

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Spice of Magic*  
*Three*

JENNA  
CASTILLE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Magic of Three

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# ***MAGIC OF THREE***

**Jenna Castille**

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## Chapter One

Smoke and incense infused the air with a drugging scent, sandalwood the overpowering essence. But it did little to dampen the smell of a thousand sexual encounters that permeated the sacred chamber.

Three shadows performed an ancient dance on the walls. Twisting and twining with moans and grunts their music, slapping of flesh their tempo. The room teemed with magic, pulsed with the pleasure of its creators. A pillar of pure, clean light flowed out from the three people sharing their bodies in the middle of the temple.

A stone altar sat in the center, its edges etched with the sparkling gold symbols of a language long forgotten. Lise lay nude and moaning on the stone, its rough texture rubbing against her skin and adding another layer to her sensual surrender. Her long, flowing silver hair draped over the sides, gliding across the symbols with each thrust of the man between her thighs. She tossed her sweat-soaked head, raking her nails down Timon's hard, gleaming chest as she fought against the rising waves of desire.

Her nails marked his flesh with reddened lines. Timon jerked his head back, freeing his long golden-blond hair from its scarlet leather thong. He growled. His face contorted, harsh and nearly pain-filled, as he dug his fingers into her hips. The rhythm and force of his thrusts increased as he pounded his engorged cock into her, trying through sheer speed to make them one being.

Julius stood at her head, soothing his cool hands across her heated breasts as his deep, masculine voice chanted in the lilting, ancient tongue. When the desires crashing through her body grew too much to contain Lise reached back and grabbed his bulging forearms for support. He leaned forward, letting his onyx flow of hair fall around her face like a curtain, cutting off the outside world. He kissed her cheeks, eyes and temples. Soft, tender, caring touches. Still he chanted between each caress. His presence, his very smell, soothed her.

She stopped working to restrain her desires, the lust building, towering above her. She simply opened wide her heart and let fate run its torrential course.

As her climax grew, so did the Pillar. The beam of bright amber light emanating from their joined bodies pierced the darkness. Blinding in intensity, it rivaled the violent emotions surging inside Lise.

Finally the monotonous chanting came to an end. Julius strode around the altar to take his place behind Timon, bracing a firm hand on his twitching and heaving shoulder. Lise didn't see Julius as he moved between her legs but she felt Timon inside her thrust forward with a harsh cry of rapture and agony. His rhythm faltered and then gained strength as Julius took control of the plunge. Each time the dark-haired man rammed forward into her lover, Timon shoved hard into her.

Three made one. Three hearts beating with the same deep emotions. Lust and love binding together the three powers—Visionary, Empath and Catalyst.

The Pillar grew even brighter.

Lise arched, overwhelmed. Her head dug into the stone. Her sleek thighs and slender calves wrapped around her two lovers, pulling them into her body. Into her soul.

They came together in a massive burst of energy, their powers feeding the pulsing Pillar.

For a moment there was peace. Silence. With a triad of groans the three parted, the men staggering to take their places at each side. They stood guard above their Third as she regained herself, for it was she who controlled and guided the Pillar. Her love and power would send it forth and close the gate to hell.

Salvation skimmed within their reach.

Lise lay curled and panting on the altar while the two men stared at each other across her body. The tenderness in that simple meeting of the eyes tore at her tender heart. Neither man ever looked at her with that depth of emotion filling his gaze.

Julius leaned forward, placing a soft kiss on Timon's lips. A kiss of caring and commitment as well as passion.

A kiss brimming with love, a gentleness she couldn't remember either man showing her, especially Julius.

Lise let out a keening wail as something precious inside her shattered under the weight of jealousy. She scrambled back off the stone, scraping skin. The two men looked down at her in amazement as tears trailed down her soft cheeks. Timon, who'd but moments before heaved into her body, reached out with one hand.

She slapped it away. "A lie. All a lie," she gasped between jagged sobs. The bitter taste of betrayal lay like ashes on her tongue.

Confusion and pain etched in both faces as she cried out.

"I'm a vessel to you, nothing more." The woman gasped in heart-rending pain as she scrambled to her feet, backing away from the men, the altar, everything. "Your love has no room for me."

Before either man could prevent her flight, she escaped the Temple of Light. The Pillar thrashed and trembled. Its brilliance grew brighter and brighter, to an intensity beyond human measure, before shattering in a million glittering sparks. The fading embers fell around the two who remained.

The bedrock of Atlantis heaved beneath their feet, sending the two men stumbling to their knees. Fissures began forming, shooting out from an ominous black void forming dead center above the altar of the Temple of Light.

The pulsing black tear in reality grew wider with each passing second. Frigid wind whipped around the chamber, freezing every drop of liquid it touched as it doused

every candle, lantern and torch. Only the stars and the moon still shone through the open windows, dimly lighting the once brilliant chamber.

But the black void was not empty. No. Figures moved, serpentine, in its depths, surging forward. Growls and cackles came first. The thunderous sound of a thousand hooved and horned feet. Then dark figures peeled away from the void, forcing their way into the mortal realm.

Timon dragged Julius to his feet, forcing him toward the single doorway, their only escape. Only there would be no escape. Not for any Atlantean. Not that night. In an instant, Julius' second sight flared, showing rivers of blood streaming down smooth marble streets. The screams of women and children competing with the growls and snarls of animal pleasure coming from their attackers.

The world as he knew it had been lost the moment their Third fled from them.

Julius saw a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye, a streak of steely blue. He felt a thump against his abdomen, not pain exactly, not yet. Just a hard, breath-stealing thrust. But the look of utter horror in Timon's eyes slapped him out of the shock.

Harsh, raspy laughter filled the air, the evil glee freezing marrow. As Julius fell to his knees he looked up at Timon. His love.

A seven-foot demon, light gleaming off his ice-blue flesh, rose behind him. Timon never had a chance to see his death approaching, eyes locked on Julius. But Julius saw. The last sight to burn behind his own dying eyes was that of Timon falling lifeless to the ground.

## Chapter Two

"Another nightmare?" a rich, deep voice asked from the graying darkness behind him, breaking through the haunting wail of sax music.

Julian Stern took another sip of scotch, letting the amber burn spread from his tongue to his stomach and outward. With luck, and enough strong alcohol, maybe he'd be able to sleep undisturbed through the rest of the night. Gods knew staring blindly out the window at the twinkling neon stars wasn't helping. The glittering skyline couldn't block out his dark dreams.

One of Tim's hands slid down Julian's bare shoulder while the other swept through his hair, ruffling the longer top. Tim bent down to place a tender, flesh-quivering kiss on Julian's throat, sending shivers through his body. "Was it the same one, or was there more this time?"

"The same," Julian growled, closing his eyes as he leaned back into his lover's embrace and tried to block out images of destruction, shattered bodies and rivers of blood. He didn't know how he'd survived so long in this lifetime without the other man's core of strength to support him, the feel of Tim's hard hands soothing his vision-ravaged body. Even the scent of the other man's cologne, spicy and bold, eased his stressed senses. Only two years together and he felt as though he'd known Timothy Mercer for an eternity.

Of course, in a way he had.

He closed his eyes and let Tim massage his temples, willing his frazzled body to relax. "It's worse now. I can see what happened through her eyes. I feel her pain, her despair. I know how much we—no, *I*—hurt her. She knew how you felt about her. You were open and honest. Your love was never the issue. She didn't know how I felt, didn't know how much she meant to me."

Julian looked over his shoulder, agony twisting his face as he remembered a past he couldn't change. "She died alone, Tim. If the spell hadn't worked she should've died in our arms. She should've known only true love in those last moments. Instead she died alone, believing herself unloved."

"The past is the past," Tim whispered, his own voice tight with unspoken emotion. He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Julian, burying his face in his lover's neck. "You've gotta to let it go."

Julian allowed Tim's words to sink in as he stared out the window of their condo. From the thirtieth floor of the building, the neon glitz of the Strip spread out like a fairytale land. Every form of human temptation, heavy on the greed and lust, lay there for the taking. But no amount of mindless entertainment could distract him from his burning guilt.



"You know it's not that easy," he whispered before tossing his head back without dislodging Tim's embrace and letting another shot of scotch burn through him. "I've seen it, Tim. Apocalypse is coming again. If we can't find her, can't get her to trust us and love us, we lose. We all lose."

His lover stopped touching him, comforting him. For a half-drunken moment Julian worried that he'd frightened Tim, sent him running as he had their Third. Instead Tim stalked around the couch to crouch on the russet fur rug by Julian's feet. Tim laid his head on Julian's thigh and wrapped his arm around his bare legs. "So we find her."

"Don't you think I've tried?" Julian asked, fighting against the urge to pull away, withdraw into himself. Resisting the urge to throw his glass against the wall and rage against his helplessness. But Tim didn't deserve his anger. "She's hiding from me. Her powers are hiding her from me."

Tim let go of Julian's legs and crawled up to sit next to him. He took the rattling scotch from his partner's hand and deposited it on the side table. Flipping over, he curled his body like a well-loved cat, laying his head across Julian's lap. With a soft light glowing in his eyes, he reached up to run his fingers over a well-loved, whisker-roughened cheek. "We hurt her, Julian. By not telling her what we felt deep in our hearts, by protecting her too much, we hurt her, devastated her. She cowers from half-remembered pain, not from us."

Julian couldn't resist the comfort of his touch, the large hand caressing his face. He leaned into the firm stroke, relishing what little reassurance he could. "Whatever she's hiding from, time's running out. God help us all if she isn't in Vegas."

"If this is the time and this is the place, then she's here."

Hope and realism waged bitter war. Julian wanted Tim to be right, yearned for him to be right. But it felt too much like wishful thinking. "It's a big city, Tim. A very big city."

Tim cupped Julian's face with both hands, forcing his eyes away from the window. His fingers slid across Julian's lips, leaving a burning trail of longing in their wake. "We'll find her. That much is destiny. Everything else is choice."

"But what'll she choose this time? Will she leave us again?" *Will she rip out our hearts again?*

Ever the joy-filled optimist, Tim's irresistibly devastating smile projected his utter belief in their powers of persuasion. "This time we tell her the truth. This time we let her in. We don't have to make the same mistake."

Julian pulled his face away and stared once more into the darkening shadows. His hands tightened into white-knuckled fists. "I don't want it to end again."

"It won't. We won't let it. This time we'll be able to enjoy a full life together."

Tim came to his knees, balancing precariously to face Julian. He took his lover's face in his hands once more, turning it toward him. Julian knew what he was up to but he was damned if he'd stop him. The comfort of Tim's strong, trim and athletic body blocked his thoughts. The anxiety gnawing away at the edges of his mind calmed.

Tim's lips met his own. Hard but gentle. Rough yet soft. Familiar and comforting. He opened his mouth to the soft invasion, the exploration of each moist recess, closing his eyes against the harsh nightmares.

Julian reached forward, dragging Tim into his arms. He sought solace in the comfort of a warm embrace, the feel of the other man's sinewy body against his bare chest. A groan accompanied the hands lacing around the back of his head and crushing him into the kiss.

The crisp smells of aftershave and Tim's soap filled his senses as he closed his eyes to the darkness building in the outside world. He was safe with Tim. Tim's lips rubbed warmly against his own in an extended, drugging kiss. Tim's tongue reached in and plumbed every secret crevice of his mouth. Seconds stretched into minutes, lost in the pleasure of lips, teeth and tongue. Spirals of growing ecstasy.

Tim pulled back, trailing nibbling kisses across Julian's cheeks. "I love you," he whispered before pushing Julian across the couch.

Julian allowed himself to fall. It would've taken no effort for him to assume the more dominant role. No matter how many hours in the gym the other man put, Julian was physically stronger than Tim. A harder life gave some gifts, like large, ropy muscles. But Julian needed to feel overpowered. He needed the weight of the world, or at least his small part of it, off his shoulders. Someone else could take control for a while.

Tim knew exactly what he needed.

With a quick pull, his lover tugged off his boxers. Julian's groan of relief as his bulging erection sprang free of its silk bindings brought a voracious smile to Tim's face. "Somebody's happy to see me. Very happy, and about to be happier." He licked his lips and stared coquettishly up through lowered lids. "Better hang on, lover. Time to fly."

Tim felt the power surging through his blood, the power to pull his lover out of his dark thoughts, out of his mind.

He wasted no time reaching down and taking Julian's rigid cock in a firm, knowing grip. He knew how to bring the man to his knees with one ruthless caress. "You like it nice and hard, just this side of rough and brutal. Bring you fast. Have you shooting in minutes."

"Oh gods, that feels so good. Gonna make me come so good." Julian thrust his hips up as Tim leaned down to lap at the very tip of his cock while pumping his hand slowly, so slowly. The salty taste danced across his tongue, a testament to his effect on his self-controlled lover. Each steely stroke sent Julian's balls tighter, closer to his thick, angry purple cock. Tim knew how Julian loved the sweet, rough torment, how close to bursting he really was.

Now time to switch tactics, Tim thought as a wicked grin danced across his face.

Tim relaxed, taking a deep breath before he let Julian's thick cock slide down his throat. Julian nearly came off the couch as he swallowed, forcing his silky slick muscles to twist around the lengthy, broad cock before hollowing his cheeks in slick suction,

ending as the mushroom head met the seal of his lips. Julian wove his fingers through Tim's thick golden locks, holding his head down as he begged and whimpered.

Tim answered the pleading by slurping down again and humming, knowing how those vibrations would feel on his lover's straining cock. Incoherent words of pleasure tumbled from Julian's lips as Tim sucked him deep. Throat muscles rippled around his pulsing cock in a wet clinch.

Julian's back bowed, his head pounding into the couch cushions. Pressure built, erasing all thought, all cares. His whimpers filled the air. He wanted release, needed release. Fought against release. "Tim, no more," he gasped, hands falling helpless to his side, grasping at couch cushions. "No more. Can't stop. You have to. No more."

"Then come. I'll take it. I'll take whatever you got to give." With that said Tim sucked even harder, swallowing the swollen cock head. Lightning skittered up Julian's spine, his balls clenching tight, struggling to release. With a harsh groan, spasms racked his body. Tim swallowed splash after splash of Julian's warm cum. His skillful tongue licked up the last few drops dotting his lips.

Julian opened his eyes to stare at his gloating lover. Love and promise as well as a spark of an infinitely deep if indefinite emotion filled his gaze. "Give me a moment to recover."

Tim's infectious grin peeked out as he wiggled back to lean against the arm of the couch. His smile warmed the last bleak places frozen in Julian's heart. "Don't worry about me. This was about you. You needed it. Not that I'd refuse if you really want to do me. I'm loving, not crazy."

Julian let his head fall back as he basked in Tim's unconditional love. Friendship, loyalty, caring and desire. These feelings marked every lifetime he spent with Tim.

If only she were as constant.

## Chapter Three

"Hey, love," a playful voice yelled in her ear over the pounding beat of the punk song blasting through the darkened, smoke-filled room. "Your friend looks like she could use some loosening up. Twenty bucks and I'll put a smile on her pretty little face."

Without hesitation Lisa Harrington reached into her purse, an evil, impish grin spreading. The male stripper was right. After being married to the slug for five years her newly divorced friend, Janice, did need to loosen up. That was the point of this whole outing, a Happy Divorce Day party.

And Lisa intended to make sure Janice's day was happy indeed. Positively electrifying. She might not be able to punch out the jerk who'd hurt her oldest, dearest and almost only good friend but at least she could take the haunted look off Janice's face for a few hours. Still, she'd prefer the bloodier option.

The dark-haired man in the black felt cowboy hat tucked Lisa's twenty into his shiny black leather g-string, letting his hand linger on his skin to emphasize his bulging package. His eyes roved over her body and he licked his lips, showing appreciation for the man-eating red dress she'd picked as a colorful form of camouflage before winking and turning to Janice. He stalked forward in rhythm with the music, his hips undulating in a provocative dance. Janice's eyes widened like a deer trapped, frozen, in headlights. The stripper tossed his taut leg over her lap, pinning her to her plush chair. He licked his lips and braced his hands on her chrome chair back.

Janice was trapped.

But oh, to be trapped like that. Public anonymity. Music pumping hot through your veins. Sweaty male flesh writhing over your body. People cheering you on as he grabs your hand and forces you to slap his hard, luscious, flexing ass. Just watching her friend basking in the center of attention made Lisa hot.

Too bad she wasn't entirely comfortable with the whole lap dance idea. She wanted it but at the same time didn't like the idea of being so exposed, even among friends.

Pure sexual haze followed by soul-shaking release. Nothing in the world compared. But the possibility of public humiliation...

Lisa almost wished she still had a husband at home waiting to fulfill her every need. Almost. But then again, Sam had never thought much about her needs anyway, greedy, insensitive bastard. She was better off with her realistic-looking, if a tad beyond natural size, vibrator with its nice little rabbit ears. It was always there when she needed it, with the exception of dead batteries. And it was never unfaithful. Guaranteed clean and non-threatening.

The song ended and the cocky cowboy backed away, tipping his hat and blowing a kiss. Janice tossed her an evil look of reprisal. Message received. Vengeance promised, vengeance in the form of a lap dance. She'd grin and bear it, surviving the embarrassment, as long as Janice didn't pick the guy who looked like Mr. Clean. Not only was oiled and bald so not her type, Lisa didn't really want to know if the man shaved everything. And let's face it, five o'clock shadow belonged on the face, not the head, chest or, god forbid, back.

Eww.

To distract herself from her future with someone limber and greased, Lisa flagged down the cute young thing of a waiter. She slapped her credit card on the shirtless man's tray and started a tab. Lemon drops, lotsa lemon drops. Plastic would keep the shots coming, and this was the night for plentiful alcohol.

Lisa's eyes followed the waiter as he wove his way through scattered tables and frantic, hopping women, but before reaching the stage her attention snagged on something else, someone much more tempting than any strip act could be. Lucifer himself sauntered toward her. Only a fallen angel could look that good and that bad at the same time. Long golden brown-blond hair floated around his shoulders in a flowing halo. Piercing sapphire-blue eyes sliced through the crowd. And his little white, glittering g-string left no part of his well-toned and tanned body to the imagination. Not that she could have imagined the reality of something that...impressive.

And he was heading straight for their table!

Lisa expected him to stop by her chair, especially when his eyes never left her face. Her heart fluttered. She felt hunted. Instead he stalked right past her and straight for Janice. Which was how it should be. It was Janice's party. She was the one sporting the condom-covered black lace veil. Still, watching him walk past sent an odd empty feeling stabbing through her. Lisa wanted to reach up and drag him back to her, back where he belonged.

Instead, he whispered in Janice's ear, giving Lisa a wonderful, uninhibited view of his tight, quivering, muscular ass. The type of ass that begged to be clawed, or at least spanked until it glowed a healthy pink.

Lisa fought back the urge to do just that as his hips hitched to the pounding rhythm of the music. Still the man kept his attention on Janice. Her face lit up and her sparkling smile sent a wave of biting jealousy crashing over Lisa. But the feeling didn't last long. Not with Janice pawing through her purse and shoving money down the front of his tight little g-string, pure devilment shining in her eyes.

Janice leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. Then she smirked at Lisa, kissing and wiggling her fingers.

Uh-oh. Payback time.

The man locked his eyes on Lisa again, devouring her. The whistles and jeers of her friends rolled off him. He never broke his stride as he approached her. Her ears roared

as Lisa grabbed the edge of her chair and prepared to be straddled. Instead he took her hand and tugged her, scrambling, to her feet.

His honey-dark voice melted over her as he whispered, "I think I'm going to need a bit more room to do you justice."

He used her hand to pull her closer to him, anchoring her to his side, an aura of urgency surrounding them. Chills raced down her body as he hooked his other arm around her shoulder. Skin on skin. Delicious, smoldering contact.

Lisa licked her dry lips, forcing herself not to break eye contact. He smiled. Not a lascivious smirk. Not the grin of a man looking for a good tip. A bright, honest and joyful smile that arrowed straight to a woman's heart. A potent combination of dark nights filled with sensuous sin and long days filled with romping romantic play. She leaned into him, wallowing in the delirium.

Lisa held her free hand to her chest as he quickly guided her through the throng of horny, somewhat-drunken women. He wove through tables filled with giggles and screams but he bypassed the stairs to the stage, much to Lisa's relief.

*Thank god for small favors. That's all I need, to make a complete spectacle of myself. Not even for Janice. Nothing's worth the teasing I'd get after being on stage with the Golden God here.*

Instead he halted at a row of tables and booths with "reserved" cards perched on them. He pulled out a sturdy leather-backed chair and handed her down, helping her adjust herself to protect her modesty in her short dress. When she sat comfortably, he nudged her knees apart. His thick, muscular thighs slid against hers as he stepped forward. The smell of spicy cologne and male musk surrounded her. He tossed his hair over his shoulder and leaned down. His knee rubbed against her damp, spasming mound as he whispered, "Now this is much better. You look like the type to appreciate a bit of privacy."

He brushed a short silver lock of her hair behind the small shell of her ear, the tip of his finger running down the soft curve of her cheek. She thought she felt his lips on that small, deliciously sensitive bit of skin behind her earlobe, but it must have been his nose.

Strippers weren't allowed to kiss customers, right?

Then lethal passion glinted in the eyes looking down at her as the music filling the room changed from frantic and driven to throbbing and sultry. His joyous smile turned wicked and those vibrant sapphire eyes flamed with the lust flowing out from him to fill her with tingling anticipation.

He slid his hands down her arms. Goose bumps covered her skin at his soft touch. Her pulse leapt to meet each caress. She closed her eyes and luxuriated in pure erotic euphoria. But they flew open as he grasped her hips in a firm grip and bucked his pelvis forward. His lengthy, virile cock rubbed against her aching cleft. Her stomach dropped. Her womb throbbed, yawning. The constant pressure sent desire tingling through her body like tiny lightning bolts. She gasped, eyes widening.

*I guess they're allowed to do more than I thought.*

His smile grew eager and avaricious with barely hidden yearning. "I'm going to enjoy this. And so will you. You'll enjoy every moment of my body sliding against yours."

A whimper caught in her throat as the man moved against her like a large jungle cat. He placed her trembling, sweating hands on his chest, encouraging her to explore his hard, damp skin. Her hands twitched. She gave in to temptation, sliding down to explore the two lickable cuts in the muscles above his pelvic bones that arched down his abs to his groin. Living stone flexed against her touch. God, how she loved a man with that particular muscular cut. In return, his fingers delved into the back of her short hair, sifting through it.

Lisa moaned and thrashed into his caress.

Her hands stroked his naked skin. His flesh gliding beneath her palms felt natural, familiar. She curved her fingers and raked her nails down, marking her territory, claiming him. She fought the urge to lick the long red trail, to taste the salt of his skin tinged with a metallic zing.

"Mmm," he growled, pushing his body against her hands, "I like that."

He rubbed his cheeks against hers, forcing another gasp from her. God, he felt good, smelled good. How would he taste? Salty? Spicy? Sweet?

Before she succumbed to temptation and started lapping at his bare chest, he shimmied down her body, raking against her breasts. Her nipples pebbled beneath the thin crimson cloth of her dress. He glanced up and laughed, a deep, dark chuckle. Lisa's heart gave a lurch as he slipped his face in her cleavage, rocking his head back and forth, and took a deep breath.

"Nothing smells quite like the skin of an aroused woman. Musky, savory, exquisite. There's no better perfume."

Lisa rubbed her thighs together as his words sent a shaft of desire straight to her core, dampening the silk of her panties, squeezing her eager pussy. His knowing, lascivious smile broadened. He stared in her eyes, his gaze holding a hint of recognition, some deeper emotions she didn't recognize, didn't know if she wanted to recognize. Then he looked down again, leaving her wondering if his expression had only been her imagination. A horny woman looking for something more from a firm young stripper who made her writhe with hunger.

As the music pounded out its slow, heavy beat, the stripper slid his aroused, satin-encased cock between her thighs. Her dress hiked up close to her hips to accommodate him, a sight anyone near could notice. But all attention focused on the stage, giving Lisa a false sense of security. She moaned and wiggled but didn't resist his invasion. Instead she arched into his lunging strokes, craving deeper contact. Temptation ruled. No one cared what she was doing. And it felt so good. So very, very good after such a long, long time.

Safe sin.

Then he spun around, bending over so his taut ripe ass flashed in her face again. She'd always thought of herself as more of a chest woman but the man had a luscious, mouthwatering ass. Something to be appreciated by a connoisseur. She was so focused on his assets that his next move surprised her.

He took her foot, slipping off her shoe as he raised her leg. Once her hose-smooth leg straightened, he straddled it. His body slid down her calf, stopping only when his cock grazed her toes. Gently, he rubbed his hard length across the tips as he firmly massaged the arch of her foot.

Lisa moaned and twitched. Never had she imagined that her feet could be an erogenous zone. She'd never really thought about her feet much one way or the other. She didn't understand the whole designer footwear fascination. Shoes were shoes. Now she'd be lucky if she didn't have an orgasm walking down the street in a good pair of heels.

When the stripper put her foot back down, she expected him to stand and face her again. She was wrong. He did turn and face her, but he didn't stand. Instead he crawled forward on the floor, between her legs, a hungry predator stalking his meal. He ran his hands along her silk-covered thighs as his chest forced her legs to spread even farther.

Closer and closer he crawled. Closer and closer to that one part of her body that wept for attention. Bound behind nylon and silk her clit throbbed almost painfully, aching and begging for promised attention. Her pouty, tingling pussy ached to be filled.

Her eyes rolled back and she scooted down in her chair. She rolled and swayed her hips, thrusting against him in invitation. Closer, she had to get closer. A groan sounded but she couldn't tell if it was her voice or his. All she knew was that she wanted more, needed more. More contact, more pressure. Just a little bit to push her over the glorious, back-bending edge. With the exception of the pulsing, musical beat her surroundings faded. No one and nothing existed but the man kneeling in front of her, offering his service, worshiping her body with his own.

Only when he gave a mournful sigh and rolled back to his feet did reality intrude once more. No more contact. She wanted to cry out and pull him back into her arms. Her hands started grabbing for him.

The MC came on over the speakers, announcing another round of pay dances on stage. The lucky girls whose names were called rushed for the stairs.

The stripper gave a sad smile, regret etched in his face, and reached down to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I wish I could stay with you longer, lovely, but I'm up on stage this round."

Lisa gave a weak laugh and straightened up in her chair. She ran a hand down her dress, smoothing out real and imagined wrinkles. "I'm sure you say that to all the girls," she quipped, trying to make light of the deep and frighteningly powerful feelings still surging through her body. "Must be good for tips. Not that you need any help in that department."



The stripper frowned, the grim expression seeming out of place on his happy, boyish face. "I'll take that as a compliment, even if you're wrong."

Lisa raised an eyebrow but he didn't expand right away. He headed for the stage, turning back only once. "I don't say that to all the girls," he tossed over his shoulder.

## **Chapter Four**

Arctic wind whipped through the barren, bleak landscape. The swirling snow-filled gusts tore at tender living flesh, the cold stripping bone achingly bare. The howls and screams of tortured and tormented souls echoed in a haunting melody of agony.

The scent of noxious brimstone, warm blood and charred flesh laced the air. A mouthwatering demonic delicacy.

But darkness didn't cover the void, leaving pitiful, bared souls stumbling, blind. Instead harsh, bright, unending white light revealed the most depraved sins and desecrations to all. No imperfection, no torture, could hide in the blazing light.

Bodies writhed and trembled along the ground, pleading for mercy, unheard and ignored. Crimson splashes broke the unending blue-white of snow and ice.

In the midst of this wasteland the demon lord Mograith smiled from his icy throne. His naked blue flesh flowed into his surroundings, camouflaging him from any would-be prey. Only the deep purple of his long hair and the piercing red of his eyes stood out from the colors surrounding him, alerting others to his appearance.

But now he didn't seek prey for his dark pleasures. He sat contemplating his next great feat as he enjoyed the depraved and artistic work of others. He chuckled as one of his lesser minions thrust a woman to her stomach.

Mograith reached down to pump his throbbing, engorged cock as his minion began tormenting its victim. Her screams sent shivers of fervent delight through Mograith. His only regret was that all he had were these few miserable wretches for his entertainment. He lived for the times the barrier fell, if only for a few fleeting moments. So much could be done in mere seconds. All the innocent lives he could destroy. All the new, pure flesh to corrupt, to lead to his domain. All the stark terror to relish.

Finally his minion grew bored with its victim, leaving her lying on the ground. Her pitiful whimpers triggered Mograith's own massive climax. His seed sprayed into the air, a sparkling silver fountain of frigid pain. Droplets splattered a few choice victims below.

Then a small current of fresh, warm air caressed his cheek. A soft, comforting beam of sunny light shone down on his throne. Mograith squinted, his face tightening in alarm. Too early. It was too early to be the end of his rule and the beginning of the new order. Too early to lose his position.

But the light wasn't a sign from a higher, forgiving and fatherly power, looking to give the tormented a second chance. No, it was something much better. Something delicious. Something to be savored. Something Mograith hadn't seen in his level of hell in over a millennium.

A tiny pinprick sparkled in the sky, a miniscule rip in the fabric standing barrier between dimensions. Negative energy building up on the other side had managed to punch through. As more energy gathered the tear would grow, allowing Mograith and his followers entrance, a moment to roam free and destroy.

As long as the blasted Three didn't get in his way.

Mograith clapped his hands. A tiny creature appeared, floating and fluttering before him.

"Go forth. Take a human host. Break the bonds of the Three. They cannot be allowed to close the rift."

The tiny, gnarled figure gave a precisely executed bow. Turning, it zipped through the minute tear. Once in the mortal world it would seek out a vulnerable human, cast out its soul and take control. In that guise it would beguile and torment those who sought to keep balance in the other realm.

Soon Mograith would have his fondest wish. A bridge into the human world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tim tossed his keys on the table as he walked in the welcoming apartment. The lights were low, soothing jazz played in the background. Tim's mouth watered at the smell of tomatoes, melted cheese and garlic. Julian knew how to take advantage of all his weaknesses. Nothing could be better after a night of work than dinner, wine, slow music and a warm loving body waiting to take him.

A place to call home.

During their first year together Tim had held his breath, waiting for the moment Julian tired of him, kicked him out. He ate voraciously, even sneaking food into his battered laundry bag, thinking each meal would be his last. But time passed and Julian still loved him. One day, without Julian's prompting, he threw out his tattered bag. Tim's own love grew from self-interest, to caring, to true love. Julian had brought him a long way from the jaded, self-hating rent boy who trolled the streets for a quick, easy mark. Even after all this time, Tim couldn't believe his luck.

So what if he had to risk his life to save the world from impending darkness? It was worth it. Anything was better than his early, bleak years. Years spent never knowing where he'd be sleeping. Years of trading sex for three squares and the slightest chance of keeping a roof over his head long enough to catch some secure, uninterrupted sleep.

Julian never looked down on him, never thought less of him for what he'd done to survive. Never thought to judge him, even subconsciously.

Julian loved him, pure and simple. He surrounded Tim with feelings of caring, security and peace. Never doubt or disgust.

And now Tim had a chance to bring her into his life as well. An earthy angel with a silver-blond bob and scarlet lips. A woman with the body of a Forties pin-up girl and the sexual responsiveness of a modern-day porn star. Her heat called to him on a level

only reached before by Julian. Another human being Tim could come to love and could love him in return. He didn't remember as much as Julian did about his past lives, but he remembered the feel of her emotions washing over and surrounding him like a warm cocoon.

At least the whole world-saving gig came with fringe benefits.

Tim walked down the darkened hall to stand in the kitchen doorway, watching Julian putter around the stove. The man took his breath away. Tall with black hair kept short everywhere but on top, well-muscled and tanned, Julian's early military training surrounded him with an aura of strength and safety. Anyone he put under his protection would stay secure, no question. Even now, years after his discharge into civilian life, he reeked of hero.

Tim never thought he'd be the type to let himself be swept up by a white knight. He wasn't a complete twinkie. But when this independently wealthy private eye-security specialist came along, Tim found himself living out Julia Roberts' dream. This hooker made good and he never wanted to look back.

Sensing his presence, Julian looked up from a bubbling pot of marinara sauce. Dark circles framed his weary brown eyes but he gave a welcoming smile. The dreams rode him hard but he refused to show his anxiety to Tim. Tim didn't know if he liked the fact that Julian wanted to shield him from worry or if it pissed him off. Either way, after tonight one hurdle would be over. Who knew how many more were to come?

"Hey, you're home late. I was beginning to worry you'd met some cute young thing and got a piece of ass without me," Julian teased as he put down his wooden spoon and stepped away from the stove.

Tim smirked at the half playful comment. Julian wasn't typically insecure and didn't give him a hard time about his job. But it didn't stop him from needing the occasional ego stroking and reassurance from his lover. Normally Tim would take it as an invitation to stroke more than just Julian's ego, liking to give physical proof of his commitment. But at the moment all Tim could picture was her sitting under him, arching into his body, fucking him with her clothes on. "Not exactly. But not that far off either."

Julian put his hands on his hips, giving him a mock glare. "What do you mean, not far off?" he growled, eyes narrowing and glittering dangerously. "I was joking, and you'd better be too."

Tim grinned at the possessive note in Julian's voice. He reached into a jar of black olives sitting open on the counter, plopping one in his mouth. He let it roll over his tongue a few times before starting to chew.

Julian kept watching him, one eyebrow cocked and lips pursed. Finally Tim reached into his back pocket and tossed him a small, carefully folded piece of paper.

Julian didn't say anything at first, just spread out the paper and read. He looked back up, brow wrinkled in confusion. "What's this? Lisa Harrington and what looks like a credit card number? Someone you know involved in credit fraud?"

Tim shrugged, struggling not to grin and to keep his voice soft and even. "I just wanted to give you what I could find from her bar tab. Figured it'd be enough for you to track her down."

"And I'd track her down why? She in trouble?" Julian asked, starting to crumble the paper in his fist.

"She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Tim answered, letting awe and wonder fill his voice. "She keeps that shiny silver hair of hers short now, so it swings just above her delicate shoulders. Her blue eyes look straight into your soul, deep and piercing. Almost makes you miss that pouting mouth, with lush lips a man can't help but imagine wrapped around and sucking his cock. And her sweetly rounded body was made to be ridden long and hard, throughout the night. Sound familiar?"

Julian's face paled as he stared down at the name, the paper rattling in his shaking grasp. "You saw her. You actually saw her," he whispered as hope and fear clashed in his eyes and his mouth thinned. "Are you certain it was her?"

Tim couldn't resist cupping Julian's chin in a firm grip. He swooped down on Julian's mouth, his tongue flicking out to wipe away the strain before plunging in for a taste. A glow filled him as he pulled back and looked at the dazed expression in his lover's eyes.

"I don't remember all the things you do but I knew her the second I set eyes on her." Tim stopped, still clutching Julian's face and willing him to listen to every word, to understand how deeply the meeting had shaken him. "It was like the first moment I saw you. Complete, heart-rending déjà vu. Even before I got near her I knew the little whimpering sounds she'd make, how hard to caress her and what places to touch to get the best reaction. It's her, no question."

"Lisa Harrington," Julian said, letting the innocent-sounding name roll across his tongue. "She came to the club?"

Tim stepped back and hopped up to sit on the cool black marble counter as he snagged another olive, tossing it in his mouth. He licked each finger before answering. "She was with a group of girlfriends. I got her alone for one dance. Then she avoided me like the plague. I'm not sure how much, if anything, she remembers."

Julian carefully smoothed out the crumpled paper, his fingers lingering reverently on the loops of her name as though he wanted to absorb the ink through his fingertips. "I'll run this info through the 'Net," he murmured, eyes still staring off into space and into the twisting ribbons of possible futures. "It shouldn't take me long to find her. Then we need to plan how to approach her. Time's short and we've got a lot to make up for. Gaining her trust won't be easy. Never easy."

"We can't let her get away," Tim replied, his heart growing tight in his chest and threatening to crawl out his throat. He didn't remember everything that happened. Julian had had to tell him about their pasts, like a story involving other people. Nothing he could relate to or remember. But he felt the scar of their failure hard and deep in his

soul. "Seducing her won't be enough. We're going to have to bind her to us if we want the ritual to work. Tie her heart and soul to ours."

Julian nodded, still staring down at the innocent, wrinkled paper. "You'll go first. She relates better to you. You can read her, use your powers to your advantage."

"No, Julian," Tim was quick to disagree. That felt wrong. "It needs to be you. She likes me. We fit together, quickly. I could tell that much from meeting her again. No memories needed. You have to approach her, connect with her. You're the one who needs time to build a relationship. This one's up to you, lover."

Julian didn't look surprised with Tim's observation. But he didn't look happy or convinced either. His lips almost disappeared in his grimace and his brow furrowed, giving him an endearingly lost look. A needy look Tim knew Julian would hate if he knew showed so clearly, even to his lover. "You think so?"

"I feel so."

Tim watched as Julian's face hardened with resolve. He knew what lay in his lover's battered heart. Julian's fear and desperation. The desire and despair. The excitement and guilt. Finding Lisa opened new doors for both of them, created hope out of bleak depression. At the same time it brought back memories of defeat. Of lost trust and betrayal.

"Did it seem like she remembered you?" Julian whispered, turning his back on Tim and gripping the edge of the counter. Avoidance and distraction couldn't take away from the raw desperation filling his voice.

Tim wanted to reassure Julian, to give him something to hold on to, some little hint of how Lisa felt. But he didn't know what to say. He could read her emotions with more ease than he could a complete stranger. But that didn't tell him what caused those emotions, where they were formed. "I'm not sure," he replied, settling on honesty, not allowing false hope even to comfort the love of his life. "Maybe she does, or maybe not. She acted like something clicked, a connection between us, but I don't think it was conscious. A part of her might feel something familiar but I doubt she understands what it is or where it comes from."

Julian sat the paper on the counter before turning back to the stove. He grabbed the wooden spoon and stirred his sauce again. Tim felt him struggling to contain his emotions, to not let them get out of his control. "So we'll approach her with caution," he said in a deceptively steady voice. "Take things as slow as we dare."

Tim lifted an eyebrow. That wasn't the way he would've thought they'd meet her the first time. "We?"

Julian nodded, turning from his sauce to the boiling pot of rolling noodles. He grabbed the pot by its heat-resistant handles, carried it to the sink and poured the steaming contents in a waiting colander. He didn't reply until the large pot sat empty and cool on the counter. "We need to approach her together, not separately. She's already met you. If I start showing interest in her alone then bring you into the picture, she'll have every reason to mistrust the situation."

Yeah, I'd love to date you. By the way, have you met my gay lover? Tim almost laughed at her imagined response to that. "I guess we don't want to start there."

"No," Julian answered with a grimace.

Tim gave a supportive smile and tried to break the tension. He leaned forward, giving his best come-hither smile. "As long as you've got a reason. Here I thought you wanted me to hold your hand."

Julian let a bit of the devil Tim fell in love with shine out of his dark, savage eyes. He stepped away from the sink and between Tim's legs. He put a hand on the counter at either side of Tim's hips and leaned forward, pushing their pelvises together, letting him feel the wood he already sported. "If you're holding anything of mine, it's not gonna be my hand," he whispered against Tim's lips.

Tim wrapped his arms around his lover, enjoying the feel of the other man's hard, warm body against his own. "Hey now, can't a guy have a few minutes after work to rest and recoup before being jumped?"

A wet tongue swiped at Tim's neck before Julian's deep voice rumbled in his ear. "A few minutes, I guess. Just be ready for the jumping as soon as dinner's over. I'm needing some support."

"Support, my ass." Tim stopped at his own words, grinning. He cocked his head, glancing coyly from under lowered lids. "But I guess that's right. It is my ass you're wanting for support."

Julian shrugged as he stepped back, a half-smile curling his wicked lips. "Well, it's such a nice, curvaceous ass. What do you expect?"

The two men continued their sexual banter, never noticing the smoky scent filling the air or the strange shadow crouching nearby, watching their every move.

*The Three are not joined. The two males doubt the Third's commitment. Lord Mograith will be pleased.*

## **Chapter Five**

One hundred and nine degrees in the shade and rising. Hazy waves danced out of the concrete and asphalt. A furnace-dry breeze whipped through her hair. Swarms of people milled about, pointing at every little distraction, mobile driving hazards. A never-ending cacophony of chatter, screaming, pyrotechnics, splashing water, music and traffic blared around her. Las Vegas was a madhouse, pure sin-filled bedlam. And Lisa couldn't imagine living anywhere else in the world, even when stuck dealing with big-city, petty nastiness.

She slipped into her personal parking space, her hands trembling on the wheel. She sat for a moment, jaws clenched and eyes narrowed, staring into space. She finally closed her eyes and took several long, deep breaths, taking in the comforting smell of warm leather. Normally that would be enough to ease her tension, even after the worst traffic snafu. But not today. When she finally stepped out she slammed the door of her precious violated baby. The sound of the metallic crash echoed from building to building, a testament to her frustration.

She couldn't believe someone could defile her cherry red ROUSH Mustang, her one extravagance.

