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A SISTER LEASHED STORY

SPIRITUAL
NOELLE

JET MYKLES

RATED: X-MAS

SPIRITUAL NOELLE

(A Sister LEASHED Story)

Jet Mykles

Loose Id.®

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage and homoerotic sex).

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Chapter One

December 5

I thought about my sister Meg during the entire train ride to Buffalo. Not so much about her involvement in not one but *two* deaths out where she lived in California, nor her subsequent exoneration as the cause of said deaths by a tribunal of grand leaders. No, despite the absence of Meg herself from the family festivities in Albany, those subjects had been the main topic of discussion during my Thanksgiving weekend at home, and I was thoroughly over it.

I was intrigued by her sex life. My little sister had leashed two shapeshifters, a rare feat in and of itself. But even more amazing was that, by all accounts, these men were not only gorgeous, but they had been lovers before she leashed them. I'd spoken to Meg myself on the phone on Thanksgiving before the family sat down to dinner. Although my sister was notoriously close-mouthed about her personal life -- when she had one -- I'd gotten enough to know that yes, the men were not only involved but that now all *three* of them were in a sexual relationship. Two men. My little sister had *two* men.

If she could, could I?

Despite a strong urge to do so, I didn't call her from the train. I wasn't sure she could really help in my situation. I wasn't entirely sure I *had* a situation.

But I had to try.

I waited until I arrived at the Depew station before I called the ones who I'd come to see. Timing was key. I'd carefully plotted my route from Albany so that there was no train headed back east after my arrival, figuring that they couldn't turn me away when I'd come so far. I stood at the window, staring out at the lightly falling snow, with my bags at my feet and my parka bunched over my arm, wondering who would pick up the landline.

"Hello?" Deep, rumbling bass. It was Jake.

I put on my "bright smile" tone. "Hi there!"

"Hey, Noelle." My heart warmed at the genuine affection in his voice. "How's things upstate?"

"It was okay." My voice was far more casual than I felt. I hoped. "But I'm back in Buffalo. Can you pick me up?"

"Back in Buffalo? Huh?"

"I'm at the Depew station."

"But ..."

"Can you come pick me up?"

"I, uh, well, sure. Sure thing. Uh ..."

There was a pause, and I shut my eyes, knowing what was happening. Sure enough, there were mutters off the phone.

The next voice that spoke was not Jake's. "You're in Buffalo?" I swallowed at the sound. Jake's soothing rumble was a welcome warmth, but Daniel's smooth tenor was a hot knife straight in my belly. A hot knife disguised in sumptuous black silk and velvet that popped something deep inside me and let it ooze out warm and wet between my legs. I closed my eyes and took a breath, keeping check on my emotions. "Yes."

“Why?”

“I came back to see you guys.”

“Why?”

I need you. Both of you. “I was worried about you.”

“Worried?”

I drew pictures with my finger in the dust on the little ledge before me. “You still don’t have things under control, Daniel. You’re my responsibility until you do.”

“We decided that I’d be fine until after the New Year.”

“I know.” *Darn it!* “But there’s all this time between Thanksgiving and Yule anyway. I figured I’d come back.”

“I’d think your family would have a million, what did you call them, ‘functions’ between now and then.”

“They do --” *Darn you for throwing my words back at me!* “-- but I’ve decided to opt out.”

“Why?”

“To help you.”

“Why?”

I grimaced at the slight reflection of my face in the window. “So you’re not going to come pick me up? It’s too late to go back.” I sighed dramatically. “I’ll have to get a room in town.”

He let the silence hang for agonizing moments. I hated it. Daniel might very well send me away, and I couldn’t come up with a better reason to be there. Well, other than the real reason, which I wasn’t ready to tell him. Yet.

“Jake will be there soon. You hang tight.”

“Thank you, Daniel.”

He grunted. “You guys should pick up some groceries while you’re at it. Looks like a storm’s coming in.”

Chapter Two

It was a good hour before Jake's green salt-and-grit-encrusted Dodge Ram truck pulled up. The station's night lights had come on to try to illuminate the darkening gray twilight. Snow left over from a fall a few days' previous formed blue-lavender mounds out near the street. I bent to pick up my small duffle bag and grab the handle of my big rolling suitcase and took both with me out the front doors.

He saw me, put the truck in park, and got out. Oh, he looked just as good as I remembered. Okay, yes, it had only been two weeks since I'd seen him, but it seemed like a very long two weeks. Big and burly, he almost looked like the bear that was his alternate form, except there wasn't an ounce of fat him. Jake was pure woodsman muscle from the top of his six-foot-three height to the soles of his size-fourteen boots. A riot of thick, deep brown hair curled around his head to about the length of his square jaw, blending into his trim, almost black beard. Today he wore faded, dark blue jeans and a green plaid flannel shirt underneath the open lapels of his olive army field jacket.

He hurried toward me and took the handle of my suitcase with one hand as he gathered me into a big bear hug with the other. Mmmm, no one does bear hugs like a bear, I tell you. He smelled of leather and firewood and musky, comforting man. I'd only known

him for three months, and already his smell warmed a piece of my heart that had been lonely during my time away.

I was in trouble. But then, I'd already reached that conclusion.

Flurries had started and the wind was biting, so we didn't talk until we were in the heated extended cab of the truck and he'd pulled out into the street.

"So. We didn't expect you 'til January." Jake's voice held just a touch of gravel. Always made me think of a bear's grumbly sounds.

"I know. But there was no real reason to stick around. Not much is going on that involves me until closer to Yule."

"So you're here for a week or two?"

I stared out the window, the easier to hedge around the truth. "Something like that." Truthfully, I didn't want to leave again. Ever. But he wasn't ready to hear that. Nor was I sure of any extended welcome.

"Your family okay with that?"

"Oh, sure." He didn't have to know that my mother was most decidedly *not* okay with it. I turned back and grinned at him. "Hey, are we going to the store?"

"Yeah. Daniel told you, we need to stock up." He gestured at the mountains of clouds in the night sky. "There's a big storm coming in."

"Good. Can we get some noodles and flank steak so you can make that stroganoff of yours? Please?!" I had discovered that bears -- at least this one -- are marvelous cooks!

He smiled and sent me a sideways glance. My heart swelled. Although he was far more subtle about it than Daniel, Jake was a beautiful man. He had these big, wonderful brown eyes that, while they could be mischievous, were the most honest things you'd ever seen. Top that off with the fact that they were surrounded by thick, dark lashes, and they were simply to die for. "Sure. We can do that."

I stopped at the end of the aisle, staring at the cacophony of red, white, and green Christmas paraphernalia. “Here Comes Santa Claus” was the latest of a string of far-too-catchy Christmas jingles that had been playing in the store since we arrived, and I blamed them for the idea that sprouted in my head.

Did I dare?

Yes.

“Jake?”

He stopped, about to go down the next aisle. “Yeah?”

“Did you guys get a tree?”

“Tree?”

“For Christmas.”

He frowned. “No.”

I clapped my hands once and beamed at him. “Let’s.”

“What?”

“Let’s get a tree and decorations and stuff.” I turned down the aisle, not waiting for him to respond. “My treat.”

He showed up with the cart and an unsure look on his face. “Noelle, I don’t know that this is a good idea.”

“Of course it is. It’s a *wonderful* idea.” I picked up two boxes of the little blinky lights and tossed them into the cart before reaching for a few more.

Jake picked up one box and eyed it dubiously. “I don’t think Daniel will want a tree.”

“Why not?” I dumped in a few boxes of gold and silver garland.

“I think he’s Jewish.”

I stopped, staring at the little Santa doorknob hanger in my hand. “Oh.” After a beat, I shrugged and restored it to the shelf, then stepped back toward the lights. “So we’ll get some blue lights.”

“Noelle ...”

“It’s not the denomination that really counts, Jake.” Resolute, I exchanged two boxes of the white lights for blue ones. “The Christmas tree is a holdover of an ancient Nordic belief anyway. Or was that Celtic? Gah, I’m bad at the exacts, but I assure you the idea was around long before a baby was born in Bethlehem.” I threw in a few boxes of multicolor lights just to add flavor. “It’s the thought that counts. The spirit of the holiday.”

I glanced at him. The word *spirit*, of course, had more than one connotation in our conversation. Jake’s brown eyes bore steadily into mine and I stared back.

Finally, I sighed. “He needs to lighten up, Jake; I’ve told you both that. What better than a little holiday cheer? This isn’t about any particular religion or belief. It’s about a cheery tree that smells good.” I leaned on the end of the shopping cart. “It’ll brighten up the house and give us something festive to do so we don’t have to think about his problem every minute of every day.”

Jake grimaced and started to reach for his pocket. “We should call and make sure.”

I rounded the cart and grabbed his arm to stop him. “If we call, he’ll say no. If we show up with everything, what can he do but pitch in and enjoy?” Okay, there were a few other possibilities, but I was determined not to think of those. “Think positive” was my motto, and I was determined to make this work. Just wasn’t entirely sure *how*. “Come now, you want to see him do something as silly as decorate a tree as much as I do.”

That got me a reluctant smile.

I leaned against his strong arm, pressing my cheek to the cool fabric of the jacket covering his shoulder. *My*, he had a solid muscle in there! “Please, Jake. It can’t hurt, and it could be a lot of fun.”

He tilted his head and looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

I batted my own at him.

He laughed. "Do you always get your way?"

I grinned, pushing up on tiptoe to plant a quick kiss to his warm cheek, loving the tickle of whiskers on my lips. "Not always, no."

He snorted, but said no more as I pulled away and proceeded to heap silly Christmas -- and a few Chanukah -- decorations onto the foodstuffs that already half-filled the cart. He even pitched in, laughing with me when we both put in the singing Rudolph doll with the apple-sized red nose that lit up.

It was getting very dark when we emerged from the store, so in the interests of time, we decided to get a tree at a lot not too far away. Jake refused to voice an opinion and merely shrugged when I finally decided on a plump, seven-foot Douglas fir.

We stood by the tree, waiting for the guy to finish with another customer and come take my money. I had my hands dug deep into the pockets of my light blue parka. Jake was less susceptible to the biting cold, so he just stood with his thumbs hooked in his back pockets, gloveless, watching the darkening sky. I envied him. Whether it was being a bear or whether it was the fact that he'd grown up used to it, Jake wasn't that susceptible to cold. His jacket wasn't even buttoned.

I shifted my boots through the thin layer of slush on the ground. Time to get all the information I could out of Jake before we reached Daniel. "Jake, was Daniel's problem with magic the only reason you two left the army?"

Jake dropped a surprised look on me.

I tilted my head to look up at him, brushing a lock of my straight blonde hair from my eyes, though the growing wind whipped it right back in my way. "Daniel told me it was the only reason, but I get the feeling it wasn't." I shrugged. The cold bit at my ungloved hand,

and I abandoned my hair in favor of the warmth of my pocket. “I meant to ask you before I left, but there never seemed to be a good opportunity.”

He hedged. “If Daniel said ...”

“Please, Jake, this is important. With how bottled up Daniel is, he’s likely not to tell me the very bit of information I need to know, just because he doesn’t want to remember or think about it.”

