Rebellion. I didn't expect you to turn your back on

them. I'd only hoped you might come to believe that your family's tragic death had not been ordered by this crown."

"I...don't really know yet what happened. I only learned what price some pay for revenge and felt it was too great."

Kaden gripped the curved armrest of his throne in one hand. "Every man makes his decisions by his own heart and mind. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful to you for your help. Perhaps someday, the mystery of your family's death will be solved."

"I hope so."

The groan of rusted hinges accompanied the sight of a hidden door swinging open behind the throne.

"We are both searching for answers, you and me. Perhaps we'll find them together?" Turning, Kaden lifted his hand to indicate they should follow him through the opening. "I have something for both of you. You must accept my apologies though. There will be no pageantry, no ceremony. Just the three of us. But I have good reason for keeping this a secret." He turned, a pair of identical swords in his fists. He handed one to Dayne, the second to Marek. Then he nodded and planted his hands on his hips. "Congratulations, men. You are the first two Cytherean Guards, an elite team of men. Chosen by me. And for a very special purpose." He set the Triad on the floor, at the center of an intricate triangular design in the floor's tilework. "At the center of our world is the sacred number—three. Just as it takes three—two of our kind and one human—to renew our lives, it takes three to mend the Triad." Dropping to his knee, he placed his palm over the relic's pieces and indicated with a nod that Marek and Dayne should do the same. The moment they had positioned their hands over top of Kaden's, a jolt of power blasted through their bodies. Bolts of electricity shot from their fingertips, the energy gathering into a ball of cracking, snapping brilliance in the air, like a miniature star. Humming, it hovered over their stacked hands for several seconds before dropping to the floor and consuming the Triad.

The white flame extinguished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a fully restored Triad smoking on the floor. Kaden cleared his throat, lifted the Triad and stood. "The Rebellion is far from over. Dark times are ahead. As Cytherean Guards, it is now your duty to protect the secrets of the Sons of the Twilight."

Marek stared down at his fist, still tingling from the powerful magic, his fingers curled around the sword's hilt. "Then you've learned what the Rebellion's plans are for the future?"

"No, I've lost my most reliable source of intelligence, my future bride."

Dayne's startled gasp echoed in the small space. "Then you knew she was —"

"The clues?" Marek interrupted. "That's why you were so sure they were for real."

"Yes, the clues came from Lena." Kaden shrugged. "And I knew she was with the Rebellion. I had my reasons for sleeping with the enemy."

"Damn, I'm sorry." Dayne murmured.

Kaden gave both Marek and Dayne an empty smile. "Nothing for you to be sorry for. Being king is both an honor and an obligation. I had to make some hard decisions. But they were mine to make. Not yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brea paced the living room. Could there be any worse punishment? What had she done to deserve such treatment? Marek had insisted she could not go with them to check on his brother. He'd never given her a reasonable excuse. Yet she hadn't felt right arguing with him. Everyone faced pain in their own way.

Including her.

Truth was, she needed the time to herself. She needed to figure some stuff out. Some important stuff. Not exactly life-or-death but pretty damn close to it.

The three of them had completed the final night of the blood-bond. Her Chippendales had done things to and with her that she never in a million years would

have dreamed of trying. And then they'd held her tenderly. She'd fallen asleep nestled between their hulking bodies, warm and satisfied and content.

Her contentment was short-lived, however. Just before her Chippendales had left, Marek had told her she was free to leave, to stay, whatever she wanted to do—at sunrise.

The Triad was history, destroyed, worthless. So she didn't need to stick around for that anymore.

She could go home. Soon. Within a few hours.

She knew she should be glad to leave. This had always been a temporary situation, even though Marek had confessed his love for her. And even if she secretly loved both him and Dayne back.

It wasn't like the emotions were genuine. They were the byproduct of some bizarre hormonal state, driven by physical changes in her body. Once she was out of range of her Chippendales' pheromones, she'd realize she didn't really love them...right?

And what about the woman in the picture? Who was she? And where was she?

Her insides ached like they'd been yanked out, run over by a Hummer and then crammed back inside the empty shell of her body. This hunger as they called it sucked big time. It hurt worse than any heartache she'd ever suffered through.

Even though she was miserable beyond words, her heart did a happy little hop in her chest when she heard the guys' voices at the front door. They were home.

It was time to say goodbye.

Ack.

She pulled in not one but two deep breaths, scooped up her purse as well as Dayne's Lions shirt—and headed toward them.

Marek was the first one to speak, "I see you're ready to go."

"Yes," she said, trying not to sigh. "I-I'm ready."

Dayne stepped forward, his piercing eyes drilling into hers. "This is harder than I thought it would be." His statement echoed her own thoughts.

"I figure it'll get easier when I'm farther away."

"Why's that?" Marek, standing behind her, snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against him. She felt the rigid length of his cock, hot and hard against her derriere. Unwanted desire pulsed through her body.