She'd left her baby in the parking lot of the strip club. After her all-too-memorable lap dance from the fallen angel, she'd gotten into a shots competition with Janice. Lisa managed to drink enough citrus fruit-laced vodka to kill a hefty Russian, leaving Janice owing her a cool forty bucks. The rest of the evening blurred into a haze of alcohol, secondhand smoke and bare skin. Her friends poured her into a cab with orders not to even think about her car until she could keep a substantial amount of food in her stomach the next morning.

Even plastered, it never occurred to her that leaving her car overnight would be a problem, not parked so close to the well-lit valet area. At least, not until the cab dropped her off that morning. A police car, blue lights flashing, sat parked out front. She'd thought she might be about to witness a raid. She found out differently when she reached her poor baby.

The word "pervert" had been scratched across the hood, the rough line carved deep in her paint. Other invectives graced the doors and trunk, half of which were misspelled. Over three-fourths of the cars in the parking lot had been vandalized, with red-faced, irate owners milling around them. She'd had to stay and make a report before the police allowed her to leave, teary-eyed, with her pitiful ride.

So here she was, two hours late to work, driving an insult-covered car. Assholes ruled the world.

There were days she hated this fucking town.



Lisa stomped into her already opened restaurant, the scent of exotic spices and mouthwatering meats flowing over her. Soft classical music ebbed and flowed around her. The chatty Saturday lunch crowd filled every table, a large swarm already waiting in the lobby and filling every chair at the bar.

*Damn, I hate being late, letting someone else do the prep work and open the doors without at least having a chance to check everything myself. Makes me feel redundant.*

Culinary Magic, or CM, was her other baby. She'd served her time working as a slave—er, chef—in other people's restaurants for years. After her divorce she worked double shifts, triple when possible, scrimped and saved until she had enough for a down payment, needing the independence of her own place, a feeling of control after her divorce put her life emotionally adrift. Then she poured every single penny she earned back into her restaurant until all debts were paid. She spent every extra moment for five solid years working to make certain she made a profit. Only within the last six months had CM become self-sufficient enough for her feel like she could take a step back and trust her manager. Finally she could leave him alone and take some time off.

But it still made her bones itch to let someone else have that kind of power over her CM. She missed the hands-on command, those lean, mean years, so the days she did work felt all the more precious. Wasting no time, Lisa dropped her purse in her spartan, if paper-cluttered, office and went straight back out front.

While Saturday was always one of their busiest days, her hostess Renee looked positively harried. Her perfectly coiffed auburn hair was mussed, sticking out at strange angles, and her black bowtie sat slightly askew.

"How's everything?" Lisa asked, glancing at the marker-covered seating chart.

Renee rolled her eyes, puffing an escaped curl out of her way. "It's been a madhouse," she grumbled before handing menus to a waiter taking a young couple to their table. "Trina didn't show at all and both Ryan and Kate called in sick. We're short-handed everywhere. We're up to an hour-plus wait and people are still piling in."

Lisa winced. More good news. Looked like she'd be hiring another waiter. Not that it would be hard to replace Trina. She'd been a ditz, if a cute ditz who made good tips. Still, this was the last flake-out Lisa would put up with. "Any customer complaints?"

Renee waited to reply, tapping her pen against the podium in a manic rhythm, until another set of customers stepped out of earshot. "Simon's having trouble. He's been picking up the slack Trina left. He got stuck with a high roller from one of the conventions in town, a real sleaze if you ask me. The guy hasn't been happy from the moment he walked in and found out he had to wait like all the other peons. Glared at me the entire time he sat at the bar. First thing out of his mouth was a demand for free drinks."

"Did you give him any?"

"I told him the first round was on the house. I know it's not policy but he reeked of trouble. Figured I'd take it out of my pay if I had to. Didn't want to deal with him on top of everything else."

Lisa eyed her hostess. She'd never seen the stoic young woman look so flustered, not even in the depths of finals week at her university. "Don't worry about it, Renee. The house will cover it. Sounds like you made the right call. I'll see what I can do to help Simon."

Renee nodded, straightening her tie and turning back to her post.

Lisa walked to Simon's station, smiling and making small talk with other customers as she passed through. Normally just walking the floor calmed her nerves. She'd planned out every gleaming inch of the space. The plantation shutters, the bright ocean-view mural covering one wall. The meandering tables and private romantic nooks down to the fresh flowers on each table were personally chosen. She garnered a great sense of pride from the smooth, friendly atmosphere she achieved. Approaching the center of the main dining area, she didn't have to ask which patron Renee meant.

The large, ruddy man created a black hole of anger around him, sucking all the pleasure and enjoyment out of the tables nearby.

Simon bent above him, obviously trying to placate the man. As she walked closer she began hearing his loud, belligerent rant.

"What kind of an establishment is this?" the man blustered, looking at other tables around him for support, uncaring that the other people avoided making eye contact. "I've had better service at a drive-thru window. First I'm forced to wait for forty-five minutes to be allowed to sit. Then it takes forever for anyone to acknowledge my presence. Now you tell me that you're out of the wine I ordered? A very expensive, exclusive wine too, I might add. I demand to speak with the manager immediately. This whole situation is utterly ridiculous."

Lisa stood straighter and flipped on her most pleasant, benign face. "Would the owner be sufficient?" she asked, waving a relieved Simon out of the line of fire.

The patron's beady little black eyes narrowed. He managed to look up at Lisa while still looking down his sharp beak nose. "You're the owner of this half-rate establishment?"

"Yes," she answered, steady wide smile firmly in place. Cool demeanor. *Keep a cool demeanor. You can be pissed as hell, but ya gotta stay calm and cool. Dealt with enough jerks over the years to know that. He's not worth the effort or energy for trading insults with, not this puny, puffed-up little weasel. Keep calm and defuse.*

"You need to fire some people," he blustered, not backing down an inch in the face of Lisa's calm, professional façade. "If I owned a place as poorly run as this I'd be ashamed to show my face in public. How you achieved your reputation as a fine eating establishment I'll never know."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, sir," Lisa said, still smiling though her teeth and cheeks ached. She forced down the rolling waves of anger, stuffing it in a little mental box and slamming it shut before offering the slimy little worm her first bone. "Is there anything specific we could do to make up for your inconvenience and displeasure?"

A crafty gleam glittered in the man's eyes. Lisa tried not to snort or roll her own eyes. *Now we get to the truth of the matter. Penny-pinching ass doesn't want to pay for his meal. Probably came in here planning to be unhappy and milking it for all it was worth.*

"I don't believe I should be forced to pay for a meal when the service was so substandard," he said, flicking a breadcrumb away from his plate.

*I just bet you don't.*

"I'm sorry but I can't sit by and watch this any longer," a deep, authoritative voice spoke behind her.

Lisa's heart gave a little leap and she struggled not to gasp. She hadn't heard anyone coming up behind her, hadn't sensed any foreboding or supportive presence. She glanced over her shoulder, ready to thank the man but shut him down. All she needed was to escalate the situation into a full-out confrontation. But the moment she made eye contact every feminine nerve she had went on red alert, her blood coursing with healthy attraction. She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed him as she walked through the room.

The man stood over six feet tall, pure masculine muscle in a designer suit which fit him perfectly. His jet black hair was clipped short on the sides but long and silky on top. Just looking at it made her palms itch to slide through it. His dark, piercing eyes stared impassively down at the other man and his lips formed a harsh line, one that begged to be chewed into submission.

*Whoa, down, girl. Remember where you are.*

The disgruntled patron glared at the intruder, daring him to speak. "I don't believe this has anything to do with you."

The dark stranger shrugged, angular face remaining expressionless. "Maybe not, but I've been forced to listen to you gripe for the last half-hour nonstop. You invited every person here to be involved with your tirade." Without glancing at Lisa, his attentions stayed focused on the other man. If not for the fact that her reaction was completely inappropriate, she'd say that fact made her feel jealous. Still he continued speaking to the other man. "These people have done everything they could to accommodate your requests, outrageous or otherwise. You've done nothing but make life miserable for them and everyone else sitting close enough to hear your incessant whining. If anything, you owe us an apology."

At the man's words the irate patron puffed up, stammering, and started to stand. Lisa stepped forward, intent on stopping things before the bashing, shoving and hitting started. She could stop this pompous little man. But if a physical fight started, no way would she be able to restrain her dark supporter. When it came to blows he had the look of a man who would strike first and strike hard and put his opponent down. She didn't need any lawsuits or more property damage to top off her wonderful wreckage-filled day.

Before she could act another man stepped forward and placed a soothing, if firm, hand on the red-faced patron's shoulder.

The hairs on Lisa's arms stood on end. She felt—something. Something calming focused around this new man and pouring outward. Suddenly the patron's tight, angry expression melted and calmed, turning peaceful. He dropped back down into his chair without a word, sipping on his mineral water and reaching for another baguette.

Lisa stared in amazement as the belligerent customer abandoned his complaints and started eating. *Un-fucking-believable*. She smiled up at the third man but her smile quickly faded. Her skin chilled then blazed as blood retreated then surged into her cheeks.

That golden halo of hair. That sin-filled smile. That hard, lithe body barely disguised by the well-made suit. Hormones pumped through her already charged body, her nipples peaking and her panties dampening. The mouthwatering pussy-drenching stripper from the night before grinned down at her, merriment and knowledge dancing in his eyes as they roved her conservative gray suit pants and white button-down blouse. Images of his nearly nude body writhing against her own echoed through her mind. Her mouth went from watering to sandy-desert dry.

*Maybe he doesn't recognize me. Please don't let him recognize me.*

A devilish smile curved his pouty lips and he inclined his head with a conspiratorial wink. No such luck. Maybe a hole would open up and she could leap for it.

*Best jump in and get things over with. Hopefully he'll keep the meeting professional as well. I mean, this can't be comfortable for him either.*

"Thank you, gentlemen, for your assistance. I think I have everything under control now." She smiled and gestured to their empty table.

"I believe we're being dismissed, Julian," her blond tormentor said, eyes dancing.

Okay, playful she could handle. Playful hunk was a joy to handle compared to bitchy fat man. She gave a pointed glance at the two plates of barely touched food and half-filled wineglasses. "No, I'm simply implying that you might want to continue with your own meals."

Tall, dark and handsome chuckled behind her, the rough sound rubbing and soothing her frazzled nerves. "You're right, Tim. We're definitely being dismissed. At least she does it pleasantly. Very nice manners."

Her skin heated more under the men's amused stares. Her face felt so hot she wondered if spontaneous combustion wasn't just an urban legend. Still, she did appreciate their help. She couldn't be rude, especially considering they were paying customers. She didn't know how they'd done it but they had diffused the situation without yelling, bribery or violence. Somehow they'd calmed the other man down in a way she couldn't.

She turned and ushered them to their empty seats. The two men shared a steamy look before following. Lisa gave a mental shake. So much for ogling. It looked like they were more interested in each other.

*Oh, well. It always was the cute ones.*

"Let me offer you a dessert of your choice, with my compliments. It's the least I can do."

The dark-haired man, Julian, ran his eyes over her body. Her skin tightened under the close inspection. His face filled with desire as he met her gaze. "Thank you. I would love savoring your...dessert."

This time Lisa knew she was blushing. Her read of the men could be completely off base, or they were bisexual. Either way she didn't understand her own reactions to the men. It wasn't as if this was the first time a customer hit on her. That was a freaking occupational hazard for anyone working service industry in this city. She never had trouble compartmentalizing her personal and business personas before. But with these two men she was acting like a blushing virgin on her wedding night, not a cool-headed divorcée who enjoyed all the pleasure sex had to offer on her own commitment-free terms. Scratch an itch and move on. Be friendly but nothing more. Absolutely no warm gushy feelings.

She met Julian's lascivious smile with a cool, professional one of her own. "I'm certain you'd love our fruit and berry torte. It's sweet but has a bit of a bite to it."

"Just the way I like it," Julian replied with a smirk, rising to her innuendo.

Then her golden stripper, Tim, confounded her. "Don't I know it," he muttered under his breath. He gave her a knowing look and a wink, almost conspiring, as though he was sharing a dark secret.

*Okay, maybe I was right to begin with. That definitely sounded like a comment made by a lover. Talk about mixed signals. Enough flirting. This is getting a little weird. Strategic retreat.*

"I'll tell your server. Whenever you're ready let him know what you'd like."

"I'd rather you took care of us," Julian whispered low and seductively as he reached out and took her hand.

She stared down at their joined palms, shocked at how such a simple touch spun her senses. Her fingers tingled and a fine shiver played beneath her skin. His rough thumb glided across the sensitive flesh of her wrist. She cleared her throat, trying to pretend to be unaffected. "I don't think that would be wise," she heard herself respond as if from a distance. "I think you have enough people caring for you as it is."

She gave Tim a pointed look. He batted his unfairly long and thick eyelashes in response, miming a quick kiss. Lisa didn't know how to react. She settled on a light chuckle.

"A man can never have too many caring people in his life," Julian answered, bringing her attention back to him.

*Whoa, definitely retreat time.*

Lisa pulled her hand out of his grip and put some distance between them. Flirting at work was one thing. She was the boss and could trust herself not to cross any lines. But Julian's eyes glowed with some emotion beyond a simple flirtation between strangers. She could see the arousal, the enticing heat. If given half a chance, this man

wouldn't have any qualms with throwing her down on the floor and fucking her raw, to hell with anyone else in the room.

The thought of inspiring that kind of voracity in any man filled her with a true sense of feminine power.

Damn, if it wasn't for her own personal code of honor she'd take him up on it. She wasn't above a good, long, hard, slamming screw. It kept life interesting. But not here. Never here. CM was her child and you didn't fuck strangers in front of children. Not to mention what her employees would think. Had to be hell on morale.

She wiped her hand against her slacks, trying to erase the warmth of his hand's caress. She felt marked somehow, surrounded by an undeniable magnetism emanating from his touch and Tim's glance and grin. "Thank you again. It is nice to know that manners and chivalry aren't entirely dead."

For a moment she thought Julian or Tim would put up a fuss, starting a whole new scene. But they looked at each other, unspoken words passing between the two. Julian turned back, the fire in his eyes banked. "It was a pleasure meeting you as well. Had I known the owner of this fine establishment was so charming I would have come here much sooner."

Not knowing what to say to that compliment, Lisa inclined her head and drew back. Quickly...but not running away. Not her.

*Whew. What the hell else could happen today? That was a marked improvement but my goodness. How much weirdness could one woman be expected to take?*

## Chapter Six

Julian stared down at the clear, flawless crystal ball, willing his mind into the future. A trite technique. Overdone and incredibly clichéd. But sometimes the best option was the tried and true. Not that crystal gazing worked like it did in Hollywood B movies. Swirling smoke and hazy, mystical images didn't twist, twine or gambol within a green, glowing sphere. No, it was more of a meditative device, a physical mantra. Something solid to help peel back layers of the invisible. Staring into the clear, bottomless depth helped him empty his mind. Helped him pull away from the present and look into the myriad futures with his inner eye.

He couldn't see as far or as clearly this way as he did with his dreams. In his dreams time lost all meaning, all anchor. Past, present and future collided in a kaleidoscope of colors and emotions. But what he lost in power and clarity he gained in direction in his conscious state. He could guide his sight, control it, look for particular things.

An important skill for a private eye.

Not that his power hadn't caused its own measure of difficulties and obstacles in his life. Nothing good ever comes without a cost.

A familiar voice, one that caught him at odd moments, echoed out of his personal past. Cold, controlled, steely anger. "First you tell your mother that you're bisexual. I could overlook that. At least you could still settle down with a nice girl, have kids and get whatever other kicks you needed behind closed doors. But now you have the balls to tell me you're a new-aged psychic con-artist? You expect me to do what? Support your delusions? You better be thankful you've already enlisted. Maybe the military can beat this rebellious crap out of you. I'm tired of trying. Have all your things gone in the morning. I don't want to see your face."

His father's face stood out in stark, bloodless white. Not even anger could heat that appalled visage. It still amazed Julian that his father hadn't completely disowned him that night.

The image flickered and snapped. Next the shriek of braking tires followed by the ripping sound of angry metal pulled Julian into the past once more. As in his first dream, the night it happened, he saw his mother's terrified expression moments before jagged metal shot through her window, slicing through her skull. Instant death.

His father's knuckles turned white as he gripped the wheel, fighting to keep the car upright as the semi slammed into it, over it. A sharp snap sounded as his father's head slammed into his mother's then against his window, shattering the safety glass. His arms fell useless to his sides.

Julian watched as paramedics fought to keep his paralyzed father's heart beating and lungs pumping as other workers zipped his mother into a long, gleaming black bag.

So the call from friends in New York hadn't shocked him. The call from his father's attorney had.

*Guess Dad didn't feel like leaving everything to the historical society or Mom's green charity of the month after all. Either that or he thought he had another decade or two to straighten out his perverted, recalcitrant son before resorting to changing his will.*

*Too bad the old man couldn't see the future.*

Julian forced the past out of his mind, staring deeper into the crystal, shoving his way through layers, ribbons, strands. Lisa Harrington. He needed to concentrate on Lisa Harrington, needed information. He needed the now, the near future. After seeing her, being near her, wanting her, he had to know more about her. How should he approach her? What were her habits? Where would it be easiest to "run into" her? He couldn't keep coming to her restaurant all the time. That smacked of stalker.

He might be hunting her, haunting her movements, but he wasn't a stalker. He meant her no harm and didn't want to scare her.

Not that he'd done too good a job of that the last time.

Julian looked deep within himself, watching his own internal movie screen. Time flickered before his eyes—images, impressions, emotions, potentials. A hundred different possibilities. Lives like threads spinning out in trillions of directions. Choices and consequences. Moments and coincidences. Turning points. Knots and kinks. Moments of unraveling. He pulled at the thin, glowing thread that belonged to Lisa. A thread that twined with his own, twisted with Tim's.

Or did it break off?

Looking that far this way was impossible. Individual threads became lost in the greater weave. Too many different possibilities, different futures to consider. Instead he looked at the near future, the next day.

Coffee, bagels, gossip. Breakfast with a friend. Meeting twice at a meal seemed too much for coincidence. *Don't want to get her suspicions up. Ah, here's a place.* Sweat, pop music and more gossip. Afternoon at the gym. Workout and relieve stress. He belonged to the same gym, just went to a different location. That could work. "I decided to try the newer facility." What a coincidence, a believable coincidence.

His mind released her thread, watching as it wound and writhed out into the multiple futures. He pulled back into himself again, reeling in his own energy. His mind settled into the present, easing back into reality. With a smile, he leaned back in his chair, setting the springs squeaking. The lights of his candles flickered and smoked a waxy, herbal scent. He could hear a mumble of movement in the rooms beyond, Tim coming home from work. Then the stereo clicked on some slow, mellow music.

Tim and his music. Every moment of his life had a soundtrack. How could he have survived all those years in silence before Tim came bursting into his life? And now if all



went well, he'd have Lisa. Another person, bringing new habits to embrace in enjoyment.

He leaned back more and rolled his head, loosening the tension tightening his neck and shoulders with a few pops and groans. So much to think about. So much to consider. So much to plan.

Nothing like the weight of the world lying on your shoulders, or at least your small slice of the world. Enlisting was the best thing he could have done to prepare himself to deal with this kind of pressure. The military taught more than basic skills. It taught a resilience in the face of adversity that served him well.

But it was the personal aspect that threw him. Not only were lives hanging on his decisions, but also hearts. Emotional futures. The happiness of people he cared for.

At least now he had Tim to share the burden with. Without him, Julian didn't know how he could survive. Someone with a different view, different ideas. And someday, if their luck held out, Lisa would be there for them both as well.

He wouldn't allow himself to believe anything else.

Julian leaned forward and blew out the candles, watching the curls of smoke twist in the air. His joints creaked and muscles clenched as he stood with a moan. He glanced over at the digital clock on his desk. Two hours. He didn't feel like he'd been sitting there for two straight hours. Only his aches and pains were testament to the stillness of his concentration.

Either that or his age. Thirty wasn't that old, was it?

He found Tim in the darkened living room, curled on the couch and staring out the window at the city lights stretching out below. The room's shades of green deepened into dark grays in the dim light. An open bottle of red wine sat on the trunk-turned-coffee table with two large, bulbous glasses, one empty and one half full.

Julian flopped down beside him, reaching for the bottle and the empty glass. He poured a half glass for himself, swirling it in his hand as he joined in on the window-gazing. He took a deep drink, letting the tart, oak-tinted taste fill his mouth.

"You were gazing for a while. I was starting to worry. Did you get anything?" Tim asked, turning away from the window.

Julian kept his attention on the twinkling neon of the Las Vegas skyline. Glitter punctuated by pyrotechnics and strobes. He took another sip as he collected his thoughts. "Nothing shocking. Just found where she would be tomorrow. I'm arranging a chance meeting. I'll take your advice and go alone this time."

"Good idea, must've been mine," Tim teased, reaching for his own glass. "Anything else?"

"No," Julian replied, his voice sounding desperate and hopeless even to himself. But he understood his own limitations. He couldn't have gotten more information than he did. "With all the various possibilities converging so soon, I had trouble pinpointing her at all."

"But you did," Tim answered, encouraging as he put his glass back down and scooted closer, his loving aura flowing over Julian. "That must mean something."

Julian snorted, his lips narrowing and his face tightening. "Like what, the higher powers support us? I should hope so. We're protecting the world from inter-dimensional invasion. Why wouldn't they support us?"

Tim raised both hands, eyes widening. "Hey, no getting defensive," he said in a soothing tone, pacifying. "I'm trying to look for a good omen here. Something to hold on to."

Julian wanted to snap at Tim, wanted to rip into him and release his impotent fury on someone. But that kind of attitude, that type of negativity, was what got their race in this situation in the first place. Too much hatred, anger and frustration built up in a small area put stress on the barriers between dimensions. A rift formed. Unchecked, the rift grew until creatures could pass from one reality to another.

Atlantis. Pompeii. The fall of Rome. San Francisco in 1906. The list of destruction was endless, stretching out for countless eons throughout human history. Even longer was the list of near-misses. Times when a group of Three stopped the destruction, mended the rift, protected mankind.

Gods willing, the fate of Las Vegas would go on the second list.

Julian took another sip of wine and wrapped his arm around Tim's shoulder. He pulled him tight, enjoying Tim's slighter if still muscular form arching into him. Tim laid his hand on Julian's upper thigh, petting upward.

Julian smiled. Tim had a difficult time understanding how Julian could look the other way when it came to his work. Tim expected to be judged, and had been judged by so many people for so many years. He always braced himself for contempt and rejection. But Julian couldn't do it, couldn't think any less of the man. Tim craved dancing, loved being the center of attention. He thrived on all those positive, energizing emotions swirling around him.

And Tim always came home horny. What red-blooded man in his right mind would stop something that caused his lover to jump him? He might not be entirely comfortable with the thought of all those people lusting after Tim night after night, but who was he to complain? It was Tim's life, Tim's choice. And Julian loved the fringe benefits attached since he was the only one sleeping with him.

Julian leaned closer and placed a soft kiss on the crown of Tim's head. Tim muttered something and snuggled closer, burrowing into Julian's side.

Julian waited, heart jumping in his chest. That tangible bond between them flared, pulsed. His nerves jangled to sharp alert and his breath paused in fervent anticipation.

Tim's hand slid up. Barely grazing Julian's crotch, he kept going until he worked Julian's shirt loose. Sharp, mischievous teeth latched on his earlobe. Nimble fingers caressed bare skin. Julian's stomach twitched under the contact, a sensation bordering between sensual pleasure and a tickle.

The teeth that nibbled at his ear swerved the sensation firmly into electrifying pleasure.

Julian shivered and groaned. He pulled Tim closer, sliding the fingers of his free hand through his lover's hair and crushing Tim's eager lips against his own.

A moan rumbled in the back of Tim's throat, adding urgency to each touch of tongues, teeth and lips. Julian met the moan as the rich, familiar and well-loved flavor of Tim rushed his mouth.

Julian pushed Tim back, laying him across the couch. Frantic hands tore at fabric. T-shirts, jeans, socks, boxers all fell prey, flying across the room. Bare flesh met bare flesh with a groan.

Tim laughed, reaching up to flick a stray lock of Julian's silky dark hair back in place. "Missed me, huh? Just what kinda things were you watching in that head of yours, Oh Great Voyeur?"

"Watch it, kid," Julian growled, holding the other man's shoulders down, heart clenching as he looked down at the one thing in the world that meant the most to him.

"Or what? You'll spank me?" Tim batted his eyelashes and grinned as he ran his fingers up and down Julian's sides. "You know how much I love it when you spank me. I've been a bad, bad boy."

Laughter and desire warred, a feeling Julian would always associate with Tim. Love and laughter. Sex and fun.

He couldn't let Tim get away with it. Hell, from the waves coming off him, Julian knew Tim didn't want to get away with the innuendo unpunished.

Julian rolled off Tim. He pulled the other man to his feet, forcing one arm behind his back. Keeping Tim off balance, he leaned forward to whisper in his lover's ear. "If you've been that bad, maybe we should take your punishment into the bedroom. I think you might need to be restrained."

Tim shuddered and panted. Julian knew how much Tim loved this particular kink, loved playing the bottom. The loss of control. The undivided attention. The physical worship. A chance to lay back and just feel.

Sinking into his part as Top, Julian licked the side of Tim's face, his teeth latching onto an earlobe. He tugged sharply before snarling, "I'll take that as a yes."

Pushing Tim down the hallway, Julian grinned. Tim didn't put up the slightest struggle, stumbling forward wherever Julian guided without comment.

He didn't bother switching on the lights. He left the door open, letting the hall lights bathe the bedroom in dim illumination. Not so dark that they couldn't see, but dark enough to soften the edges, giving a hint of mystery to the scene. Taking a step back from the harshness of reality.

Julian shoved Tim facedown on the king-sized bed dominating the center of the stark room, careful to aim his fall away from the wooden posts standing guard at each corner. This was about seducing the mind, not causing any real harm. He had the

responsibility to care for and bring Tim pleasure, bringing himself pleasure at the same time.

"Don't think about moving," he sneered, knowing what the harsh, commanding sound of his voice would do to Tim. His lips twitched as he watched Tim struggle to obey his command when his body craved contact, movement. He whimpered, squirming and swinging his ripe, curvaceous ass.

Tim shook his head, hands clutching at the comforter, twisting the fabric in desperation.

Julian's grin grew. Oh the fun they would have.

He turned to his side table, where they kept the props for this particular fantasy. He pulled out two pairs of cuffs. Each cuff was made of thickly padded cloth with adjustable Velcro. The two parts clipped together so they could be separated if needed or an extension chain could be added for situations like this. They were comfortable, not biting, while secure enough to endure pulling and twisting. Tim wouldn't be able to free himself by accident, remaining secure as long as they kept up their game.

But either man could release the Velcro with a bit of concentrated effort. If an emergency happened, the "victim" could free himself.

Julian and Tim relished exploring different flavors of pleasure and desire, light, playful and joy-filled or dark, raunchy and brutal. Neither one truly wanted to rule or control the other. Neither needed dominance or submission for sexual satisfaction. It was a form of play and release, not a lifestyle. Neither saw themselves as part of the BDSM community.

That didn't mean they couldn't enjoy the hell out of it from time to time.

Julian leaned over Tim, clipping one side of the cuffs on his wrist and the other around one of the bedposts, massive, ornately carved with ancient runes. He secured the other arm the same way, sliding Tim down the bed until there was no slack in the chains.

He licked his way up Tim's spine. His lover moaned, tugging at his bindings. Julian bit the place his neck and shoulders met, a hot button guaranteed to send Tim soaring. Tim heaved up, yanking at the chains and cuffs.

"Now, now, bad boy," teased Julian, pushing him back down before checking that the cuffs weren't cutting off circulation. "You wanted this. You have to take it now, whatever I give you and however I wanna give it to you."

Tim whimpered but settled down, no longer all but humping the bed. Julian sat up on his knees, looking down at the bounty spread before him. All that sensitive, responsive flesh anticipating whatever stimulus he chose to give. Sweet, sin-filled heaven bound and tied for the taking.

Julian ran his hands up and down Tim's back, listening to him purr and watching anticipation-tightened muscles release. He played with the shorter hairs at the base of Tim's neck, soft and velvety beneath the fall of his golden hair. He slid his fingers through the long waves, a sheet of silken decadence. Something about the soft golden

sheen spread across his pillow always kicked him in the gut, tightening both his heart and cock. He moved down and squeezed tense ass muscles, dipping a single finger in the crack between.

That did it. Tim cried out, arching back and trying to get his knees beneath him. He pulled hard enough at the chains to rattle the posts and cause Julian to worry about his straining shoulders.

Julian reached beneath Tim, cupping his velvety balls and rolling them in a tender grasp. "Shh, calm down. It only gets better. You know how good it'll be. Calm down, lover. You can take what I dish out to you."

"God...damn...Julian," Tim sputtered, voice quavering in yearning. But he responded to Julian's voice, his body filled with a fine trembling but no longer racked with spasms. Still, he wasn't above begging for what he wanted. "Do something. Do anything. Do me. Don't make me wait. Can't take it. Can't stand it. Please. Please."

Julian smiled. He'd planned on more foreplay, hours of enjoying the hot flesh spread beneath him. But the desperation in Tim's voice pulled at that place inside him that Tim alone owned. Poor baby. He needed some cock stuffing him, needed it so bad.

But first he'd have to ask for it, nicely.

Leaning forward, Julian crouched over his lust-filled victim and whispered, "You know what you have to say."

Tim lost control again, wrapping his hands around the chains and tugging over and over again, wooden pillars creaking under the impassioned assault. He tossed his head back and forth, his hair flying around his shoulders in a golden halo. "Please, you know I want it. Please."

"Tell me what you want," Julian murmured, letting his warm breath caress Tim's cheek and neck. "Maybe you'll get it. But you'll never know until you ask."

Tim groaned, straining against the chains. The muscles in his arms knotted. "I want your cock," he cried out, voice ragged, frantic. He arched his head back, fighting to catch Julian's gaze. "Give it to me. I want to feel you pounding inside me, drilling my ass. I can't stand it any longer. I'll be good, just give me your damn cock."

*Finally.* Julian strolled around the bed to the other nightstand, taking his time and letting the anticipation build. He pulled out a bottle of lube and a clean hand towel. He slid the towel under Tim's hips, having no desire to sleep on a damp spot. He poured a generous amount of lube in his hand, letting his body heat warm it before drizzling it down Tim's crack. He eased one finger then two into his lover's anus, careful to move slowly as Tim pressed down. Didn't matter how many times they'd danced this dance, he'd never hurt Tim. He pumped his fingers in and out, making certain his lover was slick and ready.

Tim writhed and jerked, panting and whimpering. But not complaining. Oh, no. He pushed into each thrust of Julian's fingers, reaching for him, pulling him into his body.

After he was certain Tim was taken care of, Julian poured another generous helping of lube into his hands. Once warm, he rubbed it up and down his cock, enjoying the

slick, pumping pressure. Head to base glistened before he crawled forward, reaching for Tim's hips.

He helped Tim to his knees then parted his shuddering ass. The muscles tightened beneath his fingers, anticipating the sweet pain of invasion.

Slowly he eased forward, teasing Tim with the head of his cock. He wanted this to last. Nothing felt better than that first moment of breaching, feeling the hard embrace of that tight ring of flesh and knowing that Tim accepted him here, at his most vulnerable.

Tim had other ideas. He wrapped his hands around the chains for support and threw his ass back, impaling himself. Julian slid in quickly, not even attempting to regain control. It felt too good. Warm, tight heat wrapped around his cock. Tim bucked, clawing and gasping beneath him.

"Please, more. Move," Tim snarled, lost in sensation. "Nail me, already."

Julian held still for a few seconds longer, keeping Tim steady by lying across his back. Tim whimpered, trying to move, to make Julian move. But Julian wouldn't, not until *he* wanted. Tim was demanding, not begging. That wasn't how the game was played.

He obviously needed more incentive to stay in his role as bottom.

Julian slid one hand under Tim, grabbing his cock at the same time as he pulled out of Tim's ass. Tim wailed, teeth gnashing as he pushed into Julian's grip while wiggling his ass, begging for attention.

Julian gave it to him, rammed him. He started a harsh, heavy, pummeling pace. His thrusts forced grunts from him as well as moans from Tim.

"Shit, Julian," Tim cried, his empathic powers projecting as pleasure shoved him closer to the edge. "So good. So close. Don't stop. Never stop."

"Never," Julian growled as Tim's emotions slammed into him. He tilted Tim's hips higher, shoving even harder. Shimmering pulses of Tim's emotions pulled him along, dragging him up the edge of orgasm.

Tim arched his back, his voice hoarse as he let out a final yell. Julian felt Tim's cock pulsing in his hand as splash after splash of cum shot out onto the towel below. Bright pleasure flashed behind his eyelids as Tim bombarded him with emotion. Love, belonging, trust, a hint of future fear. But most of all the pulsing, tearing release. Pure, untainted ecstasy. Julian bit his lower lip, almost drawing blood as he fought not to come from the staggering emotional assault. He wanted to roll in every last second of Tim's orgasm before giving in to his own.

When Tim's spasms stopped he let go, fondling Tim's softened sac. He reached up and slid his hand up and down Tim's back. His fingers curled and raked down as his balls tightened moments before orgasm.

His body convulsed as he filled his lover's ass with cum.

Julian wanted to fall into Tim, lay boneless on his warm back, but he couldn't leave his lover like this. While Tim would be the last man to complain, it was Julian's job to take care of his comfort.

He grabbed the towel from under Tim's flaccid cock as he pulled out of his tight ass. He wiped off the cum dribbling out of Tim's hole before standing.

"If you can handle the cuffs, I'll be right back."

Tim mumbled something and scooted forward and reached for the Velcro with his teeth. Julian went to the bathroom, dumping the soiled cloth in a hamper and grabbing two more. He washed himself then dampened the second cloth in warm water.

He went back to Tim and gently cleaned him.

Tim smiled, closing his eyes to thoroughly luxuriate in each caress. "That's why I love you. Always taking care of me. Lisa doesn't stand a chance against you."

Julian shook his head.

If only he could be so certain.

## Chapter Seven

Lisa glanced up from her steaming cinnamon latte and gooey cream cheese Danish as the hanging brass bell above the door of her favorite café clanged. Hot, dry Las Vegas air whipped around her as a blonde, pink and blue head popped into the air-conditioned oasis. Ignoring all the curious looks directed at her hair, Janice smiled and waved at Lisa before heading to the counter, her multicolored curls swishing around her shoulders. A large whipped cream-topped mocha and fresh-baked bagel later, Janice flopped down in the seat across from her.

"So, how's everything in the food biz?" Janice asked as she spread honey-sweetened cream cheese across her toasted cinnamon-raisin bagel.

Lisa shrugged, adding another pink packet of sweetener to her coffee. "Business is the same but it's sure been a weird couple of days."

"Tell me about it," Janice sighed, shaking her head with a self-deprecating sigh. "Divorce papers signed, sealed and delivered, matrimonial freedom, then my girls'-night-out party. Gotta love this crazy town. It was made with singles gone wild in mind."

"Yeah, but your party was part of my weirdness," Lisa grumbled. She realized she sounded petty, but something about those two men stuck with her, filling her with apprehension and anticipation. She tore a corner off her Danish and nibbled, trying to decide if she was hungry or not. The coffee smell was appealing but the sweet pastry didn't look as appetizing as it had when she bought it.

"What?" Janice asked, tapping her hot pink French-manicured nails on the table. "I thought you liked going out to clubs? Hell, you were the one to suggest the Pleasure Palace." Janice hurried on as Lisa raised her eyebrows. "Not that I minded or anything. I didn't even know they had a second floor, much less that there were male strippers up there."

Lisa grimaced, picking at the icing with her plastic fork. She felt like a pouting teenager. "If only they'd stay up there."

Janice didn't say anything, just stared holes through Lisa's head. Her friend knew Lisa couldn't stand the silent treatment. When a bubbly person like Janice got quiet, it creeped her out. Felt like her friend was trying to stare through her skull.

She had to break the silence. "The next day, guess who should walk in my restaurant."

"Who?"

Lisa stared at a brightly colored poster of a smiling, dancing croissant hanging just above Janice's shoulder, feeling the embarrassment from yesterday afternoon heating



her skin again. *Geez, what's with this schoolgirl crush crap?* "The guy you bought the lap dance from for me, that's who. The golden Adonis boy and some other guy. And to make matters worse, they jumped in to help calm down an angry customer."

With a negligent shrug, Janice turned back to her bagel. "Okay, high on the weird meter, I grant you. But for a big city, I run into people I wouldn't expect all the time." She stopped for a moment, a teasing light sparkling in her green eyes. "Was the other guy a stripper from the club too? It's not far off the Strip. Makes sense they'd try your place sometime, especially if the tips were good."

"I don't know. I wouldn't peg the other guy for the stripper type. Too tightly laced, military or law enforcement." Lisa thought about it for a moment, running a picture of the two of them standing next to each other over in her mind. Night and day. Darkness and light. One hell of a fantasy in the making. "Actually, I wondered if they weren't...you know...involved."

Janice smirked, completely ignoring her food and drink for the hot and twisted soap story in the making. "You mean a couple out for a romantic evening alone?" She laughed as Lisa blushed again, skin flaming even hotter. "Hell, it is a free country. And the stereotype of gay strippers must've come from somewhere. But it does put a damper on the whole fantasy."

"But I'm not sure if they were," Lisa muttered, wishing a hole would appear under her and swallow her up. *I know better than to mention this to Janice. What was I thinking? If I could just get them out of my mind.* "They were both flirting with me too."

Janice's smirk grew into a full-out grin moments before her trademark cackle blasted through the air. Other patrons either stared or worked very hard not to look. "So they're bi, so what? Doesn't mean you can't savor the attention. Hell, all the more reason to enjoy. A two for one deal. Can't beat that."

Lisa didn't know how to respond. The image Janice created opened up too many secret feelings, too many deep, dark, hidden fantasies. Three bodies writhing together. Four hands and two mouths roving her body. Dreams only admitted to in the cover of night.

"Two too many to handle if you ask me," she replied, forcing the picture of the three of them naked and intertwined out of her mind. The image haunted her. She couldn't let it take root, not when it was so obviously impossible. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I'm butt-ugly repulsive or anything, but the second guy was almost better-looking than the stripper, if you can imagine that. What kind of a woman, short of a supermodel, could hold that kind of attention? Holding on to one would be a struggle. Two...impossible."

"But you'd have the other guy to help you keep his attention, if they are bi," Janice was quick to point out. No way was her friend letting Lisa off the hook that easily. "You just need to learn how to work as a team. Pull together for the greater good. And can you imagine any greater good?"

Lisa reached for her white ceramic cup with a trembling hand and took a deep, bracing drink. Anything to postpone an answer. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the Sixties elevator music jamming in the background and the creamy, sweet caffeine flavor of the latte. How did you respond to a question like that? Tell the truth and let your friend know you're a bigger perv than she thought? Or outright lie to her face when you know she can read you like a book? Damn girl could scent a lie like a bloodhound. Janice's ex couldn't even lie to her, which had ended their marriage. "I can't believe I'm having this conversation."

"You're just saying that because the thought of it's turning you on," Janice replied, coming too close to the truth for Lisa's comfort. She leaned forward, forcing Lisa to meet her gaze. "Come on. Two incredibly hot guys wanting you at the same time. Win-win situation if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't ask," Lisa snapped, reaching the end of her personal comfort level. What kind of woman thought about this kind of thing, let herself get turned on by it? She liked sex, enjoyed her body. But something had to be wrong with these thoughts, these fantasies. She might not be a Puritan but a woman had to set some personal limits. Right? "And it's not like it's going to happen now. I said they flirted, not that they gave me their numbers."

"Too bad," Janice sighed, not a little wistful. But the dreamy expression didn't last long. She jabbed a finger at Lisa, sending her coffee cup wobbling. "Next time jump on it. You're single. You don't have to answer to anyone. You're a consenting adult. And you're one of my most sexually liberated friends. You're disappointing me. I'm setting out into the jungle of singlehood again and my role model's going all uptight on me. Stop it."

Lisa narrowed her eyes. She couldn't believe Janice thought of her like that. Role model? Sexually liberated? What kinda shit was that to dump on a friend? "Just because I don't believe in depending on anyone else for my sexual pleasure doesn't mean I sleep around all the time," she snapped, temper crackling just beneath her skin. "I've experimented, yeah. After being married to the asshole for so long I deserved to break out some, try out my wings. Doesn't mean I went hopping at every crooked finger either. And it doesn't make the whole mating ritual a damned bit easier."

A soft frown formed between Janice's puzzled eyes. "Hell, I wouldn't ever think that you're some kinda mega-slut," she said, sorrow for causing any pain to her friend easily heard in her voice. But it went against her nature to stay serious. "Too many fingers get crooked in this town, Sin City rep in overdrive. I had three guys at work ask me out already and the ink's barely dry on my decree. Mind you, I've got a good job and a paid-for car and home, but the guys sure don't waste any time. That's all I'm saying."