He mulled that over. I’d learned a few other things about him in the short time I’d known him. Chief among those things was that you just couldn’t push him to do things. I attributed it to his being a bear. You could suggest, wheedle, threaten, or cajole, but he ended up doing everything in his own time. It was best to make a suggestion or ask a question, then just let it lie. Luckily, he was pretty open-minded and very smart. Daniel was his best friend as well as his witch. He had to work with me here.

The tree guy came up to me before Jake could answer. I paid him, and Jake hefted the fir, showing an impressive amount of strength as he effortlessly carried it back to the truck and tossed it into the bed. He turned, and the look on his face stopped me as I would have rounded the truck to the passenger side. “They thought we were gay,” he murmured, then turned to the driver’s door.

Yes! I hurried around and climbed into my seat. “They thought you were gay, and that bothered Daniel?”

“Regular humans don’t know about the leashed thing, right? And there weren’t any other witches or shifters around us, even the officers in charge,” he continued as he turned the key in the ignition. He waited for a blue Toyota to pass before he pulled out of his parking space. “It bothered him a lot. They started making comments about how we were always together and how we always had to room together. How we were always going off alone together. We couldn’t tell them it was because of the magic.” Jake shrugged. “I didn’t care. Thought it might be a little easier if they did think we were gay. The whole ‘don’t ask,

don't tell' thing could've worked. But Daniel couldn't stand it. And the more it bugged him, the more they thought it. I guess, when I wasn't around, they teased him more."

Ah, well, that made sense. Jake was Daniel's leashed shapeshifter, which gave them a magical bond that compelled Jake to keep Daniel safe. Long before they met me, Daniel had cast a spell to draw Jake to him, then another to bind them as shifter and witch. It was a mostly one-sided arrangement, in favor of the witch, but most leashed relationships I'd known through my life ended up being an amicable situation, with the involved parties becoming good friends, if not more. Jake and Daniel had one of those relationships. The friendship that had developed between the two men during their time in the army and since almost made the leashing unnecessary. I couldn't imagine Jake ever voluntarily leaving Daniel. Daniel hadn't dissolved the spell, however. The leashing gave them an added metaphysical awareness of each other that was often useful. I sensed, in their case, there was something even *more*, but that would take careful investigation to verify. But I knew from experience that mundanes -- normal humans who aren't witches or shifters -- couldn't understand the closeness of the bond. It was often misconstrued and interpreted as a sexual relationship.

Jake's words confirmed what I'd found out when I'd called and asked their former lieutenant about it. I'd asked now so I could hear it from Jake's own mouth.

"Add to that the special treatment you guys got because of Daniel's abilities -- which you couldn't tell anyone about ..." I nodded and sat back in my seat, staring ahead at the snow fluttering across the road ahead. "I can see how that would cause quite a bit of jealousy."

"Not to mention the fact that he *is* pretty."

I studied his profile, but Jake just said it like it was a matter of fact. Which it was, but I couldn't tell how the fact affected him. "He is that," I mused. My heart went out to Daniel. True, he was a strong man in the prime of his life, but he was just naturally slim and, as Jake

said, pretty. I could imagine that the big lunks in the military could make life miserable for him.

Jake's smile was full of pride as he kept his eyes on the road, hands casual on the wheel. "I called him pretty as a girl when we first met. He gave me a good black eye for that one."

I chuckled, rolling my eyes. Like most women, I just didn't understand the joy men found in the fights they picked with one another.

We drove for a while in silence as I digested what he'd told me. Urban streets began to blend into rural roads as we headed for the densely forested area in which they lived. The wind picked up and pelted the truck with snow.

"It didn't bother you if they thought you two were gay?"

Jake shrugged. "Nah. Not like it was true. We knew it. Who cared what the others thought? Sure, we would've got in a few fights, but that would've passed. Wasn't like they were gonna discharge us or nothing, not with Daniel's skills."

I nodded. The need to keep the knowledge of magic from reaching the broad masses made it impossible for the gifted to be completely free among mundanes. I could only imagine what it would be like in the military when the big brass wanted to use a witch's special abilities.

He'd mentioned the time they first met. I frowned. My short conversation with their lieutenant hadn't allowed me to go into much detail, and Daniel had never been forthcoming with particulars. "When did he leash you?"

Jake's smile dimmed. "They made him cast the spell right after they drafted him."

"They *drafted* him?"

Jake nodded. "They found him when he was still in high school. They won't say he was drafted, and neither will he, but that's pretty much what they did." An edge of anger sounded in Jake's low, easy voice. "But he was eager enough to leave home. He's told you about that."

I nodded. Daniel had been open enough about his childhood. It hadn't been abusive, but it wasn't exactly what you'd call warm and happy. According to him, his dad, the navy man, was rarely around and his Japanese mom was more interested in living her own life in the States than in seeing to her only son.

"Well, after they had him, they decided 'cause he was young and pretty, he needed protection."

"Were you already enlisted?" From what he'd told me, the house that he and Daniel currently lived in south of Buffalo was where Jake had done much of his growing up with his aging grandparents.

"Nope. I was drafted, too. Daniel feels guilty about that, but I didn't mind."

"Your grandparents ...?"

"Were already dead. I was alone anyway." He shrugged. "It wasn't so bad for me. I wasn't doing so hot on my own."

"But he still feels guilty about it."

Jake nodded, eyes solemn in the dim light from the truck's gauges. "I expect."

I subsided, thinking. So now I had some answers to questions that had been niggling me. I knew some of the source of Daniel's guilt and fear. He thought he'd forced a life on Jake and likely felt he'd ruined Jake's life with the gay rumors. But Jake didn't seem to be at all upset. If anything, he seemed glad to have Daniel to protect. To have a focus in life.

So I had some answers. Now, what to do with them?

Chapter Three

We spoke of little, trivial things for the remaining drive south. The flurries were still going. Inky night surrounded us, making the snow seem to appear out of thin air as it hit the light from the headlamps. Always reminded me of watching *Star Trek* when they go into warp speed.

As we got closer to where they lived, I began to silently monitor our surroundings for spiritual activity. It was what I'd been sent to Daniel's side to help him with in the first place. He was a spirit witch, like me, but a mostly instinctual one. Before meeting me, he'd had practically no training in our particular form of magic, which was different enough that it did take a spirit witch to teach. But even without training, he could attract more spiritual energy than I could, and I was known as one of the strongest in our specialty. It was even more amazing since he was so young. I was days away from turning thirty-two and had not truly come into my spiritual powers until my late twenties. Daniel, however, was twenty-three, and not only could he wield more raw spiritual energy than I, but his gifts seemed to still be maturing. The strength of Daniel's gift was both a blessing and a curse. He was so strong that attracting and managing spirits had been easy for him during his developing years. His superior officers hadn't thought he'd needed any further training. Trouble was, his power had grown to the point where he simply couldn't contain the amount of spiritual

energy around him. His instinctive control was no longer sufficient. It was unwieldy and dangerous, both to him and those around him.

Spirits were not ghosts. They were not souls left over from life, nor did they have true consciousness. Spirits had never been alive and never would be so. They were metaphysical manifestations of nature that imbued everything around us. They were thoughts and feelings repeated over and over by dozens or hundreds of people around one particular area. Spirits were always there, even in places considered “dead.” In places where people felt there was an “alive” feeling, they were often reacting to a strong concentration of spiritual energy. Strong, malevolent spirits were sometimes called poltergeists when they inhabited old houses and such. Ancestral homes might have a benevolent spiritual energy that had looked out for the family that lived there for generations. A spirit witch could serve to mass spiritual energy, dispel it, or “talk” to it. Spirits were great that way. A spirit mass that had inhabited a place for a long time knew the entire history of that place. I’d once visited the Parthenon in Athens and spent days just listening to and learning from the amazing amount of spiritual energy. It wasn’t always coherent and rarely linear, but -- to me, at least -- always fascinating.

In Daniel’s case, spiritual energy amassed around him without conscious thought on his part. Spiritual energy wasn’t visible to anyone but spirit witches, and a spirit witch can’t see the aura of that type of energy that surrounds themselves, so no one had seen it happening until his control was nearly shot. The army had hoped to have him plant spiritual energy in enemy territory, then either use it to spook enemy troops or for espionage. But they couldn’t use him unless or until he could control it. As he was now, he made mundanes uneasy in his presence, because even the non-gifted could feel the pulsing cloud that surrounded him. Instinct had taught him to redirect some of it, but by the time they called me, he’d amassed so much around him that he couldn’t do anything with it. He now lived with Jake in Jake’s secluded home for a reason. The forest was a better place to accommodate that much energy

than a congestion of manmade structures. Abundant plant life or natural mineral formations had a diffusive effect on spirits.

In the three months I'd worked with him, things had improved greatly. When I'd first arrived, I felt the spiritual buzz from miles away. Even someone who wasn't sensitive probably would have felt it when they turned onto the dirt road that led up to Jake's cabin. Daniel, however, must have indeed been doing well, I decided as we made that very turn. I couldn't sense any abnormal spiritual activity on the road, nor as we approached the cabin. At least he hadn't lost any ground while I was gone.

On the one hand, I was proud that Daniel was doing well. On the other, I was anxious at losing my main excuse for being near him and Jake. It made my secret plans for the upcoming days even more important.

The little house was nestled on a gradual slope leading into a valley that cradled a tributary of one of the nearby rivers. The cluster of sycamore trees surrounding the genuine rough-hewn log cabin helped to keep the wind factor down. At least a foot and a half of snow coated the ground where it hadn't been cleared. Although it was a cabin, it had all the modern amenities: indoor plumbing, electricity from a pretty powerful generator, and a huge satellite for television, phone, and internet access. A born city girl, I'd been deathly afraid of having to rough it when my mother had given me the assignment, but had been pleased to find that was not the case.

He heard us coming, or felt Jake's approach. Whichever, a second, brighter outside light flipped on to augment the dimmer one that turned on automatically as the sky turned dark. Daniel emerged from the door of the covered porch just as Jake parked the Dodge in front of the house.

My heart caught at the sight of him. Even though I couldn't see him very well through the dark and snow, I could well guess his features. I'd memorized them in such detail that they'd haunted my dreams during the weeks I was gone. Just a bit taller than me, Daniel had one of those bodies that could never be massive with muscle. His bone structure simply

wouldn't support it. He would always be slim, no matter what he did to bulk up. Which was not to say that he wasn't ripped. I'd seen him once without a shirt in our time together, and the image was indelibly etched in my mind. He had shoulder-length, glossy black hair that seemed to have trapped some merlot wine in it for highlights, and a long, elegant face with the most gorgeous mouth the Goddess had ever created. All this and big, beautiful slanted brown eyes with the thickest lashes I'd ever seen on a man. He'd never told me the ancestry of his father, but the blood of his Japanese mother came through loud and clear.

He hurried forward to help with the groceries, hatless, with an open green jacket thrown over his thick sweater and jeans. His black hair whipped about his head, making him look elemental. Wild. He came to an abrupt halt when he saw the tree dominating the truck's bed.

I stepped out of the passenger side and loaded my arms with bags from the backseat to delay the inevitable. Jake did the same.

Daniel didn't let us get away with it. He appeared at Jake's side and glared at me over the backseat. "What's with the tree?"