She stiffened, unwilling to allow the baser needs of her body to dictate her actions any longer. This was an unnatural response. She didn't really love these men like she thought. Like she wanted to. Her mind and body were tricking her.

"Why's what?" she asked, concentrating on not rubbing against him like a cat in heat. It was so tempting. Her back was already arching, lifting her bottom up.

"Why will it be easier when you're farther away?" he whispered.

Dayne knelt in front of her and ran his hands down her legs. He gripped her ankles, using pressure to force her to widen her stance. "We want you to be happy, Brea. More than anything, that's all that matters."

She dropped her head back, letting it rest against Marek's chest. "Then stop. Please. Don't put me through this any longer. It's not real. Your feelings. My feelings."

Marek's fingers slid under her top and mapped her rib cage. Teasing. Tormenting. "What makes you believe that?"

"What you said earlier. About the hunger," she murmured, already losing her ability to think.

"Ah. The hunger." Dayne's hands smoothed up her blue-jeans-clad legs to cup the heated juncture of her thighs. He applied delightful pressure to her throbbing parts. "We just learned the hunger ends at sunrise."

"It does?" Her heart started thumping heavily in her chest.

"Did," Marek corrected.

"What time is it?"

Dayne moved aside, letting Marek guide her toward the heavily draped living-room window. "Come and see."

Brea pulled one side of the curtain up to peer outside.

"Whatever emotions you feel now," Marek said, back-stepping away from the light spilling into the room, "are yours. They aren't the effect of any kind of chemical reaction or unnatural urge. Not anymore."

"And what we feel is just as genuine," Dayne added.

Tears gathering in her eyes, Brea let the drapery fall back over the window and turned to her Chippendales. "Then I..." The words sat in her chest, refusing to come out.

Here she'd spent the last couple of days taking the kind of risks she'd spent years avoiding. She'd basically closed herself out of life, denied herself all the joys and pain that made life worth living.

No more. She wouldn't hide any longer. Life was a wonderful gift and it was meant to be lumpy and sometimes painful. Those rough parts made the good ones all the sweeter.

It had taken a couple of undead Chippendales and the Friday the thirteenth from hell to help her learn how to live again.

How ironic.

The words she'd started to speak slipped easily through her lips now. "I'm falling in love with you. But what about the woman in the picture?" she asked Dayne.

"Picture?" He looked quizzically toward the stairs then smiled. "Oh, that picture." She found herself in the middle of a Chippendale sandwich. "She doesn't hold a candle to you, Brea. Besides, there's something very unnatural about mating with my cousin."

"Cousin?" she repeated, a giggle bubbling up from her stomach. "So does this mean you wouldn't mind making this a permanent arrangement?"

"Nothing would make us happier," her Chippendales said in unison.

“Terrific. I’ll move in tomorrow. But I have a couple conditions.”

Her Chippendales slanted wary looks her way.

“First, I have to park my car in the garage. It was my father’s, you know. And second, you both must sit down and watch *National Treasure* with me. Tonight. Just in case we end up in another treasure hunt in the future.”

Her Chippendales exchanged guilty looks and nervous chuckles.

And here she’d thought she’d been joking about the treasure hunt thing.  
“Wwwwwhat?”

They proceeded to erase every worry from her mind, doing what they did so well — using and abusing her, in the most wonderful way.

*The End*

## About the Author

Nothing exciting happens in Tawny Taylor's life, unless you count giving the cat a flea dip—a cat can make some fascinating sounds when immersed chin-deep in insecticide—or chasing after a houseful of upchucking kids during flu season. She doesn't travel the world or employ a staff of personal servants. She's not even built like a runway model. She's just your run-of-the-mill, pleasantly plump Detroit suburban mom and wife.

That's why she writes, for the sheer joy of it. She doesn't need to escape, mind you. Despite being run-of-the-mill, her life is wonderful. She just likes to add some...zip.

Her heroines might resemble herself, or her next door neighbor (sorry Sue) but they are sure to be memorable (she hopes!). And her heroes—inspired by movie stars, her favorite television actors or her husband—are fully capable of delivering one hot happily-ever-after after another. Combined, the characters and plots she weaves bring countless hours of enjoyment to Tawny...and she hopes to readers too!

In the end, that's all that matters to Tawny, bringing a little bit of zip to someone else's life.

Tawny welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).



## Also by Tawny Taylor

Asteroid 6969: Siren's Dance

Body & Soul 1: Pesky Paranormals

Body & Soul 2: Phantasmic Fantasies

Ellora's Cavemen: Tales From the Temple IV *anthology*

Immortal Secrets 1: Dragons and Dungeons

Immortal Secrets 2: Light My Fire

Immortal Secrets 3: Spells and Seduction

Lessons in Lust Major

Mark of the Beast

Passion In A Pear Tree

Private Games

Sexual Healing

Stolen Goddess

Tempting Fate

Touch of the Beast

Wet and Wilde



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)