"True," Lisa agreed, letting Janice's earlier comments slide. But not without one more warning for her emotionally shaky friend. "That's why you have to be careful about who you do sleep with. You can be choosy."

"Okay, okay." Janice threw her hands above her head with a laugh. "So you don't sleep with a guy, or two, just because they turn you on. But was it only physical with your two admirers? Nothing else?"

Lisa thought about it. All things considered, it shouldn't have been a difficult question to answer. She'd barely said two words to the men, knew next to nothing about them. But there had been a connection, a click, even in such a short time. Otherwise she'd have forgotten about them already.

But how to explain that without sounding like an idiot?

"They seemed nice enough, stepping in to help like they did," she answered, searching for the right words to help Janice understand, as well as to clear her own mind. "Most people stay in their own little bubbles and mind their own business, especially in the city. But other than that, I couldn't say. It isn't like we had an in-depth conversation about our lives and goals. It was a quick meeting, less than five minutes unless you count the lap dance at your party."

"But it sure made an impression on you."

"Yeah," Lisa admitted, as much to herself as to Janice.

"So you did think about it? You and the two of them? Doing a three-person version of the horizontal tango?" Janice pried, smirking, not about to let Lisa off the hook with that admission.

"Yes, Mother, I considered it," she answered with a roll of her eyes. She was tempted to stick out her tongue. Couldn't Janice leave a woman with an iota of self-denial? "I do have hormones. I am human. But I kept my head."

"No, you kept your clothes," Janice said, a flash of fresh humor strengthening her perpetual merriment. "You had a perfectly good office in the back of CM to use if you wanted to. You know, break in even more virgin territory."

"God, can we get off this subject?" Lisa asked, making a ball of her paper napkin and shoving her Danish aside. "I'm sorry I even mentioned it."

"Okay," Janice replied, taking her last bite of bagel and carefully licking the cream cheese from her fingertips before shooting another mischievous glance at Lisa. "But next time two hotties start hitting on you at the same time, possibly as a couple, you have to promise me to at least consider it. I mean, how else am I ever going to know what something as steaming as that feels like if you don't tell me?"

"I don't know, try it yourself?" Lisa asked, rocking back in her chair, letting the squeaky wood sound sing.

Janice winced at the high-pitched noise, as Lisa knew she would. But she didn't drop the subject. "Yeah, as if two guys ever tried to get me in bed at the same time. Guys are asking me out, but not in pairs."

Lisa picked up her napkin ball and tossed it at Janice's head. "All right, already," she said as her friend launched into her trademark hyena laugh. "I get it. I'm lucky. I

just don't know how lucky. I'll take advantage of the hot, sweaty, monkey sex the very next time it's offered. I promise."

"You'd better," Janice warned, brandishing her plastic table knife in the direction of Lisa's face. "I'd hate to have to kill you in a fit of jealous rage. I at least deserve to get my kink vicariously."

"Yeah, well, find a chat room," Lisa grumbled as she jerked the offending plastic out of Janice's hand.

"Ooh. Now that's an idea." Janice picked up her mocha, savoring her last sips. "Maybe they could tell me all about proper threesome etiquette. I'd share the info, of course. You know, just in case it ever comes up again," she teased over the rim of her cup.

Lisa shook her head, dropping her chair back on all four feet with a loud thump, causing other patrons close by to look at the mismatched pair, wondering what was happening. "Of course. I didn't think you'd keep it all to yourself. Not for a moment. You never do."

Janice nodded. "Good best friends should know where they both stand. At next week's breakfast, no near-miss stories. It's either dry spell or gorge-fest."

"And what about you, oh Horny One?" Lisa prodded, determined not to be the only one dissected at this gabfest. "You're the one who's all sex-crazed at the moment, not me."

Janice shrugged, trying not-so successfully to hide the aching sadness in her expression. Ending a marriage was never easy, no matter what the circumstances. "The ink's not dry," she firmly echoed her earlier words. "I'm staying away from all men for at least six months. Gotta get my ex out of my head. I don't want to end up one of those pathetic women stuck in a rebound relationship with a clone of the jerk she just gave the heave-ho to. So it's voyeurism and toy time for me. At least for a while."

Lisa gave her a half-smile and reached over to give her hand a comforting squeeze. "Good idea. Take the time to get your head straight. Just realize, anything you say now will be held against you later. Everything," she teased, unable to let her happy-go-lucky friend stay so somber and serious.

"You mean you'll be feeding me my own words again. I should be so lucky to rate those words of wisdom. I mean, if I need advice about threesomes, you'll just have to shove me back on the straight and narrow." Janice slapped a hand over her heart, gasping in mock terror. "Oh the horror. The horror."

Lisa rolled her eyes. That was so like Janice. Melodrama to the max.

"Well, to change subjects, do you know anyone who does good bodywork?" Lisa asked.

"Doesn't sound like a subject change to me," Janice teased, her smirk firmly back in place.

"Janice, please."

Her friend shrugged and blew a pale pink curl back in place. "What, did something happen to your baby?"

"Yeah," Lisa growled, anger still lurking just below the surface. "Some asshole at the club ripped into my paintjob with profanity last night. I told you I shouldn't leave it there but you wouldn't listen to me."

Janice tapped her finger against her pursed lips in studied consideration. "Hmm. Vandalism versus DUI. Money for repairs or a big girl in uniform searching your various orifices. Let me think, which is worse?"

"Okay, I wasn't fit to drive last night, but you should see what this guy did to my paint job." Lisa's face pinched, her jaw clenching. "He carved words in it, and not very nice words either. So now I'm stuck driving around with 'pervert' and other sweet little sayings for all the world to see. I'm about ready to take some sandpaper to it myself. Do you know anyone who can fix it or not?"

Janice blinked and then shook her head. "Not offhand. My wonderful cheating ex handled car stuff. I'll ask my brother, see if he knows anyone."

Lisa put her trash on her tray, along with her half-eaten pastry. "Thanks. As it is, I'm going to get a rental. Least for the time being. Can you imagine what the customers must've thought yesterday?"

"Probably wishing they knew you better," Janice quipped, mouth twitching with barely contained amusement.

Lisa snorted, her lips trembling against the urge to smile. "You really need to work on that gutter mind of yours."

"Don't worry. I am. I expect to reach rock bottom soon." Janice swallowed her last bit of bagel and pointed at Lisa's tray. "Are you going to eat the last half of your Danish?"

Lisa shoved the plate at her friend and stared out the window. Only Janice could make her stop feeling like the world was about to end.

After finishing their breakfast, Lisa and Janice headed for their cars. They'd meet up at the gym like usual, chatting on the treadmill for a half-hour or so before going their separate ways. As Lisa followed Janice out the door, a man caught her attention. She couldn't quite put her finger on the problem, but something was off about him.

He sat at one of the umbrella-covered tables outside by the doors, watching everyone as they went in and out. He wore a dark suit and held an open newspaper in his lap. A cup of coffee sat untouched in front of him, along with a cinnamon roll. Just an average, ordinary, bland business type, nothing to give Lisa the willies. No reason for her stomach to clench and her heart to shoot to her throat.

But she could swear he'd been staring at her moments before, that he'd been waiting for her. Paranoid much, maybe, but that was the gut feeling sending adrenaline rushing through her body. He didn't walk after her. He didn't leer at her. His eyes didn't eat her alive, didn't follow her every move or track her to her car. He didn't make any moves toward her at all. But her creep radar shrieked.

She turned to Janice, wondering if her friend had noticed anything...off...about the guy. But her normally hyper-jerk-sensitive friend seemed oblivious, chatting away about all the fun she was planning on having now that she was free of the shackles of marital oppression.

But Janice never glanced at the man. Just another invisible city dweller. Not cute enough or weird enough to rank notice.

So why was he raising Lisa's hackles?

Lisa glanced back in his direction as she opened her car door. He picked up his paper, covering his face as he read. Had he been staring at her before? Was he watching her?

Was she losing it? Or maybe she'd been living in this city too long. People getting on her nerves. Needed a vacation. That kind of thing.

No one was after her. No one had a reason to be.

## Chapter Eight

For Julian, the piped-in bubble gum pop music and clangs and grunts of his fellow iron pumpers faded to a buzzing annoyance as the two women walked in the gym, causing quite a stir with the men pounding away around him. A whipcord mass of energy with golden-blond hair sporting blue and pink streaks, followed by a platinum-haired bombshell who'd look perfect gracing the pages of a Forties pin-up magazine. A more different-looking pair becoming close friends he couldn't imagine. But they fit together, complemented each other. Were perfectly content in one another's company.

Julian's heart swelled in his already tight chest at the sight of her sparkling smile. Lisa Harrington. His Third.

She laughed, tossing her head back and letting the joy spill from her lush mouth as the silky silver curtain swished around her shoulders. Seeing her so filled with bubbling happiness after years of being haunted by the image of pain and betrayal shining in her eyes melted Julian's frozen soul. Where Tim had chiseled a place for himself through the ice, Lisa thawed the final shards.

Their Catalyst, the loyal and loving woman to fill those empty nooks and crannies in their lives, stood close enough to touch.

His jaw clenched as he watched other men avariciously eyeing the two making their way to the treadmills. With two such perfect specimens of scantily clad womanhood, he couldn't blame them for staring. But no one had the right to look at her with such lust. She belonged to him and Tim, as she had so many centuries before.

He simply needed to get her to admit to that, to come back to them.

But to start he had to get to know her, this new version of her. Lisa Harrington. With a loud metallic thunk, he dropped the bar of the machine he'd been working for the last twenty minutes. He turned, wiping the sweat off the bench and snagging his water bottle before making his way to the aerobic machines. He slid onto the treadmill next to Lisa as she started a brisk, eye-catching jog.

He faked a double take as he programmed his own routine into the machine. "The owner of CM," he said with just the right mixture of surprise and pleasure. "No annoying customers to deal with today?"

With a start, Lisa missed a step in her stride, her treadmill giving a protesting, mechanical cough. On the other side, her friend leaned over, looking him over with a flirtatious grin.

After her friend reached over to nudge her and give her a pointed look, Lisa finally met his gaze. Julian smothered a smirk as a deep red blush blossomed across her face

and neck before she jerked her head forward. "Uh, no," she managed to mutter. She clicked up the speed, taking a quick swig of water as her feet stumbled into a swift gait.

"Good to hear," he replied. For a fleeting moment he wished he were more like Tim, wished he knew at least what she was feeling if not what she was thinking. He couldn't let Lisa bury herself in her routine, ignoring him. But he couldn't read her or project his feelings at her, forcing her attention. How could he make her acknowledge his presence? "I'm glad we were there, though. I hate it when people like that get away with throwing their weight around and intimidating people into giving them what they want."

"Yes, thank you," came Lisa's clipped reply.

Julian relaxed into his stride. It seemed he and Tim had made an impact, if only in rendering her speechless. Her vibrant friend, on the other hand, had no such speech problem.

"Hi, I'm Janice Thompson," the feisty tricolor-haired woman called out across her friend. Her smile brightened the room, not unlike Tim's effect. A woman who knew her power and wasn't afraid to use it. "How do you know Lisa?"

"Julian Stern," he nodded, straining to hear her over the sound to the machines and music. "I ran into her yesterday at her restaurant. She was having trouble with a customer. A friend and I stepped in to help."

He watched Janice's expression morph until her smile threatened to overwhelm her face. "Oh, so you and another friend helped her out yesterday." She gave a pointed look to Lisa, who kept walking and ignored them both.

*She'd been talking about them, girl talk. Another good sign.*

"Did she offer you and your friend anything as a thank you?" Janice asked, smirking, still staring at a rose-red Lisa.

"A dessert, but not the one we would've preferred," he teased in reply, watching the total concentration Lisa gave to the digital counter on her treadmill. "A decadent, fluffy chocolate mousse, rich and sweet, but not as tempting as what I really wanted."

Janice laughed, a joyful if piercing sound. "I'm sure it wasn't," she added with a toss of her head, curls bouncing. "Bet she even turned you down for drinks or anything else you offered."

Julian smiled in return, enjoying Lisa's expression, eyes glued straight ahead and lush lips pursed. Every word increased her concentration. With Janice on his side he had a chance. A teasing conspirator. He developed an instant liking for Lisa's friend. "Yeah, she shot down both Tim and me. But she did it in such a nice way. Almost encourages a guy to try again."

"I think you should. Every girl deserves a second chance." She gave Lisa a pointed stare, was met by a soft, almost inaudible growl. "Who knows? Maybe she'll be a good girl and take you up on your offer this time."



Ah, a definite ally. Lisa glared at her friend, ice practically forming in the sweaty, humid air. Janice mouthed the word “promise”, smirked and kept on walking.

Julian forged ahead, not above using whatever pull Lisa’s friend had with her. He appreciated any help, whatever the motivation. “Well, I was planning on asking her out for dinner sometime,” he said, jerking his head in her direction with pleading puppy eyes, hoping Janice would get the hint. “Maybe even bring Tim along if it made her feel better. He’s more comforting than me.”

Janice’s eyes sparkled, her lips twitching. “I’m sure she’d love to go out with the two of you. It sounds like a blast, don’t you think, Lisa?”

“I can arrange my own social life, thank you very much,” she grumbled between gritted teeth. But she didn’t say no.

Curiouser and curiouser. What had these two women been talking about?

“Yes, you can and you will, remember?” Janice needled.

Lisa grabbed the side bars of her treadmill and sent her friend another smoldering glower. Her hands clenched and unclenched against the black foam padding. Julian chuckled as Janice gave her a wide-eyed, innocent look. A less innocent woman he’d never met.

Responding to his snicker, Lisa turned her glare on him. “You know, it’s not nice to set up a date through a friend when the woman’s standing right next to you.”

Julian gave a wide-eyed who-me stare while internally he gloated. *Almost there.* “You mean you would’ve said yes without being egged on?”

“Maybe,” she answered, blowing a loose piece of hair out of her face. “Probably. Who knows?”

Time for the final push. If he didn’t say it now he’d lose his nerve. Gods help him if he had to tell Tim he’d chickened out at the last moment. Julian braced himself, sending up a brief prayer to the Powers-That-Be. “So you will go out with me?”

“You know, you haven’t even asked me my name yet,” she replied, an obvious stalling tactic. “Are you sure you don’t want to go out with Janice instead?”

*I don’t need to ask your name, but you don’t need to know that.* “I’m sure I want to go out with you. And I wasn’t certain you’d talk to me, much less tell me your name. You all but ran away from me at your restaurant. The way you scurried out, I got the feeling I made you uncomfortable.”

Lisa wiped a drop of sweat off her brow, one he wouldn’t have minded licking off her and enjoying the salty flavor. “I know, that’s why you’ll bring your friend if I want.”

“Well, it’s one of the reasons. Not the only one.” Julian smiled at her curious look. *Let her wonder. It’d do her good to keep the two of them connected in her mind. Let her active imagination play with the pictures, maybe even remember distant pleasures. Sex had never been their problem.* “And if you went out with me, or the both of us, then I’d have a chance to ask you about yourself, get to know you.”

"Lisa Harrington," she gasped between pants as her treadmill sped up, forcing her feet to move faster. "And maybe I will go out with you two. As long as we meet in a public place."

"Sounds reasonable," Julian answered, nodding thanks to a beaming Janice. "How about tomorrow night, around seven? You choose the place and I'll make the reservations. Wherever you want."

"Take her to Cajun Delight in the Golden Goose," Janice piped in. Somehow she managed to lean around her friend without losing her balance or slowing down. "It's her favorite restaurant, next to her own. She hates going there by herself."

Julian looked at Lisa, cutting off his ally. As much as he appreciated the support, this needed to be Lisa's decision. She couldn't use the pressure as an excuse later. "Is that where you'd like to go? Like you said, it's bad enough I worked through Janice to get you to say yes. You should choose the place."

Lisa shot a pouting glare at Janice, who concentrated on watching the music video playing on the TV hanging above her. She snorted as a barely repressed smirk danced across the other woman's lips. "I was just about to say the same thing before someone butted in. Yes, Cajun Delight would be wonderful."

Julian picked up his own pace, staggering for a second as his machine sped up and increased incline. Unlike the women, he didn't lose his breath. The military got him in shape and the discipline stayed with him, even without a large, close-shaved man yelling insults at him. It hadn't been that much different from the home he grew up in, just directed more on keeping his body prepared to fight. "Then I'll make the reservations. We'll trade numbers on the way out, in case anything comes up."

"Sounds like a plan," Lisa replied, turning her concentration back to her own workout, cutting him out.

Janice leaned over and gave him a triumphant thumbs-up. A strange friend, not who he would've pictured for Lisa but a nice person to have on his side. He'd have to take a look into her life, see how much of a help she could be when it came time to reveal everything to Lisa and make sure nothing ugly waited ahead for her.

Deciding to leave well enough alone for now, having achieved his small victory, he concentrated on running. He'd make sure to follow Lisa out, trade numbers and talk some more later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lisa's hair dripped with sweat, hanging lank around her face. Her t-shirt stuck to her body and she didn't even want to think about the sweat spots growing on her shorts and shirt. And here was tall, dark and handsome personified walking her to her car.

Fate had a sick sense of humor.

Still, she gave him a bright smile as he held open the door for her. He might believe that his friend Tim made a woman feel at ease, but he was no slouch. Traditional

manners practically dripped off him. Her stomach might be taking turns churning and tying in knots but it had nothing to do with nerves. More to do with hormones, and both guys could pull that out of a woman. Just the mixture of sweat and rich cologne sent her imagination flying.

And she was going out on a date with not one but two gorgeous men at the same time. The kind of men that made her fingers itch and her panties wet. She wondered how Julian would bring it up to Tim. Did the threesome thing just fall into place, nothing said, everything understood? She didn't think she'd misread the situation, but how did you ask a guy you're going out with if he has a boyfriend? And how were you expected to treat the boyfriend when he goes out with you both?

Maybe she would need some info on ménage etiquette after all.

As she walked out of the gym she heard a sharp whistle pierce the air, followed by what sounded like, "Whoa, baby, like to get me some of that."

A group of college-age guys hanging around the entrance preened and leered. All strong and cocky, they were intimidating in a mob mentality sort of way. Had Julian not been with her she'd have given them a wide berth, maybe even crossed the street. It was the type of group that reeked of trouble. Instead she only took a step closer to Julian as they passed.

The guys said something, eyeing her and another woman entering the gym. She couldn't quite make out what was being said, but Julian stood straighter and glared with a scolding fury in their direction. The other men laughed and raised their hands in the air, playing off whatever it was as fun and games.

Eyes narrowed with contempt and a muscle in his jaw twitching, Julian didn't look amused.

"What did they say?" she asked, letting her curiosity get the better of her. She knew it wouldn't be anything good. No way those jerks were saying nice things. Call it morbid curiosity. Also, she wondered what it took to piss him off.

"They were being asses," he replied, still glaring as the group started staring at another woman leaving the gym. He took her elbow and pulled her securely to his side.

A warm glow filled Lisa, one she didn't want to define. "That much I could tell, but how were they being asses?"

Julian's shoulders relaxed but his posture stayed alert. "They're rating the women as they go in and leave."

Lisa raised an eyebrow, looking back at the group now crowing as an older, rotund woman walked by. "How exactly are they doing it?"

"Do you really want to know?" he asked. Lisa gave him a pointed stare. He sighed, tucking her arm through his and moving her away from trouble. "They're giving women numbers as they walk by. If it's a low number they laugh about it. Toss around some insults. If it's high they talk about what they'd like to do with her."

"Really?" Lisa asked, feeling morose. "And how did they rate me?"

"Lower than I would, but higher than I'm comfortable with. They stopped before going into the comment stage." He smirked, his mature face taking on a hint of a boyish look as he puffed up. "Guess I scared them."

"Too bad," Lisa said, glancing over her shoulder again to watch a bit more of their cruel antics. "I'd like to know what they'd say."

"Would you really?"

Lisa shrugged, wondering. She didn't need other people to validate her self-image. That had been one of her ex's hang-ups, not hers. He'd wanted one of those svelte model types. So what if she was a little heavier and curvier than was fashionable. But she wasn't overweight and had a nice figure. She'd never lacked for male attention anyway. So why did she care about a group of men she wasn't interested in and would never see again?

As they reached Lisa's car Julian stepped closer, crowding her. She looked up, ready to slap him down, when she saw the twinkle in his eye. He ducked forward slowly. "I could give you my own opinion if you'd like," he whispered, his warm lips a hairsbreadth away from her own.

Lisa leaned a hip against her car door, thanking god she'd picked up a rental on the way over. She twirled a lock of hair through her fingers as she met his gaze. "Would that be a good idea?"

"It would be a good evaluation," he promised. "Much higher than those boys gave."

"Oh?"

Julian reached up and pushed her hair away from her face, grasping her fidgeting hand and placing it on his chest. She resisted the urge to run her fingers across his warm, sweaty, hard flesh. "I wouldn't have asked you out if I didn't think highly of you. You're a beautiful woman. I don't need to tell you that. You also seem like a kind person, ambitious, maybe even loyal. I'm looking forward to learning more about you."

"Really?" Lisa asked, cringing at the wispy, wistful sound of her voice and one-word responses.

"Really." Julian gave her another bone-melting grin. "It might have taken your friend's interference, but I'm glad you agreed to have dinner with me."

Lisa swallowed. Dark desires, so out of place in the bright light of day, tempted and tormented her. Her heart twittered as she dove into uncharted waters asking, "And Tim?"

Julian blinked, the only sign that her question took him by surprise. "And Tim, if you feel at ease with that."

Her body trembled but she had to ask, had to know. "Is Tim that close of a friend? Best buds since forever?"

With a chuckle, he leaned back slightly, giving her room to breathe. He reached forward, cupping her chin and running his thumb along her bottom lip, leaving a

tingling heat behind. "Why don't you ask what you really want to know? That isn't the question I see spinning in your mind."

"Is he your friend or something more?" she whispered, feeling like an idiot for asking. But the curiosity was killing her. She needed to understand what she was getting herself into, needed to know how many fantasies she might be fulfilling.

Julian leaned closer again, his hand combing back through her hair, fanning the spark of arousal. His whisper sent shivers dancing through her body. "Something more."

"Then why me?" she gasped, resisting the urge to curl her body into his. "Why the date?"

"Because something more isn't always enough," he said. He looked directly in her eyes, opening his soul to her. "I love Tim, if that's what you're asking. We've been together for a couple of years now. Lovers."

"So you're gay," Lisa said, body sagging as an acute feeling of loss filled her. A committed couple looking for something more went way beyond two guys who shared women, or even bisexuals who had occasional flings. Either more or heartrendingly less. "Do you need someone, a woman, as some kind of cover to stay in the closet? Because if that's the game I'm not that woman."

"Not at all. Neither one of us have ever been the type to stay locked in a closet. I'm interested in you." He ran the tip of his finger up her arm. "I'm not gay."

"B...bisexual?"

"You really believe in knowing everything up front," Julian chuckled, running both hands up and down her arms. "Yes, bisexual. Equal opportunity love and pleasure. You interest me, attract me. You got the same reaction from Tim."

"You figured that out from a short meeting in my restaurant?" she asked, still amazed at the turn of the conversation. She'd suspected he and Tim were more than just friends and wanted more from her. Hell she'd known it in her gut. But to hear him matter-of-factly confirm it still managed to shock her. "You guys work quick."

Julian smirked, angling his body closer. His nearness kindled feelings she hadn't expected, not so quickly. A deep, wild longing. She could feel his warmth over that of the blistering afternoon sun but he didn't touch her. Only his hands caressed her skin, teasing her with his presence. "For myself, yes. I figured that out the moment I first saw you," he confessed. "For Tim it might have been from meeting you at work."

*Oh please let the sky fall now and put me out of my misery.* "He told you about that?"

"He told me about meeting an amazing woman at work." Julian gave her a smile that set her pulse racing. "Then, to his amazement, there she was the next day at the restaurant I decided to take him to."

Lisa tried to laugh off her discomfort, seeking refuge in emotional distance since physical distance was impossible. "Surprises all around, I guess."

"Good ones, I hope."

"We'll see." Lisa managed to look him in the eyes. Where she got the nerve she couldn't say. "So what now? Planning on sharing me? Playing rock-paper-scissors to see who gets to keep me or who gets first dibs?"

Julian's expression took on a predatory glint, sharpening his craggy features. "I've always been a passionate believer in sharing. Why should only one person reap the benefits?"

Lisa broke eye contact, looking for an avenue for escape. But how could she escape from her own arousal, her own rampant desires? The warm metal of her car door grew slick under her sweaty palms. "Okay...I'm getting a little out of my depths here," she admitted.

"And you don't need to decide anything right now," he answered, stepping back ever so slightly. Lisa took a deep breath, peeling her hands off the car. Julian reached forward with a crooked finger, nudging her chin up. When she met his gaze, her own filled with confusion and conflicted emotions, he continued. "That's what the date's for. Getting to know you. You getting to know us. Details come later. First let's see if we all get along. Okay?"

Lisa didn't know what to say. Her mind flew in so many different directions she couldn't latch onto a single thought. Even after her talk with Janice she hadn't imagined this situation would come up. She wanted to know more. Hell, her thighs tingled every time she looked at Julian. At the same time this addition of Tim to the equation lingered on the other side of the forbidden.

But did she really need to decide now? Julian stared at her, his eyes beseeching. Could she say no to a simple date? Did she have to walk away?

"One date?" she asked, floundering under the sudden brightening of his expression. "No promises?"

"No promises," Julian replied, leaning in to steal a quick kiss. Barely a brush of lip on lip but it rocked Lisa to her core. "Get your cell and program in my number."

She fumbled for the door handle behind her, afraid to break away from him and lose the feeling of connection. "What about you?"

"You have a pen?"

She reached in her car, scrambling around in the middle console. It took a few moments of rummaging for her to find a pen beneath the mass of junk. Julian took it from her and raised his forearm. "Shoot."

Lisa rattled off her number and he wrote it on his skin. She smirked.

"What?"

Lisa shrugged, holding in a chuckle. "Just a high school flashback."

"Hey, if something works, stick with it." He shot a playful wink before he tossed the pen back to her. "Now your turn."

Lisa pulled out her cell and programmed in the number he gave her. "That's my home number. With our shifts, either Tim or I are usually home. If not, it's forwarded to my cell. Day or night you can reach me there."

"So if I have spur of the moment second thoughts, I can get you?" she asked, half joking, as she chewed on her lower lip.

"Nope, no second thoughts." He pulled her into his arms, reached up and tapped a finger against the tip of her nose. "I won't answer the phone for second thoughts. And you don't seem like the type to stand a guy up. You'd call first. So get that whole 'second thoughts' thing out of your mind."

Lisa felt a goofy grin cover her face but couldn't seem to shake it. Damned if the man didn't know her pretty well already. "Aye, aye, sir. No second thoughts, sir."

"See, you've already got the whole taste of this relationship down pat." He looked over her shoulder, mentally ticking off the possibilities. "Sir, I like that."

Lisa shoved his shoulder, pushing him away from her. Arms akimbo, she gave him a mock glare. "If this is going to be a relationship, don't get too used to it. I don't play that whole male dominant game anymore."

Julian gave a wickedly evil grin, wiggling his eyebrows and twirling an imaginary mustache. "Shoot. I love playing games, especially in the bedroom. And that was one of my favorites, even if I usually have to play rock-paper-scissors to pick who gets to be the dominant male. Oh well, guess we'll have to work on finding out what games you like to play best."

"That all depends on who I get to play with," she tossed back at him, leaning against her doorframe with arms crossed and watching the lust tighten his body. *Good, glad I'm not the only one.* She glanced down, couldn't resist the temptation of a quick peek at his growing erection.

"That's the nice thing about being with me and Tim," he whispered, pulling her back in his embrace. "You always get a choice of playmates."

Lisa looped one arm around the corded muscles of waist and the other hand around his neck. "And if I don't want to choose?"

"Hell, that's even better," he murmured moments before sealing her mouth with his.

Lisa shivered as pure electric lust flowed through her body, charging her as much as sticking her finger in an electric socket would have. She whimpered, arching forward and clutching him closer as her knees shook. Her nipples tingled, peaked and ached beneath the soft cotton of her sports bra.

The exotic taste of him, dark spice, filled her mouth and dimmed all other sensation. She wanted to wrap herself in his taste, wallow in it, let him suck her into the dark maelstrom of drugging desire. She felt his presence throbbing into her with each heartbeat, bringing her closer to her greatest fear and greatest desire.

Total loss of control.

He groaned into her mouth as she slipped her tongue between his lips to lap at his mouth, gather that flavor to savor. He shuddered in her arms, shoving and pressing her against the doorframe as his own legs trembled.

She purred as he slid his tongue into the recesses of her mouth, exploring her, luxuriating in her. He matched her thrust for thrust, an imitation of what they both wanted – his cock pounding in her hot, wet, aching pussy.

Finally lack of air had her pulling back. Lisa panted, closing her eyes and leaning against his hard chest to fight the dizzying spins flying through her head. *What am I getting myself into?* She heard the rumble close to his heart before he bellowed in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” she whispered into his t-shirt, unable to gather enough energy after his mind-blowing kiss to act insulted.

“I’m going to have a hard time keeping my hands off you, love,” he replied as he rested his chin on the crown of her head. He held her close, rubbing her back as though he couldn’t bear to release her, to take his hands off her. “Tim’ll be hopeless. He’s never been good at resisting temptation. And you’re more than a simple temptation.”

Lisa took a moment to enjoy the contact, snuggling into him and absorbing his strength instead of pulling away. “Then it’ll be up to me to keep the two of you in line,” she teased.

Again his steely chest shook beneath her cheek. “That sounds interesting,” he said between laughs. “What’ll you be wearing? Something lacy and clingy, or are we talking a black leather and whip moment?”

Lisa chuckled, enjoying his quirky humor in spite of herself. “You are a bad, bad man. What am I getting myself into?”

“I believe I’m the one trying to get into something.” She pulled out of his arms, mock disgust on her face. Julian smirked. Lisa grinned back. “But enough innuendos for now. Time to get you ready for work, so you can make sure you have tomorrow evening off.”



## Chapter Nine

Mograith stared down at his bitter cold realm, a petulant pout out of place on his sharp, furious blue face. Long, curved, glinting purple nails tapped on the ornate, grotesquely carved silver arms of his gigantic throne. Frozen wind caressed his nude body but couldn't bring him pleasure or inspire him to take part in the myriad grotesque tortures abounding around him. An emotion he hadn't felt in centuries filled him to overflowing, something that rivaled the rage of eons.

Jealousy.

His smaller imp-like minions rejoiced in the delight of tormenting fresh, unclaimed humans in the mortal world. They had freedom. Could he bathe in their blood and wallow in their misery? Was he allowed access to the pleasures of the flesh and the pain? Was he bathing in a crimson shower of warm, sparkling blood?

No. He was stuck waiting, watching the warm golden beam of light grow larger with each passing moment. A mere pinprick at first appearance, it now floated above his throne, the size of his fist. But still far from large enough for his massive form to squeeze through.

Tormented souls scraped and crawled closer, their emaciated forms reaching toward the light for imagined salvation, pilgrim supplicants praying for forgiveness and pleading for release. They shivered with newfound hope, their torn flesh and hanging, tattered skin snapping in the fierce wind. They thought the glittering light offered them deliverance, a passage from this hell to paradise and redemption.

Hardly. It signaled a new round in the eternal battle, a chance for his piece of hell to grow in numbers from weak-willed and immoral victims dragged down to his pits. Now if only his minion would do its work and secure his victory.

As if summoned by the thought a small, gnarled figure darted through the glowing opening. Its leather wings flapped through the air, frightening many souls back from the promise of the light. The lesser demon ignored their cringing, scurrying forms and sped toward Mograith, bowing before its king midair.

"Report," Mograith snapped, gripping the arms of his throne and leaning forward. "What happens in the mortal world?"

His minion kept its head bowed, eyes to the ground and arms crossing his chest as he answered. "The Three have begun to gather."

Mograith snarled, hands clenching and slamming down on the arms of his throne, denting the ancient silver. It writhed, trembled and reformed beneath his craggy fists. "Damn them," he snarled, wicked teeth bared and snapping.

The lesser demon dared to peek up for a moment, eyes flickering to the area above Mograith's left shoulder. "But there is still a chance to stop them, Sire," it offered, shrill voice quivering.

The Demon Lord tilted his head, wide lips still peeled back in a snarl. "Yes?"

"The Empath and the Visionary are tied to each other," the small creature began, leathery bat wings fluttering in agitation. "Their relationship is strong, solid. Too much time has passed and they will be impossible to separate. But the Catalyst... She is a different story."

Mograith pressed his dry palms together, tapping his nails against each other. A glimmer of a plan sparked in the back of his diabolical mind. "She isn't bound to the other two?"

His minion shook his head, smiling eagerly at its lord, ever ready to please him. "Not yet," it answered, gaining enough courage from his lord's obvious pleasure to flit closer. "They have met but she hasn't established any connections to either of the other two. She is their weakness, the length in the chain that can be broken. We simply need to exploit her precarious station."

Mograith smiled, an evil, hatred-filled gleam of tearing teeth. "So all we need do is make certain that separation continues." He chuckled, the grating sound sending tormented souls below scurrying for their hiding places while even the lesser demons bowed their heads in respect. "This makes our job so much easier. If we keep the Three from combining their essences, the keys to unlocking their powers, the Pillar will never form and the portal will open for us."

"Sire, why not kill the Catalyst before she has the protection of the other two?" his minion questioned, eyes cast down again under the sound of Mograith's gloating laughter. "It would be simple to snuff out one unguarded human life."

"That would solve nothing," Mograith snapped, falling back into his embracing throne to stare contemplatively at the growing light. He could almost taste the sweet honey flavor of victory, but the eons had taught him that it wasn't wise to underestimate his enemy, no matter how seemingly weak. "With the absence of a Three so close to an opening portal, another Three would be called. And the next Three may not be so weakened. They may pose a greater challenge. Let us take the unbound Three we have and deal with them."

The smaller demon bowed to its Lord's decree, body shaking with barely restrained energy, ready to return to frolic in the mortal realm. "What do you suggest?"

Mograith snapped his fingers, two more of his lesser demons appearing, floating in midair beside the first. "We don't want to kill the woman, but we want to divide her from the others." His lips curled to one side, revealing a single, dripping, serrated fang. "Do what you do best, my minions. Do what you enjoy. Terrify, confuse, destroy her confidence. Find her greatest weakness and exploit it. You three will rend the ties that bind the Three. Do whatever you feel necessary, short of killing them, to keep them apart. But report to me immediately when you've achieved your goal."

The three demons bowed in unison, arms folded and wings spread. Without another word they spun on their leathery wings. Golden light flickered and flashed as they flew through the portal and into their vile futures.

## Chapter Ten

Music throbbed through Tim's veins, pushing him farther from reality and deeper into emotion-coated dance. He twisted and contorted as though his body had a mind of its own. Women screamed, stomped and chanted, but all from a distance. The fog of the smoke machine burned his heaving lungs but he paid little attention. His mind floated in a lust-filled haze. So much desire. So much angst. All the sexual energy rose and fell over him with each step he performed.

Pleasure Palace boomed, completely packed, energy level skyrocketing. The doormen were turning women away, having reached the maximum capacity an hour ago. Tim lived for nights like this, ones that sent him flying. During his street days, he never succumbed to the siren's lure of escape through drugs that killed or destroyed the lives of so many of his friends. This was a true high, one beyond anyone else's comprehension. His own personal mind trip. Nothing on earth could surpass this feeling, this pure state of emotional bliss.

For him the club was an emotional roller coaster. Emotions fed into him, powering his dance. He sent them flowing back into the crowd, twofold. The women's voracious desire spiked higher in response, arrowing back to him, creating a cycle of avid, scorching lust whirling out of control with Tim spinning wild in the eye of the hurricane.

If only Julian could experience this electrifying storm, he'd understand Tim completely. He had a clue, the smallest hint of how Tim felt surrounded by such strong pulsing emotions, buffeted like a leaf in a tornado. But Julian couldn't realize the pure, ecstatic bliss if he didn't experience it, hadn't had it fill his veins and color his soul.

Maybe when Lisa and her powers joined the mix Julian could taste it. She was the Catalyst, the one who could thrust them both to the next level of power. She would become their connection, the knot tying them together, binding them even as she set them free. Even Julian couldn't say exactly what she would bring to the blend. He spoke of pillars of light, extremes of sensation, sharing on the highest level. Of creating enough energy to mend a tear in the veil between dimensions.

But what did that mean? Tim couldn't wrap his mind around the mystical abstracts. He understood the power of emotion. He understood the currents that ran rampant through the human psyche.

He understood the pulsing heartbeat of desire, the sweet, cloying taste of lust. The thought of Lisa joining them in their personal passion sent his own soaring higher, flying through the stratosphere.

How much more would she bring to him? What new plateau would he explore?

Holding Lisa's image in his mind along with Julian's, both wrapped and writhing in a passionate embrace as they waited for him to join them, Tim threw himself into his dance. Sweat covered his bare chest, rivulets pouring down to mark his white g-string. His hair flew around his face. The stage vibrated beneath his feet with the pounding of the speakers and the impact of his frantic movements. Women pressed forward, money clenched and waiting in their fists.

He fell to his knees, sliding on his kneepads until he reached the edge of the stage. Hands flew forward, caressing his slick abs and shoving money into his g-string. Each physical brush sent another stab of blinding emotion coursing through him. When it became too much for him to handle he jumped to his feet to the sound of disappointed moans.

But he didn't go far, just far enough to catch his mental breath. He turned his back to his audience, spreading his legs. Bending forward, he put his hands on the floor, his head hanging between his knees. Women screamed. One propped herself far enough up on the edge of the stage to reach forward and slap his ass.

Shrieks filled the air as he smiled and winked at the woman. She fanned several bills, waving them in front of her face. She curled her finger at him, daring him to come for it.

Tim braced himself. With a quick push he thrust his feet into the air, standing on his hands. He stayed there for a moment before letting his feet fall back. He flipped up from his bridge then turned back to the woman.

Her eyes widened as he strutted forward, taking the bills from her hand. He reached forward and tucked them in her neckline, his fingers barely brushing her skin. Bending over slowly, he pushed his face in her cleavage, taking the bills with his teeth. Her soft floral scent filled his nose as her companions yelled and whistled.

With that last move the music started winding down. He took the woman's hand, placing a short kiss on her knuckles before stepping back. He did two perfect backflips, ending back at center stage. More female screams and whistles filled the air. With a flourish and another wink he bowed and headed off stage.

On the stairs he passed three men dressed as cowboys, complete with black hats, scarves covering their mouths and long, black dusters. He nodded to one, a friend from the old days whom he'd recently helped get work at the Pleasure Palace, before making his way to the back bar. He needed a quick drink before working the floor. Passing out from dehydration in a woman's lap wasn't good for business – a definite buzz kill.

At the bar, several women in line raked their eyes across his barely clothed form. Didn't look like it'd take long for him to find someone wanting a lap dance. Not on a night like this. He'd keep his emotional buzz going strong until closing time, no downtime stretching out, no monotony. Hopefully Julian wouldn't be locked in his office when he got home and would be ready for more fun and games.

But the closer he got to the bar, the more the happy vibe seemed to thin and break, finally disappearing all together. A total energy void. Positive and negative colliding, canceling each other out. Tim looked around for the source of the emotional dead space.

A well-dressed man and woman stood together at the head of the line. Not an unusual sight. Couples did come in together, especially this late. Most wandered up from the female stripper area downstairs and didn't stay long. They tended to be lookers, not paying customers up here. Men didn't buy as many lap dances for their women upstairs in the male stripper section as they did downstairs. Most preferred to see their women rubbing themselves across another woman, not another man. Kinda greedy, Tim always thought, but to each his own.

Didn't know what they were missing in Tim's opinion. He couldn't wait to see Lisa under Julian, legs wrapped around his waist. The thought alone brought a lascivious smile to his lips.

But this couple didn't look so happy. The woman wouldn't raise her eyes from her shoes and the man was so red he looked like he was about ready to bust a blood vessel. The bartender had a desperate look about his pinched face, his eyes scanning the room for help.

Tim looked around. The nearest bouncer was across the room dealing with a vomiting woman. Nobody else stood close enough to be of any use.

Seemed like this one was up to him.

He stepped forward, snagging a cool water bottle from the chest to the side of the bar. Women made way for him, taking the drink in his hand as cue that he was on break. Only a few disappointed mutters reached his ears, the occasional stray hand caressing his bare flesh. He made sure to make a mental note about who seemed the most frustrated with his unavailability. He'd find them later and make up for the lack of attention.

He pasted on his best smile, filling himself with happiness and contentment and projecting it out. He wrapped his aura around him like a cloak, hoping to make this as quick as possible. "Hi, can I help you two?"

The man rounded on him, hands already forming fists and elbows bending. "Somebody better come out here and explain some things or there's going to be serious trouble," he growled between thin lips and gritted teeth.