"Hi, Daniel," I said brightly. "It's good to see you."

He grimaced, a travesty for those generous lips, but it was his normal expression. He cocked his head. "Noelle, what are you up to?"

"I'm not *up to* anything," I said, keeping my smile as I took my armful around the front of the truck and toward the door. "Other than what I was sent to you to do."

I left them behind, managing the porch door even with plastic bags hanging from my forearm and fingers.

The inside of the cabin was warm, thanks to the fire in the fireplace and the wonderful little pot-belly stoves, one in the corner of the main room and one toward the back to keep the downstairs bedrooms toasty. The place was furnished with typical cabin furniture, nearly all of it made of sturdy cedar, which matched the planked walls. Painted scenes of wildlife

hung on the walls between mounted wood carvings Jake's granddad had made. The television was on, but the sound was down. A hallway directly across from the front door led to two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a utility room with another door that opened to the back yard. A staircase dominated the right wall of the cabin, leading up to Daniel's open loft bedroom and its small half-bathroom.

Darn it if I didn't feel like I was coming home! I allowed myself a small sigh since neither of the men could hear it.

I took my bags to the left and dumped them on the heavy dining table that stood half in the kitchen and half in the main living area. The men were only moments behind, two sets of strong arms easily getting the last of the bags.

Jake turned to go back outside.

I kept taking things out of bags and setting them on the table, steeling myself as Daniel dropped his bags on the table and shrugged out of his jacket. "What's with the tree?"

I took a deep breath, then looked up at him, hoping that the flip of my heart didn't show on my face. Goddess! One man should not be allowed to be this gorgeous. It simply wasn't fair to poor little mortal women and their fragile hearts. Even in a bulky gray sweater and relaxed jeans, he was a wonder to behold, despite his skeptical scowl. "I thought it would brighten up the place."

He draped the jacket over the back of a chair. "None of us are Christian."

I tilted my head to the side, widening my eyes. Sometimes the blue-eyed blonde innocent look was enough of a distraction to get me out of conversations that I didn't want to have. "Are you really Jewish?"

He blinked, and some of his anger slid off into confusion. "No. What gave you that idea?"

"Someone told me you were." I glared at Jake as he entered with my duffle bag and suitcase.

“You told her I was Jewish?”

Jake flushed and shrugged, setting my luggage near the couch, then going back to stand by the door, no doubt waiting to see if he was to bring in the tree or not.

Daniel rolled his eyes at him, but shrugged it off and returned his irritation to me. Goody. “Whatever. That’s not the point, Noelle. We don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“What do you celebrate?”

“What?”

“What *do* you celebrate, Daniel? Anything? What time of year do you set aside to just be happy and do silly things? When do you just kick back, take a break, and enjoy the company of those you care for?”

He frowned and didn’t deign to answer.

I nodded, calmly balling up one of the empty plastic bags. “Just as I thought. You don’t, do you? Ever.”

The right side of his mouth lifted in a small snarl. “I don’t have a hell of a lot to celebrate.”

“That is entirely untrue. You have your life. You live in this beautiful cabin. Most of your expenses are paid for by the US military. You have the best kind of friend and companion in Jake.” I picked up steaks wrapped in butcher paper and went to put them in the freezer. “And you’ve got me.”

A glance over my shoulder showed his arms crossed and one slim, jet-black brow arched. That brow was so perfectly shaped that it looked painted on. I wanted to run my index finger over it to see if it felt as sleek as it looked.

Stop that!

“We don’t need a tree.” From his tone, you’d think he was the oldest of us and not the youngest. But he was definitely the one calling the shots. I’d discovered that early on. Woe to anyone who challenged him.

Like me. “Actually, I think you do.”

“Why is that?”

“You need to lighten up.”

He cast his gaze toward the beamed ceiling and sighed. “That again.”

“Yes. That again.” I returned to the table for more groceries. “You’ve got this dark cloud hanging over you, Daniel, and as long as it’s there you’ll never bring the spirits completely under control.”

“I thought you said my cloud was neon blue?”

It was my turn to glare, even if I knew I wasn’t as practiced at it as he. “Ha ha. You know what I mean.”

He stared at me, and I forced myself to stare back. He didn’t quite believe that it was his emotions that kept the spiritual energy out of whack. We’d been having this argument almost since I’d started working with him. I’m pretty sure Daniel was convinced -- or wanted to be convinced -- that he didn’t *have* emotions.

Not surprisingly, I relented first. *I’m a reed; I can bend.* “What can it hurt?” I asked softly, hoping a bit of hurt came through in my voice and manner. Manipulative? Me? *No!* “I’m not proposing the entire Christmas celebration, or even Yule. I just thought it’d be fun. When’s the last time you decorated a tree?”

He breathed in, the nostrils of that slim nose flaring. “Not since I was a kid.”

“Exactly.”

“It wasn’t fun then.”

His mom even ruined that?! Best not to discuss it. “But it will be this time. This time it’s me and Jake, and we care for you. We want to help you.” I took a chance and stepped toward him, reached out and put hesitant fingers on the back of his hand. His hand, not his forearm, because I just had to touch that warm, pale skin. “Please, Daniel. It can’t hurt and it could help. And it’ll give us something to do when the storm throws the satellite out.”

He glanced down at my hand, and I braved myself to keep it there. His dark eyes darted back up to my face. He sighed, stepping back, breaking contact. "Okay. Have it your way." He turned to the table and pulled the reindeer doll with the light-up nose from the bag. His look of open-mouthed horror was priceless. "*This* is *not* being hung anywhere in the house."

I laughed and exchanged a happy glance with Jake just before he went to fetch the tree.

Chapter Four

Daniel and I finished putting the groceries away while Jake brought the tree in to the porch. Then they started on dinner. Jake pulled out the flank steak, noodles, and other ingredients for the stroganoff.

Daniel saw the ingredients and raised an eyebrow at me. "Your request?"

I smiled. "What can I say? You have me addicted!"

He shook his head, but made no further comment on the meal as he unwrapped the meat and got a knife to cut it.

I busied myself with first stashing my luggage in the spare bedroom across the hall from Jake's, then moving the tree decorations to the coffee table. I took my time with the decorations, though, because I was really watching the boys.

They worked so well together. Almost like one person. Jake sliced onions, then started them sautéing with the mushrooms. Daniel finished with the meat, then started the noodles. Jake asked Daniel about the football game he'd abandoned to come pick me up, and Daniel filled him in. While they discussed the finer points of football, I got the teakettle, filled it, then took it to the potbelly stove to heat to avoid getting in their way. Not that interested in the sport, I just listened, enjoying their camaraderie. They were very close friends, which

was always a good thing between witch and shifter. There was a deep caring between them. I couldn't quite convince Daniel that Jake's shared strength was probably the only thing that had kept the spiritual energy from tearing him apart. He'd been taught that the leash was a one-way spell to control the shifter. He wasn't prepared to believe some of that could reflect back on or help the witch.

I perched on the stool near the stove to wait for the water to heat. Did they even notice how close they stood to each other? I'd grown up with plenty of men around the house -- my mother's bodyguards and employees, mostly -- and not even the closest of friends remained so far within the other's personal space. I watched Daniel lean in to add the meat to the sauté. His shoulder actually brushed Jake's and neither of them flinched. Yes, it was brief and casual, but such touches were usually solely reserved for lovers. But they weren't lovers. I believed that they thought they were only friends, but their body language said so much more.

Now, if I could only show them that, part of my goal would be reached.

When I went to get a mug and fetch tea and the infuser, Daniel refocused on me. He put his back to the counter, crossing his arms as he propped his tight little butt against the cabinet's edge. Casually, he flipped glossy black hair from his brow, although it fell right back seconds later. "Noelle, why did you really come back?"

I walked away from him toward the water whistling softly in the kettle atop the stove. "I told you. I was worried about you." Truth. I didn't have to admit there was more to it.

"Why? You were okay to leave in the first place."

Could I hope that he was upset that I'd left? I poured steaming water into my mug. "I was sent to help you. You've managed to contain most of your attraction to spirits, but you still don't have much control." I turned with the mug cradled in my hands, breathing away the steam as I crossed the room back to the dining table.

He pushed an exasperated breath through perfect lips. "Have I slipped while you were gone?" He had to ask me because a witch can't see their own spirit aura. It's like trying to see the back of your neck. You know it's there, but you can't twist around to see it. Others, however, with the proper gifts can see it fine.

I looked up at him and deliberately skewed my sight so I could not only see the plainly visible but also the metaphysically visible. To him, it would look like I was kind of looking blankly past him, sort of cross-eyed.

Daniel's spirit aura was amazing. Everyone had a spirit glow to them, even mundanes. This is not the aura that some of the non-gifted have learned to see and even photograph. Spirit energy lends to that aura, but it is, in fact, something different. The non-gifted see auras in many colors, whereas the aura that a spirit witch sees is always in varying shades of blue, from almost greens to deep purples and all through the deep and light blues. I'm told my color was lavender to cerulean blue, depending on my mood. Daniel's color was vivid, neon blue with strange midnight streaks throughout.

When I'd first met him, the roiling blue cloud immediately surrounding him had extended fully ten feet in all directions with a piercing ice blue shot through the farthest edges like a cloud's silver lining. The cloud extended even farther when he was agitated, and it had looked like it had tentacles, reaching out to touch everything surrounding him. On occasion, it would even knock things down, which was the dangerous part. He'd had, in effect, a poltergeist riding him, and it would occasionally reach out to do things to the physical world. Usually it was harmless enough, like knocking things off shelves, but Jake had related one horror story about Daniel's energy throwing the truck Jake was driving out of gear while they were on a particularly serpentine road.

In our time together, Daniel had reined in much of that wild power so that his aura was only about a foot surrounding him and the energy couldn't affect the physical world. He still radiated more than the average person and still did not have it quite under control, but it was far more manageable. I still didn't quite know what the darker blue streaks meant. The

research I'd done while away hadn't given me anything other than that they indicated some emotional state.

What was most interesting about Daniel's aura, however, was its active nature. It was the busiest aura I'd ever seen, with very strange behavior. For one thing, the midnight color extended in sinuous tendrils down the glowing yellow leash connecting him with Jake. I'd never seen anything like it. The root of the leash that could only be seen with magical sight was anchored in Daniel's heart and reached in two trails to Jake, the end of one trail winding around Jake's neck like a collar and the other around the base of his cock like a cock ring. The leash was common enough -- although the root in Daniel's heart was not as common; most leashes were rooted in the witch's hand -- but the extension of spirit energy down it was not. During my time away, I'd consulted with a few other spirit witches about it, and none of them had heard of it either, even the two who had leashed shifters of their own. The dark blue vines tapered to nothing before they actually reached Jake, but the fact of their existence was puzzling.

I'd told Daniel about the neon blue with the shots of darker blue through, but I'd kept the fact of it creeping down Jake's leash to myself. I wanted to know what it meant first before I worried him with it. Although I was now under the impression I knew what it meant, I still kept it to myself. For now. "Your aura looks the same as when I left," I told him, blowing on my tea again.

He nodded. "See?"

"But not any better."

His eyes shuttered. "I'm working on it. At least I kept it steady. Besides, I knew you were coming back." He turned to the refrigerator. "I know I'm not there yet." He extracted a bottle of beer and opened a drawer to rummage for the bottle opener. "But you didn't have to come and baby-sit."

I shook my head. If only he knew. "That's not it."

“Then why are you here?”

I smiled at him. “I enjoy your company.”

Another arched brow told me he didn’t believe me.

I sipped at the tea that was just now cool enough to drink. “I come from a huge, very political family, Daniel. The holiday season with the Grays is spent traveling to various places between Albany and D.C., posturing and showing off. There’s very little cheer, and you always have to watch what you say. I’m not a member of my mother’s coven, so I wouldn’t be participating in the Yule or solstice rituals anyway. To be honest, you’re a very welcome excuse to get away from all that.” Which was mostly true.

“That must be awful,” Jake chimed in, nudging Daniel forward so he could get into the refrigerator behind him.

“It’s not horrible, but it can be tiring.” I shrugged, noting the casual slide of Jake’s hand off Daniel’s shoulder as the younger man stepped forward to give him room. “I grew up with it. With my mother who she is and being one of her seven daughters, it was expected of me.” My mother was the grand dame of the Northwest United States. It made her the leader of witches and shifters in her region. Where my mother was concerned, it sometimes extended outside of her sixth of the country. Her influence also extended into the realm of the mundane, but we weren’t supposed to talk about that.

Neither did Daniel know much about that, other than that the army had called my mother for someone to help him. “So we’re an excuse?”

I didn’t like the sharp edge to Daniel’s voice, but I wasn’t sure which part of what I’d said got to him. I smiled and stood, stepping up to reach above the counter to open the cabinet. “Yes. A welcome one.” I pulled out three plates and turned back to the table. “To be honest, I haven’t decorated a tree myself in over a decade. Mom’s trees always had to be just so. I’m looking forward to it.”

“You decorated trees as a kid?” Jake asked.

“Yes. We did. Like I told you in the store, the tree decorating was not originally a Christian thing. They just adopted it. Heck, most of the Christmas traditions are like that. Mom didn’t see any reason why we couldn’t enjoy Christmas just like our friends in school. To the mundanes, we’re supposedly a good Christian household.”

Jake laughed at that. “I never knew that. But then, my grandparents were devout Catholics and real good at not seeing what they didn’t want to know.”

I sensed an underlying meaning to his casual words, but didn’t press.

Daniel pulled the bag of pre-mixed salad from the refrigerator and stepped up to the cabinet to get a bowl. “Doesn’t your name mean Christmas?”

I paused, fingers on the drawer containing the silverware, and smiled at him, delighted he knew it. Well, okay, it was an easy one to know, but still. “Yes, it does. In French.”

“More of the front of being a ‘good Christian household’?”

I got out three forks and a serving spoon. “No. Mom named me that because my father’s French and I was born on Christmas day.”

“Christmas is your birthday?” Jake asked as I set out the forks.

“Yes.”

“Aw, man, you should’ve told us. We would have gotten you something.” He turned to the stove to stir the sauce. “How old will you be?”

Older than you. I returned for glasses and swatted his arm. “You don’t ask a woman her age, silly man!”

“What? You’ll be the ripe old age of twenty?”

“Sweet talker.”

He winked at me. “You know it.” He laughed and bent to bestow a kiss on my cheek. He turned back to the stove. “All right, you guys sit down. This is ready.”

“Get off me!”

“Come on.”

“Let go, Jake.”

Jake completely disregarded the daggers Daniel glared and hauled him off the couch to his feet. He proceeded to shove a shiny red ball into Daniel’s hand and force him to the tree. I watched, laughing, fascinated. He did it by stepping up behind Daniel, pressing back to chest, and literally walking him forward with both hands securely fastened to Daniel’s upper arms. When they reached the tree, he grabbed Daniel’s wrist and lifted his arm, ornament and all, toward the waiting tree bough.

“See?” he said, holding Daniel’s shoulders once the ball was hung. “Was that so bad?”

Even Daniel’s sulk was pretty, emphasizing the plump curve of his lower lip. “Yes.”

Jake smacked the back of his head. “Scrooge!”

“This game is for you two.” Daniel scowled, glaring at the ornament. He tried to step away, but Jake held him by sliding one arm about his shoulders. It secured Daniel’s back to his chest. While it was a borderline acceptable pose for close friends, it was also a perfect pose for lovers and sent my imagination into overdrive. Daniel showed no reaction to it other than to stare resolutely at the tree and its blinking lights, his arms now crossed over his chest.

Jake leaned in closer to his ear. “It’s for you, too, buddy. *Smell* that!”

Since his nostrils were flaring, Daniel couldn’t help but pull in the spicy scent of Douglas fir.

Jake stepped back, then slapped Daniel’s back, turning to get more ornaments. “Lighten up and help us.”

Daniel grimaced, but he stayed where he was beside the tree.

I turned away before he could see my amused smile. Or was it aroused? They looked so good together!

To my delight, he actually came to the table and picked up another ornament. "If I don't help, you'll be all night about it," I heard him grumble. "It's already midnight."

"That's the spirit!" Jake crowed.

The coffee table contained far more than the paltry ornaments Jake and I had purchased at the store. Since Daniel had given in, after dinner Jake disappeared into the storage shed attached to his woodworking shop out back and returned with boxes of his family's Christmas decorations. Much to Daniel's chagrin, there was now a wreath on the inside of the front door -- "where we can see it," Jake had declared -- and a few garlands waiting to be strung along the staircase banister.

"Hey, don't turn that!" Daniel protested when Jake grabbed the remote and flipped away from the football game he'd been watching.

"It's recorded. You can watch it later." He flipped to the satellite's seasonal station, but got nothing but static. "Damn."

It looked like the storm had well and truly settled in outside. We could occasionally hear the howl of the wind, but the thick walls of the cabin mostly muffled it.

"See?" Daniel paused by the coffee table, a delicate white filigree angel in one hand and a wire decoration hanger in the other. "Put the game back on."

"No way. I've got a better idea." Jake crouched before the cabinet underneath the stereo. It was where all the CDs his grandparents had owned still sat. Moments later, as Daniel and I continued with the tree, Jake stood with a handful of CD cases in hand. I saw flashes of bright red and green. My suspicion that he'd found their Christmas collection was confirmed when Elvis came on singing "Santa Claus is Back in Town."

Daniel groaned and shook his head, but continued to help decorate, which I found heartening.

Jake, delightedly animated, picked up another item from the storage box and began to unwrap it.

I was beginning to wonder if the tree would hold all that we had for it.

Things became surreal when the CD reached “Blue Christmas” and Jake started to sing. He wasn’t horrible, but he wasn’t entirely on key. It was worse because he insisted on copying Elvis as closely as he could, complete with a truly pathetic attempt at the King’s famous hip swing.

Daniel’s reaction was positively comical. He stood frozen beside the tree, staring with wide eyes and jaw agape at Jake.

“What?” Jake asked when he noticed.

“What are you doing?”

“Singing.”

“Is that what you call it?”

Jake beamed, pulling up a long rope of gold and silver garland. “Yup.”

He started up again and caught me off guard by wrapping the garland around me and pulling me into his arms.

I was laughing so hard that I had to follow his lead or fall to a giggling heap on the floor.

Daniel became engrossed with decorating the tree, careful to keep his distance from us as we danced. Jake and I amused ourselves through Elvis and into a Burl Ives album, but we had to attack Daniel with the light-up reindeer when “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” came on. He ran from us, but we cornered him and I almost caught him smiling as he wrestled Jake to the ground for the thing. When he snatched it up and threatened to throw it into the firebox of the potbelly stove, we laughingly surrendered.

Since Jake was tallest, he got to put the angel on top of the tree. It was a lovely, delicate piece with a dress that his grandmother had crocheted by hand. We all stood back, staring at the twinkling lights among the gaily colored balls decorating the boughs, drinking in the

singular biting smell of Christmas tree. We hadn't managed to put all of the decorations Jake had found on the tree, but some of them were now scattered across the tables and chairs around the room, giving the room a decidedly holiday feel. It was a satisfying experience.

I slanted a glance at Daniel and twisted my sight. I had to suppress a grin. The bright neon surrounding him was subdued. The cloud wasn't tumbling and rolling over itself so much. Curiously, the midnight blue was like a lining around it, also calm. The tendrils around the leash were thinner but looked more solid, and they extended just a bit farther toward Jake. *Interesting.*

Jake distracted me by taking my hand. Startled, I turned to him and was surprised to be folded into a hug.

Smiling, I hugged back.

"Thank you," he murmured in my hair, sliding his hands across my back. "I haven't done this since ..." His breath hitched, and he rubbed his cheek against the top of my head. "... since before they were gone." Judging by his tone, "they" would be his grandparents. From all he'd told me, I gathered that they had been strict but the love amongst the small family had been wholly mutual. He hugged me tighter, then kissed the top of my head. "Thank you. This is the most fun I've had in ages."

I beamed as he pulled back. Before I could say anything, he cradled my face in his big, warm hands and bent to bestow a simple kiss on my lips. It might have lasted just a bit too long. Not that I was complaining.

He smiled as I blinked, then released me. He glanced over my shoulder to where Daniel stood. "I'm beat. I'm gonna hit the hay." He stepped away from me toward the hall that led to the back rooms. "See you guys in the morning."

I turned to Daniel, and the warm fuzziness that surrounded my heart chilled. The look he gave me had a hard edge. I could almost see the blue cloud surrounding him, guessing it

was no longer quiescent. But I didn't dare alter my vision. He'd see it, and I wasn't sure what had upset him. Had he taken offense at the hug? The kiss? Or was this something else?

I didn't get an answer. He nodded curtly, said what I think was "good night," and retreated upstairs.

I was left staring at the merry Christmas tree, wondering where the peace of just a little while ago had gone.

Chapter Five

December 13

It was so dark when my eyes opened that my sleepy mind first thought it was still night. But a glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand told me that it was eight a.m. I rolled onto my back, letting my hand escape the warm cocoon of my blankets to rub sleep from my eyes. It was quiet. The storm of the past week had tapered into an on-again, off-again snowfall. This was certainly turning out to be a grand, white Yule season. I stayed where I was, cozy in the warmth of blankets and quilt, and dozed for a little while more.

Eventually, noise in the other room and the smell of coffee woke me. Jake was at his morning routine. The man could be completely silent, but he chose to make little noises in the morning to wake us up. Like me, Daniel was not a morning person. If Jake was actually making noise, however, that meant that he intended to go out for a while. He liked for at least one of us to be conscious before he went outside.

I sat up, yawning. *So, what to do with Daniel today?* I mused as I braved the chill in the air and hurriedly stuffed myself into stretchy Lycra-cotton leggings, a long green skirt, and a gaudy green-and-red-striped sweater. Thick red socks served to keep my tootsies warm.

A week since I'd returned to the cabin, and things had settled back into the same routine as right before I'd left. Jake would get us up, see us fed -- or at least put coffee in one or the other of us -- and then he'd leave for most of the day. He either went roaming the forest in his other form, or if weather didn't permit, he went out back to his woodworking shop. Despite the fact that bears hibernate during the winter, Jake was perfectly fine being awake. Seemed shapeshifter bears had different winter routines. Jake's absence gave Daniel and me a chance to work on "the magic stuff," as Jake put it. Daniel and I would decide how to tackle his training that day and spend hours on that. The only difference now was that when Jake returned, we did something Christmassy instead of watching sports all night.