Tim raised his hands in peace, laughing as he kept his positive energy swirling around him. He couldn't respond to the threat with negativity. That only made things worse, escalated the cycle that weakened the barrier and created the portal. "What's the problem? I can bring you a manager if you want."

"One of you bastards propositioned my wife," the man answered, one of his hands grabbing her by the elbow.

"Really?" Tim asked, a picture of amazement and contrition. "Are you sure he wasn't asking if she wanted to buy a dance? I can't believe someone would take it farther than that. It'd cost them their job. The management is very clear about their

response to that kind of behavior. Pleasure Palace could lose its license if anyone started their own side business. No one wants to be out of a job."

The man's jaw clenched as his grip on his wife's arm tightened, his knuckles whitening. "I know what he wanted. I saw how he looked at her, stripped her with his eyes. He wanted sex, not a stinking twenty."

Tim resisted the urge to roll his own eyes. How a woman would bring an obviously possessive spouse into a strip club never ceased to amaze him. Didn't they have any sense of self-preservation? Of course, they were with men like that in the first place. That said something about their ability to make logical decisions. At least this was a situation easily diffused. It happened sometimes, often enough that he'd gotten some practice.

Tim tugged on the feelings of freedom and joy flowing around him, catching the streams from various women nearby. Pulling them in, he tapped into that part of himself that twisted and turned deep inside his soul. The part that truly felt with every iota of his being. He took those tides of positive emotions and built on them, spinning them and weaving them into a tight blanket of pure positive energy. Stronger and stronger, he directed all the good emotions toward the man.

"Are you certain? Do you really want to hurt someone here? Is it worth the cost, the energy to lash out?" With each question Tim sent another wave of positive emotions to envelop the fury-filled husband, each more powerful than the last.

The man blinked under the continuous barrage. His brow wrinkled. He looked around, a faint thread of confusion filling his gaze. His expression seemed lost, puzzled. He slid his grip down to his wife's hand, squeezing it gently. "I don't know."

Tim cocked his head, letting his powers do their work while giving the man alternatives to his rage. "Well, before making accusations you really should be certain."

"I guess. Maybe I'm overreacting. Tina?" The man looked down at his wife, who still stared at the floor, lips quivering.

When she glanced up Tim could see the tears shining in her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. His heart swelled at the pain he felt in her, familiar in its taste, like an animal trapped in a situation it couldn't control, trapped by someone it loved but couldn't understand. The instinct to escape warred with the need for acceptance and approval. He pushed a little of his strength and courage at her, giving her back her speech.

"I hate it when you get like this, Adam," she whispered, eyes beseeching. She reached out a trembling hand to cup the man's cheek. "I can't talk to you and you embarrass me. You act like I'm nothing, I don't exist except as something to get angry about. You go overboard and I'm left in the background watching how other people react to you. Can't you drop it this time? Please, for me? We don't have to come back. Please just drop it."

The man nodded, turning without another word. As the two left Tim walked back to the bar and the bartender gave Tim a weak smile. "Man, I don't know how you do

that, but I'm glad you showed up. I knew that one was trouble the minute he got in line. I just couldn't catch anyone's attention."

Tim shrugged it off. "No problem, Rob. Some people just need a person to help them see that they're acting liking an ass and give them an excuse to stand down without losing face. That's all. But I'm glad I could help."

"I owe you one, man. Tell you what," Rob offered as he swiped spilled tequila off the bar with a dry white towel. "I'll buy you a drink for after closing, whatever you want. It'll be waiting for you. Least I can do after you saved me the hassle of dealing with that asshole."

"You don't have to," Tim answered, turning back to a group of rowdy, hungry women watching him. He lifted his water bottle to them, setting off a peal of giggles and whispers. He took a last swig before handing the empty plastic bottle to Rob to throw away. "But I'm not going to say no to a free drink."

"What'd you like?"

Tim turned back to the throng of waiting women, letting their energy fill him once more, drawing back what he'd used to end the confrontation and more, feeling his personal buzz shoot him high once more. "Surprise me. I've found I like surprises."



## Chapter Eleven

"Ms. Harrington. Ms. Harrington!"

Lisa shook herself, pulling her mind away from Julian's mind-blowing, panty-drenching kiss and back to the brain-numbing paperwork she was trying to finish before closing brought in a whole other set of numbers for her to crunch. She blinked several times before she could even focus on the bare wood-paneled walls, broken only by the occasional filing cabinet and a single sofa. Maybe she should get a houseplant or fish or something to liven the place up if she was going to be spending so much time here. She rubbed the bridge of her nose as she looked down at the pile of papers and receipts spread on her one office extravagance, her oversized oak desk with ornate tropical carvings.

As the door opened the clink of dishes and the constant murmur of the kitchen and waitstaff filled the room along with the scent of exotic spices, making her wish even more fervently that she could be out there instead of stuck in a windowless back room.

"Yeah? What's up, Mike?" Lisa asked her manager.

The tall lanky college kid ran his fingers through his tousled red hair. Young but an able employee, Mike didn't normally look so flustered. "The new girl we hired to replace Trina seems to be working out. But now Renee's sick."

Lisa rolled her neck and stretched her arms over her head, trying to loosen her stiff shoulder muscles and stiffer brain cells. She sighed as she looked at tropical picture sitting on her desk. Her dream vacation seemed farther than ever tonight. "Renee seemed fine earlier."

"Well, now she's in the employee bathroom praying to the porcelain god," he replied, lips pursed, looking a little green at the thought. "We need an extra hand up front."

Lisa winced. Poor Renee, but thank goodness she made it to the bathroom. There were some things a restaurant didn't need to see in its waiting area, vomit being high on the list. "Sarah's been wanting a chance at hostess. Give her a call and see if she can come in. In the meantime I'll cover the spot. As soon as Renee feels up to it call her a cab. I'll foot the bill. If she's feeling this bad she shouldn't be driving."

Mike sighed in relief, giving her a weak, appreciative smile. "Thanks, boss lady."

Lisa narrowed her eyes and shook a playful finger at him. "Keep calling me that," she threatened, eyes narrowed and a mock sneer curling her lips, "and you can handle all those impatient customers on your own. I'll leave early. How'd you like that?"

Mike shook his head, standing straighter as the weight of the world lifted off his slim young shoulders. "You wouldn't do that to me. Not when you're already taking tomorrow night off. You'd go crazy. You practically live here."

"Watch me," she growled, not pleased with the truth of his statement. CM meant a lot to her but not everything. She did too have a life outside work.

Didn't she?

Mike laughed, looking relaxed as he left, the door swinging closed behind him. Lisa took a moment to run a comb through her static-charged hair and slip her black patent-leather shoes back on. It took her a minute to find the jacket that went with her outfit—sliding off her filing cabinet—and shake the wrinkles out of it. She made herself as comfortable as possible when playing with the numbers, not paying much attention to details like personal neatness.

Anything to make the job easier. Food she could handle. Employees flaking out or getting sick she could handle.irate or deadbeat customers she could handle. But math? Yuck. She worked hard, meticulously, to make up for her numeric disability. But she'd never love it.

As she headed out the door Lisa nodded at a pale and sweaty Renee who stood sagging against the wall near the employee restroom. Poor girl really didn't look good. Lisa put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Renee, a cab's waiting whenever you're ready. Don't worry about a thing. Call us when you feel better."

Renee nodded but dashed back to the bathroom, hand cupped over her mouth. Lisa made a mental note to have someone check up on her, maybe escort her home.

The next two hours passed in a blur, a flashback to her startup days working with a skeleton crew, a choice group that still formed the heart of CM. For the most part she enjoyed herself, enjoyed the camaraderie, enjoyed being back in the trenches. It'd been a while since she'd had such hands-on time with her customers. Normally she only saw the ones who were dissatisfied. Seeing pleasure on their faces was a nice change of pace. Made her feel like she had accomplished something. Made her remember the dreams she'd come into this business with.

But one dark spot hovered over her otherwise busy evening. The businessman. She couldn't be certain but he looked like the same guy from the café that morning. With his white-collar professional clone look it was hard to tell. Perfect haircut. Well-tailored, gray pin-striped suit. Solid blue tie. Well-mannered. Nothing with personality showed in his demeanor.

But he gave her the creeps. Just looking at the man sent shivers down her spine and made her skin crawl. Something was off about him, not quite right. It put her hackles up. She kept a close eye on him, making sure he didn't give her waitstaff any trouble, hassle any of her men or women. But he kept a low profile. He didn't complain. He didn't joke. He acknowledged his server's presence just long enough to ensure prompt service but nothing more. He didn't flirt with anyone, male or female, young or old. A

lone male completely in his own space, ignoring anyone and anything in his surroundings.

So why did she feel like he was watching her?

When Sarah showed up, grinning and as chipper as if she hadn't been called in on her night off, Lisa didn't return to her office. The paperwork could wait. She'd stay late this evening if she had to. She wanted to keep watch on Mr. Businessman, make sure he stayed on his best behavior. Never let it be said that she didn't look out for her people. She stopped to talk to Mike then wandered over to the bar. She nodded to the bartender but didn't interrupt him.

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. Nothing happened. The businessman ate dessert and drank coffee. He paid his bill and left a decent tip, not extravagant but not a gyp either. He picked up his nondescript briefcase and walked out the door. He didn't so much as visit the john on the way out.

Lisa shook her head. Her instincts were off. Way off. It'd been too long since she'd been in the trenches. She couldn't even spot a jerk. But she shouldn't be so surprised. The weird turn in her personal life was obviously throwing everything else off kilter. With a mental shrug she headed back to her office and the massive pile of backed-up paperwork.

*No rest for the wicked.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later a yawning Lisa turned to lock the door to CM. Her security system beeped one last time before setting into what she called sentinel mode. Well after two o'clock, she thanked god that they didn't do breakfast. Not that she'd be going in at all tomorrow. Sleep late. Take a leisurely shower. Maybe go in for a manicure. Get a full acrylic set, maybe even in a fancy air-brushed French design. Add some sparkle too. Janice kept bragging about her nail lady. A hot date rated new nails at the very least.

Cars zoomed by, filling the air with a constant engine roar and the noxious smell of exhaust. New York wasn't the only city that never slept. Twenty-four hours a day people drove and walked the streets of Las Vegas. A city filled with life and decadence, it deserved the title more than the Big Apple did.

A crunch of rock against asphalt gave her warning of impending trouble a split second before strong hands grabbed her.

She tried to scream but a hard palm slammed over her mouth, cutting the sound off to a muffled yelp. Her hands clawed at her attacker's fingers, trying to pry free. Her heels scraped the concrete as the man jerked her into his body.

Lisa's heart slammed against her rib cage. Her stomach knotted and her body shook convulsively. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. *God, please. I don't want to die. Don't let me die.*

She reached back, clawing at the man's face, feeling his flesh jam under her short nails. He grunted but didn't let go, instead increased the pressure of his hold. He pulled her along toward a dark-colored van parked away from the streetlights.

*If he gets me in there I'm dead.* Pictures of what a body dumped in the desert would look like after a couple of weeks flashed in her mind. Sun and insects. *Dear sweet god.*

Lisa kicked and growled beneath the hand on her mouth. With his arm hooked around her waist both her hands were free. She took advantage of his mistake. She reached back again but not to claw his face. She meant business. To hell with gross. She found his eyes, shoving in with both her thumbs.

A soft pop sounded and viscous fluid flowed over her hands. The shriek he gave defined the word "inhuman". The high-pitched screech shook the glass of CM's windows and had Lisa cupping her ears. But she didn't stick around to see how much damage she did to him. She felt liquid and flesh clinging to her skin and that was enough for her. She staggered forward, away from her attacker and away from his howls of pain.

As she dashed toward the safety of the lights and people she tripped over something. It skidded across the ground in front of her as she stumbled, managing to keep on her feet.

A briefcase. A familiar, black, nondescript briefcase. The businessman's briefcase. It popped open, duct tape and knives flying everywhere across the asphalt.

Lisa's stomach heaved, causing her to gag. Her teeth chattered. Panic froze her muscles as her vision wavered and grayed. But the sound of feet staggering behind her and her attacker's harsh breaths punctuated by pain-filled whimpers set her back in motion.

Starting to scream, she ran for the gas station across the street. People and a phone. She needed people and a phone.

*Please let me make it.*

## Chapter Twelve

Heart racing, sweat covering his entire body, bile coating his tongue, Julian jerked awake. Darkness embraced him as his muscles trembled, spasms tossing his body. Bed sheets twisted around him, tying him in place. Car exhaust and blood filled his nose. When the vision struck hard, particularly brutal, he had trouble pulling himself back to the present reality.

The king-sized bed shifted as Tim grumbled next to him, yanking Julian free to curl closer beneath the satin sheets. Julian pulled him in his arms and forced several deep even breaths, chills racking his body as the image of Lisa's terror-filled face burned the back of his eyes. He could still hear the ear-piercing scream of the man as her fingers shoved into his eyes, blinding him. Her panting answering cries as she ran for safety echoed endlessly in his fevered mind.

*She's okay. You know she's okay. She got away. This time.*

He squeezed Tim and kissed his forehead, using him as a focal point. He needed an anchor to hold on to, to bring him back to the real. Tim smiled in his sleep and snuggled closer with a snuffling noise. Julian took comfort in the darkened room and the warm feeling of his lover tucked next to him. His chest loosened and tears that threatened to fall never came.

It took several minutes before he regained his composure. But when he was ready to deal with the crisis and turn it to their advantage, Julian reached over to his nightstand and grabbed the cordless. He punched in a familiar number.

"Hello, Detective Ramirez speaking," a deep voice rumbled in his ear, the hint of a New Mexican accent still present after all these years in Nevada.

Julian remembered the first time he met Manuel in boot camp. Big, beefy, a linebacker of a man, he'd pegged Manuel as being a clone of his father and prepared for the snide, cutting comments, if not outright physical bullying. Instead much to his surprise he found a friend trustworthy enough to let in on a few of his secrets without worry of contempt. A man he could depend on in times like these.

"Manny," he said without preamble, "I need a favor."

"Damn, Julian," Manny all but whined. The rapid-fire click of his ballpoint pen echoed over the line. "Not another one of your dreams. I'm not gonna get hit with another serial homicide or spree killing? Tell me you want tickets to the charity ball. Carla's just getting used to me being home at a halfway decent hour."

Julian grimaced. He didn't blame Manny for his petulant response. They didn't socialize as much as they used to. His life centered on loving Tim and trying to find Lisa and saving the world from demonic invasion. Not much room left for downtime.

Instead Julian found himself butting in on Manny's professional life. The last case he'd helped with had left him with nightmares for weeks, and he was used to seeing the cruelty of human kind on a grand scale. He could only imagine how his bighearted jovial friend had dealt with it. "This is a little more serious than a nice date night but not a homicide. I had a dream about a woman I know. I want to check on things."

"A woman?" Manny asked, the teasing note he was infamous for singing across the line, almost overpowering his relief. "Tim know about her? Do I need to be ready to break up a domestic call up at that pricey condo of yours?"

"Yes, Tim knows and we just met so quit with the innuendoes. I may move fast but not that fast." Julian paused as Tim cracked one droopy eye open and scooted his head back to his own pillow to get a better look at him. Julian patted his hand in reassurance. "Her name is Lisa Harrington. She was attacked tonight outside her restaurant, Culinary Magic. She escaped, leaving her attacker wounded, possibly blinded."

"Okay, what do you want from me? It's out of my area. I don't get the kidnapping or rape cases unless there's a body involved."

Tim laced his fingers with Julian's and kissed his knuckles. Julian appreciated the wordless support. This is where things could get tricky. He didn't know exactly how Manny would react to the situation, not if he knew everything. ESP was one thing, demon hordes another entirely. But how much could he get away with telling him? "I know, no bodies, not your thing. Actually all I need you to do is give her some advice for me without telling her it's from me. There's more trouble heading her way and I'd like to know she's safe, taken care of."

"You saw more?" Manny asked, intrigued now. Julian's power always piqued his curiosity. Hopefully being intrigued was enough to get him to go along with the rest of Julian's plan. "This wasn't a random attack," he stated, mentally getting his facts straight. "Okay, what do you need her to know?"

Julian held on to Tim, his personal touchstone. Here's where he could lose Manny. "Have her contact my company for security," Julian said, quick to continue before Manny could ask for an explanation. "I want to be in charge. She's going to need all the help she can get for this and I'd feel better being in on it from the beginning. Maybe stop it before she becomes one of yours."

"Attracted a crazy stalker? Trying to keep her alive?" Manny stopped for a second then snickered. "Or are you using your gifts to hit on people now? Tim not enough for you so you're scouting out the weird realms for dates? Man, I had more respect for you than that."

Julian refused to rise to the bait. He wouldn't win. Even being able to see into the future he didn't have enough power to match verbal wits with Manny Ramirez. "Not quite. Tim's always taken good care of my needs, thanks for asking. Will you do it?"

Silence met his question, seconds ticking by. Finally he heard Manny taking a deep drag on one of the cigars his wife refused to let him smoke in her house. He could only sneak one when he was in the privacy of his office. "Protect and serve," he muttered on

his exhalation "I admit I'd like to be preventative for once, keep my workload down. One less cold one on the slab, one less unsolved homicide sounds fine by me."

Julian closed his eyes, thanking that bit of divine intervention that had put Manny into his squad all those years ago. Who knew how much one good friend could affect the rest of your life? "Thank you."

"Do you want me to tell her the name of the company's owner?" his friend teased, unwilling to let things be.

"No, not yet," Julian answered, waiting for the interrogation to begin. But the harassment he had to deal with now was worth it if he knew that Lisa would be safe. He'd be there for her this time, be able to protect her. If he was right this attack was only the beginning of a major assault.

"Oh, she doesn't know about your little extra something-something?" The wheels in Manny's head spun so fast Julian could hear them chugging and clanking over the line. "Want to keep her in the dark?"

Julian decided to give him enough to satisfy his morbid curiosity. He looked down at Tim, whose eyes filled with worry. He held Tim's warm solid hand and pressed it against his chest, over his heart, before he answered. "Not unless you have to. We have a date with her tomorrow and don't want to scare her off. Tim and I are enough to handle by ourselves."

"You *and* Tim?" Manny chuckled, his chair squeaking over the chatter of other officers in the background. "You're both dating her? Damn. Where were you guys before I got married? The things you could've shown me."

"Somewhere far away from you. I'm sure Carla is happy that she demanded a ring before you enlisted."

Manny's chuckle grew to a wall-shaking full-belly laugh. He tried to talk but only managed a few incoherent word fragments. It took several minutes before he managed to put his thoughts into real words. "Yeah well, maybe you're right. I got no desire to piss sitting down. She'd cut off certain parts of my anatomy that I've grown rather accustomed to if she thought I wanted to try swinging with her."

"For good reason," Julian added. He liked Carla. Manny needed a strong, no-nonsense woman to keep him in line and grounded, especially in his line of work. Manny's Carla more than fit the bill. A tiny package but a real spitfire. "Better be careful unless you really want to start pissing through a plastic tube."

Manny snorted but didn't bother trying to disagree. "You be careful yourself, man. Tim doesn't seem like the kind to share either, no matter what he does for a living. He's male, no matter what his sexual tastes are. He's gotta feel territorial. You might be putting yourself and the little lady in a bad position."

Julian smirked, glancing down at Tim and taking in the lecherous expression spreading across his boyish face. It looked like the man in question wanted to try some positions all right, just not bad ones. No. Ones that would make Julian feel oh-so good. "That's why we're both going out with her, not just me."

"Shit, I can't keep up with you tonight," his friend grumbled when Julian didn't rise to his bait. No fun teasing someone who wouldn't be teased. "I'll see about tracking down your Lisa and passing on the word."

"Thanks, Manny. I owe you one," Julian mumbled as Tim slipped his knee up his thigh and reached over to cup his balls, rolling them in his palm. Julian closed his eyes and fought off a groan but couldn't keep from filling with arousal.

"Now that's a change," Manny replied, clueless of Julian's current, happily sexual predicament. "It's usually the other way around, me owing you. Why don't we just call it even?"

"Deal," Julian managed to gasp as Tim leaned over to lick up the side of his neck and blow in his free ear. Heat flooded his body as every ounce of extra blood rushed through him to his rising cock. So hard, so damn hard. Tim would pay for his teasing and he'd love it.

"Now back to bed," Manny clucked.

Julian smiled down at his playfully grinning lover, pumping into his rough grip. "Already there."

Manny harrumphed. "Well, for god's sake, get off the phone before you start anything. I don't wanna hear it."

Julian chuckled as the phone slammed down, cutting off the connection. Tim looked askance. "Our friend at the police department may be extremely open-minded for someone in his profession but even he has his limits."

"Hung up on you?" he asked, wrapping his arms around Julian's waist.

Julian nodded, pulling him closer and connecting his pelvis with Tim's. Sweet, hard, engorged flesh dueled with his own.

Tim snickered but his amusement didn't last long. "What was that about Lisa? Is she all right?"

"Physically yes," Julian answered, his dream teasing the edges of his mind with a red tinge of anger and fear. It was enough to deflate him. Damn, but he wanted to get his hands on the man who'd dared try to hurt her. Unfortunately he suspected her attacker was more than a man. "But someone scared her, badly."

"Random violence," Tim said, disgust filling his words. "All the more energy to open the portal."

"Or maybe not so random." Julian pulled Tim closer, clinging to the one thing that made his world safe and sane. He took a deep breath, pulling in Tim's musky, spicy scent. "In my dream there was a strange aura around her attacker, something not of this dimension."

Tim pulled back, shock stealing some of the warmth from his body. "You think things are already leaking through?"

"I think we better get Lisa on our side and quickly."



"So no late-morning snuggles," Tim grumbled as he scooped up a pillow and shoved it behind his back. "You'll want to have someone tailing her, making sure she's okay until she calls."

Julian rolled out of bed, a half apologetic grimace on his face. He grabbed a pair of jeans out of his side of the dresser, not bothering with boxers. "It's better if I do it. Less to explain later."

"Need company?" Tim asked as he started crawling out of his cocoon. Blurry eyes and golden hair shooting out in every direction, Tim warmed Julian's cold heart.

*Mine.*

"No," Julian answered, grinning as he watched his lover slide and struggle against slick satin sheets, pillows and an overstuffed comforter. "I should do this myself. Like you said, it's my feelings that are the most in doubt. We don't have much time and I should spend it on her, by myself."

Tim pouted, crossing his arms, but didn't argue. "Okay, you're right, but I hate being the one left out."

Julian walked back to the bed as he snapped the top catch of his jeans, grimacing at the tight fit around his still half-aroused cock. He knelt down, reaching out to turn Tim's face toward him. He leaned forward, softly kissing Tim, trying to convey with actions what he couldn't with words. He lapped at full lips, begging entrance to the treasure trove of feelings within. Tim pursed his lips for a moment then gave in with a soft exhalation. Julian's tongue sank deep, gliding over warm, tasty, wet flesh. Home. Tim was home. He needed Lisa home.

He closed his eyes, pressing his forehead against Tim's. "You won't be out of the loop for long. Whatever's leaking through isn't going to allow that to happen. We're all safer if we're together."

"Safer and happier," Tim replied, gripping Julian's hand.

"For now I'll be satisfied with the safer," Julian muttered as he stood and turned back to the dresser.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Creatures throughout the icy, barren, hellish realm scrambled about, seeking some hidden place for sanctuary or at least a fleeting moment of peace from constant torture. The world trembled with volcanic fury, overpowering the most tormented soul's anguish. Mograith's bloodthirsty growls filled the air as everyone sought to avoid being the object that he unleashed his violent displeasure upon.

But for once in nearly a millennium the majority of the underworld was safe. He knew exactly who to blame and punish for his current irritation. One small, moaning demon, wings already bloody and shredded, lay crumpled and cringing on the ground at his lord's barbed feet.

"Please, Sire. I did what you asked," it whimpered as it curled into a tight quivering ball.

Mograith's eyes glowed a deadly crimson as he stared down at the one who dared present him with failure. Not nearly enough of the metallic scent of its blood filled the air. Not nearly enough torment and anguish tinged its features. Yet. "And how exactly do you see that?" he sneered.

"I did not kill," answered the sniveling, piteous excuse for a demonspawn. "I terrorized. I attacked the Catalyst. It would have been better if I'd succeeded in my attempt but either way she must be traumatized emotionally and wrecked. Soon she will leave the city to seek shelter. The other two won't be able to complete the ritual alone."

Mograith smiled, the expression colder than the frozen depths of his realm and prison. The sight of his gleaming shark-like teeth and fangs gleaming in the blazing light didn't begin to reassure his minion. "And do you know if your plan worked?" he asked, his voice a mild calm before the storm.

The lesser demon trembled, not daring yet to stand. "I haven't checked yet. I sent one of the others to do so. I wanted to come back and report to you immediately. Keep you informed of our progress in the mortal realm, Sire."

Mograith's smile grew as he leaned over the cringing demon. "Well, guess what?"

"What?" the demon whispered, not liking the soft tone of voice its lord used. It boded ill.

"The one you sent reported to me as well. He came moments after you arrived, crowing your victory." Mograith hauled his foot back, slamming it into his minion's gut, twisting his toes at the last moment. The purpled claws ripped through the lesser demon's scaly flesh. "You failed," he hissed.

The demon gagged as it clutched its stomach. When the wheezing and bubbling subsided it asked, "How? I know she was frightened. I fed off her sweet terror. How could my plan have failed?"

Mograith lashed out again, kicking it to its back, his foot jarring with the impact. He loomed over the smaller figure, eyes filled with disgust and contempt. "Oh, it not only failed, you unmitigated fool. You've thrown her at the other two."

"What?" the lesser demon gasped, its eyes filling with the realization of its precarious circumstances. Failure it might survive. This...this mistake could end his existence.

"Even now one of the mortal realm's keepers of the peace is sending her to the Visionary for security. It seems they fear another attack and believe she needs a protector," Mograith spat. "The Visionary works as a personal guard. You let her play right into his hand."

"I'm sorry, Sire," the demon whimpered as it crawled forward on his knees through jagged ice in supplication, begging, the only option that was left to it. "I had no idea. I'll do better. Please let me try again."

The small demon cowered as Mograith loomed above it. Pus-yellow venom leaked from its ruler's fangs, steam rising with each drop. His eyes blazed with a reddish light. His body hummed with restrained violence. "I will consider your punishment and redemption," he growled, the deep rumble chasing away all hope. "For now lie there in your own filth. Think about your mistakes and my response until I return."

The lesser demon whimpered, green tears of blood leaking from its eyes and tracing sickly trails down its face. Its lord turned heel and left it.

## Chapter Fourteen

Lisa gripped her trembling knees as she rocked back and forth on her brown bargain-basement couch. Baggy worn gray sweats and an oversized red and gray college sweatshirt still didn't feel warm enough to break through the ice pumping in her veins. With a ragged, well-loved Goodwill quilt wrapped around her shoulders she stared blankly as bright sunlight gleamed off sterling-white walls.

The fresh freesias sitting on her glass and fake chrome coffee table added a splash of color, a bit of life, as well as a sweet fragrance but their cheerfulness couldn't break through her stark fear. With no sleep and no coffee her mind frayed, replaying her attack and the aftermath over and over again. Her heart pounded in her chest nearly to the point of pain as the words of the homicide detective echoed in her mind. *Best be safe. Serial killers. Stalkers. Could attack again.*

At least he'd given her a number to call for help after scaring her half to death. It didn't do much for peace of mind or sleep but it was better than nothing.

Triad Securities, Inc. It took time and money to set up a system with a security company. That reeked of permanence, something she wasn't very good at. Actually the word alone was enough to send her into a panic attack. Her ex had her right about that. Every muscle in her body clenched up at the thought. She'd taken the plunge once, risking connection, and what had she gotten for her trouble? A man who didn't understand her in the least, a man who cheated and hit. Complete freedom seemed the best alternative.

She stared at the two boxes she hadn't unpacked, stacked under her glass coffee table. A year here without finishing unpacking and she was setting up a security system in her condo? It didn't feel right, made her itchy. Of course the alternative was more permanent.

Didn't get more permanent than dead, did it?

The secretary's reaction when she called Triad Security did little to calm her fears. Hell, Lisa'd chewed her fingernails to stubs waiting for the security guy to show up. She told the secretary about being given the company name by Detective Ramirez hoping to get a quicker appointment. Next thing she knew someone was coming by personally to look over her home and discuss options. No waiting at all.

In a town where she had to make her dentist appointment over a month in advance, not very confidence-inspiring.

Lisa stared down at her jagged, chewed nails and tried not to cry. Now instead of sitting in a massage chair as one person slathered her legs in lotion and painted her toenails and another cover her fingernails with acrylic and paint she was stuck staring

at her institutional white walls waiting for someone to come tell her how unsafe she was and quote her an exorbitant price to fix it.

Maybe she'd still have time to shop for a knock-'em-dead date dress and some fuck-me pumps if she pulled herself together. Maybe she'd take Janice's advice and jump right in. No-holds-barred purely physical sex. A hot fling with two guys would keep her mind off other, less enjoyable aspects of her life. The perfect escape from the images playing in her mind.

A quick, clipped rap sounded at her door. Her heart flipped in her throat before she could stop her panic. *Finally*, she thought as she gained control.

She jerked the door open, fully planning on establishing her role as the person in charge from moment one. Damn male contractors. She would not play the whimpering little victim but a proactive survivor. No way was he going to take advantage of the poor scared single woman. The guy at the custom paint shop was bad enough, shaking his head and clicking his tongue over her paint job.

But one look at the man behind the door knocked all thoughts of control out of her mind.

Julian leaned against the doorjamb, slightly rumpled in jeans and a wrinkled t-shirt with an overstuffed accordion-style briefcase at his feet. Concern furrowed his brow. "When I heard about what happened to you I couldn't let anyone else come." He stepped forward, taking her cold hand in his strong warm grip, giving it a brisk rub. "Are you okay? I called Detective Ramirez but he couldn't tell me everything I wanted to know. What happened?"

"You know Detective Ramirez?" Lisa asked, still standing in the open doorway, blocking his entrance. Her hand felt good in his. Safe. Maybe too good.

Julian raised an eyebrow at her unmoving position but didn't mention it. He didn't release her hand either, keeping it in his tender clasp. In a calming voice, one a person used with small children and skittish animals, he explained, "Manny and I go way back. We've worked on some cases together before."

Lisa shook, reaction setting in. Her knees went weak as tears filled her eyes and threatened to spill over. *Damn it, hold it the fuck together*. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't do this, wouldn't freak out. She wasn't a freaking victim. She was better, stronger than that.

Just because she was paying someone to help protect her and he showed honest concern didn't mean she had to break down.

"I'm fine," she snapped, verbally pushing away his sympathy. *Pity is for the weak. I refuse to be weak. I'm not my mother*. "It was a random attack and I got away. I didn't even see the guy's face. Even with the DNA they scraped out from under my nails I'm no help if he's not in their system."

Julian grimaced but didn't back away. Using her hand, he pulled her into him and gave her a quick comforting hug. Her body stiffened but he let her go before she yanked away. "If you were completely out of danger Ramirez wouldn't have sent you to me."

There's more than we know going on here. But you don't need to worry. Triad will take care of you."

*That'll be a first, someone else taking care of me. No one ever takes care of me. They take from me.* Lisa grimaced at her own innate suspicion. "What can you do? Beyond wiring my house I don't know how much good you can do. The attack happened at the restaurant, not here. It has a security system. Giving me a system here will make me feel better but it won't stop anything."

Julian took her hand again, holding it loosely in his own. "Quit being a pessimist. It doesn't suit you. Let us worry about what you need."

Lisa flinched at the tingling sensation shooting up her arms from that simple contact. Her pussy clenched, ache building. She tried to pull away but he just wouldn't let go of her, wouldn't let her retreat. *God, why can't I just run and hide?* "What I need may not be what I can afford. The restaurant's doing well but I'm not making buckets of money. I can only imagine how far back this'll set me."

He shook his head, not taking the bait, as his thumb caressed her palm. "Don't worry about that. My company's been around for a while. We make a good profit. I think we can afford to take a hit on one assignment for a friend."

*Friend? Right.* "Planning on giving me the horizontal discount?" she asked, half joking as she stared down at where he still touched her hand.

When she glanced back up a scowl crossed Julian's face, quick to disappear. She could almost imagine he was insulted. Still he didn't let go. "I wouldn't ask that of any woman, especially not one I'm interested in. I thought we'd already worked this out?"

Lisa snorted, freeing herself with a quick jerk. "I barely know you," she snapped, glaring at him. "I'm going out with you...and Tim...tonight to get to know you. Now I'm forced to let you invade my home. You'll have to excuse me if that makes me a little uncomfortable."

Julian's lips twitched but his gaze remained serious and somber. "I'm glad to hear we're still on for tonight. I wouldn't push it if you didn't feel like going out after what happened. You don't have to worry. We'll take it slow. And this situation is separate from anything else. Wanting to make certain you're safe has nothing to do with my desire to do other, less innocent things to your body." He let his eyes rove her form. Even with her sweats on, hair sticking out in different directions and nails chewed to the quick she could feel the heat in his gaze. "I'm not going to pretend I don't want you. I'm not going to be completely professional. And if you want to go to another company for your protection I'd understand. I can even give you some names. You'd be making a mistake but I'd understand."

"I'd be making a mistake?"

He nodded. "Triad is one of the best security companies in the business. We handle all aspects of protection from self-defense and security systems to private investigations. As a friend you'd get even more attention than our usual accounts, as

well as the discount." Finally Julian smiled, comforting light breaking through a cloud of worry. "If anything I'm the one being taken advantage of."

Lisa stood her ground for a moment longer. Letting him so far into her world felt almost as dangerous as facing her stalker alone. But, ignoring that little voice of warning in favor of the smaller voice of hope, she stepped to the side. Julian nodded, moving through the doorway.

He walked into the middle of her living room, turning a slow circle in the low beige carpet. His sharp eyes scanned, missing not the slightest detail of the stark white cavern she called home. Basic bargain furniture in bland colors. The beige and white broken by bright prints and fresh-cut flowers. Small space with few personal touches. Anally uncluttered. "Not too bad. Shouldn't be too hard to set up. Not much here we have to work around. Second story helps. No other entrance than the one door and the balcony. How many windows?"

"Two in each bedroom. A tiny one in the bathroom," she listed, hating that the openness and light that had attracted her to the condo in the first place had become a risk. "I doubt a cat could squeeze through that one. And there's another one covering most of the wall in the kitchen area."

He nodded and pulled paper and pen from a side pocket of his briefcase. His face lost expression, his mind focusing on business as he took notes. "Okay, that'll be priority. Wiring windows and doors." He glanced out the living room window, checking windowsills. He scribbled again. "I'll see about putting in braces on these windows as well. A quick-fix delay tactic against the truly inspired. Later we'll look at shutters or security screens. We also need to talk about your normal schedule. If last night wasn't a crime of opportunity we have to assume that your attacker's been watching you and has a good idea of your routine. It might be wise to have some of my people keep an eye on you, at least for the next few weeks."

"I can't live with people following me around all the time. I'm not some pop star with goons at her side." She flinched at the whining tone in her voice but she couldn't stop the anxiety-filled words. "I feel like someone's following me around all the time now. Can you imagine how paranoid I'd get if I actually have someone following me?"

Julian turned back to her, dropping his pad of paper on her coffee table and taking her hands again. Such strong hands, calloused and work worn. Hands a woman could put her trust in. Hands a woman could imagine doing many naughty, erotic things to her body. "I know it's an adjustment," he murmured, reaching up to tuck one silky if mussed lock of her hair behind her ear before holding both hands again. "No one wants to go through a situation like this. But it happens, to normal people, more often than you'd think. If not my company wouldn't be doing half as well. The trick's to deal with it in a quick strategic strike, not to dwell on morbid possibilities. And you don't need to worry. If they're doing their job right you won't even notice them."

Lisa stopped short of rolling her eyes. Right, paranoid woman not noticing a tail. "Not likely but I'll play along."

Sympathy filled Julian's gaze. "Ramirez scared you," he murmured, seeing more than she felt comfortable with. How did this man she barely knew look into her so deeply? Why did she feel like she stood in a familiar embrace?

Lisa gave a humorless laugh. "Ramirez's a big teddy bear. I wish he was my problem. The guy in the business suit did more than just scare me."

Her words took a moment to sink in. Julian's mouth opened, his hands grasping hers tighter as he gaped at her. "Business suit? I thought you said he was behind you and you didn't see him."

Her body tightened as she lost herself in the adrenaline-filled memory. Slideshow pictures, emotions, sensations all flew past her mind's eye. The damned shakes threatened, building deep in her bones. "Not during the attack, no. But I did see his briefcase. I remembered it from earlier."

"Earlier?"

"He ate dinner at my place." She closed her eyes, bringing his image into focus, trying to put a finger on what it was about the man that rang wrong. At the same time she struggled for distance. "He gave me the chills but I wasn't sure why. I kept an eye on him but he left hours before the attack so I can't be sure it's the same guy."

"You can't?" Julian asked, his disbelief easy to read.

"Not for certain," she answered, but she knew what he was really asking. "But in my gut, yeah, it was the same guy."

He put his hands on his hips, eyeing her intently, as though he could see into her soul. "Anything else you didn't tell the police that you'd like to tell me?"

Lisa cringed internally at his authoritative tone but managed to keep her face blank. Part of her wanted to bow to his dominant stance but resisted. She based her new life on not being dependent, not letting people disappoint her and definitely not letting them order her around. But if she planned on paying the man to help her he needed all the information she could give. "I think I may have seen him earlier too. At breakfast. He was at the same café Janice and I ate at but I don't think she noticed him. Maybe that was where he picked me?"

A strange pensive look passed over his face, quickly gone. "It's possible. Or he may have already targeted you and was stalking you, looking for an opportunity."

"Gee, you're already making me feel so much better," Lisa muttered as she sank down on her couch, arms cradling her upset stomach. "I'm glad I called a professional security service."

Julian smirked at her sarcasm. "I'm not going to lie to you, sugarcoat your situation like some people would. You're in danger. You'll continue to be in danger until the guy's caught. End of story."

She gave a soft snort, lips twitching with dark humor. "After what I did to him, I don't see how. I mean, he sure can't see. I'm surprised he hasn't been found already, in the hospital."



"Obviously you didn't do any permanent damage or they would have. Which is another reason for the extra protection. He's going to be angry. Hell, fucking furious. That could send him after you again."

The picture of an eyeless, half-crazed maniac beating at her door froze the blood in her veins. "Okay, okay. No more shades of horror movies past. You've convinced me. Stick with the devil you know. I'll hire your company. Show me the contract and give me the quotes."

Julian nodded, walking around her couch and plopping his briefcase on her glass coffee table. He smirked at the shiny surface.

"What?" she asked as he sat close next to her.

"Let's finish business first." He pulled out several papers and started throwing out numbers. Low numbers. Too low to be true, but he faithfully wrote each one into the contract. It really did seem that he was trying to help her, not take advantage of her situation.

When he finished his pitch she signed.

Julian gave her the bottom pink copy of each page and then stuffed all the papers back into his case. With a decisive snap of a lock, business ended. He closed his eyes, sighing and stretching.

"So that's it?" she asked, staring at sleek muscles working under a thin layer of cotton.

"Not quite. That was the easy part. Now I have to work." Julian wrapped his arm around her, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze. "I have equipment in my truck. The locks need changing and I can put metal braces in the windows. I'll set up a temporary alarm system, something that'll hold the fort until my electricians can come in and put in the permanent system. You should be wired by tomorrow afternoon. It'll take a little longer to get the security shutters and screens in place."

Lisa shook off the feeling of safety that single touch filled her with. "That's fast."

His smile widened, giving his strong features an internal glow. "Yes, but I think you're worth it."

His absolute belief only served to make her feel more nervous. No one thought that much of her, not even her ex. Especially not her ex. Hell, her own father walked out on her the day after her mom died. "And what happens if you find out I'm not worth it?"

"Not gonna happen," Julian quickly replied, taking no time for thought. A gut reaction, one Lisa wanted to trust, desperately wanted to trust. "But on the extreme off chance, nothing will happen. I won't ask you out again or you won't agree to come." A quirky grin sliced his face with perverse humor. "That would be a tragedy. I so look forward to you coming."

Lisa felt the hairs on the back of her neck tingle and her cheeks heat. But she kept her eyes locked on him. "That's what I'm talking about. What if that doesn't work?"

You're still stuck doing all this work for pennies and no other 'compensation'. How will you react?"

How would any man react?

Julian shrugged but he honestly didn't look worried at all. "True, it might not work out the way I'd like but I'd help you no matter what. Whatever else happens, Lisa, I do like you. I care about your safety. A bad date won't change that, sure as hell won't make me wish you dead. I just want a chance to see if I can do more than like you."

"And Tim?"

"Oh, I more than like Tim already," he replied, wiggling his eyebrows and laughing.

Lisa groaned but Julian kept up the comedy. "Oh, you mean you and Tim. Now that's an image I could enjoy." He scooted down in his seat and closed his eyes. "Let me bask in my imagination for a moment."