I smiled, leaving the spare bedroom for the bathroom across the hall. Daniel was not enamored of the turn of events. Over the course of a few nights, Jake and I had dismantled and redecorated the tree twice, had spent a night making and decorating sugar cookies with the ingredients we'd bought that first night I'd come back, and had even spent one hilariously frustrating night with Jake trying to teach me how to carve. I was horrible at it. His wood carving looked exactly like a cute little brown reindeer; mine had turned out looking like a four-legged duck. But I didn't mind. It was fun and kept us amused, especially on the nights that the storm blocked the satellite reception. On the nights when we could watch television, we vetoed most of Daniel's leaning to watch sports and turned on whatever Christmas specials we could find.

After my morning bathroom routine, I put a barrette with a sprig of holly into my short blonde hair. Big blue eyes blinked at me over what I'm told is my characteristic smile. I like to smile. It makes me feel good and seems to have a similar effect on those around me. Most of the time, anyway.

Jake chuckled when he saw my outfit. Daniel, seated on the couch with a cup of coffee cradled in his lap, just glanced up, blank face totally unreadable.

Jake placed a mug of coffee into my hands and kissed me briefly on the cheek, passing me on his way out back. He went, barefoot and coatless, down the hall to the utility room. I

squelched the urge to follow him and watch him change. A moment later, the back door opened and then slammed, shut securely by the weight of a bear.

I leaned on the half-wall between the main room and the kitchen, nursing my coffee. “Well,” I said after the silence had drawn on. “Should we try some meditation?”

Daniel’s profile was to me, sharp and defined as he stared intently at the tree. His black hair was pulled back into a tail secured at his neck, but shorter strands trailed along his temples and cheeks. A dark blue sweater hugged the curves of his chest and arms, and jeans encased the long legs he had stretched out before him. He shrugged and twisted to put his mug on the side table by the couch. As I put my own cup on the sideboard against the back of the couch, he got up and pushed the coffee table from the rug to allow us to take our accustomed places in the center of the woven design.

No sooner had I settled my butt on the rug than Daniel leaned forward to grab my arms and shake me.

“Don’t sleep with him!”

I blinked, completely caught off guard. “Excuse me?”

He knelt before me, eyes narrowed. “I’ve watched you. I figured it out. You came back to sleep with Jake!”

“No, I didn’t ...” *Not entirely.*

“You’re attracted to him. I can understand that. It’s just ...” He closed his eyes, swallowed, a look of pure anguish passing over his exquisite features. His fingers squeezed my arms, and I’m not sure he knew he hurt me. “Just don’t. Please. Not now. Not ...” He shook his head.

I leaned into his grip, staring intently into his face. “Daniel.” When he didn’t open his eyes, I bent my elbows to grab his forearms and shook him slightly. “Daniel.”

Sharp brown eyes opened to me.

“Tell me why.”

He frowned. "Why?"

"Why don't you want me to sleep with him?"

He released me and sat back on his heels, but I pushed forward to kneel, keeping my grip on his arms.

"Tell me why, Daniel."

He tried to act cool, brushing my hands off. His eyes darted away from mine. "Because I don't want to be around the two of you acting all lovey dovey."

I ducked my chin and tilted my head, trying to reestablish eye contact. "No, there's more to it than that."

"No."

"Yes. I told you, you've got to be open with me if I'm going to help you."

He scowled. "This has nothing to do with the spirits."

"This has everything to do with the spirits. It has to do with your peace of mind."

He frowned, blinked, stared at me. He wanted to deny it; I saw it in his face. But he couldn't. "I am being honest. I'm asking you not to ... I ..." His voice got steadily softer as he went on until the last was barely a whisper. "I don't want to see you with him. I couldn't handle it. Not ... now."

"Why? Because you want to sleep with me?" I paused just a second, wondering if the next sentence was wise. Instinct told me I had to. "Or because you want to sleep with him?"

Anger flared, coloring his alabaster cheeks. He reared up on his knees, grabbing my arms to yank me nose to nose with him. "I'm not gay!"

"Are you sure?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I was committed now. "I've seen you around Jake. You guys are so close --"

"We're close, so that means we're *gay*?!"

“Daniel, that’s not all there is. The way you two ...”

His nostrils flared. His eyes went wide, then narrowed. Quick as a viper, he hauled me up to his chest and forced his lips on mine.

I’d known this was a possible reaction. I’d be a hypocrite to say that a part of me didn’t want it. The few touches I’d been allowed on that beautiful body hadn’t done anything to lessen my desire to rub against him like a cat in heat. I probably should have backed away and forced him to talk to me, but *oh*, even if his kiss did mash my teeth into my lips, he felt *good*.

At first he was punishing me, pressing his lips to mine and holding me pinned. I think it was when I clutched his waist, or maybe it was when a happy little moan escaped my throat, that the kiss changed. He backed off from the hurt and tilted his head for better access. I went with him, opening my lips to suck in his bottom lip. It was his turn for a little moan as he opened his mouth on mine, disengaging his lips to make room for his tongue to plunge in. Finally he released the harsh grip on my arms, sliding one hand up to cup the back of my skull and slipping the other around my waist to hold me up against him. *Sweet Goddess!* His chest was hard and his arms were strong and he tasted so darn good. I cursed the layers of clothing that prevented me from feeling his hardness against my bare skin.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and desperately devoured his mouth.

He bent a bit and wound an arm around underneath my rear end. He lifted me slightly so he could tilt my body and gently lower me to the rug, without ever breaking the kiss.

I gratefully accepted his weight as he settled on top of me, arms coming up under my back to hold me. I parted my legs and threw them around his waist, that eager to hold him close.

He managed to pry our lips apart, but had to bring a hand up to peel my arm from around his neck to do it.

I whimpered, switching my lips to his neck. I folded my fingers with his to keep his hand from pushing me away. When I bit his earlobe, he groaned.

“Noelle ...”

“Please, Daniel, please.” I heard the begging in my voice and didn’t care. I wasn’t above begging for this. “Please.”

“We can’t ...”

“We can.”

“Jake ...”

“You could call him back.”

He raised his head and looked at me clearly. I swallowed, afraid I’d gone too far. But then his eyes shadowed and he lowered his lips to mine again. “Very funny.”

I moaned to feel his hand bunching up my skirt at my side.

When he found the leggings, he grunted. “What the hell have you got on?”

“Give me two seconds and I can be out of them.”

He took me at my word. He went up on his knees, grabbed the hem of his sweater, and ripped it off.

I lay there, stunned by the pale glory of his hairless chest. A year out of the army’s physical regimen had probably softened some of the chiseled edges of his muscles, but not so much that he wasn’t still cut. I could count the taut hills of his six-pack quite easily.

His hands went to the buttons of his jeans, but he paused, eyeing me meaningfully.

Oh, yeah, the leggings. I pulled my knees up and shimmied out of them and my socks, all the while trying to watch him as he unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down his thighs along with the blue silk boxers he wore underneath. I tossed my leggings behind me and pushed up to rip off my sweater. I left the skirt bunched around my waist, not daring to take the time to remove it.

He didn't give me a chance to get out of my bra. He was back on top of me, one arm sliding up under my shoulder and the other pumping the hard, red cock that I'd unfortunately only glimpsed. Our lips met and my legs fell open.

At times like this, I did love being a witch. My magic gave me enough control over my body that I couldn't get pregnant without allowing it. Since he was human, I technically could get a sexually transmitted disease, but I couldn't fathom a situation where Daniel might have caught one. So there was no need for a condom to sheath that wonderful erection as he smeared the head through the folds of my sex.

"So wet," he murmured against my lips. "You want me that bad?"

"Goddess, yes!" I cried, rolling my hips up into him, trying to get him to hurry. "Please."

He set the head at my opening and pushed hard.

I groaned, clutching his back and burying my face in his neck. "Oh, so good," I muttered, winding my legs around his waist so I could push at his tight little butt with my heels. "More."

He muttered something I couldn't translate, but I also didn't care. His fingers clutched in my hair as he slammed home.

I arched back, mouth open to scream. He slapped his free hand over my lips just in time to muffle the sound. I cried out into his palm as he pulled out and rammed back home.

This was every bit as good as I'd imagined.

I lay beneath him, tense as a wire, concentrating on the pool of heat in my groin as I tried to grip him as hard as I possibly could. He snarled and muttered, lips somewhere in the vicinity of my ear as he pushed endlessly into my body, his ass working underneath my heels.

I couldn't stop my ramping orgasm, nor did I try. I exploded under him, screaming then whimpering into his palm.

He cursed, tensing as I tightened around him. He pulled my hair harder, waiting until I stopped spasming, then started pumping again.

I clutched at his back, fingers tearing into his hot, satin skin. The one orgasm had barely subsided before his continual movement sparked another. I chanted his name, turning my head so I could suck at his earlobe, so I could beg him to fill me. Without intending to, my vision skewed and I saw the bright neon blue surrounding him.

No, it wasn't neon. It was all midnight, underscored with a shimmer of violet that I'd never seen before. And his aura didn't extend very far, not the usual foot or so away from his body. It was tight and compact except where, if I didn't miss my guess, it reached down to encompass me.

Now that I was aware of it, I felt the tingling of spiritual energy. Sweet Goddess, he was dripping pure spirit into my body! I opened myself to it, and in it flowed, dark, sweet energy, roiling with decadent power. Strong and almost physically tangible, as I'd only felt spirit energy in Daniel's presence. It instantly touched off my next orgasm.

It might have been my absorption of the spirit energy from him, but he didn't have a chance to hold back this time. With a muted roar, he flung back his head and shuddered, filling me up both with seed and a pure rush of dark essence.

He collapsed on top of me, and we both just lay there, skin wet with mutual sweat and lungs laboring for breath.

I stared at the beamed ceiling far above. I had *never* had sex laced with spiritual energy before. I hadn't known it was possible. Then again, I'd never had sex with another spirit witch, either. Thinking on it, it made sense. Daniel's mere presence attracted spirits; his focused attention could direct the spirit energy. Why couldn't it be used sexually? I couldn't help but wonder what it would do to someone who wasn't attuned to it as I was.

Daniel pushed up on one elbow, gazing down at me. There was something serious in his eyes, a question that I didn't understand until he spoke. "Did you feel it?"

“The spirit?”

Distaste passed over his fine features. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I tried to ...”

“What are you *sorry* for?” I grabbed his chin with my fingers and made him face me when he would have turned away. “It was wonderful!”

That surprised him. “Really?”

“Really. Why do you ask?”

He stared at my chin. Strands of his long, silky hair caressed my cheek. “It’s freaked out the few other lovers that I’ve had.”

There was my answer. I smiled, smoothing my fingers over the sharp curve of his jaw. “But I’m attuned to it, remember. I loved it.”

There was that almost-smile again. It lit his eyes even if it didn’t curl his lips. “Really?”

I nodded, hoping he could read my sincerity in my eyes. “Really.”

Some tension drained from his face, and there was that ghost of a smile. He pushed back, rolling his hips to press his groin and his softening cock against me.

I moaned, loving the feeling.

He chuckled softly -- how he did that without smiling I’d yet to figure out -- and pulled away. With a sigh, he sat on his heels, then went further until he was sitting with his back against the couch, knees bent before him. Head back, arms on knees, he looked as content as I’d ever seen him. A quick glance through magical sight showed me that his aura was still tightly compact and a dark midnight blue. The violet was gone.

I wondered how to tell him. I was pretty sure we’d just made a breakthrough in discovering the secret to his control, but I was unsure how he felt about what we’d just done. It had started in anger even if it hadn’t ended as such.

But as I watched, some of the rolling neon resurfaced and his aura expanded. He brought his head down and fastened his gaze on me. He was outwardly calm, but the aura alone told me emotions were rocking inside.

“Don’t tell him.”

I let my vision smooth back to normal and frowned. “What?”

“Jake. Don’t tell him. He doesn’t need to know this happened.”

I pushed up to sit cross-legged on the rug a few feet from him. My skirt settled around my hips, hiding most of my legs from view. “But you can’t hide sex from shifters.”

“What?”

I blinked. “You didn’t know?”

“Know what?”

I swallowed. “Jake’s a bear, hon. He’ll be able to smell what happened. If he didn’t feel it through the leash.”

His eyes went wide. “What?”

I kept overestimating his knowledge of magic. What had they taught him about his gifts while he was in the military? But I already knew. They’d taught him just enough and nothing more. He’d had teachers who had given him just enough information to understand the basics of magic. They certainly hadn’t provided him with a spirit witch as a teacher until they’d sent the request to my mother for help. Throughout the ages, the military had frequently misused the magically gifted. It seemed that present times were no different. But it hadn’t occurred to me that they wouldn’t have let him know about shifters and sex. “You didn’t know?”

“No!”

No. Of course not. And I hadn’t told him because, in that moment, I hadn’t wanted to give him any reason to second guess what we were doing. In that, I was as bad as the army, keeping information from him to get him to do what I wanted.

He pounded his fists on his knees. “Shit! What have I done? And you knew!”

I flinched. “I don’t think Jake will mind.”

“Mind?! I just ...” He rolled to his knees, snatching up his jeans. “This will make things uncomfortable for him.”

“Why? Do you want to do it again?”

I seemed to be surprising him a lot today. He sputtered, tried to frown. “I ... don’t you?”

“Well, yes. But I wasn’t sure if it’d just be a one-time thing with you. I don’t know, Daniel. You don’t *tell* me anything. I have to pull every little bit of information from you.”

“I’ve told you more than --” He cut himself off with a muttered curse and stood.

Even through the emotions of the situation, I had to admire the beauty of his body. Pale skin stretched taut over smooth muscle everywhere. The slim, toned shape seemed fit more for an angel than a human being. When he turned from me to step into his jeans, I saw that his ass was just as firm and beautiful as the rest of him. He even had those precious little divots just in his lower back that made me want to trace them with my tongue.

Sweet Goddess, I had it bad! “Are you okay with what we just did?”

His back was to me, so I couldn’t see his face. I skewed my sight to magical and watched the neon blue energy roil around him. Fingers of it extended out, reaching for anything near to him, including me. The midnight blue was a faint understatement, hanging close to his skin except along the line of the leash that trailed toward the back of the cabin.

He, of course, had no idea. He just continued to step into his jeans. “Yes.”

“You don’t seem okay.”

“I don’t want to hurt Jake.”

“Jake just wants you to be happy, honey.”

I watched the shimmer of midnight blue pulse through the neon, still unsure what the heck it meant. “Yes.” But it was strained.

“Come back and lie down with me.”

I easily counted to five before he shook his head. “No.”

I watched miserably as he gathered up his sweater, very carefully not looking at me. I stayed where I was, trying to figure out if I should push the issue or not.

“You should get dressed,” he said as he settled his sweater back around his chest. “We should ... get to work.”

I nodded dumbly, realizing the discussion was over. To push now would just make him dig in his heels. I’d had some of the best sex in my life with easily the best-looking man I’d ever met, and I felt like someone had just punched a hole through my heart.

I got dressed all right, but I didn’t immediately sit down with him on the rug. He sat, and I took my cold coffee to the kitchen, then made a visit to the bathroom. When I came back, I heated up some tea just to give me something to do. He was seated on the carpet, palms on knees, eyes closed, practicing his control. He didn’t need me and had effectively excused me. Except for the ache between my legs and the tingle on my skin, you’d never know that we’d just been going at it like teenagers.

I sat at the table, nursing my tea, watching him. I let my sight skew toward the magical and monitored his lack of progress in bringing the neon under control. He’d had a certain amount of success with the method of brute force, trying to rein in the control. It had worked toward the beginning, bringing the ten-foot-plus aura down to the mere foot, but that’s where the force had stopped working. It seemed like trying to jam things into a suitcase. At some point, force just wasn’t going to cut it. At some point, one had to rearrange or try a completely different tactic.

Like sex. What had it been about our joining that afforded him control? Was it my magic melding with his? Was it an abandonment of his cares into pure pleasure? *Had* he abandoned himself? I certainly had, which meant that I couldn’t be entirely sure if he had. If we did it again, I’d have to try and be more aware.

I set the mug down carefully between my elbows and stared into the murky brown depths of my tea. *If* we did it again. He said he wanted to, but whether that remained true

was anybody's guess. My skin still tingled. The amount of raw spiritual energy he'd pumped into my body was akin to what I felt when I completely let go of all of my own control and just let the spirits flow through me. I'd felt similar feelings of surging, raw power when I was first coming into my talent, long before I gained true control over it. I had not, of course, ever felt it coupled with sexual arousal. It was quite a heady combination. One I would gladly repeat, if Daniel was at all interested.

I looked up at him again. Magically. There was that darn midnight color. It still snaked out along the ropes of yellow that faded in the distance to where Jake would be. What did the midnight mean? And where the heck had the violet come from? I wondered if it had something to do with sex. I should tell him about it. Maybe we could hash it out together. But I was reluctant. What if he jumped to conclusions and just tried to suppress everything without trying to get to the bottom of what it meant?

I was still in the kitchen, watching him and silently arguing with myself, when Jake returned.

The back door screeched and banged, heralding his arrival. A few moments later, Jake strode down the short hallway, dressed only in the jeans he would have left in the utility room before he'd shifted. I idly admired the furry mat of dark brown hair that covered his chest and trailed in an intriguing love trail down his cobbled belly as he slid on his plaid shirt.

He saw me at the table, then glanced at Daniel seated twelve feet away from me. Brown eyes darted from one of us to the other as he stepped into the room, buttoning his shirt.

I could tell the moment he smelled something. He stopped at the other end of the dining table from me and took a deeper breath. His gaze landed on me, dark brows up in surprise, a silent question on his face. I wished Daniel could see the little smile of hope that curled Jake's wide mouth. His first reaction was pleasure, and it warmed my heart.

Jake didn't say anything, mindful of Daniel's meditation. He moved quietly to my side and leaned down to kiss my cheek. I didn't miss that he took another sniff. "About time," he murmured, rubbing his bearded cheek against mine.

I smiled up at him as he stepped away. He paused, his smile fading, no doubt because my smile was weak. He frowned. Okay, now he knew something was wrong. I shook my head and glanced at Daniel. He grimaced and nodded and said nothing.

He passed by me and quietly started dinner.

Daniel wasn't too long in emerging from his trance. Whether it was Jake's presence or the smell of the potatoes he was frying, I wouldn't know. I used my magical sight to confirm that he had things pretty well under control as far as the spirit energy that surrounded him. I was pleased to see the neon glow was a bit more faded. Oddly enough, the midnight-blue vines about Jake's leashes were pulled up close to Daniel's body, the first time I'd ever seen them like that.

He opened his eyes and turned his head slowly, locating both Jake and me with a glance. Without a word, he stretched his arms above his head, then got up in a fluid motion and came toward us. His eyes were for Jake alone, even though he came to rest at my side.

"Jake, we ..."

"Steaks okay with you?" Jake asked, tossing a grin at Daniel before turning back to the skillet. "I'll bet you guys worked up an appetite."

I smiled.

Daniel flushed. "Jake, I ... I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Jake paused, spatula held aloft. "What for?"

"We just sort of ... I mean, we didn't mean to ..."

"Mean to what?"

Daniel huffed. "I didn't think when it happened. I just sort of ... I'm sorry if my having sex with Noelle makes you uncomfortable."

Jake glanced at me.

I shrugged.

Jake smiled, shaking his head. “Doesn’t make me uncomfortable, buddy. It shouldn’t make *you* uncomfortable.”

Daniel was doubtful. “It doesn’t?”

“Hell no. *Someone* should sleep with her.” He gave me a wink. “Fine woman like that deserves to be made love to. And often.”

The warmth in his voice flooded my heart. It floored Daniel.

Jake chuckled at our reactions, clearly getting exactly the responses he’d intended. “But seriously, buddy, don’t you worry about me. If Noelle makes you happy, I couldn’t be happier.”

Daniel pulled himself together and sat around the corner of the table beside me. He finally met my gaze and just stared at me for a moment. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what he was thinking or whether it was good or bad.

When Jake opened the refrigerator and bent down to open the meat drawer, Daniel glanced at him. Was I being far too analytical to think that there was a touch of appreciation in his eyes at seeing Jake’s ass presented so nicely?

Then he sat back. “Jake, grab me a beer?” He pulled an air of nonchalance over himself like a veil and turned to me. “So, I’ve got more of it under control now.”

Ah. Business. I nodded. “You’re getting better.” I wanted to tell him that making love to me seemed to have helped him gain more control. That is, until he started thinking about Jake. I should have told him, but I couldn’t. Not with the memory of his body in mine so fresh in my mind. I stood. “Excuse me. I need to visit the restroom.”

I felt their eyes on me as I went, but didn’t look back. I got to the bathroom and leaned against the sink, sighing in relief.

Sex with Daniel was far more than I'd expected. I'd anticipated wonderful, maybe awkward. I knew his guilt might take over because of leaving out Jake. But I had not at all anticipated the actual feel of that sensuous body in mine, nor the thrill of sharing spiritual energy. My blood still sang from it. I dearly wished I could see my own spiritual aura because I was dying to know if that same violet was shot through it.

I took my time using the bathroom and washing my face, needing to settle my nerves. If I didn't, I might very well scream, and I wasn't sure if it would be inarticulate frustration or a demand for Daniel to take me again. Neither one would help my cause.

When I finally rejoined them, I passed by Daniel and went to offer my help to Jake. The blessed bear started to tell a story about his mother and her "hotter-than-hell" marinade, which he threatened to make for us sometime.

Chapter Six

We put in a DVD and watched the movie *Elf* while eating on the couch. Well, they ate on the couch. The two men took up much of the couch, so I ate in the big recliner chair. Which was fine. I couldn't be that close to Daniel right now and not want to touch him.