Lisa took a swipe at his arm. He chuckled, ducking under the swing and using her momentum to pull her across his lap. Lisa's stomach dropped at the contact with hardened flesh. Damned if the man wasn't already aroused, cock hard and ready for action. "Now see, here's another thing we need to work on," he whispered, the feel of his breath sliding over her neck setting off a round of goose bumps. "Self-defense. Your reaction time could use some help."

"It worked last night," she huffed, struggling to free herself while fighting her desire to sink into his embrace.

"True," he answered, pulling her back to nestle against his cock. His chest rumbled against her but he didn't stop talking. "But few attackers would have expected you to go for the eyes. It takes courage to blind a person."

"No, just stark, terrified desperation." Lisa relaxed as Julian didn't make another move.

"But it worked. Most attackers expect some clawing, maybe a groin shot. The eyes, not so much. But that's the kind of thing we'd teach you."

"How much more is that going to cost me?" she asked, moving her ass against him. How far could she push before he broke and took what he wanted? And did she really want him to?

Julian held tight, pursing his lips as he considered. "Let me think. You'd be rolling around on the floor with the person, right? Hmm. If I volunteered my services we could waive the fee."

He gave her an expectant look bordering on puppy dog. She had a hard time keeping a straight face. "You're a goof," she accused him. "I wouldn't have thought it to look at you but you're a complete goof."

Julian ran his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. "If you'd accused me of that before Tim came into my life I'd have laughed in your face. I've lived with Tim for

two years now. He told me I had to develop a sense of humor for my own sanity, made it his personal mission. He was right."

Lisa gave a put-upon sigh but wrapped her arms around his neck. He was distracting her. She knew exactly what he was doing. And she snuggled closer, taking advantage. She wanted to forget. If she couldn't she wanted to laugh. "Great, I'm going to have a threesome with two goofs."

A slow smile spread across Julian's face, his playful look turning devilish.

"What?" she asked, holding her ground when she wanted to take a step back.

"You said it," he replied, voice filled with half shock, half determination. He pulled her even closer, giving her a quick bear hug. "We're having a threesome. I prefer the term *ménage à trois* but you admitted it. I'm holding you to it."

Lisa looked into his eyes. She'd joked about it with Janice. She'd played with the thought, the idea. It would be the ultimate escape, a memory to hold tight to when she was old and wrinkly. But was she really going there? And with this man, who held her cradled in his arms?

Her heart stuttered in her chest and her mouth trembled. Laughter faded from his expression, his eyes darkening with hunger.

She licked her lips nervously. His eyes followed the movement, predatory. A shot of pure yearning flew like lightning through her body, spiking outward in unpredictable jags of sensation. She trembled, bone deep, but not from terror this time. She couldn't stop herself from repeating the motion, watching him watch her tongue slide across her still-damp lips.

Julian groaned, lacing his fingers in her hair. Lisa could've resisted. She knew that all she had to do was push away, turn her head, anything. He wouldn't push her. But she couldn't deny the draw, the need to feel his lips on hers again. She had to feel something, feel alive.

She braced herself for the invasion of his tongue, prepared to be claimed, overwhelmed by a powerful man. She could feel the heat of his body and the flesh growing even harder against her thigh.

But he surprised her.

Mad ravaging became gentle seduction. His teeth nibbled at her lower lip, pulling it in his mouth where he sucked on her lush flesh. Each pull sent another wave of desire surging down to her eager core. A wet hot ache pooled deep in her core, pulsing in time with the suction.

"Sweet, so fucking sweet," he murmured against her mouth. "Wanna eat you up, each honeyed bite, swallow you whole." Then his tongue came into play, flicking at her lips and coasting the edges of her teeth. She growled, thrusting into his embrace. She shifted her weight, twisting in his arms until she straddled his hips, rocking against his erection. Not even the layers of cloth could distract her from the pressure of his hard cock against her hungry pussy.

*Oh god. Please.* She pitched forward. Playtime over. The world tilted and spun. Julian lifted and pushed her down, his hard body pressing her into the couch cushions as her ankles crossed around his lower back.

His mouth slammed across hers, tongue demanding entrance. She opened, her hands locking around his neck, weaving through his short hair. So hungry, so needy. The crisp clean scent of his cologne surrounded her. His delicious mouth and tongue poured liquid fire through her body, heating the deepest corners.

*More. Please more.*

Her desperate fingers slid down, tearing at his shirt. With a growl he pushed up, jerking the offending cloth over his head. "No," she cried, grabbing his hard, flexing arms, trying to pull him back down to her. "Want you here. Want to feel your weight on me."

"I'll give you what you want. Just need to feel your bare skin next to mine." He pulled her sweatshirt over her head and fumbled with the front clasp on her bra.

Lisa whimpered, using the grip of her legs around his waist to pull him back down where he belonged. It had been so long since she'd had a hard warm man between her thighs. So long since she'd touched another person so intimately. His dark laughter rumbled just under her skin as he held himself up. Satin parted.

"Now that's a sin," he whispered as he bent down to her nipples. His cool breath blew across her pink flesh, pebbling the taunting tips. His hands cupped her breasts, massaging. "Such wonderful breasts hidden, bound from sight. A pure sin. Love the way you fill my hands."

Lisa's back arched as his mouth closed over one aching nipple, teeth clenching just shy of pain. A pulsing empty ache spilled over her. She could feel her labia swelling, seeking comfort.

"Please. Oh god, please," she begged, thrashing in his arms.

"What do you want, my lovely? You have to say it," he murmured as he moved from one breast to the next. "Is this what you want?" he asked as he licked the very tip.

Lisa arched beneath him, groaning.

"Oh it's not?" he asked, pulling inches away and blowing lightly against heated skin. "You have to tell me. I'll give you anything you want."

God, it felt so good, his hard body looming over her. But not good enough. She needed the connection, the attention focused on her. She needed to forget. "You. I want you. Now!" she cried, hands pulling at him, trying to force his weight against her.

"But you barely know me, remember?" he teased as his fingers tripped over the skin above her sweats, dipping briefly beneath the elastic. "Are you certain?"

"Yesss," she hissed as his fingers traced lower, inches from where she needed him.

He slid his hand down beneath the fabric, fingers parting her pussy and dipping into her. "Mmm, you are wet, slick. You do want me, want this, don't you?" With his last word he flicked her clit.

"Yes!" she screamed, body twisting as she grazed the edge of orgasm from that single touch.

Julian lifted his hand, sniffing it with a contented smile before licking her cream from his fingers. He closed his eyes and purred, the sound sending shivers down her spine and forcing another moan from her. He smiled down at her. "I'm giving you one chance. One chance to come to your senses, if you want to. Take me to your bedroom. I don't want our first time together to be stretched over a lumpy couch." He lay across her body, nuzzling her neck as her hands slid up and down his bare back. "Don't change your mind."

He rolled off her, the corner of the coffee table scraping his thigh. Lisa blinked, cold air knocking rational thought back into her head. Why did he have to stop?

Tousled and half-naked, Julian watched her with neutral eyes. Whatever her decision it would be entirely hers. He wasn't going to allow her the luxury of using him as a scapegoat for her behavior.

She hadn't spoken to him for more than a few minutes, hadn't gone on her first date. But he made her feel protected, cherished, safe. He managed to pull her out of the nightmare. Something about him seemed almost familiar, right. What would it be like to throw caution to the wind, to become the wild woman who took her own pleasure whenever she wanted? To be what people believed she was?

Lisa chewed her lower lip. Julian smiled ruefully, disappointment blooming, and offered her a hand up. She took it and took control of her fate. Standing on her toes she pulled Julian to her. She kissed him, a hard wet meeting of the mouths, her lips eating at his.

"Down the hall," she whispered against his mouth. It didn't take him long to get into the swing of things. Sweeping her off her feet, he started walking, lips still locked on hers.

Wasting no time, he kicked the door open and tossed her on the bed. Lisa gasped but didn't struggle. She crawled back for a better position to watch him as he peeled off his pants, his last remaining barrier.

Sheer masculine beauty. Lisa stared at sheer masculine beauty. Here, in her bedroom. His body sculpted hard and proud. His cock springing long and hard from a thatch of dark curls, a tiny glint of wetness peeking from the tip. A dark god come down to earth and offering himself to her for her enjoyment.

Heady.

Julian didn't hold himself from her for long. After fishing in his wallet to find a foil-wrapped condom and rolling it over his hard cock, he crawled forward over her body. "What's that look for?" he asked.

"What look?" she gasped as he curled his hands into her sweats, easing them down her hips. Her abs jerked in the cool air.

"The I-can't-believe-this-is-happening look. It's a bit intimidating from my side." He stared down at her, leaning forward to place a kiss on the twitching flesh above her close-clipped pussy.

"Okay, you're hot," she panted, back bowing toward him, begging for his touch. "Surely Tim tells you that."

Julian scooted up her body, sliding his naked flesh against her own. "Well, Tim's pretty hot in his own right. So I can't say I've seen that look on his face."

"Not even the first time?" Lisa asked as she tugged on his head, forcing him to face her.

He shrugged, tucking one of her silver locks behind her ear again. She'd never had a man more fascinated by her hair than her boobs. "Maybe the first time."

"Well, there you go."

Julian just smiled back.

"What?" she asked, seeing the pure happiness shining in his gaze but not understanding it.

"You're going to be mouthy in bed," he teased, licking the mouth in question. "I need to figure out a way to keep that mouth of yours occupied."

"Any ideas?" she breathed, looping her arms around his neck.

"A few but they'll wait." He grabbed her hands, forcing them over her head. He parted her legs with his knees. "I can't take any more foreplay. I want in you. Want to sink in, wrap myself in warm wet silk."

He took both of her wrists in one hand and slid the other down her body. He dipped a finger into her wet heat, gliding back and forth across her slit. "Good. You're wet and ready."

"Little quick, aren't we?" she gasped, her actions not matching her words as she reached for him. "Aren't you going to seduce my senses, savor this first time? Tie me to you?"

His mouth slammed down over hers, his tongue imitating what she wanted his cock to do. Leaving her breathless and wanting, he pulled back. "I'll always savor you no matter what. The tying part'll have to wait. My bed's better for that kinda play. No, I'm going to ravage you, take you places you've never been before and can't reach without me. I've waited too long to take it slow. Longer than you know."

Lisa clenched her fists as he slid deep, slid home.

Filling her completely, Julian held still, eyes clenched shut and nostrils flaring. "Fuck. Better than I imagined. So hot. So wet. So perfect. So beautiful."

Incoherent words fell from Lisa's lips in answer as she shoved upward, wanting more. Needing more.

He grunted but pushed down in response, sliding a few seductive inches farther in before stopping completely. "God, sweetheart," he muttered between pants, "that's it. Hold me tight. Squeeze me in that tight, tight pussy."

Lisa drummed her heels into his immobile lower back in a sporadic rhythm. Stillness? She wanted a good hard fuck and he gave her stillness? "Move, damn you! Do whatever you want. Just move. Move. Now."

Julian laughed, the random shake dragging a scream from her as tender, hypersensitive flesh fought to contain the jagged pleasure. Her frantic hands clawed at his shoulders.

With the little pain he arched back, giving her what she needed. Giving her more.

Lisa gasped as he grazed a spot no one had ever taken the time to touch before, a node of nerves deep inside. Her body stiffened in his arms. Her head tossed back and forth as her tongue seemed to swell in her mouth, choking her on ecstasy.

"Like that, sweetheart?" he asked but didn't stop, a piston pounding against that spot, that wonderful, awful spot.

"Yes," she howled. "What I want. What I need."

Julian wrapped his hands around her hips, pounding her depths. Harder. Faster. No longer gentle. Taking them both where they wanted to go. Higher. "Give it to me, sweetheart. Tell me the words. Wanna hear you say it. Give me what I need. Tell me how you want me to take you."

A hoarse groan flowed from her lips, counterpoint to the rhythmic slaps of heated flesh on flesh. "Fuck me hard. Take me. Use me. Make it all go away. Make the world go away," she cried as tears blurred her vision, surrounding Julian in a halo of wavering light.

He hooked his arms under her knees, pulling her legs up around his shoulders. Lisa screamed as he thrust even deeper. For a split second she felt so connected, felt like one being with another person. Never closer. Never alone.

Never again.

Then her pleasure spilled out, rippling forth like an ancient tide. As her womb and pussy clenched and released Julian cried out and joined her.

Lisa sighed, content, as Julian collapsed at her side. He mumbled, stumbling out in the direction of the bathroom. But his temporary absence changed nothing. She felt the connection still glowing warm inside her.

It comforted her and scared her to death.

## Chapter Fifteen

"You did what!" Janice yelled before rolling on her back and curling her knees to her chest, her peals of laughter echoing off Lisa's bare white walls.

"It's not funny," Lisa griped, tucking her legs under her on the couch. How could so much happen to her in such a short time? "I don't do things like that."

"Well, obviously you do now." Janice batted her eyes and fanned her face with her hand. "Wow. Here you were warning me about sleeping around and you go out and hop into bed with bisexual hottie man. You totally can't expect me not to give you shit about it. Man, I have ammo for the next decade or two."

*Melodrama Queen.* Lisa tossed a throw pillow at her overly amused friend's head, bouncing it off her sputtering face. "You're my friend. I totally expect you to be on my side." Lisa scowled as Janice continued chuckling, hugging the brown pillow as Lisa poured out her raw emotions. "I'm in emotional crisis mode here and you're cackling."

"Emotional crisis? What emotional crisis?" she asked, chucking the pillow back at Lisa. "You slept with a cute guy. He treated you right, more than right from the glow on your face. What's the problem?"

Lisa cradled the pillow, staring down at it. Lost, confused, off balance. "The problem is I slept with a guy I just met." *No matter how familiar and right he might feel curled in my arms. No matter how good he made me feel.* "Now, I've got to get ready to go on a date with him and his boyfriend. What more of a crisis do you need?"

Janice scooted closer, patting her knee. Lisa relaxed as Janice's comfort flowed through her in warm, lapping waves. "Okay, immediate stuff first. Do you need to go shopping before your date? I can do your nails and hair. Hell for this I'll do your makeup. But do you have something to wear?"

Lisa blinked, the thought of her mediocre wardrobe blanking out her mind. "Not what I'd like. But I don't have the time, do I?"

"Let's not panic," Janice said in a soothing voice as she reached for her friend. "Take me to your closet. I'll get an idea of what you have there, combine it with my own stuff. Don't worry, I won't let you go out with your new bed-buddies looking like a schoolmarm."

"This is stupid," Lisa grumbled, prying herself out of her seat, following her friend in spite of her words. "I feel like an idiot high school girl getting ready for prom."

"Except now you know you're getting laid before the end of the night," Janice replied, flinging open Lisa's bedroom door. "Better yet, you know how good it's gonna be. So sit back and enjoy. Let me do the work."



"I'm putting my trust in you." Lisa eyed her friend's multicolored streaks with trepidation. "Just don't go too extreme. I still want to be me at the end."

"No problem."

*No problem, she says. I had mind-blowing sex with a near stranger. I fell into bed with him like it was the most natural thing in the world and had the best orgasm in memory. Now I may be doing the same thing with his male lover. No problem.*

Lisa opened her closet and stood aside for her flighty friend.

Clothes flew out in a whirlwind in all directions. "No, no, no. Definitely not." Janice stepped back for a moment, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "Dear lord, girl, where were you when god gave out fashion sense? I haven't seen anything this bad since I played dress up at my grandmother's house."

"I just need business clothes and comfortable stuff for home," Lisa mumbled defensively. It couldn't be that bad. Could it?

"You've just put the last knife through the heart of my image of you. The wild free single woman has turned out to be a closet foggy. Well, hopefully these guys will knock that right out of you. Bring you back to the dark side. Okay, this has possibilities."

Janice pulled out a short black skirt, part of an old uniform from her table waiting days. A skirt that had to be at least five years and one dress size old.

Her friend shook out the wrinkles and held it up to herself first. "Here's a start. Try it on. I want to see how short and tight it is. With the right shoes and some fishnets it may do the trick."

"A top might be nice too," Lisa sniped, taking the skirt and eyeing it doubtfully.

"Why? You won't be in it for long."

Lisa scowled.

Janice took one look then threw her hands up. "Hey, just kidding. Don't want you arrested for public indecency. That's not part of the plan." She shot her friend a coy glance. "I want to hear about you and two hot guys, not you and a bunch of beefy, greasy women. Not a personal turn-on."

"I'll keep that in mind. All future threesomes only to include sexy men."

Sucking on her lower lip, Janice shook her head as she pawed through more clothes, not dignifying Lisa's sarcasm with a reply. "One of your suit blouses'll have to work. We'll just make sure it's unbuttoned with a nice lacy bra underneath and an eye-catching necklace that'll highlight your cleavage."

Lisa raised an eyebrow.

"Hell, woman, you've got it, use it." She gestured at her less generous curves. "Do you have any idea how much women pay to get those things implanted? And to top it off you have the gall to still be perky."

Lisa looked down at her ample boobs. People always told her big breasts were a plus, a real man magnet, but all she got from them were pain on the treadmill and an aching back. "So you keep telling me."

"Yeah well, some of us aren't as blessed. You've gotta deal with the boob envy. And heaven help you with the jealous stares when you're out with those two prime pieces of eye candy. Now take a shower and put this stuff on. I'm going home to pick up the stockings and my makeup case. I might even lend you a pair of my boots."

"Boots?" Lisa asked. The only pair she remembered Janice owning would be charitably called hooker boots.

"Trust me, with the skirt and the fishnets, the boots will give the outfit that last just-this-side-of-slutty look."

Lisa didn't know what she thought of that but when it came to style Janice had the advantage. Her own personal style might be extreme but Lisa knew that Janice had a better feel for looks than she did. Hell, any woman who could daily go from her present almost punk look to classic businesswoman attire had to have serious fashion magic up her sleeve.

She watched Janice scurry out the door, a woman with a mission, before throwing the bolt lock on her door. Janice had her own key. She could get in if she got back before Lisa finished.

Silence. Blessed, blessed silence. Only one way to truly enjoy the peace.

She turned to her bathroom. It was a simple apartment bathroom. No fancy roman tub or three-man shower. But it was neat and clean, fresh smells wafting up from her small collection of perfumes in delicate crystal bottles. With the exception of those bottles and a bright red fluffy towel, all surfaces were free of clutter.

A small oasis in a hectic world.

Turning her shower on as hot as it could go and turning the showerhead to pulsate, Lisa stripped. She couldn't prevent her groans as stiff muscles, not used to the type of exercise they got the night before, vehemently protested.

She let the pounding steam envelop her, let hot water wash away her worries, doubts and fears.

Since her romp with Julian, she felt different. She couldn't put her finger on how exactly but different, almost centered. Maybe she felt a connection she hadn't felt with anyone before, not even Janice. Belonging. Maybe she felt the tingle of roots trying to grow.

She knew she felt embarrassed that she had been that easy but wanted even more.

Her desires never completely ruled her like that. She enjoyed herself, did whatever she wanted, when she wanted. She answered to no one, explained to no one. But she hadn't wanted so much so quickly before, had never been so out of control.

She closed her eyes, tipping her head back in the steaming stream. *Block it out. Block it all out. Don't think. Don't think about tonight.*

*Don't imagine two men running their hands over your body, tracing your form. Don't see those hands lifting your breasts up to be worshiped by two pairs of lips.*

Lisa picked up her lavender-scented foaming bath wash. She pumped a generous amount into her palm and let her hands glide over her shoulders and chest. Her nipples peaked at the attention, nerves remembering a masculine mouth closing over them. Teeth clutching and nipping. Tongue caressing and teasing.

Lisa screwed her eyes closed, shaking her head. She slammed her palms against the shower wall, leaning into the spray. Shit. She couldn't let herself get into a state. She'd had sex, for crying out loud. Nothing more. A nice quick release of tension. Not the end of the world. Barely a beginning of a relationship.

Then why did her body get all tingly at the thought of Julian? Or worse, why did she keep imagining how Tim would fit into the mix? She knew the feel of Tim's body, though not as well as Julian. She remembered the spicy scent of his skin, the way his muscles clenched next to her own along with the rhythm of the music.

Would he make love the same way? Would he be gentle, flowing against her like a gentle stream? Or would he be more like Julian, taking her where and how he wanted, pushing her beyond herself, a wild, erotic storm?

Was she ready to find out?

Lisa flipped off the water and stood in the stall, body trembling. Her gut twisted and her knees shook. Julian and Tim flat-out terrified her. Not because they would hurt her. Not because of their unusual relationship. Not because she didn't like the idea of having sex with the both of them, loved the idea of being sandwiched between their two solid bodies.

She wanted them too much. Too damned much. And when she wanted something that bad, ached for it, the world had a way of ripping the rug out from under her.

She didn't know if she'd survive those two men coming into her life just to be ripped away from her.

## Chapter Sixteen

Lisa took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders before following the immaculate maître d' to her table. Dark polished-to-gloss hardwood floor clicked beneath the heels of her borrowed boots. Wood and billowing cloth flashed by. Dimmed lights and glittering candle-lit chandeliers sparkled. Every time she came here she felt like she walked back in time to a more genteel place. Pure Southern gentility, the kind only found in historical fiction. Not exactly in keeping with the fuck-me outfit Janice came up with. But the management was much too well-trained to say anything to her or to treat her with anything but the utmost respect. Vegas being Vegas, there was no telling who she really was, no matter how she dressed. Hooker or high roller—who could tell?

But eyes weighed heavily on her, not just those of the two men waiting for her in an intimate corner table. The quiet, warm feeling of the classic restaurant hushed as she made her way to her dates. Janice did her job well. Lisa looked hot and she knew it. But she stood out in the sedate atmosphere of Cajun Delights and all the patrons knew that.

Both Julian and Tim stood as she approached. Julian took her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles as Tim came around, beating their server to her seat. He pulled it out as Julian lowered her.

"You look breathtaking," Julian whispered in her ear, his warm breath tickling the delicate skin of her neck. Images of what that wicked mouth had done to her that afternoon taunted her.

"Appetizing," Tim added, eyes sparkling as he took in her partially opened blouse and the hint of lace.

She blushed under the dual perusal, too much male attention at one time. Her heart raced and her fingers trembled as she reached forward to sip her water.

"I took the liberty of ordering a bottle of wine," Julian offered as the men took their seats. "I hope you enjoy a nice rioja."

Lisa swallowed and nodded. "Yes, thank you."

She couldn't meet his knowing eyes, eyes she'd last seen dark with desire as he stared down at her naked body. She glanced over at a smirking Tim and wondered how much he knew.

He looked at her then at Julian, a half-smile teasing his lips. Her blush deepened and he chuckled. "Don't worry, love. Believe me, I know just how fast he moves when he really wants something. He has you on your back before you know what hit you."

Lisa glared at Julian. He shrugged sheepishly but didn't pretend to apologize.

Tim reached across the small table, taking her chin and turning her to face him. "Julian doesn't kiss and tell. But I know that look. Satisfied and slightly shocked. I've had it on my own face too many times not to recognize it. Don't feel embarrassed. I'm not. Julian's not. There's no reason for you to be. And goodness knows you'll live with a blush on your face around us if that's all it takes to embarrass you."

Lisa was saved from answering by their server bringing their wine and an appetizer, a fresh, tart shrimp ceviche.

"Have you had a chance to look at our menu?" the server asked as he spread her napkin across her lap.

Lisa nodded. She was a regular, though it didn't surprise her that she hadn't been recognized. She ordered their pâté-crustéd filet mignon and trademark crab cakes. As the men ordered she picked up her small fork. She nibbled at the small serving of tangy seafood, wondering how she'd manage to eat anything she'd ordered. Butterflies bloated her stomach.

Julian took her other hand from her lap, gently stroking. "Lisa, relax. You have nothing to worry about. We're enjoying a lovely meal together, getting to know each other. Nothing else. Nothing to let yourself get worked up over."

Lisa looked up at Julian, her face still hot and the hand holding her fork trembling so hard she gave up pretending to eat. "You'll have to forgive me if I don't know what to expect. This whole situation is strange to me. I don't know how to act."

"Don't worry about acting," Tim responded, scooting his chair closer and resting his hand on her thigh. "This is about three people having a good time, not about appearances and acting. You're worried about what other people think. You know what we think. We want to get to know you better, no matter what happened between you and Julian earlier. No matter what happens between all of us later. Who cares about anyone else?"

Lisa forced her shoulder muscles to fall and sipped her wine. But she didn't scoot away from Tim or free her hand from Julian. She nodded. "Okay, I'll try to take things as they come. I can't guarantee I won't freeze up at odd moments but that's the best I can do."

"I'll thaw you out if you freeze," Tim answered, his hand sliding up her thigh ever so slightly, heating her flesh. She wondered if he could tell how far her stockings went. "I mean, I am the one with the charming sense of humor. And Julian rushed things so it's my turn."

Lisa laughed but let his hand stay and Julian's grasp to remain as she reached for her drink with her free hand. "Do you always take turns?" she quipped.

"Nope, Julian's a greedy bastard, likes having things his way. Likes to be first, no patience. Sometimes I get a turn. Otherwise we do share well." Tim looked down her blouse, leering and wiggling his eyebrows. "Real well."

She sputtered, struggling not to choke or spray wine at him as she laughed at his antics.

Julian sighed, releasing her hand and leaning back in his chair. "You'll have to get used to Tim. He's a constant flirt and he's under the impression that he's funny. I let him keep his delusions of comedic grandeur."

"You're just jealous because you're so serious," Tim taunted. "You wouldn't know a good joke if it came up and bit you on the ass."

Julian raised a single eyebrow.

"Hey, I'd know better than anyone," Tim replied, his grin growing wider, the sparkle lighting up the dim room. "I have bitten you on the ass. I love biting your ripe ass."

Lisa looked at Julian, wondering how he'd respond. She'd never been around any gay or bisexual men before. She didn't know how open they would be. But she was learning, fast.

His face twitched, a smirk lurking in the corners of his lips. "Maybe, but don't forget it's your ass that gets most of the workout."

Tim burst out laughing, hand coming off Lisa's leg as he tipped his chair back. "Okay, okay, you have a slight sense of humor, twisted though it is. If you didn't I'd have dumped you ages ago."

"No, you would've driven me nuts and I'd have killed you ages ago," Julian deadpanned as he drained his wineglass. "Let's get our stories straight."

Booming laughter subsided into soft snickers. People at other tables glanced their way but both men ignored them completely. Lisa smiled along, relaxing despite herself.

By the time Tim regained control, wiping tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes, the server came with their soup. Lisa enjoyed the rich, thick, spicy gumbo as the two men continued sniping playfully at each other.

"Well, one thing's for certain," Lisa joked. "It'll never be boring around you two. Are you always like this or is it only on my account?"

Tim leaned forward, grinning. "You ask that like a person who's planning on spending a lot of time with us."

Lisa stared down at her gumbo for a moment, stirring it aimlessly before shooting Tim a coy glance from below lowered lids. "Well, I don't go out on dates with people planning on never seeing them again. That'd be a complete waste of time. What would be the point of that?"

"True, but you are considering us. Julian didn't scare you away."

"I didn't scare you away," Julian grumped. "Why should I have scared her?"

"I don't know. You're overbearing and overpowering?" Tim quipped.

"Only when the person I'm with wants me to be." Julian turned from Tim, leaning closer to Lisa. Heat shot up her arm, followed by an electric tingle as he slid his thumb against her wrist. "Do you want me to be overpowering? I didn't hear any arguments before."

Lisa licked her lips, watching as Tim's infectious grin faded and both men's eyes darkened, tracing the movement. "I guess it depends on the situation. If you didn't hear an argument I had no problem with it."

"So if we rushed you you'd tell us?" Tim asked.

"Of course."

"You wouldn't do anything you didn't want to?" Tim asked again.

Lisa shrugged but appreciated the concern behind the question. "Life's too short. I've had enough of doing what I didn't want to already. I promised myself that I wouldn't be pushed around like that ever again."

With that she found herself spewing out all the angry years with her ex-husband and her father before that, about losing her mom and practically raising herself. Julian told her about his overly controlling father and Tim touched on his life on the streets after his own family kicked him out. They didn't dwell but she could practically feel the pain behind their words, especially with Tim.

Then they talked and laughed about trivial things. Tim entertained them with stories about different customers in the club. Julian responded with edge-of-your-seat tales of different cases he'd worked, no names of course. Lisa talked about the struggles of opening her own business, being responsible for other people's well-being as well as her own success.

Time flew by and before she knew it they lingered over coffee, beignets and an order of Bananas Foster. She scraped her spoon against the plate, getting the last bit of ice cream and banana.

She'd enjoyed herself and didn't want to leave.

The men seemed to feel the same, lingering at the table. Julian sipped his second cup of coffee while Tim stared down at the remains of his first. No one spoke for a long while, a comfortable silence.

"What now?" Tim finally asked.

Lisa found herself staring at Julian. He stared back. "Do you want to go home?" he asked.

Lisa shook her head. The thought of going back to her lonely apartment filled her with a strange emptiness.

Tim grinned, looking to Julian as he signaled the server, who quickly brought their bill. He tucked cash into the black leather holder before standing. He and Tim walked around the table, both helping Lisa to her feet.

Julian tucked her under his arm, leading her out as Tim followed close behind.

"Your choice," Julian murmured as they nodded to the host and walked out onto the Strip. "We can spend more time on the town, gamble, dance, catch a show, whatever your heart desires. Sky's the limit. Or we can go back to our place."

Lisa knew the answer but had to ask the question. Had to hear him say it. "What would we do there?"

"Whatever you're comfortable with. We can talk, listen to music, watch a DVD or anything else you want."

Tim came up on Lisa's other side, lacing his fingers in hers. An eager puppy look scampered across his lovely face. "You know what my vote is but no pressure. It's your choice completely."

Lisa squeezed Tim's hand as she leaned into Julian's side. "I'd like to see your place. Sounds like the hottest time to be had in Vegas tonight. No promises that I won't back out but we'll see."

Tim raised her hand, rubbing her thumb across the back to his lips. She expected him to let go or Julian to step away as he signaled for the valet. Neither happened. The two men seemed content to hold on to their pieces of her.

In turn, she basked in their warmth, their attention. Never had one man affected her this way much less two at once.

They continued to hold her until a jet black Mercedes pulled up to the curb, the valet hopping out and heading their way. Julian released her to take the keys and slid into the driver's seat. Tim opened the door for her, helping her into the passenger seat before taking the back.

Julian looked at her as he turned over the engine. "Here's to possibilities."



## Chapter Seventeen

Feeling like Cinderella escorted by two Prince Charmings, Lisa stepped into utter luxury. That was the only way she could think of Julian and Tim's thirtieth-floor condo overlooking the Strip. Pure, clean, classic design. She didn't know what kind of a place she'd imagined for the two men, especially considering Tim's occupation, but this wasn't it.

Wood and solid marble floors. Deep plush throw rugs that tickled ankles. Sturdy oak furniture. Beautiful, realistic paintings of exotic landscapes. Every piece spoke of wealth, class and taste. Not a bachelor pad with its cheesy shag carpet and pin-up posters. It even smelled nice and clean, wood and polish as opposed to leftovers and dirty socks.

"I know, doesn't look a bit like me," Tim said, grinning at her gaping amazement. "Julian decorated the living room, kitchen and his office. I did the bedrooms and dining room."

Lisa nodded, walking farther in to where she could see the dining room. She smiled. She'd stepped into something out of the Arabian Nights. Rich exotic colors and fabrics. Dim flickering lighting, emulating candlelight and punctuated by a small gas fireplace against one wall. The table sat close to the floor with three short plush stools as seats.

"Let me take your purse and get you something to drink while Tim gives you the tour," Julian said, stepping closer, heating her with his body warmth. "I'll throw some snacks together and set them up in the living room. The night view's fantastic."

Lisa nodded, handing him her little black clutch purse as she let Tim take her by the arm and guide her down the hall.

The guest bedroom was another exotic theme, set up Japanese-style down to the bed, barely inches off the floor, and the rice paper shades. A kimono covered one wall while a Japanese mountain landscape covered the opposite. A full set of samurai armor stood in one corner, a set of katana hanging proudly above the helmet.

She expected Tim to take her to the master bedroom next. Instead he pointed out the guest bathroom, done in tropical style, soft pastels and mosquito netting. The smell of an ocean breeze filled the cool air. She ignored the effect and stared at the far door, obviously the room foremost on her mind.

Tim tapped her on the nose, drawing her attention back to him. "You'll see that room soon enough, when you're ready. Until then you'll just have to wonder what I did. Keep you curious enough maybe we'll get there sooner."

"Another theme?" she asked, still staring at the closed door.

"Of course. I enjoy hunting for pieces to match the theme I have in mind. I love setting a mood, letting the environment channel certain emotions, associations." He stopped, grin turning playful. "Julian even helped on choosing and designing that one."

"So what mood did you want for your room?"

"Do you honestly have to ask that?" he asked, pulling her toward him.

Lisa didn't resist, letting her body sag against his. Hard muscle and warm skin beneath tight cloth. Tim ran his hands down her back, cupping her ass and pulling her closer. She felt the hard length of his growing erection press against her stomach.

Tim dipped his head slowly. At any time she could pull away. He held her firmly, but not so tight that she couldn't break his grip. He left everything up to her.

And she wanted a taste.

As his mouth covered hers she melted. Heat. Lust. Emotion flowed over and through her as he pushed her against the wall. Here was the ravishing she'd expected from Julian. One hand moved up to cup her breast as his other pulled her leg up to his waist.

She moaned against his mouth as he pressed forward. He rubbed his aroused cock against her quivering slit as his tongue licked her lips, begging entrance.

Lisa tilted her head to the side as she buried her fingers in his long golden locks. Her mouth opened to his invasion, happy to follow wherever he led.

Tim groaned his approval. His mouth took hers, sinking in and filling her. He tasted sweet, thick and bright, like liquid sunshine. Lisa's pulse roared in her ears as she pulled him closer.

Tim pushed her away. "Shit, you're addictive. I'm surprised Julian made it home at all today. You must have kicked him out because I sure as hell wouldn't have left your bed voluntarily."

Lisa grinned, her hands falling to his waist as her leg dropped back to the floor. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Confidence, hell." He jerked her away from the wall and against his body. "I hope you stay tonight," he purred, the ramble rattling through her. "I want you. I want to slide inside you and never leave. I want to watch Julian push you past anywhere you've ever gone before, breaking your control. I want to taste your screams of pleasure against my tongue."

Lisa swallowed, hunger making her throat feel thick and her mouth dry. "And I thought Julian was the poet."

"Where do you think he learned how to use that silver tongue of his?" Tim winked. "You don't think he was that good before I came along, do you?"

Lisa laughed, her head dropping against his chest. He petted her hair and murmured endearments until her shoulders stopped shaking.

"How am I supposed to resist you two?" she asked against his chest, not wanting to move away, his dark spicy scent sinking into her soul.

"Haven't you figured that out yet?" he growled, rubbing idle circles on her back. "You're not supposed to resist. You're supposed to succumb, to fall deep under our seductive spell."

Lisa's lips twitched. "Well, I'm halfway there already."

"But not quite all the way yet?" Tim asked, nudging her chin up, forcing her to meet his solemn gaze.

"Not yet," Lisa whispered, not sure herself if she was telling the truth. It felt so good, so normal to be here with both men but how could that be? "Why don't we go back to Julian for now? Let me get my bearings and decide where exactly I want to go?"

"I like you better without your bearings but you're the boss," Tim replied with a shrug. "It's always your choice."

Lisa stood on her tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss on his lush mouth, chewing his bottom lip for a split second. "If things go the way I suspect it'll be worth the wait."

"Oh, I have no doubt," Tim answered, licking his abused lip before smiling. "You're well worth the wait."

She blushed and shoved at his shoulders. He laughed, leaning over and smooching the tip of her nose. "We'd better get moving or Julian's going to start feeling left out. You've never seen anything as pitiful as Julian in a full pout."

"I can't picture a man like Julian pouting."

"Believe me," he said, shaking his head in mock horror, "it ain't pretty."

"We can't have that. I like both of you just the way you are," she replied, casting a teasing look from beneath heavy lids. "Even if you're prettier than me."

Tim sighed in pity, patting her back. "I know it's hard to look as good as we do but you more than do us both justice. I can't wait to get my hands on that body of yours. Julian gets to have all the fun first."

"Now who's pouting?"

"Yes but I make pouting look good. Hell, I make everything look good, better than Julian. But I don't let him know that." He turned, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and moving back down the hall.

She leaned in, tucking herself in his grasp. "You're incorrigible."

"Only when I get the right encouragement," he replied while making a kissy face. She giggled, hanging off him as mirth shook her.

"Tell me you haven't been encouraging him," Julian said, looking over the back of the couch as they returned. Lisa's stomach took a dip at his tousled hair and dark, heavy-lidded eyes.

Tim smirked at her blank look and gave Julian a conspiratorial wink. "No, she's just giving me a taste of paradise before ripping it away."

Julian gave Tim a Cheshire Cat smile, eyes raking Lisa's mussed appearance. "Necking the second I'm out of sight, hmm. Not even considering that I might want to take part. Now that's pretty selfish of the two of you. You're going to owe me for that."

Lisa's cheeks warmed but Tim jumped into the verbal fray with both feet. "You're one to talk," he snapped, hands on his hips and eyes narrowed. "If anyone should feel left out it's me."

The testosterone lay thick in the air, even if all in play. Lisa had no intention of being treated like a bone in a tug of war between two junkyard dogs. "If you don't shut up you'll both be left out again," Lisa snapped as she plopped down.

Tim plopped on the floor at her feet, looking up at her with those puppy dog eyes again. "You don't mean that, sweetheart," he pleaded, his full lower lip quivering as he slid a hand up her calf, massaging as it went. "Tell me you don't or tell me how to make it up to you."

He laid his head against her thigh as Julian scooted closer to her. Julian slipped his hand into her hair, rubbing her scalp. Tim ran both his palms up and down her fishnet-covered thighs.

Lisa leaned into both caresses, a purr of satisfaction flowing through her. "Well, this is a good start," she murmured, eyes closing as she absorbed the pleasure of their touch and gave up any semblance of resistance.

Tim moved first, edging between her thighs. He pushed her skirt up, fingers brushing naked flesh where her stockings ended. He leaned forward, blowing against her heated core. Her flesh shivered and she slouched back, moving her hips closer to temptation.

Taking Lisa's groan as encouragement, Julian joined in. Fingers tripped over buttons and cool air blew against warm flesh as fabric parted. Lisa shuddered. Only the thin lace of her demi-bra separated him from his goal. His nimble fingers opened the front catch at the same moment Tim's fingers nudged the thin strip of lace to the side, leaving her completely vulnerable to his touch.

Lisa gasped as Julian's lips closed over a straining nipple at the same moment Tim's tongue flicked across her clit. Her hands fluttered against the couch as sensation flooded her. She didn't know where to turn, which man to touch.

One of her arms crept around Julian's shoulder, pulling him against her. The other slid down, anchoring Tim's head as he ate her pussy. His tongue parted her, sliding past her labia to lap at her opening. The pad of his thumb gently brushed her clit, bringing her closer and closer. She whimpered as desire flamed through her veins.

"Mmm, so good," Tim murmured against her flesh, taking a moment to lap at her again. "You taste so good. Forgotten how different and good a woman could taste. Delicious. Musky and sweet. And your pussy's in a class all its own."

Lisa panted, back arching as her body strained to reach that peak. So much sensation, glowing beneath her skin, threatening to split her in two. Only Julian's weight bent across her own kept her anchored.

Just when she topped the crest, the tingle of anticipation building, Tim pulled back, taking his magic tongue with him. She whimpered, reaching for him, needing him back. To bring her there so quick and leave her hanging at the peak... How could he leave her like this?

Still kneeling on the floor, he gave Julian a questioning look. Julian pulled away from her chest. Lisa shivered as the cool air touched her heated flesh. Lust warred with frustration.

Julian rose to his feet. Leaving her? How could he be leaving her? Didn't he know she needed him, needed them both?

He knelt down and scooped her into his arms, her shirt and bra falling unheeded to the floor. Swept off her feet. What woman never dreamed of being literally swept off her feet? While she wasn't exactly overweight Lisa had never imagined a man would carry her to the bedroom without serious risk of throwing out his back or at least giving her some nasty comments. Gently Julian turned and took her to the middle of the room, Tim following close at his heels.

He laid her out on the deep black fur rug in front of the panoramic windows. The silk caress of the fur on her skin pushed her higher, shoving a small sob from her lips. She stared up at her men, watching the reflections of flashing neon lights dance across their faces, one dark, one light.

"This is your chance, love," Julian said as he stared down at her half-naked form, desire weighing down his gaze. "The only chance we can give you. You want us to stop best say so now. Otherwise we're both having you. We'll take you far beyond yourself. We'll share your body, pounding deep into you throughout the night, driving you to climax after climax. Your choice. Decide."