Daniel spent most of his time pointing out the inconsistencies of the story, and Jake spent most of his defending. I barely watched. I spent quite a bit of time staring at the Christmas tree, wondering what to do now. I couldn't let sex drive a wedge between me and Daniel, or Jake and Daniel. I very much needed Daniel to be comfortable. Perhaps it was time to tell him about the colors in his aura and how they behaved? Would he believe me? Would he start to draw the same conclusions I had about him and Jake? How would he react to that? I drove myself crazy, thinking in loops. I wished I was much more straightforward about things, like my sister Daphne. If she were in my place, she'd simply tell Daniel the way it was and make him believe that she knew what was best. I laughed at myself, at the thought. No, Daniel and Daphne would probably not get along very well.

Jake came back to the room from dumping his dirty dishes in the sink and made a big deal about stretching and yawning. "Well, I'm going to hit the hay. Don't worry about waking me up. You know I sleep like a log."

Daniel looked skeptical.

Me? I'd never heard of a shifter that really slept like a log, but then, I didn't know any other bears that well. He didn't hibernate the winter away, true -- thank Goddess! -- but bears might sleep heavier than other shifters.

He left us, and an awkward silence descended.

Daniel aimed the remote and switched off the DVD's vamping menu graphics and music. "Noelle, I don't know if it's wise ..."

I nodded and stood, headed toward the kitchen with my own empty plate. "Don't worry about it, Daniel. I know. I'll go sleep in the spare room." Just to be perverse, I went and bent over to place a kiss on his cheek. "Good night."

He remained where he was, staring at the blank television as I left my dishes in the sink. I left him with the lights of the Christmas tree twinkling bright.

I'd changed into my cozy pink flannel pajamas and was just getting into bed when my door slammed open. I had magic at the ready for protection, but let it fizzle when I saw Jake looming in the entrance to the room.

The look he leveled at me was as stern and dark as anything I'd seen on his normally pleasant, calm face. The fact that he wore a pair of sweatpants and seemingly nothing else distracted me a tad.

"Jake? What --? Hey!"

Without so much as a by your leave, Jake stormed across the room and picked me up.

"What are you doing?"

I squirmed, but quickly found out how hard it is to sway a bear with a purpose. The man was just plain strong. I don't even think he heard me or noticed my squirming, and there sure wasn't any getting out of his arms. Of course, they were *nice* arms. I didn't want to hurt him with magic, so I ended up going where he took me.

“Jake, I don’t think this is a very good idea,” I murmured halfway up the stairs to the loft.

Daniel sat in the middle of his king-sized bed, green sheets and green-and-black-patterned down comforter bunched in the hand he had in his lap. His unbuttoned black silk pajamas provided a nice frame for his gorgeous, pale chest. “Jake! What the hell --?”

His protest was cut short when Jake unceremoniously dumped me onto the bed beside him.

Jake loomed over us, pointing at me. “She belongs *here*,” he proclaimed, glaring at Daniel. “You want her here and you know it. Don’t be a damned stubborn ass about this.”

Daniel glared but said nothing.

I lay very still.

“It’ll bother me more to know that the two of you aren’t fucking, you cold bastard. You got it?”

I think I heard Daniel’s teeth grind, but I didn’t dare look to confirm it. “I got it.”

Jake nodded, then turned and stormed back down the stairs.

I stayed, frozen and silent at Daniel’s side, until I heard Jake’s door slam shut downstairs. I very carefully kept my eyes trained on the banister that looked out over the main room and not at Daniel. “I’ll go sleep on the couch.”

His fingers closed firmly around my upper arm, stopping me. “Don’t.”

“Daniel ...” I protested as he pulled me close.

He buried his nose in my neck, pulling my back up against his chest. “Stay.”

I swallowed. “Do you really want me here?”

His arms snuggled up under my breasts. “Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He took my hand and pulled it back, tucked it with his under the comforter until he could finally squeeze my fingers around his silk-clad erection. "Believe me now?" He kissed my neck. "I've had this since I came up here."

"You were the one who --"

He squeezed our hands again, clearly liking the feel of it. "I'm not good at asking for things, Noelle," he murmured. "Please. Just stay. Help me."

"No fair appealing to my Mother Teresa complex."

He chuckled, an actual, warm chuckle. Goddess, I wanted to see if a smile went with that! He left my hand around his cock and brought his back up to tweak my nipple. "Help me, Noelle," he breathed, all levity gone. "Warm me up."

I sagged against him. How was I to fight that?

He felt my surrender. Gently, he turned me and laid me down on pillows that smelled of the lavender shampoo he favored. A few tugs got the covers over both of us, creating a hot cavern of warmth. His lips found mine in a soft caress, and for long, agonizing moments, all he did was kiss me and rub his hand lightly on my belly just underneath my pajamas.

I lay quietly as long as I could, not wanting to break the spell. But it soon wasn't enough. I tried kissing more aggressively, sucking his tongue into my mouth and attempting to up the foreplay. He let me do it, but didn't respond in kind. Finally, I reached up to sink my fingers into his silky hair, pulling his head back. I tasted his cheek, his chin. Slid my tongue to the warm spot just under his ear.

He propped himself on his elbow, hovering above me. His hand slid up my torso to one of my breasts, lightly plucking a nipple.

I groaned. "Goddess, Daniel, please," I whispered.

He brought his hand out to quickly undo the four buttons of my top. He laid it open, then bent to suckle my breast. I cradled his head to me, biting my lip over the voluptuous feel of his lips on me, of his hair falling down to caress my chest.

He shifted to kneel over me and started a slow slide down, kissing and licking my skin as he went. My ribs, my belly, the swell just beneath my navel that I hated so much. He breathed into the top of my pubic hair as his hands slid my pajama bottoms down and off my legs. He reared back, letting the covers slide off his back as he tossed my pants aside.

I'd never seen the wicked gleam in his eye before. It was delightful. Almost made it seem that he was grinning. "You smell good," he told me, settling down on his elbows between my spread thighs. He breathed on my curly hair again. "I'll bet you taste good, too."

He bent and I gasped. He was actually going to do it? He was going to put those succulent lips on me and taste me? I could hardly dare believe it and kept my eyes glued to him as that beautiful face tilted over me, as soft, silky hair tumbled down to brush my thighs. Long-fingered hands spread my drenched sex wide, and a sweet pink tongue poked out to drag from entrance to clit.

"Daniel!" I groaned, heedless of being quiet.

It was too good. He was too good. I didn't know where he learned it and frankly didn't care. He set to delicately nibbling me, like a tasty treat that he didn't want to finish too soon. He found my little nub of pleasure and tormented it. He soon had to wrap his arms around my thighs to hold me down because I couldn't keep my hips from helplessly grinding up into that glorious mouth.

"Daniel!" I cried, clutching the pillows above my head. They came forward over my scalp and I clung desperately, suffocating myself in cotton that smelled of lavender and Daniel. I screamed into the pillow as a wave of pleasure crashed over me.

He stopped, and I collapsed in relief, my body tingling. Fingers trailed the inside of my legs and my whole body jumped, attuned to his touch.

The bed moved and the pillow was pulled from my lax grasp. I blinked bleary eyes and actually groaned at the sight before me.

Daniel knelt between my thighs, calmly working his way out of the black silk pajama pants. The overlarge top remained, framing his chest and achingly beautiful groin. How to explain the beauty of the man? He didn't seem at all real. The graceful taper of his chest to narrow hips was a thing to make a sculptor cry. He had those sweet little creases at the sides of his groin, just above his thighs, that formed a perfect V. There was very little hair to hide any of the pale glow of his skin, just a very faint trail from his navel to the light patch that bunched at the base of his cock. And his cock ... almost perfection. My only protest was that he was cut and it seemed a travesty to have removed any portion of that loveliness. It jutted forth from its base of black hair, flushed red with arousal, the tip weeping. Fascinated, I reached out to wrap my hand around it.

He groaned, tossing back his head and pushing forward into my grasp.

I sat up and leaned forward, eager to have a taste. I tormented both myself and him by hovering, mouth open just around the tip. The smell of him here was intoxicating. I put my free hand to his hip, sliding it around to grasp his buttock in an effort to steady myself.

"Noelle," he sighed.

Oh, yes! My name. That must be rewarded. I closed my lips around the head of him and swiped my tongue across the slit, tasting the salty cream.

Long fingers curled lightly around the back of my skull, urging me to take in more.

I don't think I could have denied myself. My mouth watered just from that little taste. Slowly I let my lips slide down his length, using my tongue to caress the veins under the velvety smooth skin. I was almost able to take his entire length into my mouth, but not quite. I'm not a deep-throater by any means, so I had to stop before I gagged, but I pushed my own limits, needing to take as much of him as possible. I used my hand to grasp the rest and closed the head of his cock between my tongue and roof of my mouth.

He sighed my name again, and I actually felt my sex get wetter.

I squeezed the root of him as I wetly eased back up the shaft. Lovingly, I nipped and lapped at the head, coaxing more cream to dribble out on my tongue. At the gentle pressure of his fingers on my scalp, I descended down his length again. He let me do that for a while, let me explore him. I lost myself in tasting him as I'd never lost myself in another lover before.

His fingers guided me to a faster pace, and I started to apply suction. His soft cries of encouragement kept me going. I didn't know how far or how long he wanted me to go, but I was content to keep it up, even after my jaw and neck started to ache from the repetitive motion.

But he stopped me. Palms at my temples ceased my movement.

I chanced a glance up his torso and couldn't suppress a groan at the sight. His face was tilted down toward his chest, his loose hair a sleek curtain to either side. Those smoldering eyes were open.

And he was smiling! It was small and darkly seductive, and it was an *actual* smile. For me. I clutched his ass and pulled him forward for another suck, anxious to do anything that would keep the smile on his face.

He hissed, eyes closing and smile turning to a snarl. "Stop." Fingers in my hair pulled me away.

I couldn't resist sucking hard at the end, loving the loud pop as he jerked his hips back, taking himself from my mouth's embrace.

He laid me back in the pillows, following me down. His lips landed on mine, still damp and drenched in the scent of my sex.

I grabbed his head, opening my mouth under his and chasing his tongue with mine.

He groaned, letting me lead the kiss while he reached down to center his cock at my opening.

I wiggled.

He pushed.

We both froze on a shared groan.

“Daniel.” I slid my lips down his jaw, sucking on his chin, biting at the soft skin beneath it.

He braced on his elbows above me, eyes closed as he concentrated on shafting in and out of my body.

“Daniel.”

There it was again. The spirit energy. It pulsed from his body, bearing down on mine. Heedless of unknown repercussions, if any, I dissolved my own barriers against it and allowed it to flow through me.

“Ah, Noelle,” he gasped, dropping his head to rest his face in the bend of my neck.

I held him, hands spread across his back. I kept my eyes shut, enamored with the feel of him and the surging spirits around us. Goddess, the strength of him. If he could harness it, he might well be able to use the spirits as a viable weapon. Unharnessed and uncontrolled, it was certainly taking me over.

But I was a willing victim. And that type of energy recognized me. Amplified in me. As we strained together, a fine sheen of sweat coating our bare skin, I cautiously embraced some of the flow and willfully pushed it back at him.

He felt it instantly. It caught him unaware. He froze.

I pushed some more.

His mouth fell open and a cry spilled out as his body rocked on a wholly unexpected orgasm.