Lisa shivered as Julian's deep voice echoed in the darkened room, giving words to her desires. Why was he making her choose? Why did she have to say it? Why couldn't they just do it?

"Please," she whispered, arching toward them. Couldn't they see how much she wanted them?

"Please what?" he asked, unmoving. "We need the words."

Lisa pounded clenched fists against the fur-covered floor. Damn him, why wouldn't he take her, or let Tim take her? Why stall? "Take me, both of you," she growled, hips arching. "I want both of you."

"Thank the gods," Tim muttered as he turned to leave.

Lisa sat up on her elbows, following his departure with wide eyes and tightening muscles.

"Don't worry, love." Julian answered her unspoken question as he began shrugging out of his clothes. "He's going for supplies. You're trusting us so we'll keep you safe. But there are some things we don't typically keep in the living room."

Lisa smirked as her shoulders relaxed. "Don't use this room that much?"

"Only for special occasions." He paused, standing in shiny black silk boxers. "It seemed a bit crass to leave stashes of condoms and lube in every room. Practical idea, but kinda crass."

"We can't have that."

Julian peeled down his boxers, reaching down to give his long cock a quick tug. Lisa licked her lips as she watched a small pearl of liquid form, gleaming, at the tip. He saw her reaction and stepped forward.

"Suck," he ordered, an air of authority surrounding him.

She blinked at his command. But she crawled to her knees, reaching up to take him in a firm grip. She ran her tongue over the spongy purple head of his cock, gathering the salty flavor that was him alone, savoring it, memorizing it.

He shoved his fingers in her hair, pulling her forward, fucking her face. Lisa struggled for balance but smiled at his loss of composure. She opened wide and took him in as deep as physically possible with a groan of satisfaction.

"Gods, sweetheart, that feels so good. Hot, slick, tight." He gasped, rocking forward on the balls of his feet.

A tsking sound came from behind him as Tim entered the room.

"So impatient," he teased, dropping a box and bottle on the coffee table. "And you have the balls to complain about me sneaking a kiss. You couldn't even wait for me to get back. I see I'm going to have to keep my eye on you with our girl."

"Taking too long," Julian groaned as Lisa gave a hard suck, her cheeks hollowing.

"Obviously," Tim answered as he tore clothes from his body, fell to his knees and crawled toward Lisa.

He leaned in, putting his arm around her shoulder to support her. As she pulled back on Julian's cock he let his tongue slide up and down the exposed glistening length. Tim's tongue played with the seal of her lips around Julian's cock, causing her to suckle even harder.

"Shit, stop. Can't take that. Not both, not both." Julian freed himself from their oral duel.

Lisa smiled back at a naked grinning Tim. "When you're good, you're good," he quipped, leaning forward and licking her swollen lips.

Lisa leaned into his mouth, kissing him deep, letting him taste the intoxicating flavor of her and Julian at the same time.

He murmured approval, lapping at the ridges at the roof of her mouth. Lisa made a weak whimpering sound, moving into his ravaging kiss. Tim growled, eating hungrily from her mouth. Julian came to his knees beside them, reaching forward. She thought he wanted to join the embrace. Instead he worked the back catch of her skirt, pushing it past her hips. He maneuvered her to pull the fabric out from under her knees without breaking her kiss.

"Naughty, naughty girl," Julian taunted at the sight of her barely there g-string tied at the hips, untying the neat bows and whipping it from her. "Looks like you came prepared for action."

Tim let her go, leaning back to get a better look. His eyes darkened even more as they lingered on her naked form. "Well, we can't disappoint. Let's leave the fishnets on though. That and the heels are hot. Makes me want to do dirty, dirty things to you."

To hell with expectations. To hell with what other people thought. To hell with her own damned insecurities and uncertainties. This felt right. "Join the club," Lisa purred, stretching and arching her back, her breasts pushing toward Tim. "Tonight I'm all about dirty."

Julian knelt, wrapping his warm body around her back. "And just how dirty do you want to be?" he asked, trailing a single finger down her spine to flirt with the very top of the crack of her ass. "Willing to try something new?"

Lisa whimpered, reaching for something to hold. Tim's fingers closed around her own. "Your choice. Whatever you want and nothing more. But if you trust us we'll take you. We'll use your body in ways you've only imagined. Let us play. You won't regret it."

With Tim's words ringing in the air, Julian rimmed his fingertip over her tight virgin hole. Lisa's body tightened and a shot of unfamiliar pleasure coursed through her. "Julian," she cried out, not knowing herself if it was in encouragement or protest.

"Shh, sweet," he whispered against the back of her neck moments before his lips glided across her flesh. She lost track of Tim as her concentration centered on the feel of Julian's mouth against her sensitive flesh.

The click of a cap opening pulled her back to reality and away from the promise of pleasure. She watched as Tim squatted back in front of them and coated Julian's fingers with thick, clear lube. "Lean forward."

She trembled but obeyed Julian's order. Tim wrapped his arms around her for support as he murmured words of guidance and encouragement. "Easy, we won't hurt you. Might not even work this first time. If it gets too uncomfortable we'll try again later. Don't worry, we know what we're doing. See how far we can stretch you. Push down on his fingers."

Her eyes widened and her breath came in pants as Julian sank his first finger into her, past the ring of muscles clenching against him.

"You're tight but not too tight. Not hurting?" Julian asked as he hooked the finger inside her.

"No," she answered as her body arched into him.

Tim grinned in approval. "She's taking it good. Such a hot, hungry little body. Give her more. Wanna see you make her squirm."

Julian twisted his finger in and out over and over. Lisa cried out, pulling Tim tighter. Julian stopped.

"No," she groaned, grinding herself back.

"Damn, Julian, can't you see she's begging for more?" Tim snarled, pulling her forward and pushing her back. "You like his finger up your starving ass. Saw how you wiggled and reached for it. Tell him. Say it. Wanna hear you plead."

She shook her head. They asked for too much. But then Julian pulled out.

Lisa looked over her shoulder. "Don't. You can't stop now."

Julian leaned back, farther from her twitching body. He raised a single brow. "Why not? You said no. I'm giving you exactly what you want. Exactly what you asked for. Are you saying that isn't what you want?"

"You know it isn't."

"I don't know anything if you don't tell me."

She looked up at Tim, eyes pleading. "Oh no, love. You'll get no help from me. I want to hear you beg him."

"Please," she whispered, arching her back.

"Please what?"

"Fuck my ass. I want you to fuck my ass."

"How? With my fingers?"

"Whatever. Don't care. Please," she whimpered. She was on the brink of something. She didn't know what but she wanted to find out.

Thick cool liquid slid down her crack as Julian moved forward. She gasped and pushed toward him as his slick finger circled that needy rosette again. Greater pleasure. Wider stretch. More this time. Two fingers entered her, stretching. She clawed at Tim's arms as Julian rotated and scissored those two magic fingers in her, loosening her.

"Give it to us," Tim encouraged, smoothing her damp hair from her face and kissing her cheeks. "Tell us how you feel. Wanna hear you beg. Wanna hear you scream."

"Oh, oh, oh," she cried as Julian pulled out and a third finger joined the other two. "So full. God, so full."

"But you like it, don't you, you naughty, dirty little girl," Julian grunted as he twisted his wrist and opened his fingers. "Like getting it up the ass. And I'm gonna give it to you. Tight enough to suck me dry but loose enough to take every inch. I'm gonna sink my cock so deep in your ass you'll taste my cum on your tongue. But you'll love every minute of it."

"Yesss," she hissed.

"And while I'm there, fucking this hot ass, Tim's gonna shove into your hungry little pussy. Fill that too. Sandwich you good."

"Do it. Want it."



Julian pulled his fingers from her, crawled away. But Lisa didn't have time to bemoan the loss. Tim jerked her forward, sealing her lips with his. "So good, sweetheart. Gods, you're so good for us."

Lisa didn't answer. Julian walked into her line of sight, tossing a foil packet to Tim as he ripped open his own. Carefully he rolled on the protection, never taking his eyes from her. "We've both been tested but don't want you to worry. Just want you to feel, to enjoy. No worries."

Lisa didn't mention the Pill she took each morning, comfortable in the thought of their protective instincts.

Tim helped her bend forward, bracing her again. More cool liquid spilled down her crack. Then the pressure. So much pressure.

"Push, love," Tim coached. "You can take him. I know you can. Push out."

She struggled to pay attention to Tim's words. Let Julian in. Had to let him in. So much. So much more than fingers. His cock. Oh god, his cock.

"That's it, sweetheart. Take me. Take all of me. So fuckin' tight. You feel so good. Almost there."

Lisa heard Julian's grunt at the same moment his balls slapped against her ass. All the way in. He was all the way in.

Slowly he slid out, rubbing against a bundle of nerves never touched by any previous lover. Her clit throbbed. Her ass ached.

She wanted more.

Julian and Tim seemed to read her mind. Tim pushed her back as Julian wrapped his arms around her.

Lisa cried out as she slammed down on Julian's cock. "Shh, Lisa. It's okay, sweetheart. Let your body adjust. It's Tim's turn now. Don't want him to be all alone, do you?"

Lisa tossed her head to look up at Tim. His cock strained before him, head turning more purple as he rolled on a condom. So big. Not as long as Julian but thicker. Thick enough to make her wonder. Two at the same time. How could one woman take two at the same time?

"Don't worry. You can take me. Even with Julian in your ass, you can take me. But you'll be so full I'll be able to feel his cock moving in you, rubbing me as we fuck you so hard."

Lisa whimpered.

"Oh, you like the sound of that, huh, lovely. Like knowing I'll feel his cock sliding against my own while we pound you good."

"Yes. Fuck me. Wanna feel it. Need to feel it."

Tim looked behind Lisa. She felt Julian nod. Tim crawled close then lay on his back. Still hard inside her, Julian guided Lisa forward. He reached around to help Tim slide deep inside her.

"Hot, wet cunt. Haven't had it in so long."

"She feel better than me?" Julian teased.

"Not better. Different. Good. And you. Feel you too. Feel you both. Fucking fantastic."

Lisa was beyond words. Sensation spilled through her. So very full. No rest. Tim rubbing her G-spot. Julian hitting that mysterious node of nerves deep in her ass. Her clit rubbing against Tim's pelvis with each thrust.

Too much. Too damned much. Couldn't take it. No more.

Lisa screamed, back arching and body contorting under the power of a massive orgasm. She fell forward, teeth sinking into Tim's meaty shoulder. The pain triggered Tim's climax, his groan and spasms sending Julian over the edge.

A warm, secure pile of bodies lay wrapped and satiated on the floor.

## Chapter Eighteen

Lisa wrinkled her nose and groaned as morning light shot a rainbow of colors behind her eyelids. *Shit, forgot to close the blinds again.* She reached across the fur-covered floor for a blanket to toss over her head. Warm arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. Muffled brain cells started nagging about the inconsistencies of her position, no soft bed. No huge quilt bought from Goodwill after falling in love with its kitschy charm. And arms—strong, muscular arms? Something tickled her nose.

Lisa cracked an eye open, blinking several times before focusing. Tim faced her, still fast asleep and snoring lightly. A lock of his hair fell over his shoulder, the tip flicking against her nose. She wiggled enough to get one arm free and smoothed the hair back in place. The body behind her snuggled closer, tightening its grip. Julian wrapped his big arms around her and around Tim, keeping all three close.

Comfort and safety surrounded her. The smell of male flesh and hot sex still filled the air. Her body ached and she needed a shower. Sticky, she hated being all sticky. Yet she didn't want to move, didn't want to leave her cocoon and face the world.

"You're thinking too hard," Tim grumbled. "My eyes are closed but I can tell you're thinking too hard. My rotten luck, stuck with two freaking morning people. No morning snuggles for me."

Nice to know the blond Adonis had some faults. *Mental note. No talking to Tim before the first cup of coffee.* "Just contemplating movement."

"Yep, morning person. Long words this early. Morning person. Not working this morning. Sleep late." Tim scrunched his eyes closed and burrowed forward.

A sigh sounded behind her, ruffling her hair. "That's my cue," Julian groaned, throwing his arms above his head and stretching. "Coffee all around. I'll get it. And breakfast. He'll be starving once he regains consciousness."

A blast of cold air swept against her backside as Julian stood. Lisa started to roll over and join him. "No, stay there," Julian said as he pulled a throw from the back of the couch. He tucked it around the two of them. "Catch a little more shuteye while I get everything ready."

Tim grumbled, flipping over and pulling her close. His strong thighs bracketed her, surrounding her in secure warmth. Julian snickered. "Not to mention he likes a nice long cuddle in the morning."

"Don't we all?" Lisa asked, resting her head on Tim's shoulder and batting her lashes at her darker lover. It'd been a long, long time since she'd woken up with someone. Even longer since she enjoyed the experience.

"I like a nice long something in the morning, but it's not a cuddle," Julian growled with a wink. "It does involve another person though."

Tim smirked, proving he was more conscious than he'd admit. "Shaddup, trying to sleep here."

Julian shook his head and smiled down at the two of them for a long moment before turning to pad into the kitchen. Lisa watched his tight ass, now decorated with a bite mark that matched her teeth, wiggle out of the room.

Lisa couldn't go back to sleep. Instead she basked in the feeling of Tim wrapped around her while Julian started the day for them both. Clangs and soft thuds punctuated his bright whistling as he cooked in the next room. First the tempting smell of fresh coffee filled the air, followed by the mouthwatering scent of eggs and bacon.

As the smells grew stronger Tim blinked his eyes and smiled. "Now this is how I should wake up every morning. One lover wrapped in my arms while my other lover slaves over a hot stove for me. What more could one man want."

"Or one woman," Lisa couldn't help but add.

Tim's smile grew wider. He tightened his legs around her as well as his arms, rolling on top of her. Lisa threw her head back as pure joy bubbled from her throat, her laughter echoing through the room.

"And who's starting without who this time, hmm?" Julian asked, hands on hips, now covered in sweats, and bare foot tapping as he stared down at the pair of them.

Tim lay cushioned in her breasts, not a bit contrite as he faced Julian. "I'm alone, naked, with a gorgeous woman. What did you expect me to do?"

"Sleep until I was done slaving over a hot stove for you, you hooligan. Now up, the two of you." He wagged a finger at them as Tim snickered. "Lisa, I set out a towel and left a robe for you in the guest bath if you want to take a shower. Use whatever you want. We keep extra toothbrushes, razors, you name it, just in case."

"Have a lot of odd company?" she half teased, feeling out what her place really was. *Please don't let me sound too needy.*

"Julian's brought his work home with him on occasion." Tim smirked as he ran his hands up and down her bare back, making no move to release her. "Once we had a world-famous model stay with us for nearly a month."

"That must've been fun," she griped, a touch of insecurity tainting her voice. *Supermodels? What the hell do I have to compare with supermodels?* "Two gorgeous men entertaining a gorgeous woman."

"Nawh, you're the first gorgeous woman we've entertained together," Tim answered, finally hopping to his feet. He stood completely comfortable in his nudity while Lisa wrapped the blanket around her, holding it at her neck. Of course, looking as good as he did, Tim had no cause for embarrassment. If the man had an ounce of extra fat anywhere she hadn't seen it. And lord knew she'd investigated all of him last night, no inch unchecked or unlicked. "You're the first woman for us, period," he said, pulling

her attention away from gawking at his naked form. "Actually, having a model live with you isn't all it's cracked up to be. Weird diets, bathroom hogging and continual compulsive exercise are not my thing."

Lisa smiled at his joke but ran his other words through her mind. First woman? What made her so special? Looking into Tim's eyes, watching the way he gazed at her, made her feel special.

But why? And why did it feel so natural to be with them? So right? She never let anyone get this close this quickly. At least not emotionally. She enjoyed these two men. She'd opened up to the two of them, talking about her life and sharing stories from theirs.

How did that happen?

Before she let her doubts eat at her confidence, destroying the happy moment, she excused herself to go shower.

She turned the heat as high as it would go trying to steam away her doubts. Thoughts and images of starting every morning here teased the edges of her mind. Tempting but not practical. Staying with these men could fill her life with unprecedented joy. Or it could kill her, take her independence and give nothing back but empty sex.

But she didn't feel empty.

Lisa turned the temperature down. A blast of cold water shocked her system out of maudlin thoughts.

She leaned forward, bracing her head against the wall and letting the cold water fall around her.

The glass door slid open, followed by a creative round of cursing. "Gods, woman. Don't you know how unhealthy it is to blast a man with frigid water when he first wakes up? Shit, shrivels all my bits and pieces."

"Actually I thought it was supposed to be good for you. Polar bear club and everything. Not that I invited you in here in the first place."

Tim reached around her for a bottle of liquid soap, not so subtly brushing her breast in the process. "Naked woman in my shower. Sexy naked woman in my shower. Sexy naked woman who fucked my brains out the night before in my shower. Blatant invitation if you ask me."

Lisa snorted but fumbled with the shower knobs until steam started to rise and a satisfied sigh sounded behind her.

"Better. Not as good as it will be but better." Tim leaned against her back, nibbling at her neck.

"Oh and how much better do you plan on it getting?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder but not pulling away.

"Let's see," he said, ticking off fingers. "Gotta sexy naked woman. One oversized shower with handy seat. Already hard. Seems to be a recipe for a good morning wake-up screw."

"Really?" Lisa gasped as Tim's hands cupped her breasts, plucked at her nipples.

"Got any complaints?" he asked, taking her earlobe between his teeth, nipping lightly.

She shivered. "Not yet, but you haven't started, have you?"

"Far be it for me to keep a lady waiting."

Lisa squealed as he scooped her in his arms and spun her around, water flinging in all directions.

He plopped down on the tile-covered seat, dragging her across his lap. "Now this is even better. Hot water running over my body and warm woman in my arms. Wanna wrap your warm, wet heat around me."

"Oh really?" Lisa asked, sinking her fingers in his slick hair.

Tim's fingertip teased her clit then retreated. "Yeah, gotta problem with that?"

"Nope, long as you don't keep me hanging."

"Not a problem," he replied, moving her legs so she straddled him, opening her to his every caress. "Not leaving you anywhere. You're coming with me the entire way. And I do mean coming."

"Wow, and I thought you were the romantic one."

"Can be." Tim smiled, licking a drop of water from her nipple and setting off a widening ripple of shivers sinking into her clutching womb. "Doesn't me I can't take it down and dirty. Actually I like it that way. Just ask Julian."

Lisa rocked forward, running her slit over his hard, throbbing cock. "Maybe you can show me?"

"Oh baby, if you want a show you came to the right place." He grabbed her wiggling ass, squeezing and rocking her forward. "I'm definitely a showman. Julian's usually private but for you I'm sure he'd make an exception. Keep it in mind for tonight."

"Planning on me being with you tonight, are we?" she gasped.

"Planning on being in you tonight. Maybe with Julian in me this time. Like the idea?"

Her heart tripped against her ribs as she imagined the erotic sight of Julian pounding Tim as Tim fucked her. Shit. "The idea has promise."

Tim teased the entrance of her cunt with the firm head of his cock. "Then make it a promise."

Lisa grabbed his shoulders for support, pushing down. But he only clicked his tongue and held her poised. God, the bastard. So close. He knew he had her so close.

She'd never felt this hot, this needy before. At least not before she met these two men. Had to have him. She had to have him.

"Promise. Tonight. Anything you want. Pleasse."

"Then take it, love," he muttered, kissing her cheeks. "Take everything I've got. And remember you'll always have more. More of me. More of him. For as long as you want. Just say the word and we're there for you. Just say the word."

"Stop talking and fuck me. Need you. Fuck me."

Slowly, so slowly, he lowered her onto his massive throbbing cock. She squirmed. She whimpered. She clawed at his shoulders. Nothing worked. He wouldn't move faster. Wouldn't let her go. Wouldn't let her ride him, ride him hard.

She needed it hard.

As if sensing that need he slammed into her, increasing his pace. "That what you want? Hard," thrust, "and," thrust, "deep?"

Lisa wailed, her head flying back as sensation overtook her. Too much. Every word, every movement flowed back on itself, lifting her higher. Closer to the edge.

Sensation. A surplus of sensation. Warm water rolling off her skin. Hot hands anchoring her into a pounding rhythm. The sounds of Tim's pleasure flowing off his tongue like melted chocolate. The musky scent of man and sex tinting every breath she took. And the jagged shocks of pleasure each thrust gave, her clit rubbing against his skin as the head of his cock dragged across that spot deep in her womb that rolled her eyes back in her head.

Finally the erotic pressure reached the breaking point. Her entire body bowed in Tim's arms, water splashing across her face as her orgasm crashed through her body. She screamed her pleasure as Tim's cry burst from his lips.

She sagged into his arms, shaking with pent-up energy and emotion. "Shh, sweetheart," Tim murmured as he held her close. He kept a tight hold as she eased her way back down from the heavens. "I'm here. You're safe. You're with me, in my arms. Where you belong."

In that moment she believed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later a pleasantly tired and aching Lisa stumbled out into the condo hallway. Tiffany-style sconces bathed the hall in a warm glowing light, matching the soft glow filling her.

Tim waited outside for her. He wanted a private date, time alone like Julian had already gotten. Horizontal activities optional but highly desired.

Julian stayed, calling to make sure her security system was in place by that evening. She fingered the key he'd handed her on her way out. An open invitation to visit whenever she wanted to, no matter when or why.

A woman bumped into her on her way toward the elevator. Jet-black hair streamed down her back, set off by her red power suit. Lisa wrinkled her nose at the overpowering scent of waaay too much cheap perfume covering something else she couldn't quite place. Something almost sweet masking something repulsive at the same time.

"Sorry," Lisa said with a forced grin. "Long night. Wasn't paying attention."

The woman snorted, looking over her shoulder at Julian and Tim's door. She rolled her dark eyes and sneered. "I just bet."

Lisa blinked at the venom in the other woman's voice. *Prejudiced much?* "Excuse me?"

"Oh you know what I mean," the woman answered with a humorless laugh, her blood-red lips twisting in a dark smirk. "Those two. You're another one of their women. Go through them like tissue."

"What?"

"Those two are the building's sexual acrobats. The stories I could tell." The other woman shook her head, eyeing Lisa, disdain dripping with each word. "Be interesting to know how much was true. Two at once or do they take turns?"

Lisa's face heated. She shook as the woman's words made impact on her morning afterglow. Eggs-over-easy twisted in her stomach. "That often, huh?" she whispered.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure they'll have you over a few more times before they're done. Most women last at least two weeks." The woman pursed her puffy lips while considering her next words. "One even lasted a month and a half. Had her own key."

Lisa gripped the cold metal of the key they'd given her. It bit into her flesh as she turned to the stairway. Tim would be waiting at the elevator. This close to the Strip she could catch a cab.

She never noticed the red glow of the other woman's eyes as she planned her escape.



## Chapter Nineteen

Lisa slammed her cup down on her coffee table hard enough to set the glass trembling under the blow as she glared at the small brass condo key.

*Special. Only woman. Yeah, right. I fell for that one hook, line and sinker. Bastards.*

She snarled, puffing that annoying lock of hair out of her face again as she slouched down on her couch. She resisted the urge to kick the table.

But the memories refused to leave her in peace. Moments from the past teased her. Lying safe, surrounded in their secure embrace. Feeling their bodies heaving around her, beside her, in her. Pleasure crashing over her, wave after erotic wave. Her soul-deep loneliness fading, if only for a few precious hours, in the wake of their constant attention.

The shrill beep of her phone shook her from her reverie. Even with the machine turned down she knew it was them again. It had only been them calling since the moment she stepped through the door. Over and over, she'd lost count of how many times they'd called. She refused to pick up. She couldn't face them. Not yet.

The fact they'd made no promises didn't stop the stinging deep in her chest or the tears clawing at the back of her eyes. With every breath, every thought, she fought against that rise of tears. The cut ripped deep, an old wound gaping wide. How had she let them in so far, so fast?

A brisk knock at the door shook her from her thoughts. Sniffing, she dragged herself out of her cocoon. She peeked out the peephole at a man in a uniform with Triad Securities blazing across it. Not Julian. Not Tim.

"Miss Harrington?" he asked, glancing at his clipboard as she cracked open the door.

"Yes?"

"I'm here to put in your system."

Lisa nodded, stepping back. She hadn't expected Julian to still send the man, contract or no contract. At least he'd meant *something* he'd said to her. "Will this take long?"

"A few hours to get everything wired," the man replied, glancing around her home. "You can go out if you want. If you leave your cell number I'll call when I'm done."

Lisa glanced at her watch. Janice should be off for lunch soon. A little venting time sounded good.

She gave the man her cell number and left him to work. She scurried to her car on the off chance Julian showed up to supervise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bright sunshine mocked Lisa's mood. It should be raining, thunder and lightning punctuating the gloomy silence. Maybe even a gusting wind ripping through the city streets. A normal shady lunch at a passable café, Janice's favorite, seemed...wrong.

Of course, everything seemed wrong to Lisa now.

"I think you're overreacting," Janice told her, disgust obvious in her voice.

Lisa stabbed at her salad, looking at the next table on the patio before answering in hushed tones. "Overreacting. I'm a link in a chain of one-night stands and worse, they lied to me about it."

"Worse?" her friend asked, raising a single brow. Her bright locks danced around her head in the light cooling breeze, sunlight turning them into a rainbow-colored halo. But a stranger, more irate angel Lisa'd never seen.

"Yes, worse," Lisa replied, feeling shame eating away at her pleasant memories, leaving only an empty shell, somehow more lonely for the brief reprieve. "I went into this with open eyes. I didn't expect to have a relationship with two guys at once, not really. But then they started telling me how special I was and how they'd never done this before. And I fell for it, freaking fell for their crap. They made me go from feeling valued to feeling like an idiot. What could be worse than that?"

"Okay, put like that I can see your point. But can you trust what some strange woman said?" Janice asked, trying to be Lisa's voice of reason. "Could be flat-out jealousy."

"She didn't seem jealous," Lisa mumbled. *Rationalization. I've stooped to rationalization, grabbing at an excuse, any excuse. But why does hope that I could be wrong scare me as much as being made a fool?* "More like the building gossip."

"Right, an attractive woman living next to two gorgeous men tells a complete stranger about their sexual history. She didn't say she'd slept with them, right?"

"No," Lisa pouted.

"Jealousy," Janice stated with conviction before taking a huge bite out of her turkey croissant.

Lisa watched her friend swiping at crumbs and felt tiny rays of frightening hope. "I don't know."

"And you won't find out sitting around here with me," Janice snapped, actually glaring at her. "You're acting like a coward, not the woman who stood up to her cheating abusive husband and told him where to stick it."

But how could she face them? She'd walked out on them without a word. Refused to answer their calls. *I'm an idiot.* "You think I should talk to them. But how can I trust them?"

"How can you trust anyone?" Janice stared at Lisa, the sincerity in her steady gaze making her squirm. "How do you trust? You either do or you don't. Your choice. All I

can say is Julian seemed worth the risk to me and I suspect Tim to be worth it too. Now stop avoiding the real issue. You haven't told me a thing about last night yet."

Lisa closed her eyes, wrapping herself in memory. Warm skin. Wet mouths. The moment her lover slid into her body, filling it beyond measure while the other held her steady. Supporting the invasion. Rhythmic, pounding pleasure.

God damn, what a night.

"Shit," Janice muttered. "That good, huh? I need to see if I can find a couple of guys willing to give it a whirl with me."

Lisa grimaced. "I may know a couple if the woman was right."

"Well, hell. Nice of you to test-drive them for me."

Lisa stared at her friend.

"Come on. You can't be taking me seriously. They must have shaken you more than I thought." Janice patted Lisa's hand, projecting comfort and easing some of Lisa's strain. "I feel for you, I really do. I know you don't let people in easy. Took me two years living next door to you in the dorms before you started letting me see the real you. And I'm not a closed kinda person."

Lisa smiled remembering the flighty young college student in the room next to hers. Definitely not somber and closed off, something Lisa's husband had accused her of being before hitting her the first and last time.

"Okay, I give the guys a second chance." Wasn't like it was the first time she'd swallowed her pride. "I just don't trust myself alone with them. I get near them and my hormones shoot out of control. I can't think straight."

"No problem," Janice said, one of her evil, mischievous, I'm-going-to-get-you-into-so-much-trouble smiles spreading across her face. "You can take me with you."

A familiar sinking feeling weighted down Lisa's guts. God, what would Janice do? What would she say? Was she really serious? "Take you with me?"

"Yeah. I want a chance to get to know this other guy. I got a good feel for Julian at the gym. Nice enough guy at first glance, old-fashioned in a weird but charming way. All I got to see of Tim was his hot sweaty body. Not that I'm complaining. Nice to look at but not much to go on with giving my friend relationship advice. Sex advice yes. But not relationship."

Lisa cast a quick look around, making sure no one was listening in. "You expect me to take you to their place to give you a chance to gawk at them? How crazy do you think I am?"

"No, I expect you to take me for moral support, to help you say what you want without tripping over your tongue. You know, someone to make sure you go. Someone to poke and prod you," Janice smirked, "and not the same way they did. Sheesh, get that look off your face, girl."

"What look?" Lisa asked, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair.

"That cat-ate-the-canary look," Janice teased. "You've already got their neighbor woman jealous. Now you're working on giving me the green-eyed monster. Totally unfair. Gotta be a breach of the girlfriend code of honor."

Lisa appreciated Janice's attempt to cheer her up and calm her nerves. "I do not look like that. This isn't my well-pleasured look. This is my dreading-facing-the-men-I-slept-with look. This is the my-friend-is-going-to-embarrass-me-horribly look."

"Hmm. Well-pleasured. I like the sound of that." Janice leaned forward, tapping her fingers against her lips. "Now that you're done moping are you ready to share some well-pleasured stories?"

Blood rushed to Lisa's cheeks. Rough skin. Sweat. Moans. Orgasm after orgasm, no breaks between. Shit. "I don't kiss and tell."

"Come on. Guys do it all the time. Take it as proving you're a liberated woman. Tell all."

"Nope," Lisa answered, crossing her arms and looking at the sky through the draped patio cover.

"Oh come on. Don't be like that," Janice pouted. "You promised to educate me, now spill."

"Nope."

"At least tell me some technical stuff. Did you try them one at a time, with the other watching? Both at once? What?"

With a Mona Lisa smile, she stared her best friend down. "You mean I had to choose one way or the other?"

"Now that's just plain cruel."

## Chapter Twenty

Who'd have thought that a place once so filled with life and happiness could feel so empty and barren? No music. No teasing. No laughter. No moans of pleasure. Nothing he expected after a night in Lisa's and Tim's arms. Instead Julian paced. If it weren't for Tim he'd have charged right out, broken into Lisa's house and made her listen after she refused to answer his third call. But during the night Tim had developed a tie to Lisa as strong as the one he had with Julian.

He felt her emotional pain, anguish ripping at her heart. It was Tim who'd rushed upstairs to find her gone, Tim who'd told him something was wrong.

So much for the so-called Visionary. He hadn't seen this coming and couldn't see any reason for it. Everything had been going so well, better than he imagined.

"She was happy when she stepped outside," he muttered, eyes pleading with Tim for some sort of explanation, something he hadn't thought of. "She looked forward to riding with you in the Corvette. She said she had a thing for cars and couldn't wait to try to talk you into letting her drive. She was excited. What could've happened in less than five minutes to change that?"

Tim stared down at his hands, unable to meet Julian's disillusioned gaze. "I don't know. I just have her feelings to go on. They're in a maelstrom. Heavy on the pain, a taste of betrayal, a whole lot of confusion."

"But nothing physical?" Julian asked, grabbing at what reassurance he could find as he floundered in the depths. "She's not in that kind of pain?"

"No. Alex told us she looked fine when he got to her condo to setup her security system. She left right after he started working. Nothing's changed."

"Something sure as hell changed," Julian growled.

"Why don't you look and see again?" Tim urged, Lisa's emotional turmoil and Julian's eating away at him. "Maybe there's some trace."

Julian glared at Tim, throwing his hands in the air and snapping, "I can't see her at all. Not anymore. Our lives, my life, is too tangled with hers to see it clearly. I can't see my own present life that way."

"Not even now, after being with her?"

"I have more control but some rules can't be broken." Julian stared down at clenched hands, mentally cursing his own limitations. "A person can't know too much about his own future. And some past events are too closely tied to personal future to be allowed to view them either."

Tim sat next to Julian, wrapping his arm around his shoulder, giving Julian what comfort he could. "Has Alex called back yet?"

"Not yet," Julian replied, looking up at Tim with bleak, defeated eyes. "He's not close enough to being done to call her back in."

"Do you want to go looking for her?" Tim asked, giving options. Julian appreciated the support but couldn't see how anything could help. It was up to Lisa now, completely out of his control. They couldn't force her to them. That would add to the negativity causing the tear in dimensions, not heal it.

"No, until we know what happened, what set her running, I don't want to risk doing more harm."

"So we wait," Tim replied, sinking his hands in his pockets and slouching.

Julian growled, hopped up and started pacing again. The nerve-jarring shriek of the phone set his heart racing. *Don't get your hopes up. Probably Alex.* Tim got up to answer, leaving Julian to his dark thoughts. *How could I have been so stupid, so confident, when the past has taught me just how easy it was to lose her trust, her love?*

Tim came back with a hopeful grin lighting his face and brightening the room. "You up for some coffee? One of the mom-and-pop joints near CM?"

"Want to spy on her?" Julian asked, holding his breath. So much relief and joy came off Tim.

"Nope, she wants us to meet with her and a friend for coffee. Wants to talk," he said with a smirk and a wink. "Sound good?"

Julian's stomach clenched, hope and fear at war. "I don't know about good but better than complete silence any day."

\* \* \* \* \*

Once more coffee seemed to be the great equalizer. The dark rich scent perfumed the air, calming tight nerves as two women sat waiting for the coming confrontation. Janice leaned forward in anticipation with each chime of the door. Lisa tried to become one with the wall behind her. They sat at a far table, both facing the door, a steaming mug in front of each. Neither spoke a word, their silent concentration locked on the glass door.

A rattling chime sounded one last time as Julian and Tim marched in, drawing attention from every female in the place. But they didn't immediately join Lisa and Janice, getting their own orders after spotting them.

They took their seats, Julian opposite Lisa and Tim opposite Janice.

"So?" Julian asked, sipping his coffee black, no sugar, and collecting his thoughts before looking up at Lisa. "Are you going to tell us what happened?"

Lisa stared at him, wordless.

Seeing and feeling her confusion and insecurities warring with her need for them, Tim went for a different tactic. "You had me worried. After your attack, when you didn't show up downstairs and we couldn't find you I was sick thinking of what could have happened to you. You wouldn't answer your phone or anything. If Alex hadn't

told us you were at home when he went in for installation we would've called the police."

Janice stayed quiet but anger snapped in her eyes. Tim ignored her, difficult though it was with so much pent-up emotion flowing from her, focusing his attention and the force of his emotions on Lisa. "What did we do wrong?" he asked, projecting contriteness as well as concern. "I thought we had a good time, that you were comfortable with us and what happened between us. We didn't rush you. What changed?"

Lisa didn't meet his eyes, focusing on her mug, spinning it 'round and 'round, the scraping sound her only reply.

"Second thoughts," Julian murmured.

Lisa shrugged.

Julian's face hardened, the first time he'd showed any of the anger simmering below the surface since walking in the door. "You called us here, Lisa. If you want to talk then talk. Otherwise we're all wasting our time."

Lisa glanced at Janice, who gave her an encouraging nudge under the table. "I need to know some things," she whispered.

"So ask," Julian urged. "We've never denied you an explanation."

Lisa frowned at Julian's ready answer. But his face remained impassive, impossible to read. She had to explain on her own, no help from him. "I ran into someone as I left the apartment. She told me some things about you, things that hurt to hear. I admit I panicked. I shouldn't have run off like that. I should've talked to you first."

Julian reached for her hand. She leaned away, shaking her head, ashamed of herself and her reaction. "No, Julian, please. You know I can't think straight when either one of you touch me. I need to say this before I chicken out and Janice has to smack me."

Julian and Tim both glared lasers at Janice. She held her hands above her head. "Hey now, down boys. She's exaggerating. I'm just here to prod her when she needs it, keep the words coming so we have no misunderstandings. No hitting, I swear."

Lisa slammed her mug down. "Stop being idiots and listen to me."

They both turned, their gazes smashing into her.

"You said something to me last night," she blurted, trying to get the words out before she had second thoughts. "I took it at face value but if you were exaggerating I'll understand. I just need to know where I stand in everything. If what your neighbor told me is true then I need to know. I don't like being lied to and I won't see you again if it continues."

Julian and Tim looked at each other in confusion. Tim shrugged first. "I can't think of a single lie we told last night, exaggeration, white or outright."

"What did this person tell you?" Julian asked, reaching for her hand. "Because I can't think of a single lie we told either."

Lisa pulled her mug toward her, studiously avoiding Julian's grasp. "You said I was the only woman you'd brought in to create your ménage, that I was special to you both."

Julian leaned back, crossing his hands behind his head and rocking his chair back on its hind legs. Back and forth, back and forth. "I still don't understand. Yes, we said that. Many times over. What's the problem?"

"Problem is," Janice piped in, propping herself on her elbows and staring intently at a confused Tim. "Neighbor lady disagreed. She spent a good deal of time letting Lisa here know how many women she'd seen with you and how long, or not long, they tended to last."

Tim snorted in disbelief but Julian's face remained impassive. Tim craned his neck at Janice and Lisa. "You can't tell me you bought that?" he laughed.

"Why not?" she asked, face red with anger as he laughed off the fears and worries that had plagued her all day, slicing small rips in her aching heart. "You have to admit things happened real fast between us. Why should I believe I was the first?"

"Because we said so," Julian stated matter-of-factly. "Because you are the first and only."

Lisa stared at Julian, trying to see the truth behind his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Hell, do you think we don't know who we've slept with? Just how loose and horny do you think we are?" Tim asked with a pained scowl. "Julian and I have been a couple for two years now. I moved in right away. There hasn't been anyone else, male or female, the entire time. With the exception of you we're talking completely monogamous. We have guests, I told you about that. But even then it's only for a night or two. And we don't have sex with them."

"I run a security agency not an escort service," Julian growled, body vibrating with insult.

Lisa blushed. She couldn't meet their insulted and accusing eyes. "I don't mean to offend you. I just need to understand my place, get my footing. This is a situation not many women find themselves in."

"Yeah, most of us aren't that lucky," Janice added, leering at Tim like he was the last piece of chocolate cake on the plate and she wanted to eat him all up.

Tim's ears grew red but he ignored Lisa's oversexed friend. "I can understand your confusion. But it does hurt. It hurts that we thought you trusted us, that we were building something solid last night. I thought we had a chance to be more to each other. I hate that I might be wrong."

"Then you understand how I felt, why I ran." She grimaced, folding her arms across the cool wooden tabletop. "It wasn't mature behavior. But it hurt when I thought I was wrong about you both."

"Then why are we here?" Julian asked.



Lisa looked at Janice. "Because a good friend of mine knocked some sense into me, convinced me I needed to talk to you first."

"Verbally, knocked sense into her verbally," added Janice at the men's protective glares.

Lisa rolled her eyes but continued. "I have a problem trusting. Bad history that seems destined to repeat itself over and over. My trust gets smashed more often than not. But I'll never get anything in life if I don't try to believe in people."

"So you want to try with us?" Julian asked, risking her rejection by reaching out for her hand again.

Lisa smiled at the telling tremble in his gesture before squeezing his fingers. "Yes, but I want you to realize that I'm going to have problems with this. It might get to be too much for me to handle. I don't want to be hurt and I tend to run when it looks like I will. I don't want to hurt you – either of you – in the process."

Julian and Tim looked at each other, gazes heavy.

"I know, sounds stupid," she rushed to add, pulling her hand away once more. "If you don't think it's worth the trouble I understand. But at least I put my cards on the table."

Julian let her retreat physically but refused to let her go completely now that he understood her problem. "You're more than worth it, Lisa. We've never done this before, despite what you might've heard. That should tell you how much we feel you're worth. We'll put up with your doubts if you'll put up with our own problems, whenever they come up."

Lisa smiled and Janice tipped her chair back and whistled.

"Now how about you come home with us," Tim pleaded with big puppy dog eyes. "Stay until you have to go to work. We can stop by your place and check your system out first and pick up some stuff you might need. After work we'll pick you up."

Lisa nodded. In for a penny... "Okay."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Mograith growled in frustration. Damn them. Damn them. Damn them!

Two trembling lesser demons knelt behind Mograith, heads hidden against crossed arms.

"What happened, exactly?" he growled, eyes glowing a deep blood red. "Explain to me why you failed."

"It seemed to be working, milord," one whimpered as it prepared for the inevitable flurry of angry blows. "A reason for doubt whispered in her ear and the Catalyst left the other two."

"Then why are all three together again, stronger than before?" Mograith snarled, grabbing the demon by the neck and holding it with feet dangling, pedal-kicking midair.

"Another human involved herself, one we didn't consider," it squeaked, hands clutching at its master's tight grip around its throat. "She managed to talk the Catalyst into speaking with the two. She was uncannily convincing."

"So you didn't give the Catalyst enough reason for doubt." Mograith turned to look above his throne. The ripping, glowing tear of light spanned nearly the width of his wide shoulders. One day, two at most and he would be able to cross through it and feed on mortal terror. Four and his armies could attack. "We are running out of time. *They* are running out of time. If they wish to create the Pillar it will be tonight or tomorrow night. How do you plan to stop them?"

"You tell us that none can be killed, at the risk of attracting a bound Three," the other demon spoke, trying to ingratiate itself with the master. "But what if we take her instead?"

"Take her?" he asked before throwing the first lesser demon to the ground, sitting on his throne to enjoy the warm rush of air and soft light spilling from the small portal.

"We kidnap her, hold her until the portal opens completely," the demon explained as it crawled forward, ice tearing the leathery skin of its knees. "When nothing more can be done to stop us we can kill her. Or bring her to you, milord, to use as you will."

Mograith thought, the image of her on her knees begging mercy putting a wide gruesome smile on his sharp face again. To have one of a Three at the mercy of his every degenerate desire and fantasy. It had been eons since such a prize presented itself to him.

"I like the sound of that," he sneered, the sound of his awful pleasure sending shivers down the spines of the most heinous demonspawn. "Do what you must. But treat her with care. In fact, you will contact me from the mortal realm as soon as you

have her in your possession. Use the portal so I can be certain you have not failed me. I want her in immaculate condition until I get her. Save the pleasure of her desecration for me."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The evening passed in a blur of numbers accompanied by the dull throbbing of her right temple, difficulty focusing and slight nausea. Supply orders. Utility bills. Schedule sheets and employee hours. Pure migraine-worthy busywork. More than enough to keep a woman's mind off her social life.

*Wish it worked.*

Lisa sighed, rubbing her neck and blinking her eyes to clear her foggy vision. She reached for a bottle and popped another migraine pill before staring at the phone for the hundredth time. Maybe she should give it up and call Tim or Julian. Leave early and enjoy the rest of her day with them before her evening with Tim. But after everything else did she want to look that eager and needy?

Abandon her responsibilities? Yeah, that sounded like her. Not.

As much as spending more time with them, getting to know them in and out of bed appealed, she had too much to do. A flourishing business to grow, employees to take care of, patrons to pamper.

Lost in thought, she barely noticed the door opening. She didn't look up to see who walked in, just assumed.

"Mike, do we have the figures from last night yet?" she asked, still glued to the paperwork in front of her.

He didn't answer.

It wasn't until a slender, perfectly manicured hand clasped over her shoulder that Lisa realized she was in trouble. She looked up, half expecting to see the businessman. Instead the woman in the red suit, Julian and Tim's nosy neighbor, loomed over her.

"What are you doing here?" Lisa asked, still not grasping her danger.

The woman didn't answer, face blank. She pulled a syringe out of her jacket, jabbing Lisa in the arm before she could react.

As Lisa's sight went dim she saw another man walk in and smile. For a split second it looked like his eyes glowed red.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you mean you don't know where she is?" Julian demanded, drawing curious stares from lingering employees.

The gangly college kid she had for a manager trembled at the anger in his voice, looking around for reinforcements, but didn't change his stance or his story. "I don't

know where she is. The last time I saw her she was doing paperwork in her office. I didn't see her leave and she's not there now."

Julian's temper soared, nearly blinding him in a cloud of rage. He trembled with the desire to hit someone, anyone. Tim stepped forward, placing a calm, if quivering, hand on his arm. "Are you certain? This is very important. Julian works for her security company and we're concerned about her."

The manager's personal fear faded from his face to be replaced with worry over Lisa's safety. "This is about the attack on her a couple of nights ago. You think she's been hurt. I thought that was a random thing."

"As my associate just said, I work for her security company and I wouldn't be asking without a reason," Julian replied, trying to keep the anger and panic from showing in his voice. Had he Tim's powers, no one in the room would retain their sanity in the face of his emotions. "She promised to meet the two of us after work to discuss her safety. Ms. Harrington doesn't seem to be the type to forget that meeting."

"No," the boy whispered, his face suddenly showing his lack of years. "She's anything but flaky. She's almost compulsive about being on time, not leaving someone hanging. If she said she'd be here to meet you she'd be here or she'd have called to let you know. Unless something happened. I'll ask the staff, see if anyone saw anything. Should we call the police?"

Julian nodded, fighting a growing nausea, powerless. "It wouldn't hurt. They can't do anything yet. Not enough time's passed. But it's best to report this now."

The manager nodded and scurried away.

Tim frowned, his hand on Julian's arm no longer comforting. He gripped it for his own support, fear flowing from him to Julian and back again. "This isn't good."

"Did she change her mind?" Julian hoped for once that was the case. Hoped she lost trust in them and left. It was better than the alternative. He couldn't survive without her somewhere in the world. "Did she run out on us again?"

"I don't think so. She felt certain, had every intention of meeting us." Tim faced Julian, letting him know his growing concern. "Now I don't get any feelings from her. Nothing above a low buzz."

"Is she dead?" Julian whispered, heart singing as he dared to give voice to both their greatest fears.

"I don't think so." Tim's eyes went glassy as he reached out with other senses, searching. "I am getting that buzz, just nothing concrete. It's like she's asleep."

"Or unconscious," Julian grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets to fight the urge to hit the wall. "Keep trying. Tell me the second you get anything."

The heavy tread of male feet and the click of high heels signaled the return of the manager, followed by a pale, shaky blonde.

"Sarah might have seen something," he told them, pushing the young, overly thin girl forward.

"I don't know. It might not be anything," she hedged, her pale blue eyes looking anywhere but at him.

"Let us be the judge," Tim replied. Julian stood back, letting Tim work his special magic.

"Well, I noticed this woman earlier," Sarah said, staring intently at Tim as he projected a sense of calm. "Made me uneasy. Kept getting the chills around her. She wasn't in my section so I tried to ignore her. But it was hard to do. Then I thought I saw her heading to the employee restrooms not far from Ms. Harrington's office. I was about to tell Mike but she didn't come back and no one said anything so I thought I was wrong, that she went in the hallway beside it. Went to the ladies' room instead."

"Did you see the woman again?" Tim asked softly, pushing at the edges of her emotions, easing the jittery fear. Calming her enough to keep her memories clear.

"No. She and the guy she was with must've left soon after that. I didn't see them go."

Tim gave Julian a worried look. Something seemed off about the whole setup. "Can you describe the woman and the man?"

"Sure, she was average height, straight black hair hanging mid-shoulder." She held her hand at her back, showing the length. "Kinda exotic-looking but I couldn't say what nationality. Oriental or Middle Eastern if I had to guess."

The girl paused for a moment and screwed her eyes closed, searching for details. "She wore a bright red suit—skirt and jacket. Made her stand out more than anything else. The guy was just average. 'Bout Mike's height. Short brown hair, wearing corporate casual. I thought it might be some kinda business meeting going on when I first saw them. But they didn't talk much, just ate. Maybe that's what caught my attention. Usually there's some small talk."

Julian nodded, stepping forward and breaking Tim's contact with Sarah. "May we see her office?"

"I don't know," the manager answered, looking even more uncomfortable by the second. "Maybe we should wait for the cops. You could mess up evidence or something. If Lisa's in trouble we should keep everything untouched, right?"

Julian reached into his wallet, fishing out a card. "Call this number and ask for Detective Ramirez. We've worked with him before. You can give your report to him and clear us to go in."

Mike nodded, clutching the card like a security blanket. "You really think she's in trouble, don't you?"

"I think every moment we waste might be one of her last," Julian replied, as blunt as possible to make his point. He didn't have time to hold the kid's hand. Lisa needed him. "The first few hours are the deciding factors for whether or not a missing person comes back alive. We're running on borrowed time. I think we all want to make certain Ms. Harrington doesn't become a statistic."

Mike didn't say anything but practically ran to the phone. Two minutes later he led Julian and Tim into the employee areas, flipping through keys. The frantic, jarring clang raked both Tim and Julian's nerves.

He opened the door. The lights blazed. Nothing seemed disturbed, nothing was obviously out of place. Lisa's coat hung on the back of her chair. Papers were stacked neatly on her desk, pencils lined up beside them. Her computer was shut down. At first glance nothing screamed kidnapping. It looked like she'd taken a break. Numbers got too much for her and she needed to clear her head.

Even though Julian warned himself not to get his hopes up, he'd rather that be the case. She'd taken a walk and lost track of time. But he looked down at the area under her desk for signs of struggle.

"Shit," he muttered.

"What?" Tim asked as he and the manager came around the desk.

Julian reached under and pulled out a pair of black pumps. "Know anywhere she'd go without her shoes?"

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"The human bitch is waking up," a sinister, scratchy male voice growled in Lisa's ear.

"Finally," a familiar female voice replied, the cold tone sending chills down her spine.

Lisa's stomach pitched, sending her rolling to her knees in a round of dry heaves. Colored lights danced behind her closed lids as agony exploded through her head. The pain made every migraine she'd had in her life feel like a minor inconvenience.

The woman laughed, a dark, chilling melody.

"Oh, this one is so responsive," the man said as Lisa struggled to open her eyes. Rough fingers slid down her smooth cheek, turning her face this way and that for examination. "She's going to be so much fun. A little dose of drugs and she pukes. Can you imagine what she'll be like when we really get going? She'll keep the master entertained for weeks."

"Imagining is all you get to do," the woman snapped, slapping his hand. "His lordship wants her saved for him. We keep her immaculate until he comes."

"Not even a little fun?" he whined in petulance, dropping Lisa's face and stepping back. "I won't kill her. I just want to hear her scream a little."

"She's a member of the Three. We can't afford the risk of killing her. She dies and Lord Mograith will use our skins to make the whips he'll beat us with."

Lisa curled up in a ball but managed to right herself, the harsh concrete scraping her hands and palms as she clawed her way to a sitting position. She looked up at her kidnappers, blinking to clear blurry eyes and see in the dim light. She sat in a cavernous barren room, a few small windows lining the walls at the edge of the ceiling. Large beams supporting the ceiling broke the space with a single table sitting by the door the only thing on the floor. Nothing else to be seen but a few bare pipes and the two maniacs arguing over her fate.

Lisa half expected her kidnapper to be the businessman from before. Maybe wearing an eye patch, bandages or something. Instead the nosy neighbor and another man stood sneering down at her.

"You just couldn't stay away from them could you, human?" the woman asked, lashing out with one foot and kicking her in the side. Bright multicolored pain shot through her ribs. Lisa almost missed her next comment as she battled the wave of nausea the action caused. "If you'd stayed away you would've had a few more days of peace. Maybe even gotten out of the city before we struck. Instead you let your lust get the best of you and shortened your existence in the mortal realm."



The man leered, reaching down to adjust himself as his cock tented his pants. He let his hand linger while he sneered. "Lust is one of my favorites. Maybe if we do a good job Lord Mograith will reward us. Maybe even let me have a go at her."

"I wouldn't bet on it," the woman snorted, walking over to the small foldout table covered with white cloth. She flipped the cover back and fiddled with objects Lisa couldn't quite make out. "He wants this one for himself. He looks forward to amusing himself with a Catalyst. She might even be able to withstand more damage than an average mortal. You don't want to get in his way."

The woman sighed and shrugged, pulling out a length of white nylon cord. "Wish we could find out. But not enough to risk Lord Mograith's ire. We keep her here, alive and in perfect condition. When the rip is complete and the portal opens wide enough for our lord we give her over. There are plenty of other mortals to torment. Maybe even her friend, the bitch that ruined my plans."

Lisa spat on the floor, trying to clear the taste of bile that filled her mouth. What the hell were these nutcases talking about?

The woman squatted down next to her, lacing her fingers in Lisa's hair. She jerked her head back, forcing Lisa's teary eyes to meet her gaze. "You, bitch, are trouble. Once Lord Mograith has you you'll wish we'd taken you and ended your misery now. An eternity in our care will cure you of any ideas of grandeur."

"Don't know what you're talking about," Lisa whispered, eyes overflowing at the sharp bite of pain. But at least her stomach didn't revolt this time.

"Right, Catalyst. You don't know." The woman shoved Lisa to the ground.

"Careful, don't want to damage her, remember?" the man taunted.

"She's not worth it," the woman replied before wrapping the cord around Lisa's ankle, tying her to a nearby pipe. "She won't give Mograith much pleasure. She doesn't even understand her own role in the scheme of things. She might have fucked the other two but she doesn't know the power wielded by the Three."

"For which you should be thankful. Had she known we'd have never taken her. Lord Mograith doesn't deal well with disappointment." For a moment the man showed fear, something Lisa didn't know how to react to. "I don't want to end up like the last poor bastard who failed him."

The woman looked down on Lisa, disdain filling her red-glowing eyes. "Stuck here for two days with her. Least it'll be quick."

Lisa couldn't pull her gaze away from the woman's eyes. Red glowing eyes. How did she do that? Special effects? Contacts? And why couldn't Lisa look away, break the woman's gaze?

Was she in deeper shit than she'd ever considered?

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian sat in front of his crystal ball, Tim curled at his feet. He shouldn't be able to find her this way. It shouldn't work. She was a part of his life. He didn't have enough control. But he'd joined with the Catalyst already, if not in the actual ritual. And he had a path to follow, an anchor locked in on Lisa. Tim could feel her now. Her pain and terror.

The gods willing that would be enough to help Julian link with her as well.

He stared deep into the ball, willing his mind blank. An almost insurmountable task with his thoughts and emotions in turmoil. But Lisa needed him. Lisa's life depended on him. All their lives depended on him. He couldn't let it end this way. Not again.

As his mind flew into the infinite possibilities he reached out to Tim's presence nearby, using him as a focus for Lisa. He could almost see the ribbon of emotional light connecting them. He followed the path Tim blazed.

Lisa's life strand shined bright, pulsing in time with his own. Tim's life strand crossed it, slid against it, twisted around it, but couldn't connect, not completely. A darkness stood between them and threatened to snuff out her light. It pushed against Tim, trying to shove him away. Julian felt the pressure against the back of his eyes as he tried to grab on to Lisa, look past the strand into the present.

The darkness thrust him back, sending his consciousness spiraling out of control. But Tim's presence held him steady, braced him for the next attack.

He slipped past the darkness for a split second, saw a building, a warehouse not far from Lisa's restaurant.

A flash of pain blasted through his mind, stark and jagged. A dark frozen voice lashed through him, shaking his bones. "Stay out, Visionary! You are not welcome here. Leave your city before the rip is complete or I shall feast on your flesh and that of your lover for the rest of eternity."

Julian tumbled out of his chair with a yelp, hands up to protect his face. Tim curled around him and murmured nonsense words against his temple, cradling his larger body in his arms.

When he recovered enough to think straight Julian turned to Tim. "We're almost out of time. I know where she is but if we fail we do more than lose her."

"What happened?" Tim asked, keeping a firm hold around the first love of his life, a man quivering and pale in his embrace.

"Demons wait," he gasped, gripping Tim like his only lifeline. "They know us now. They will drag us, all three, to their hell dimension. We will pray for true death."

Tim's carefree face took on a dark, solemn cast. "Then we'd better not fail."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Time lost all meaning. In the locked windowless room minutes, hours or days may have passed. Lisa had no idea how long she'd been unconscious, much less how long she'd sat huddled against rough concrete in a corner, trying to disappear. She prayed for the first time in years, the only avenue of hope left to her as the bitter smell of stale air and rodent droppings filled her lungs. The scent of abandonment.

More than anything she tried to ignore the growls and grunts coming from the two psychos going at it in the middle of the room.

"More, damn you," the woman screamed, tearing her nails down the man's naked flexing back as she jabbed her stiletto heels into his clenching ass. "I want to feel you ripping inside this body. Give me the pain. I need to feel the pain. Fuck me harder."

The man growled, his mouth slamming down on her shoulder at the moment his pace increased. Flesh slapped against flesh in a sharp staccato. Candlelit shadows contorted on the walls. The woman convulsed, whimpering and groaning in the same breath.

The crude chalk circle the woman had drawn beside them before the two tore into each other began to pulsate, glowing a sickly green. Droplets of blood that had been spilled from both kidnappers pooled toward the outline.

Lisa screwed her eyes shut, curled even tighter and began rocking in her corner. *Not seeing this. Not real. Not real. God, don't let this be real.*

The ground shook beneath her. Her eyes flew open and she let out a squeak, gripping her calves and struggling to become a ball, head tucked against knees. None of this was happening. They'd drugged her and the drug was still running through her system. That's all. The ground wasn't groaning and separating, a huge, jagged crack forming in the ancient concrete. Unholy howls weren't filling the room with the sound of anguish. She didn't really smell of burning flesh or rancid smoke, at least not any that didn't come from the incense the two nutjobs were burning.

And she most certainly did not see a big scale-covered blue arm clawing its way out of the nonexistent crack in the ground.

*I'm going to die here.*

But drugged or not she could tell the attention of her kidnappers was completely focused on sex and blood, not her. If she stood a chance at escape this was it. Praying helped center the mind but only did so much. Unless god sent down some divine intervention, and soon, she was on her own. Lisa tugged one last time on the cords holding her ankle. She'd pushed and pulled at them so much blood now coated the

nylon, turning it light pink. To her surprise the blood soaking through the material gave her more leverage. Millimeter by millimeter the cord gave.

As soon as she could slip her foot through the loop she scooted toward the door.

A noise came from the hall, freezing Lisa to the spot, eyes shooting to her captors. The woman urged the man on but his attention pulled away from his sexual haze, gaze flicking to the door. The room fell eerily silent.

"Pay no attention. It's just vermin. More. I want more. The portal will soon be open enough for the master to speak with us, tell us what to do next. I want more pain from this body before he does. Who knows what his next command will be? We may have to return to prepare for the invasion. Curse you, fiend, fuck me," the woman growled and sneered, pulling the man closer to her. The hand creeping out of the crack in the floor clawed harder. The woman bucked beneath the man, trying to force him back in her. But the man gave Lisa a warning glance, pulled out of the other shrieking and spitting woman.

"We can't risk anyone knowing of the master yet."

He opened the door, peeking outside. Another sound, a faint thud, echoed in the dark distance. The man jerked on his pants and fished a key out of his pocket. When he left, Lisa heard the faint click of the lock engaging.

Lisa scrambled for the door, keeping a close eye on the woman, who lay on her side watching with a self-satisfied smirk, thighs spread as she fingered herself. Lisa jerked the handle, sagging to the floor as she found it locked back automatically. Tears warping her vision she looked around the room for something, anything that might work to open the door.

She gritted her teeth against despair as the woman snickered behind her.

A scratching sound came from the other side. She wished for a piece of wood or something to bash the bastard's head in with but other than the lasciviously smirking woman the room was empty. She crouched down. Her only hope was to push past him as the door opened, to make a run for it.

The woman continued to watch her as a cat would watch a trapped mouse. Obviously she didn't see how Lisa could escape. Not when she didn't even bother to tie her back up.

Maybe she planned on Lisa joining in on the fun when her perverted lover got back. Maybe she just enjoyed watching the mouse struggling in the trap. Either way, her unconcerned gaze set Lisa's teeth chattering.

The door eased open slowly, with a crack of light and a creak of old wood. Lisa launched forward, powering her way past her captor.

Lisa bolted down the short hallway. She barely had time to pray it was unlocked before she hit the door, tearing it open. She slammed it behind her just as the man rammed into it. Her fingers trembled as she shoved home the bolt lock.

He had to have the key. He'd had it before. Not much time. The warehouse room was immense and the exit was way on the other side. Her eyes darted for a hiding place.

Then a cool hand clamped over her mouth, pulling her against a hard body. She squeaked, clawing at fingers as her heart jumped to a faster beat.

"Shh," a soft, familiar and comforting voice whispered in her ear. "Follow me."

The hand slid from her face to clasp her own. Tears filled her eyes as she looked up at Tim's dear face.

Lisa could barely hear the other man searching the far side of the hall over the screeching and pounding of the woman behind the door. But she didn't wait around. Every muscle in her body trembled, adrenaline deadening the pain in her side as she scurried behind Tim. He rushed her to a bank of windows, to one that was broken out. He shoved her through the window and followed after.

Tim grabbed her hand and dragged her down a short alleyway to a deserted lot. Her lungs burned but she stumbled along with him as fast as her poor bare feet could run. Gravel-abused soles rated much lower than rape or torture. A nondescript sedan sat there behind a dumpster with a large Hispanic man at the wheel.

"Hello, Ms. Harrington. Good to see you again," the big teddy bear of a man quipped, a look of true relief in his eyes as Tim wrenched open the door.

Lisa blinked at the thickly accented, rumbling voice. "Detective Ramirez?" she asked in grateful amazement.

"I know," the detective replied with a quick nod. "Not who you expected to see. Not tall or handsome enough. Just got the dark covered."

"Julian not back yet?" Tim asked, sliding in the backseat behind the detective, scooting over and dragging Lisa in after him.

Detective Ramirez looked in his rearview mirror, lips pursed, face tight and tense. "Nope. We'll give him a couple more minutes. If he doesn't show by then I'm dropping you off at your condo. He said if anything got tight he'd meet you there."

"Aren't you going in after him? You're the officer. He's just a security expert," Lisa said, appalled. Not matter what her drug-hazed mind might have imagined during their sexcapades those two were dangerous. Julian had put his life at risk for her and this cop planned on sitting the whole thing out? "You're leaving him in there with a couple of violent psychos?"

The detective gritted his teeth and drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, looking as happy about the situation as she felt. But he didn't budge. "They'll explain it to you but this is one case where I'm out of my element. Julian knows what he's doing."

Lisa started to ask more but Tim interrupted, pointing out the window. "There he is. He's running. Get this car moving."

Ramirez peeled out, dust shooting out in plumes behind them. He squealed to a quick stop beside Julian, who dived in the passenger side, Tim reaching forward to

close the door behind him. The male attacker ran close at his heels. His hand was raised but Lisa couldn't see what kind of weapon he held. Ramirez didn't wait to find out. Another quick, bumpy takeoff and they roared down a paved road.

Suddenly everything crashed down on her. Her skin turned clammy, freezing under the blast of the car's air-conditioning. Lisa started shaking uncontrollably, teeth chattering. Tim reached for her, cradling her in his arms and smoothing her hair with a gentle hand. "It's okay, sweetheart," he crooned. "We're here. We wouldn't let anything happen to you. You're safe with us."

"You're just saying that 'cause I'm paying Julian a pittance to guard my precious self," Lisa muttered, snuggling into his comfort, tears brimming.

"No, we're saying that because we're sleeping with you. We're not done with you yet," he joked. But he never let her go. It was as though he planned on holding her sanity together by sheer force of will alone.

"Just ignore the married man driving," the detective teased, glancing back in the mirror. "I'm not even here. You can talk all you want about your kinky sex life. Don't let my presence stop you."

"We won't," Tim replied, holding her tighter.

Lisa was beyond caring. She curled into Tim's secure warmth. Peace, love and calm flowed from him and into her. She wallowed in the sensation before reaching out with her other hand between the front seats, grabbing for Julian.

He took her cold hand in his large, warm grip. The two men anchored her, keeping her safe and calm.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

Lisa huddled on Julian and Tim's couch, a comforter wrapped around her shoulders and a mug of hot chocolate cupped in her frozen hands. So this is what recovering from shock felt like, cold and empty. At least she had people who cared about her with her, people who would put on soft music and tuck warm covers around her. Even if she didn't know how to feel about the fact that she could depend on somebody to take care of her, much less two somebodies. But Tim sat close beside her, arm wrapped around her shoulder, as Julian pattered in the kitchen for snacks. Each man did what he knew best to make her feel better.

"You've never been quiet this long before," Lisa said, scrunching down in the plush couch, letting rich warm chocolate flow over her tongue.

"I didn't know if you wanted me to talk or if you just wanted someone to be near you," Tim answered in the soft tones one would use with a small child or wild animal, not a lover. It was as if he thought the slightest jar would shatter her.

"I need to be normal," Lisa whimpered, putting her cocoa down and closing her watering eyes against memories she didn't want to revisit but couldn't seem to let go of. "Be normal for me."

"Okay, what do you want to talk about?"

No matter how hard she tried Lisa couldn't take her mind off what happened. She felt the warmth of the blanket and the pressure of Tim's embrace. She smelled his spicy cologne and the hint of savory food drifting from the kitchen. She heard the soft jazz music. She should be thinking of her last night in their arms. But somehow some part of her was still trapped in that dark, barren warehouse, listening to her kidnappers fuck each other senseless and having delusions of a gate to hell opening. "How did you find me so fast?" she finally whispered. "I thought no one would find me."

Tim looked at the kitchen, tension and uncertainty clear on his face. "That's for Julian to say. I came along for the ride. Backup."

Lisa could feel more behind his words, insincerity rolled off him. But she was too tired to confront him. She just wanted to talk out her fears, find out the details of her rescue. "Okay, how did you get in the warehouse?"

He shrugged, tension draining from his frame. "That's an easy one," he answered with a self-deprecating laugh. "You know, before meeting Julian I lived on the streets. I did some things I'm not proud of, learned some things normal people wouldn't know. I had to break into abandoned buildings sometimes to get off the streets at night. Worst came to worst I coulda picked that lock. Not too reliable if you ask me. Shoulda called Julian to set up their security."

As he talked Lisa looked down at his designer jeans and brand-name sneakers. "I can't picture you on the streets."

Tim gave her his boyish half-smile and shrugged. "What can I say? Living with Julian, having money, it's easy to get used to. He keeps me in a style I've enjoyed becoming accustomed to. I don't think about the other side much, not unless I have to."

"That bad?" she whispered.

"Worse."

Tim looked so sad, lost in his own dark memories, that Lisa regretted pushing him to talk. Even if it did go to show how little she actually knew about either man or their lives. She let loose of one side of her blanket to reach out to him. "Sorry, didn't mean to drag you down to my level. Seems to be a night for life sucks."

But Tim wouldn't let her get away with her maudlin attitude. She might not know him very well but she realized somber and Tim didn't often mix. "Hey, better than the alternative. You're here with us contemplating life suckiness. Could be a hell of a lot worse."

Lisa shook her head but tucked her blanket around herself and snuggled closer. "I don't understand why this is happening, any of it. I didn't know either of them. The man wasn't the same one as before. What are the chances of two random attacks happening to the same woman in less than a week? Why would people be after me? I've never known anyone to go after a chef if they didn't like their meal. Sue or threaten to, yes. Call the media, yes. But try to kill her, no."

On that note Julian stepped in, carefully balancing a heaping tray of drinks and finger foods. He eased it on the table in front of her.

She stared blankly down at the array, her stomach twisting at the mere thought. *Now here's a new diet to try, shock. Lose weight quick. Makes even bland cheese and crackers look repulsive.* "I'm not hungry."

Julian gave an understanding smile, reaching for a cup and handing it to her. "At least drink more. I made hot tea. The warmth should settle your nerves."

"Hot tea?" she asked. But she took the cup with a shrug, trying a sip of the flower-scented concoction. "Whatever floats your boat. The cocoa was better. Hell, a stiff drink sounds great."

"It might block out the memories but it wouldn't do much to help you. Believe me, been there, done that. Never works," Julian murmured, sitting on her other side and wrapping his arm around her.

*Won't cry. Won't cry,* she thought as she shook in the embrace of these two strong men.

"It'll be okay," Julian whispered into her hair before covering her cheek with what should have been light, electrifying kisses, if she could feel anything past the bone-deep cold.



"No, it won't. It won't ever be okay again. Why me? Why can't they leave me alone?" Lisa sobbed, trying to hold it together but failing miserably. Vulnerability left an aching hole in her chest. So empty and so cold. "I don't even know why they picked me."

Tim pulled her across his lap and stared pointedly at Julian.

Julian sighed, running his fingers through his short dark hair. "I know why," he muttered, unable to meet her gaze. "You won't believe me. You won't like it. You might even think I'm crazy. But I know why they're targeting you."

"What?" Lisa asked, struggling to pull herself out of Tim's comforting arms. Tim held tight, anchoring her even as he forced her to listen. "You know? Your company must be even better than I thought. Do you know who they are? Have you told the police? Is that why Detective Ramirez was with you? Is this going to be over soon?"

"This will be over soon, one way or another," Julian replied, still not meeting her puzzled stare. Something in his manner tugged at her heart at the same time. She'd never seen the man so unsure of himself, so insecure. What wasn't he telling her? "But I haven't involved the police," he continued. "They would have less reason to believe than you."

Lisa blinked, forcing her brain to process what he was saying and come up with some answer. But nothing made sense. And Julian looked worried, very worried. More worried than he had in the car, or even when he'd come over to check out her apartment. Almost afraid. His brow creased and she could see the lines of tension crinkling around his mouth and the bags under his eyes that she hadn't noticed before, so wrapped up in her own fears. "What aren't you telling me?"

Julian opened his mouth but Tim held up a silencing hand. "Maybe you should show her. I didn't buy any of this shit, not really, until you showed me."

Head jerking up, Julian's mouth dropped open in shocked realization. "I didn't show you until weeks after you moved in with me. Are you telling me you moved in with me thinking I was a complete nutjob?"

Tim gave a dark laugh, the sound grating against Lisa's nerves in the somber atmosphere. "No. I moved in with you thinking you were a kind, hot as sin, loaded and generous nutjob. Your tight ass and six-pack abs had quite a bit to do with it too. Add to that the fact that you're a maestro in the bedroom and I wasn't budging. I figured I'd be the one keeping you anchored in reality. Then you pulled the big magic show and I realized I'd be doing a hell of a lot more than that. Not that I'm unhappy with it or anything." Tim ran his hands up and down Lisa's sides, barely grazing her breasts. "It definitely has its perks."

Again Lisa tried to pull out of Tim's embrace only to have him hold her tighter, rocking her against his body. She felt his arousal hard against her but didn't stiffen or pull away. Deep inside she knew he wouldn't do anything she didn't want. It was a feeling of confidence in another person she'd never experienced before. She stopped fighting her feelings, relaxing into his hold as she asked, "What's going on?"

"Do you trust us?" Julian asked, voice and face serious as he leaned toward her, reaching out to take her still-cold hands in his.

"I'm here, cuddling with you two, after being kidnapped and held prisoner in an empty warehouse for hours. I let you bandage my ankle and fix me cocoa and tea to make it all better. What do you think?"

Julian moved both her hands to one of his as he cupped his other hand around her cheek. He rubbed his thumb against her lower lip. "I think what I'm about to tell you is going to strain that trust. You might turn from us. You've done it before."

Lisa rolled her eyes, snuggling closer to Tim's warmth. "I know I don't have a good track record with trusting you but I promise I'll try."

"You'll see," Julian whispered, uncurling from the couch and reaching for her hand.

Tim hopped up to take her other hand helped her stand, still clutching her blanket around her shoulders. "Don't worry, sweetheart," he promised, seeing her doubtful expression. With a single finger he tipped her face up to give her a gentle kiss. "It's not as bad as you think. Creepy, a little world-altering, but not like you think."

Lisa grimaced but took both men's hands. She let them lead her down the hallway to the door Tim had said was Julian's office. In the dim light, with the escort, Lisa felt like she was walking death row. The men's heavy expressions did nothing to change the impression. She could feel the importance of the moment in the air.

What could they possibly know that had them so worried? The entire condo felt weighed down with their concern, it filled every crevice, pounded through her with each beat of her heart. Were they the reason someone was after her? Were her attackers actually after Julian and Tim, using her to hurt them? Could that be the answer?

Lisa almost felt relieved to realize there was a reason, nothing random to what happened. Random violence was worse, with no way to predict or protect against it. But that wasn't enough to prevent the butterflies from beating against her stomach as Julian opened the door. At least she was getting some answers, some control of her life back.

As Julian opened the door Lisa caught her first glimpse of his inner sanctum. The room surprised her. After Tim's tour of the other rooms she expected a theme den, despite the fact that this was Julian's territory, not Tim's. A Thirties art-deco office that reflected a sense of style and history came to mind, or a Victorian library with a faux fireplace and tumblers of port.

Warmth was the only unifying theme she could see here. Comfort. Dark, shiny wood lined the walls. Brightly painted landscapes brought out color and a sense of nature. A plethora of candles dotted every surface, their woodsy aroma lingering in the air. Crystals, different sculptured objects and a multitude of dusty books sat on low shelves along the far wall. A deafening silence enclosed the room as the door swung shut behind her, a testament to the miracle of soundproofing.

In the center sat a round table covered with dark blue satin trailing the floor. Only a crystal ball graced it, with three chairs completing the tableau.

"Okay," Lisa said as Julian stared at her expectantly. "Not what I expected. A little Romanian Gypsy chic. Into the whole New Age stuff, huh? Pagan, Wiccan, something like that?"

"Yes and no," Julian replied, pulling one chair out for her as Tim helped her sit without tripping over her blanket. The two men tucked it neatly around her and scooted her in as Julian continued. "My beliefs are a bit older and not as well-known. But if you're asking whether my religion is a bit left of the norm the answer is yes. Much of my belief system goes against the Christian majority. I find some similarities in the Eastern religions, reincarnation being the strongest one."

Lisa raised her eyebrows. Vegas was close to California and its flighty wackiness but flaky hippie stuff hadn't bled over. Too much blatant capitalism and self-interest to get a foothold in. Julian was the first person she'd met who actually confessed to believing in reincarnation and wasn't Hindu or Buddhist. "You think you've lived before? Alexander the Great or King Richard the Lionheart?"

Julian grinned at the image, puffing up slightly at her assumption even as he denied the connection. "No, no one a historian would know of but thank you for the compliment. Two of history's greatest warriors. I like your image of me. No, the first life I remember was that of a priest."

That finally dragged a grin to her face. Priest. Right. This from the man who'd ridden her ass so hard the night before that she had trouble sitting without twitching. "I'm in a threesome with a priest? I'm either going straight to hell or I'm building up some serious time in purgatory."

Tim snickered, his mischievous mind easily following her train of thought. "He wasn't that kinda priest, sweetheart. Think pre-Christianity. No celibacy required."

"Oh." Lisa nodded, playing along. Julian looked so sexy when he got all huffy, his strong jaw tightening and his eyes darkening. It made her want to lick those tight lips into submission. "Fertility rites. Standing over steaming bowls of entrails and speaking to the gods of nature. That kinda priest."

Julian rolled his eyes. "Spare me from bad B movies. But for lack of a better definition we'll go with that."

Looking around at the suddenly ominous-seeming candles and paraphernalia, Lisa couldn't prevent her snarky side from coming to the forefront. Her eyes locked on the clear crystal ball. She reached out and tapped the surface. "So is someone's disembodied head gonna appear in there and intone great and ancient wisdom for us?"

A frown flickered across Julian's face. "You know, you don't have to be so snippy."

Lisa crossed her arms beneath her blanket and glared up at him. "After my day I can be whatever the hell I want to be."

Tim laughed as he flopped into his chair. "She's got ya there."

Julian gave a long-suffering sigh, eyes rolling. "You know this isn't easy for me to do with someone else in the room. You're not making it any easier."

"Just get on with the magic show, Houdini," Lisa teased, crossing her arms and legs. "Make a believer out of me."

Julian opened his mouth but snapped it closed as he thought better of whatever he'd been about to say. He turned to the shelves and started pulling out three short, chunky white candles and multiple sticks of incense. Lisa just shook her head. Stereotypical after all. She'd hoped for a little originality, especially since this was Julian.

"Do we join hands and start chanting odes to Hecate now? Or maybe we strip down and dance naked for a while. I wouldn't be against that."

"Damn, Julian," Tim snickered, rocking his chair on its back legs with an irritating squeak. "She's worse than I was. Least I acted like I believed you. She's not even going to pretend you're not crazy."

Julian ignored their banter, concentrating on setting up whatever show he had in store for her. He lit the incense, leaving it in a dish on the bookshelves. He then turned to make a perfect triangle around the crystal ball with the candles. When everything was placed to his satisfaction he sat down and stared into the orb.

Minutes passed in silence. Lisa yawned and wiggled in her hard seat. Sharp needles tingled through her butt as her circulation came back. "Isn't the table gonna levitate or the spirits start rapping? I mean, this isn't very impressive. Not even any chanting or flickering lights. If you wanted to bore me into a coma you coulda done it while I was on the couch. More comfortable there."

"Why didn't you tell us what you saw in the warehouse?" Julian asked.

"I told you, two crazies having an orgy before they killed me," Lisa replied, ignoring Julian's blank, entranced expression. The very thought of the warehouse had her pulling her blanket tighter. "What more do you need to know?"

"What about the ritual?" Julian continued asking, voice locked in monotone and eyes glued to the crystal and sights no one else could see. "The blood pooling around the summoning marks, being absorbed by them? The trembling earth and the opening of the portal?"

Lisa sat up straighter, gripping the edges of her blanket. The hair at the back of her neck prickled and her stomach turned cold. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You saw the opening, the portal," he continued in a monotone, never looking up from the crystal. "You saw the hand of the master, their Demon Lord, clawing his way into the mortal world through a breach in reality. You caught a glimpse of what the future holds for this entire city."

Shaking her head, Lisa scooted her chair back, her legs too weak for her to stand. "I had a hallucination. I saw a drug-induced illusion."

Finally Julian looked up at her, refusing to allow her denial. "The past is clear to me. If that's true, how do I know about it, details happening in your mind that you never told anyone else? How could I know if it wasn't real? If my powers aren't real?"

The room wavered in front of Lisa's eyes. Her skin grew clammy and her stomach rolled. The electric taste of utter fear coated her tongue. How could he know? It hadn't been real and she hadn't said anything. So how?

But his explanation was a lot weirder than she could've imagined.

"We've known you for centuries, millennia," he began, leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling. "We've loved you throughout every one of our lifetimes. More often than not you don't believe us when we tell you this. But we do love you and we want nothing more in this life or any other than to protect you. What you saw was real. It's coming, soon. We have to stop it. Together."

Lisa blinked, trying to take in his words. Past lives? Demons real? Saving the world, together? Things were sounding more and more like a bad B movie with every passing moment. "We have to stop it? If what you're saying is true, and I'm not saying that it is, how could we stop it? You're talking ultimate evil. Armageddon. Revelations-type stuff. Horror movie shit. Kinda beyond the scope of a small business owner or chef. Am I supposed to save the world by giving the evil overlord salmonella?"

Tim snickered. Julian glared at him. Tim raised his hands above his head. "What? My first question was whether you expected me to fuck Satan to death. I was closer to the truth than her but just as sarcastic."

"Cursed to an eternity spent with you two," Julian grumbled as he tried to concentrate on the crystal again. "That was my punishment for before."

"Before?" Lisa asked, letting his statements settle for a moment.

"Atlantis," Tim replied.

"You're responsible for the fall of Atlantis?" This was just too much, beyond any semblance of reality. Her brain teetered on the edge of breakdown. "You expect me to believe you're responsible for the fall of the mythic island city?"

"Why not?" Julian responded matter-of-factly.

*And how do I respond to that, beyond the obvious?* "I don't know. Because this whole thing sounds full of shit?"

Finally the smart-ass attitude struck a chord with Julian. His face grew red and that little muscle beside his right eye began to tic. "What do you want to know? What can I tell you to convince you?" he growled more than asked. "I know what you saw, what you didn't tell us but that isn't enough? Do you want me to tell you about your father, how he left and your mother died? Should I talk about the asshole you married, how he only hit you once then you left him to start over without any help? You didn't put that in your divorce papers, didn't want other people knowing you were weak enough to stick with someone capable of physically hurting you. Janice probably knows or guesses but I doubt you told anyone else, if you told her."

"How?" Lisa gasped and stood, heart bleeding with embarrassment coupled with a strange sense of betrayal. Her eyes felt suspiciously wet and she couldn't seem to hold her blanket around her tightly enough. "You investigated me? You found that out about me?"

Julian shook his head, his fierce expression fading into remorse in the face of her pain. "While I appreciate the vote of confidence, I may be good but I'm not that good. I can't know what you never told anyone. Not without having some other way to find the information. I have second sight. I am a Visionary, one of a Three destined to protect the mortal world."

Lisa shivered but stood her ground. "And who's he," she asked, gesturing at the Tim with his pity-filled expression, "demon bait?"

"Projective empath," Tim answered, chest puffing as he deflected a little of her anger and hurt away from Julian to include him. "The Empath is the power behind the throne."

"Huh?"

Tim laced his fingers behind his head, stretching his pecs beneath his well-loved cotton t-shirt. The picture of calm and cool. Too bad the bizarre reality behind his words ruined the effect. "If we do the ritual to keep these bastards where they belong we use my power to get the party started."

"And where do I fit in?" Lisa asked, edging away from the men. "No freakish powers here to speak of, unless the power to peel a potato in twenty seconds or less comes up."

"You're the Catalyst, the controlling factor," Julian replied, taking control of the conversation again. Lisa looked at Tim for a reaction but he only grinned and shrugged, nodding to his partner. Julian ignored the exchange and continued his explanation. "Without you to channel and magnify Tim's powers through the ritual I perform we aren't strong enough to stop them."

"This is impossible," Lisa whispered, taking another step back from the table.

Julian wouldn't let her retreat into denial, wouldn't allow her to leave without hearing everything he had to say. "You saw it. Deny it all you want but it won't change the truth. It was real no matter what you want to believe. We're just damned lucky it was just his arm and the portal hasn't opened enough to let him through completely yet."

A loud bang echoed through the room, causing Lisa to jump. Tim shoved out of the chair he'd just dropped back to all four legs. For once his happy-go-lucky expression was completely missing. "She doesn't believe you, Julian. But maybe she'll believe me."

He stepped forward, golden face dark, his light blue eyes snapping with his thundering displeasure. For the first time ever Tim frightened her. Julian seemed the strength of the couple but at that moment something in Tim's stern face sent chills racing throughout her body.

"I won't hurt you," he muttered as she retreated with each step he took. "But if you won't believe what we say, you'll believe what I feel."

With that his hands shot forward. He gripped her face with firm palms and closed his eyes. At first all Lisa felt was his warmth. Strong manicured fingers that played her

body like a fine instrument. She expected the shot of lust she always got when he touched her. And fire did lash her body, but not lust alone.

Love and worry. Protectiveness and caring. Strange foreign sensations battered her, filling her with a glowing heat.

She whimpered under his touch, tried to wrench her head free. "No, you won't deny us, not in this," he snarled, hands tightening as more sensations swirled around them, bombarding her. "You see the truth. You feel the truth."

He pulled her closer, forcing her lips against his. Not angrily or brutally. A butterfly's caress. A gentle meeting of the mouths that melted her heart, shook her soul. "I love you. We love you. Now. Then. Forever. Eternally. Nothing you do or did will ever change our feelings. Even if you run from us we'll still be here waiting for you. You'll never find abandonment here with us. Only love, support and commitment. You mean everything to us."

Lisa whimpered, closing her eyes. But she couldn't deny this, couldn't block out the emotions. His love. And through him she felt the echoes of Julian's.

But could she trust it? Did it matter? An apocalypse in the balance. Destruction on a massive scale. Could she just go with the flow this one time? Or would more than her heart break when they left her?

Would they shatter her soul?

"Can you at least trust us enough to give us a chance? It's all we ask, a chance. One more night with the two of us and you'll know the truth, one way or another," Tim said as Julian stepped to her back.

She closed her eyes as their dual warmth and strength surrounded her. A fair chance. One last night of passion.

Even in the face of this insanity, could a sane woman reject such an offer?

"So we have sex and the world is saved?" she asked, needing to be absolutely certain about what she was agreeing to. "Spell it out for me. I'm not entering into some sort of eternal pact in your religion? Or some legal mess I'll be fighting for the rest of my life?"

"If we follow the proper rituals and you give yourself over to us the world is saved. Anything after that is up to you," Julian answered.

*I can't believe I'm considering this.* "And you'll drop all this crazy talk if nothing happens?"

Julian looked almost ill at the thought. "Oh, something will happen, believe me."

"But you'll drop it if nothing happens?" she demanded. If she did this, against all her better judgment, she better get something out of it, if only a sense of closure.

It was Tim who answered, his hands cupping her shoulders, squeezing and releasing. "We'll do whatever you want for as long as you want if you just trust us for this one night."

She looked into Tim's earnest eyes. So much raw emotion simmering below the surface. Aching waves rippled from that deep well. It was easy to believe he was an empath capable of filling others with his feelings.

If it was true, what would it be like to make love to him while he used those powers, to feel him inside her?

"One night," she heard herself saying as her common sense screamed bloody murder in the back of her mind. But a night with these two men was worth the pain of the morning after. "I promise one night. Nothing more. I can leave the moment it's over, no questions and no pressure."

"If that's what you want, you have our word," Julian swore with no little anguish in his voice.

Lisa bit her lip but kept her eyes steady. "So what do we have to do?"

"I think it's time for you to see our bedroom."



## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Mograith stared down at his still-throbbing arm. He'd barely managed to yank it out as the rip moved through space. His minions hadn't been able to hold it in place and give chase to the Catalyst at the same time. Fucking bitch. Idiots. Bastards. No one hurt him. No one. When he got his claws on that human cunt he'd make her wish his minions had shoved her through the tear and let him have her then and there.

Cradling his aching arm, he spat onto the chunks of meat at his feet. Failure was unacceptable. How dare those fools think that they could return here and beg his forgiveness? He had no forgiveness. Demon lords were not known for their kind and generous manners. But they'd had nowhere else to go. The imps couldn't stay in the mortal realm indefinitely. And no other demon lord in any other level of hell would've accepted such miserable failures into their numbers. They wanted to absorb strength, not give sanctuary to weakness.

Now they'd never again disappoint him.

Not that her escape made much difference. He'd still have her, soon enough. Already the tear grew larger with each passing moment. Mere hours stood between him and utter conquest.

Mograith turned to look back at the horde gathering behind him, a dark wave of destruction stretching out to the horizon. Teeth and claws glistened in the cold lights. Leathery wings cracked in the breeze. Clawed feet stomped and scratched at the ice. Snarls and growls, punctuated by the occasional howl, filled the air with demonic fury. Brimstone, dried blood, musk and darker scents filled the air.

His army waited for the chance to create havoc and chaos. Soon the mortal world would fall once more beneath his heels. Terror and anguish would feed his masses, bringing them strength, maybe enough to break into another hell and extend his realm.

Opportunity waited. Opportunity for power. Opportunity for revenge.

The tear need only extend mere inches and it would become a full portal, the opening large enough to expand and control from this side. First he would cross, with his horde close behind.

Then he'd rip the Three apart, put them back together and start on the real fun.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

At first, compared to the rest of the house, the bedroom seemed stark. No theme and no artwork filled the corners. There were no splashes of quirky personality. One sturdy utilitarian dresser stood against the wall. Strategically placed blue rugs broke the bare hardwood floor. But then there was the bed.

The bed made the room.

The thing was massive, what Janice would call orgy-sized. It could comfortably fit six, much less three. And it was a perfect square with no headboard or footboard. The only thing differentiating the top from any other side was the line of plush pillows. And at each corner, towering above the rest, were solid squared posts made from a dark wood.

All in all this room stood for only two things—a good night's sleep or a spectacular evening of sex.

Lisa leaned back on the bed, stomach clenched as her lovers took their places to either side of her. One golden and giving as a Greek god. One dark and brooding as a Celtic warrior. Watching them move closer through the dim light sent waves of desire crashing through her, despite everything else. Their spicy masculine scent, the smell of male desire, enveloped her, heating her blood.

The bed shifted beneath her as Tim sat down, crooning. "Don't worry so much. This is about pleasure, nothing bad. Making a connection with other human beings, people you care for. What's to worry about?"

"I don't know. According to you the fate of the world comes to mind." She cringed at her own halfhearted nervous laugh following her words. "I mean, talk about performance anxiety."

Julian stepped forward, sat beside her and took her cool hand. "You don't need to worry," he told her as he rubbed warmth back into her nerve-cooled skin. "Performance isn't part of this. Just leave everything to us. All you have to do is focus on what is important. Emotion. Trust. Love."

"Love?" she squeaked, heart thumping at the impact of the full meaning of the word. *I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I'm capable of going there. Sex is one thing, but love?* "Isn't that going a little fast, even to save the world?" she added with a forced chuckle.

"You tell me," Julian responded, reaching out to smooth her hair across his pillow, a sheet of pure silver sparkling across a field of black satin. "I knew how I felt the moment I saw you, just like it was with Tim. I love you. The more I learn about you, the

longer I know you, the deeper that love becomes. When this is over it will still be the three of us together. Why shouldn't what we're about to do be about love?"

Lisa felt tears well up, her chest tightening against her next breath. Not a good start for some mystical sex magic. But her heart ached. No one had wanted her before, not really. Why should it be different now? "But you two have each other," she whispered, closing her eyes against the pain lashing through her heart.

Two sets of hands grasped hers, holding her in the present, forcing back the pain and fear of the past. Heartfelt warmth soothed her frayed nerves. Caring and acceptance filled her heart. "Don't run from us, sweetheart," Tim pleaded, kissing her knuckles. "Not even in your mind."

"That'll mess with the magic, huh?" she whispered, gripping the men's hands, a drowning woman going down for the final count.

"Yes but that's not the point," Tim answered, eyes filled with a strange deep sorrow. An emptiness echoed in her own heart as Tim continued, "I have room in my heart for you and Julian. Don't you have room for both of us? That's the real question, the only uncertainty. You're the one who ran from us before. Please don't do that to us again."

"Tim!" Julian snapped, glaring at the other man. But he didn't let go of Lisa's hand. He shared his strength with her even as he snarled at his other lover.

Tim stood his ground, staring down at her as waves of pain flowed out of him, enveloping her and bringing her to her mental knees. "She should know, Julian. We've told her so much already. We didn't tell her everything before and we lost her. *We* lost her. I couldn't stand it and survive. I don't want to have that happen again. Do you?"

"You guys keep talking about past lives and how everything went to hell before, literally. But beyond the obvious fall of Atlantis, which I still don't know if I buy yet, you haven't told me much. What happened to us the last time?" Lisa asked, wanting to understand the sudden oppressive heaviness filling the room, sucking out all the joy she should be feeling.

"You thought exactly what you're thinking now," Tim answered, ignoring the heated looks shooting from the other man. "I love Julian. Julian loves me. We've played this game many times and we've always failed because of a lack of trust. In the end our bond is too weak."

Lisa didn't have to consider that long to find the problem. It had been the foremost question in her mind since hooking up with the two men. "Where do I fit in?" she asked, rubbing her chest with her free hand, heart aching even more than it had before.

Tim nodded, scooting closer to her to reach out and soothe his other palm down the side of her face. "Exactly. I don't remember the past the way Julian does. I'm in the dark, like you, at least beyond what he's told me. But I still have the feelings dragging behind me. Weighing me down. I know I loved you. I know you left us and it broke my heart. We lost everything. The demons came and people died. We died. But I don't

remember any of that. All I remember on my own is the pain of you leaving, the empty hole left in the wake."

Lisa propped herself up on her elbows, pulling her hands out of theirs. She looked at the two precious faces. One dark, sharp and strong, filled with the heaviness of responsibility thrust upon him much too young. One light, shining and mischievous, his playfulness hiding a deep scar of abuse and mistrust. Even without the mystical mumbo jumbo could she turn these two precious men down without trying? Could she run before she got hurt? Or would she hurt herself more by avoiding pain?

Did she want to give up?

Lisa swallowed, loosening her tight throat. She reached up and cupped Tim's face, letting his myriad emotions wash through her, pure and clean. The power in him amazed her. The love in him shocked her.

Another hand reached out for her face, turning her away from Tim to Julian. "I need to know now," he whispered, his voice echoing with pit of need. She might not be able to feel his emotions like she could Tim's but she knew a ripping heart when she saw it.

"Before the ritual?"

Julian's face hardened, his grip on her chin tightening almost painfully. "Damn the ritual," he snarled. "We could leave now and let the city burn for all I care. I need to know how you feel, this minute. I do remember the past. I remember the look on your face as you ran from us. I wake up every night with that memory gutting me. Every single night for as long as I have dreamed. I remember the tears flowing down your cheeks as betrayal ripped you from us. I can't go through that again. I won't survive it. Even with Tim here for me I can't face that pain."

Raw anguish filled Julian's face, painful to even look at. Something warm grew and turned in Lisa's chest, twisting like a living thing and expanding without pain. Open and loving Tim. Controlled but deeply passionate Julian. Stay or go, she loved these two men.

She loved them both.

"Then let's not think about the past," she replied, reaching out to wrap her arms around both men, both lovers. "Let's forget about the future. Let's wipe out everything but the three of us. Do what you have to and start this ritual but then I want you here, now, with me."

Julian relaxed for the first time since entering the room. Joy cut through the harsh edges of his face as his smile spread. With a nod he stood, walking to the wardrobe and bringing out a small wooden chest. Opening it, he pulled out several white candles and sticks of incense.

The man was stuck on candles and incense. Must be an Atlantean fixation. What, they weren't advanced enough to have electricity?

As Julian placed the candles and incense around the room, muttering to himself and counting paces, Tim tossed his t-shirt over his head. Gleaming skin and contracting

muscles distracted Lisa for a moment before he bent over to pull his pants off. She wasn't overly surprised to see that he didn't wear underwear. Pleased but not surprised. Still she had to tease as he lay down naked next to her, reaching for her blouse.

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" she asked as his fingers tripped across her buttons, popping them one by one.

"Just getting you ready," he answered, staring up at her with that bit of devilment dancing in his eyes. Her heart skipped at the sight like that of a teenage girl with her first crush. "Don't want a cold start."

Lisa's laugh melted into a moan as his hands slid down her arms, peeling her blouse off and tossing it over his shoulder. "I somehow don't think cold is going to be a problem with you two around." She gasped, her nipples pebbling beneath more black lace. Never had she felt such desire from a simple caress.

"Count on it," he whispered, leaning in for a kiss as his arms wrapped around her to reach the back clasp of her bra.

Lisa shivered, abandoning herself to the sensation of bare skin on bare skin. She whimpered as he moved back, taking her bra with him.

"Damn, you've got great breasts," Tim said, eyes devouring her chest. "Fucking wonder of nature."

Lisa blushed but kept her arms lying at her side. "Well, now you know. Not that you didn't see them last time. Be happy."

"Oh, I plan on being more than just 'happy'," he replied with a leer.

The silliness of a leer on his almost angelic face killed any nervousness. Lisa sent him a coy look under lowered lids. "Well then, let's see some action," she replied, putting in every ounce of husky tone into her voice that she could muster.

"Your wish is my command."

Tim pulled her pants off with a quick tug, tossing them halfway across the room. He smiled at her choice of panties, fingers caressing where cloth met skin. "Love the black lace but it's gotta go."

"Impatient much?" she teased as she arched up her hips to help him. "What happened to slow easy foreplay?"

"Julian's almost done with the prep work," Tim murmured, sliding the damp slip of lace inch by inch down her thighs. "If I want any alone time with you it's gotta be now."

Lisa resisted the urge to cover herself with her hands, covering her insecurity with teasing words instead. "But I thought you didn't like to work alone."

"Oh, I don't mind working you alone," he replied, licking his way from her pelvic bone to flick at the skin below her breast. "It's just more fun with three. I thought we already taught you that."

"Looks like I need to be reminded," Lisa gasped, arching ever-so slightly.

"We have the rest of our lives to remind you," Julian said as he came to stand at the head of the bed between the two posts.

"Damn," Tim cursed, moving back to let the cool air dance across her skin. "Done already?"

Julian grinned at the disgruntled Tim. "Don't worry, you have more time."

"Oh," he nodded, moving back to loom over Lisa's supine and hungry form, "you still have to get with the chanting?"

She shot Tim a puzzled look. Again his boyish grin broke through the golden god persona. "He has the memories so he gets to play high priest, which I think is kinda like being a glorified porn director. Calling action and keeping track of everything."

Lisa rubbed her naked thighs together and sat halfway up. Hot nectar pooled between her legs. She was ready for action but not sure how to get him to put out. Did they wait? Did Julian tell them what to do? Exactly how choreographed was this ritual and when did the fun stuff start? "Director, hmm. Didn't think we were filming this. You should give a girl some warning."

Tim crawled up beside her. But he didn't take her right away. Instead he tapped the very tip of her nose. "Naughty, naughty girl. Maybe some other time. What it means is this starts out with you and me. He gets to provide background for most of it."

"Okay, nice to know," Lisa replied, looping her arms around his neck and grazing the hard tips of her breasts against his smooth warm chest. "But when do you get to the good part?"

"The good part?" he asked, running one hand up and down her bare leg.

"You know. The part where you start fucking me already. Or at least more touching or something. I'm getting all cold and shivery."

Tim grinned. "We can't have that."

That was all the warning he gave her before pouncing. He pushed her, giggling, down into the huge satin comforter. His hands grasped her wrists, stretching her arms above her head, arching her body into his as he tossed his leg over her. Then he kissed her.

Damn, but the man knew how to kiss. No gentle teasing seduction. No playful nibbles. His mouth ate at hers, devouring her and sucking out her soul. Tongue grazing between lip and teeth then plunging in deep, conquering and memorizing each dark wet crevice.

Lisa's mind crashed around her. Everything centered on the feel of his plundering mouth against her own. Wave after wave the erotic pleasure grew.

After an enticing eternity he pulled back, panting. "I'll make sure you don't regret this, that you don't regret us. We'll give you everything we have, make you crave more. And you'll stay with us. Even after. You have to stay with us."

"Why?"

Tim pushed up, bracing himself with his arms so he could rack her with his poignant, soulful gaze. "Because we need you. We're better with you than we are without you."

"Better?"

With no warning, Tim eased a single finger deep into her wet channel. His thumb flicked her clit, causing her to gasp and writhe as he pulled out. Eyes locked with hers, he sucked her cream off his finger. He smacked his lips and smiled. "Much better."

The pleasure he took from the taste of her rocked Lisa. But that little kernel of doubt still lingered. Body tight as a bow string, her mind still looped back on the crazed newsreel they'd created for her. Real or not they believed it. So what did they really think? "Even without the demon-hunting end-of-the-world shtick I make you better?"

"Before, during and after the demon-hunting end-of-the-world shtick. You always made us better. Then you leave us as less than we were before. Julian says you never believe us. Never. We always lose you in the end, even when we manage to seal the portal. But we need you after. I'm really hoping for an after."

Lisa shivered, wanting to believe him but more than that. Wanting him, wanting to keep him, wanting to block out her doubts and insecurities.

"So you have this time alone with me, something we haven't had much of, and you spend all your time talking. No action. Not what I expected from an exotic dancer. All show."

"All show, huh?" he growled, fingertips raking down her side. "I'll show you. Can't fuck yet but I can make you squirm."

Lisa squeaked as he flipped her on her stomach. She felt his hair slide over her skin a split second before the wet slick caress of his tongue slid up her spine.

Her eyes widened and she clawed at the satin beneath her. Who knew a back could be so sensitive? Vertebra by vertebra he moved from the top of her ass to the base of her neck. Desire shot straight to her core with each lick, her womb throbbing and her cunt grasping.

"Like that, sweetheart," he whispered between laps across her skin. "Thought you might. Get you nice and revved up. Keep you hot and wet. Then I'm gonna fuck you raw. You won't be able to walk out on us. Make sure you won't be able to walk at all. Keep you here with your legs spread, ready to take it from either or both of us whenever we want. You belong to us, with us. Won't leave us that way."

"Please," she whimpered, twitching beneath him. Where did all this pleasure come from? She wanted more.

"Please what? Please fuck you? Please make you come? Oh, don't worry, I will. I'll make you come hard, over and over again. Make you crazy with it. But not yet. Can't waste all that psychic energy. We'll use it, use you. And you'll love every last, pounding second."

Lisa shoved at the bed with both hands, trying to turn over. He pushed her down with a hand at the center of her back. "Oh no. Not 'til I'm good and ready. Not 'til Julian's ready. You're ours tonight to do with as we please. Any pleasure you get will be a gift or reward, something you earn."

"Having fun being a Top?" Julian asked as he stepped back beside them.

"Maybe," Tim answered, clawing down her back and drawing a pleased gasp from her. "Don't get much chance to practice."

"I'm thinking we might let you practice more."

Lisa felt something drop on the bed beside her but Tim wouldn't let her move to see what it was.

"Do we need those?" Tim asked before nipping at her ass.

Julian chuckled. The rasping sound of his voice talking over her naked body ratcheted up her arousal another notch. "Without any preparation, she needs it. She's never used her own abilities before. The powers we'll be channeling are extreme. She'll need the anchor."

"And she's lying right here, dying by fucking inches," Lisa snarled, bucking and shimmying to free herself. "What the hell are you talking about now? I want fucking, not damned talking."

Tim swept her hair off her neck, sucking at the flesh just below the base of her skull. She screamed as electric lust shot through her. "What are your feelings on light bondage?" he whispered.

Dark images, more tempting than she cared to admit to, flickered in her mind. The two men filling each other. One in her mouth, another sunk deep in her ass. Each man taking turns pounding her cunt. "Right now anything. Don't care. Want. Want now."

"We're going to tie you down," Tim said, hands manacled her wrists as he lowered his body against her back to whisper his dark promise in her ear. "Keep you from hurting yourself. Can you take that for us?"

Lisa stilled her frantic movements. "Can take anything you can dish. Just give it already."

Julian laughed. "Damn, you've got her primed. I love when you do that to me but it's almost as good watching you do it to her."

"What?" she asked.

"I'm drawing in your desire, combining it with mine and shoving it back in you," Tim explained as another wave of lust slammed through her. "And it's just starting. You'll get more, much, much more. Will you let us bind you, fuck you, make you come so hard you shake this world and the next?"

"Yes, yes, do me. Do me now."



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Julian dimmed the lights of the cavernous bedroom as Lisa tugged at the cuffs wrapped around her wrists, holding her down, naked and vulnerable. Chain lengths rattled against the bedposts but stayed firm. Enough give remained for her to wrap her hands once in the cool metal. She had a range of motion but she wouldn't fly off the bed if things got as extreme as the men warned her. She trusted both men but the act of being restrained still made her body quiver.

"They'll hold you no matter how much pressure you put on them," Tim said as he clipped her ankles in a similar binding with longer lengths of chain. She looked down her body at his sleek, golden head framed by her thighs. Now she understood the posts being there without a foot or headboard. Easy access.

He grinned, sliding his hands up and down her legs, playing lightly with the cuffs. She stiffened at the clang of metal on metal, heart rattling against the cage of her chest.

Tim's grin turned to a knowing smile. "If you really want out you just have to work the Velcro free," he reassured her, demonstrating a quick release. It wouldn't be easy on her own but she could free herself.

"So I can get out if something goes wrong? It won't take me too long to get out? You know, if all hell breaks loose, literally?" she asked, wincing at the childlike quality of her voice. Young and helpless. She hated being helpless, at someone else's mercy, even if it was for her own safety.

"Nothing will go wrong," Julian murmured as he took position above her head, smoothing her hair across his pillow. She closed her eyes as he leaned forward, running his hands down the insides of her raised arms before placing a soft kiss on her forehead. She inhaled his dark spicy scent, finding comfort in its familiarity. "We love you," he whispered. "Our love and yours will close the portal."

"And then what?" she asked, her fear of abandonment hovering in a secret corner of her heart.

Julian reached forward, massaging the tension from her shoulders. "We want you to stay with us, live with us. But that's up to you."

*A lifetime of moments like these, the center of two men's attention. Can I trust it? Isn't it worth the risk?*

Lisa looked down at Tim, still standing at the foot of the bed. He wasn't touching her, wasn't even looking at her. His attention locked on the far corner of the room. "Is that what you want too?" she asked, straining her neck to follow his gaze as an icy breeze from that direction drifted across her exposed skin.

Her question shook Tim out of his worried trance, the serious expression on his face clearing. He looked down at her, desire and adoration shining from his eyes. "Of course I want you. Thought that was apparent. What do I have to do to prove it to you? Julian's the one who plays things close to the chest, not me." He raked his fingers down her inner thighs, sending a quick burst of arousal through her pussy. Tim grinned as she twitched. "How 'bout we stop stalling and get down to the good stuff?"

Lisa frowned at the loss of Julian's touch as he backed away to his position behind her head. But Tim made up for the absence, crawling up her body with the grace of a jungle cat. Arousal flowed from him, crashing over her and enflaming all her senses. The emotion filled her to the brim. Shocked at the invasion of alien sensation, she gasped and twisted against her bonds, fighting against the rising lust while wallowing in Tim's need.

"Liked that, did we?" Tim asked with a deep laugh. "Oh, this is going to be so much fun. I've only let go of everything with Julian, let him feel what I feel. No one else, ever. Now I have a new toy to play with."

He leaned down and flicked her nipple with the tip of his tongue and smiled as it tightened. "A very responsive little toy." He took the crest between his teeth and nipped. Pain and pleasure zinged through her, a hot wet surge of lust. Lisa whimpered, tossing her head and pulling at the chains around her wrists, straining the Velcro fastenings.

Dimly she heard Julian begin chanting, the sound of strangely familiar words wrapping around her, filling her with a vibrant energy. That energy twined with the emotions flowing out of Tim and lapped through her body. A shock smashed through her, similar to an orgasm but much more powerful. The breath slammed out of her. She trembled as power permeated every nerve, racked every muscle.

"That's it, sweetheart. Let it fill you. Let us fill you," Tim murmured as he straddled her. His fingers curled, nails raking down her sides. Trails of fire, lust edged with a hint of pain, left Lisa gasping again.

Tim smirked, a look of pure masculine power. "Sensitive. More than I remember." He glanced behind her to Julian before lying across her body and whispering in her ear. "We were too quick last time. Tonight I plan on savoring you."

His teeth grazed her neck before moving over for a deep kiss. His tongue plunged into her mouth, conquering and tempting her own to join it. She leaned into his lips, sliding her tongue against his. This time Tim groaned, thrusting his pelvis.

He pulled his mouth away, panting. His eyes burned as he stared down at her. "Can't stand it. I won't last through the ceremony like this. Need relief. Now."

Crawling farther up her chest, he brushed her mouth with the tip of his cock, a small drop of glistening precum coating her lips. "Suck me," he commanded, burying his fingers in her hair and tilting her head back.

Lisa opened her mouth, letting the head of his cock slide against her tongue. She circled the spongy helmet, his salty flavor filling her mouth as she teased the small slit.

But Tim wanted nothing of slow and easy. With a growl he shoved himself deep down her throat, fucking her mouth in punishing thrusts. Lisa swallowed to accommodate the invasion. She was his to control. His to take. She had to trust that he wouldn't go too far.

"That's it, sweetheart. That's what I needed." Tim groaned as he pumped his hips, sliding his cock in and out in a hard rhythm.

Lisa's soul shook at the look in his face. Never had she seen such complete fulfillment in a man's eyes. And she was the reason. He might control their pace but she had control over his pleasure, a pleasure that spilled out of him, filling her with heat. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked harder, needing more, needing to taste him, needing something other than his power filling her.

Julian's deep voice continued chanting in the background, surrounding the two of them in a blanket of safety. As Tim moaned and let his cum spill down her throat a pure bright light crammed her body, overflowing her skin. Her body, teeming with heat, threatened to split in two with power melting its way free.

Golden light danced on the walls as her skin started glowing. Lisa gasped as Tim slid free of her mouth, her eyes rolling. She tossed her head frantically, a low electric hum echoing in her brain, zinging across exposed nerves.

And yet the frigid breeze from the back of the room taunted her heated skin, chilling her to the marrow of her bones. Beneath the strong tone of Julian's voice she could hear distant groans and screams, shrieks filled with unimaginable pain. Her hair started blowing around her face.

Tim shook as he stared over her, face pale. Julian stopped chanting.

An icy prickle of fear teased the edge of her mind, threatening to break through her glowing pleasure. Heart pounding, she pulled against her bonds, struggling to wrench free enough to see what was happening.

The light emanating from her body dimmed.

Julian stepped to her side, standing tall, his erect cock at eye level. "It doesn't matter," he whispered, turning her face toward him. "Nothing matters but the Three."

She trembled but forced tense muscles to relax. The light flickered as the chilled air and haunting noises grew.

Slick, warm, wet. Something flicked across her clit, sending a shock wave through her body. Her womb quivered in response, her juices spreading. The scent of her sex warred with Julian's incense. She stared down at a smirking Tim. "Now, now, sweetheart," he scolded, his tongue lashing her clit again. "Keep your attention on us. We're the ones you should be worried about."

As her body recovered, Lisa feigned a grin at his playful expression. "I need to worry?"

"Considering what we intend to do to that sweet body of yours you should worry whether you're up to the challenge," Julian said before leaning down and sucking her breast deeply into his mouth at the same moment Tim nipped at her clit.

Lisa gasped, the light coming from inside her steadying and flaring brighter. She rattled her chains frantically. "Let my hands loose. Please. I need to touch you."

"All in good time," Julian said, moving to her other breast. "Right now lay back and relish the sensations."

Tim's tongue flicked her clit before lapping from the bottom to the top of her labia. Lisa arched and whimpered, heels digging into the bed. Without the bonds holding her she would've bucked off the bed from that sensation alone. But Tim wasn't her only tormentor. Julian kneaded and suckled one breast then the other. Flashes of pleasure lashed from each contact, tugging deep in her womb.

The light grew stronger, nearly blinding her as climax approached.

Tim pulled up first. "Think she's enjoying herself enough yet?" he asked Julian, mischief in his voice.

"If she enjoyed herself any more I'd go blind."

Lisa thrust her hips out toward Tim, gnashing her teeth and thrashing, the edges of her cuffs biting into her skin. "Damn you both, don't stop. So close. Don't you dare fucking stop!"

Tim grinned but crawled up her body. He positioned his cock against her, pulling back as she arched into him with a whimper. He looked askance at Julian. Julian nodded his head.

Tim thrust forward in one powerful surge. Lisa screamed, her pussy clenching his cock and pulling it in deeper. So full. So good. The light surrounding her grew brighter still, heating the room as it became a physical presence. The once frigid breeze coming from the corner of the room now felt soothing against her scorching skin.

"God, sweetheart," Tim moaned between gritted teeth as he pulled back and pushed in. "You're so tight. Feels so good."

Lisa opened her eyes, looking at her two lovers. Julian stepped behind Tim, grabbing a handful of hair and pulling his head back. His mouth slammed across Tim's. Somewhere in the back of her mind she thought she should feel jealous or at least threatened. Instead, watching the two men as their tongues thrust against each other's at the same pace that Tim pounded into her body sent a shiver through her, brightening the light coming from her body.

After breaking the kiss Julian ran his hand down Tim's bare back, causing him to shudder and thrust harder. Lisa gasped, pulling against the chains at her feet, trying to wrap her legs around him to brace herself.

"Unhook her and turn over," Julian ordered. "We should both take her. I want her ass."

Lisa whimpered as a shot of illicit adrenaline knocked her arousal higher. With a wet ripping sound the Velcro at her hands gave way. At the same moment Julian released her feet.

She wrapped herself around Tim, desperate to get closer. With a grunt and a powerful surge of muscles he flipped them both so that her backside faced Julian.

Julian moved behind her, snagging something from the bench at the foot of the bed as he did so. He ran his hands down Lisa's back, stopping at her quivering ass. A squirting sound caused Lisa's muscles to clench. Tim gasped. "Damn, Julian, get on with it. You keep startlinging her like that and I'm gonna come."

Something wet and slick dribbled down her crack. "Didn't mean to. Didn't think she'd be so jumpy." Slow and easy Julian slid a single finger in her ass. She bore back, trying to loosen enough to take the invasion.

"That's right, love," Julian crooned. "Push into it. Gonna give you another now. Nice and easy."

Another finger edged in, scissoring and twisting. Lisa arched back, letting sensation fill her.

Tim kissed her temples, sending another spike of his arousal lancing through her body. "You still with us? Still good?"

"Yes, yes, want more. God, you're going to drive me insane. Can't take it. Give me more."

She felt the bed shift behind her. Julian spread her ass cheeks wide, rubbing more lube around her opening in wide, caressing circles. Then she felt the blunt pressure of his cock head seeking entrance. Millimeter by millimeter he sank in. For a moment she struggled against the invasion, certain she couldn't take it. Surely she'd split wide. Then with a slight pop, he was in. Moments later she felt his pelvis push against her ass.

"In—I'm in," Julian grunted. "So tight. Can't get over how tight she is."

"I can't get over the feeling of her wet silk wrapped around me and the touch of your cock on mine through her thin walls," Tim replied, voice hoarse. "Could live like this." But he didn't stay. Now that Julian was in her Tim slowly pulled out. The feel of one cock filling her while the other rubbed against her shook Lisa to the core.

She whimpered and bucked, wanting Tim back. Julian petted her, soothed her. "Easy, love. We're almost there."

"Need more," she wailed, tossing sweat-soaked hair out of her face. "Burning up. Need more."

Julian wrapped his arms around her torso, pulling her back to her knees at the same time as he pushed his pelvis forward. "Then let's give you what you need."

Tim groaned. His fingers dug into Lisa's hips as Julian maneuvered her to a squat above him. As Julian eased back out, he pushed her down on Tim—hard.

Her eyes snapped shut and she gritted her teeth as Tim's full power poured through her. Lisa felt the essence of both Julian and Tim deep inside her, sawing in and

out in a perfect rhythm. She felt the warm wet embrace of her own flesh against Tim. She felt the deep pleasure-pain of Julian's cock shoving hard into her, caressing a sensitive bundle of nerves with each movement. She felt the clench of her ass muscles, tight around Julian's cock.

Pleasure, desire, lust, love, caring. Emotions swirled around her in a hurricane of sensation. All her other senses closed down, everything focused on feeling, the burning desire building up within her tighter and tighter. Overflowing positive energy. Hot, glowing.

Distantly she heard Julian cry out – a hoarse triumphant shout. His orgasm poured into her, splash after splash of his seed filling her. Filling them. Searing brighter, she burned.

Tim followed close behind, crying out to the gods as he spent himself in her body, shoving his orgasm into her. Inferno approached.

Lisa's entire body tightened as she neared the edge of the abyss. With the power of both Julian's and Tim's orgasms gushing through her she couldn't hold off her own. An explosion tore through her core, ripping a scream from her throat as it ripped energy from her body.

As blinding light shot from their joined flesh, two sets of strong warm arms wrapped around her, pulling her close and anchoring her as the world incinerated.

"No, damn you all. I won't go back empty-handed," a deep voice growled, a furious rumble that shook the room. Lisa opened her eyes and glanced over her shoulder. Through the light she saw an image out of nightmare. Dark blue with jagged teeth and wickedly sharp claws, a creature seemed to be frantically pulling itself out of a softly glowing void. Its blood-red eyes were fixed on the bed.

The positive light, a Pillar of buoyant emotions, energy built on trust and love, flowed toward the creature. He snarled, lips peeling back to reveal row after row of teeth. His claws dug furrows into the hardwood floor as he scrambled to cross fully into the mortal world but he couldn't stop the energy shoving him back through the portal. With a rage-filled howl he lost his grip.

As he flew into the void the light slammed out of the Three, sealing the tear.

Shaken, Lisa looked up at the two faces staring down at her. One openly grinning, the other serious but still filled with love. Julian leaned down to kiss her swollen lips. "There's no going back now," he promised, the truth of his words pulsing through the link with Tim and into her. "We're keeping you. Get used to the idea."

Lisa grinned, sliding her arms around two solid chests. Everything she ever wanted and more lay in the circle of her embrace. "Don't worry. You just have to keep reminding me why I stay."

Tim curled the fingers of one hand through her hair, the other through Julian's. "Don't worry about that, sweetheart. It'll be our pleasure."

## Epilogue

Janice stared at her gloriously laughing friend as Lisa twirled between the two loves of her life. Her cream-colored dress floated around her ankles, making her look like a fairytale princess come to life, while both men could easily head up an ad campaign for tuxedos. The official service, held at one of the more quaint chapels on the Strip, legally bound her to Julian Stern. Mrs. Lisa Stern. The unofficial wedding of all three packed CM. Some were true well-wishers. Some were gawkers. Some people came for the free food. But all were people who cared for Lisa, Tim and Julian.

*If only I could find the same love for myself*, Janice thought as she let the deep, true and loving emotions of the three wash over her. She wasn't greedy. She didn't have to have two guys at her beck and call to feel complete. But she missed having someone to come home to, someone to care for and who cared for her.

No matter what bright façade she put out to the rest of the world, Janice was lonely. Even a well-needed divorce took its toll on the old self-esteem. Bright-colored hair and clinging dresses covered the wounds. They couldn't heal them.

Still watching with a hint of envy, she took a sip of champagne and tried to control the green-eyed monster. Now wasn't the time to get all maudlin. Her best friend had finally found true, if a tad unconventional, happiness. This was a celebration, not a funeral. If it had been she'd be in her classic black sheath, not an emerald green halter-topped bridesmaid dress that danced around her knees.

Janice remained leaning against the far wall, brooding, until a presence joined her, pulling her attention away from the trio whirling around the dance floor.

"Nice to know there's still a chance for the rest of us, even an unconventional one," Eric said as he leaned against the wall beside her, crossing his long, lean legs at the ankle. His light blond hair, tied back in a long ponytail, gleamed against the black of his suit.

Janice had been surprised when she saw office heartthrob Eric Malcolm walk in the restaurant. She'd worked in the same building with him for two years now, trading an occasional word, a quick conversation in the elevator. But she'd never really talked to him. Her tongue tended to go into full retreat in his presence, turning her into a blushing schoolgirl instead of an able and highly respected personal assistant.

She wouldn't have guessed Eric knew someone like Julian.

"They make a cute trio," Janice quipped as she took her last sip of champagne.

Eric nodded, watching the three with his own bit of envy if she wasn't mistaken.

"Friend of the bride or grooms?" he asked.

Janice flagged down a waiter, handing him her empty flute. "Bride. I've been friends with Lisa since college."

"Okay with all this?" Eric asked, turning toward her for the first time, locking his hazel eyes on her face.

Her heart skipped a beat as she felt a blush rise up her face. Nothing like a gorgeous man to get the blood pressure up. "Of course I'm okay. Lisa's happy. Tim and Julian are both nice guys. I'd be happy if she hooked up with either one. Having both is a bonus."

Eric grinned, the expression lighting up his whole face. "Nice way to look at it. Most people would fly into a fit of moral outrage."

Janice reached up to twirl a bright blue curl. "I've never been accused of being conventional. Happy is happy."

Eric nodded, turning his attention back to the three giddy dancers. Janice tried to think of something to say, something not too inane to get him to talk to her more. Eric beat her to it. "So did the boss snag you for the San Francisco trip?"

"I'm packing tonight," Janice answered, heart surging again at the possibility that the trip might go better than she imagined. Not a simple dry series of negotiations to follow, research, take notes for and possibly keep people from killing each other over. She hadn't considered that Eric would be there. "You?"

He nodded, lips pursed. "I'm team head. I'm glad you're on board. This one's going to be tricky. It's good to have dependable people with you."

"Drat, you mean there won't be any time for a quick Napa-Sonoma run?" Janice teased, a mock pout twisting her full lips.

Eric rewarded her with another shining smile. "Not unless things go much smoother than I anticipate. This merger could get ugly. It'll be good to have your calming influence around." His brow wrinkled in confusion with his next words. "People can't seem to stay angry around you."

Janice laughed, pink- and blue-streaked curls dancing around her face. "What can I say, I'm a people person," she snickered, not liking how close he was to the truth. "Even big-time power brokers respond to that."

"Whatever the reason, I like knowing I have skilled people on my team." Eric took a last draw on his glass before flagging down another waiter. "I better give my best wishes to the newlyweds. Need to get some things together at the office so I might get some sleep tonight."

He turned to her, tucking a pink lock behind her ear. "See you at the airport, bright and early."

Janice watched his tight ass walking away from her. *And how the hell am I supposed to act professional when he goes and does something like that?*

The sharp repetitive clank of metal on crystal dragged Janice's attention back to the happy trio. Her friend looked absolutely stunning. Lisa stood between her two men, her



wide smile brightening the room. Julian held a crystal flute, tapping on it with a silver spoon for attention.

The low din of the crowd hushed in anticipation. "Before everyone starts sneaking out we wanted to take a moment to thank all of you," he said, his own smile rivaling Lisa's. He put down the glass and took Lisa's hand as she took Tim's. "The three of us never had a real family, not the kind that cared for us. We had to make our own. But our family isn't just the three of us. It includes each and every one of you. Our friends."

As Julian's words faded Tim stepped forward. He looked over the crowd, nodding at a few smiling, teary-eyed faces. "Thank you for being there for us when we needed you and always being supportive. We hope that everyone here finds the same love and trust we have in each other."

Several women sighed. Even Janice's jaded heart filled with the hope and promise in his words. It was as if each and every person in the room could feel the emotions binding these three people together.

Finally Lisa edged forward, dwarfed by her husbands but with mischief lighting her eyes and making her seem somehow larger than life. "And thank you for all your well wishes. Now get out so the honeymoon can start."

The room burst out in laughter as Lisa grabbed the back of Tim's and Julian's heads. She dragged them down for a three-way kiss that left the room thundering with both whistles and applause.

*The End*

## About the Author

It's always the quiet ones. Mild-mannered Jenna Castille lives a rather normal life with her husband and daughter in Las Vegas. Only her husband and closest friends know about the twists and turns her imagination takes. She's loved fantasy and horror stories since childhood. Then she discovered romance and Romantica®. As a writer, she never could figure out which genre she liked better, so she decided throw them all in a pot and see what came out.

Her husband still shakes his head every time she describes one of her plots, but he's always more than willing to help with any "hands on" research she might require. And her friends love to read her stories. They tell her that at least now they understand the glassy stares and all the mumbling to herself. Happily, they don't have to worry about her anymore.

Being a writer is much better than being committed.

Jenna 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).

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