I’d be fibbing if I said that didn’t fill me with some amount of pride.

His body shook as he collapsed atop me.

I happily nuzzled his neck and shoulder, content to hold his weight as he recovered.

“What did you do?” he finally asked, voice soft, breath caressing my shoulder.

“Shared the energy with you.”

“But there wasn’t that much.”

“No. I contained it. That’s part of what I’ve been trying to show you.”

He pushed up on his elbows so he could look down at me. “You can craft the energy from me?”

I squeezed his biceps. “When you let me.”

Ah, that gave him food for thought.

So I added the next part. “If you trust me.”

He blinked. “I don’t trust easily.”

“I’ve noticed.”

The very edges of his mouth tipped up. He leaned in to brush a soft kiss across my lips. “You’re winning me over.”

I hummed happily as he rolled to his side, bringing me along to cuddle against him. “I hope so.”

Chapter Seven

It wasn't easy, despite the fact that I knew Daniel was trying. He was. He tried very hard to trust me. But only one other person in this world had ever given him a reason to trust, and Jake just wasn't helpful in my particular arena.

I kept my theories about Jake to myself for the next few days, waiting for an opening. Daniel was more trusting of me, but he wasn't quite ready to hear that. Nearly every time Jake was in the room with us, I caught Daniel stealing guilty glances at the man.

Yule approached.

December 16

"Will you be going back to Albany for your birthday?"

I snuggled at Daniel's side, head resting on his shoulder, an arm and a leg thrown over him. It was warm and toasty up in his loft thanks to the rising heat from the main room below as well as the fact that his bed was right up against the chimney. His skin was warm, and we were freshly rested from a night of sex. I was feeling good. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind."

His fingers sifted through my hair, breath soft across my forehead. “I don’t mind. Will your family mind?”

I let myself feel the pleasure at his first words. He didn’t mind. He wanted me near. I had to enjoy that.

“Noelle?”

I shrugged. “They might mind, but they’ll get over it. Mom sent me to help you, after all.”

“Strange to think that you have such a big family.” He paused, chin propped on the top of my head. “Such a powerful family.”

I tensed. I had wondered if my family would accept him if I could make a relationship work. But I’d come to the conclusion that they’d be pleased. Daniel, after all, was a wonderfully powerful witch, even if it was only in one specific area. My mother’s favorite thing was to bring the powerful under her sphere of influence. But I hadn’t thought what Daniel might think. He’d never really had a good family life, and he’d certainly never encountered one like mine. There weren’t many like mine.

“They’re not so bad.” I deliberately calmed myself, sliding my hands over the warm, silky skin of Daniel’s chest to remind me of the issue at hand. Nothing to be done about what my family might think. I wanted this, so I had to make it work. “Mom and Talia are bossy, but they’re generally fair.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s not in the picture. Mom provided a different father for each one of her daughters.”

“Huh?”

I chuckled and pushed up on my elbow. “My mother is the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter, et cetera, all the way back to the middle ages. There’s a lot of power in that. She decided to add her own twist to it and chose a different,

powerfully gifted man to father each one of us. Only Talia's father got to stay around and be a dad. Sort of."

"Talia is ...?"

"My oldest sister."

"Oh." He shifted his weight. The bicep of the arm he had bent behind his head flexed, distracting me. "So, your mom's not married?"

"Hmm? No. Richard's always been around, but they're not married."

"Richard is Talia's dad?"

I nodded. I could see that the conversation was making him think, and I didn't really want him to think. It was time to put in motion a little plan I'd been thinking of for the last few days.

I slid my hand over the sharply defined lines of his collarbone and dropped a light kiss right above the nipple nearest me. "Come on. Get dressed. I have an idea."

"Oh?"

I slapped his belly lightly, punishment for the skeptical look. "Yes." I turned to get off the bed. "But it involves Jake, so I need to get dressed and catch him before he goes out."

I heard the sheets rustle behind me. "What?"

By standing, I narrowly evaded the hand that grabbed for me.

"How does this involve Jake?"

I retrieved my pajama pants and stepped into them. "Get dressed and come downstairs to find out."

He tried to get me to say more as I put on my top, but I refused. I was nervous enough about my little plan. I certainly couldn't let him in on it.

I pattered down the stairs to find Jake in the kitchen. "Jake! Just the man I wanted to see."

He glanced toward me and did a pretty good job of not reacting to the fact that I still wore my bed clothes. I was, however, looking for the telltale reaction. He wasn't completely unaffected by the fact that I wore a layer of flannel and nothing else. The scent of sex on my body surely added to it. I wondered if he liked the bounce of my boobs. My breasts weren't huge, but they were a respectable size and I wasn't wearing a bra. His eyes did widen, and I think his hand trembled a bit as he closed the refrigerator. He had to clear his throat before answering. "Me?"

"Yes. Can you stick around today? I've got an idea that might help Daniel."

Jake glanced up and over my shoulder. I didn't need to look to know that Daniel was on the stairs. Daniel's reaction must have reassured him a bit, though, because he nodded. "Sure. Okay."

"Wonderful. I'm just going to take a quick shower." No sense in drowning the poor shifter in the scent of sex.

When I emerged all fresh and clean in my sweater and long skirt, Daniel passed me to take his own shower. Jake set a plate of eggs and bacon before me, and we both watched the news as we waited. Snowfall was light, so we had satellite reception, although it was a tad spotty.

When Daniel rejoined us, however, the television went off. I directed the men to move the couch and coffee table to make room for us on the rug before the Christmas tree. The smell of pine and peppermint from the candy canes was comforting.

"Good. Now ..." I turned to Daniel, who stood with a skeptical look on his face. And didn't he look lovely in a long-sleeved blue flannel shirt and jeans. "Do you feel safe when Jake's around?"

He frowned but eventually said, "Yes."

I nodded. "What about in bear form? More safe?"

"Why?"

I sighed. "Please, just answer the question. I'll explain in a minute."

Daniel glanced at Jake, who shrugged. "I don't know. We haven't really spent much time together when he's shifted."

I nodded. It was surprisingly quite common. Unless the witch was in danger, his or her shifter might not change around them all that often. Some shifters rarely changed at all. "I'd like Jake to stay with us today. I'm hoping that his presence nearby will help you concentrate more."

He frowned.

"I'm never far away," Jake said.

"I know that. And Daniel knows that, but he holds back." I met Daniel's eyes again, but surprisingly, he didn't refute me. "But if Jake's right here with us, you might not feel the need. I could kick myself for not thinking of it sooner. He's your shifter, so his physical presence should help you let go a bit more, knowing he's there to watch your back."

"Are you saying I'm afraid?"

"I'm saying that you've trained yourself to hold everything in. Part of that may be a kind of fear, yes."

Thankfully, he thought about it rather than immediately arguing. Eventually, he nodded. "All right, that makes sense. But why'd you ask about shifting?"

"Your meditative state is largely about the subconscious. Do you think you'd subconsciously feel safer with Jake here in human or bear form?"

Daniel stared at me for a long moment, then shifted his gaze to Jake.

Jake, for his part, just stood there. He grinned at Daniel, obviously willing to go either way.

"Shifted, I think," Daniel said slowly, eyes on Jake.

Jake nodded, then turned to me. "Now?"

“Please.”

It’s actually a fascinating thing to watch. Shifters don’t morph like in the movies. Well, some movies. It’s not physics; it’s magic. One second they’ll be fully human, and the next, they’re not. If they’re shifting their whole form, there’s a flash of what witches tend to dub “not quite light” in between. It’s that split second of time which allows any clothing they’re wearing to fall to the ground.

So, one moment Jake was there, and the next there was a black bear standing on his fallen shirt and jeans. He wasn’t a grizzly, so he wasn’t just plain huge, but he was still a bear and plenty big enough. He stood on the rug on all fours and shook, almost as though he was fluffing out his dark, shiny fur.

Something amazing happened. Well, amazing to me. I caught Daniel staring at him. Really staring at him. “Daniel?” He didn’t hear me at first, so I had to repeat his name. When he turned to me, I asked, “Have you ever seen Jake in bear form?”

“Sure I have. I just ...” He shrugged. “Not often.”

“Why?”

“Wasn’t necessary. He couldn’t shift all that often when we were on the base, and I’ve never been in that type of danger, so ...”

I stepped up to Jake, who lifted his snout into my waiting hands. The short hair around his muzzle was a bit prickly, but the fur around his cheeks was thick and surprisingly soft. I smiled and scratched behind his ears, laughing when he closed his eyes and grunted in what I took to be a happy manner.

I looked up at Daniel, who was watching intently. “Touch him, Daniel.”

“No, I ... He’s not a pet.”

I looked down at Jake. “Do you mind if Daniel touches you, Jake?”

His big head shook from side to side, gently dislodging my hands. He turned his rounded, furry body toward his witch and butted the flat top of his head against Daniel’s hip.

I laughed. “See?” I stepped up to Jake’s side and dug my fingers into his fur. “Touch him.”

Reluctantly, Daniel laid his hand on Jake’s head. Jake twisted so that Daniel’s palm rested near one curved ear. Slowly, Daniel dug long fingers into the fur to scratch.

Jake closed his eyes and wuffed in contentment.

I smiled. I’d had a notion but couldn’t be sure until I saw them together. Some witches just never got the hang of the fact that their constant companion literally had an animal side. Daniel had quite obviously never been given the chance. “Most shifters don’t mind being petted,” I mused, stroking Jake’s back. “Not in human form, of course, well ...” I laughed, letting Daniel catch my meaning. “But in animal form, they usually like being scratched and stroked just like a full animal. Isn’t that right, Jake?”

He grunted assent and rubbed his head against Daniel’s side.

Daniel actually had to step back to catch his balance. Instinct had him grab Jake’s solid neck, and I was gratified to see him keep his hands there.

“I didn’t know bears were soft,” I mused.

Jake twisted his head and looked at me through slitted eyes with his mouth hanging open a bit. I figured that was an ursine version of a grin.

“Quite a handsome bear you are, too,” I continued. “Isn’t he, Daniel?”

“Shouldn’t we get on with this? Your plan didn’t involve a full body massage for Jake, did it?”

Jake’s happy little rumble told me his thoughts on the matter.

I laughed. “No.” I thumped Jake on his ample rear. “Lie down, Jake.”

He gently nudged Daniel aside, then dropped his heavy body to the rug. He ended up partially on his side, curled to face us.

I gestured at the natural backrest his belly made. “Have a seat.”

Daniel sat down and gingerly worked himself back into the curve of Jake's body. It wasn't his normal position for working with me, but it looked wonderfully *right*. Jake rested his muzzle on his paws, and Daniel's hand came up to rest on his head.

"Comfy?" I asked.

Daniel glared up at me.

Smiling, I sat before him, my knees almost touching his. "Okay. Go through your normal routine, but this time be aware that Jake's there." I grinned at the bear's watchful brown eyes. "He's here and he's not about to let anything happen to you."

Jake underlined my statement with a growl.

I chuckled. "Let's see if his presence helps."

Daniel took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Instinct had me lean forward to slide my hands into the ones he had resting on his knees.

He cracked his eyes open for a second at that, but didn't question before closing his eyes again.

Why didn't I think of this sooner? I berated myself. In half the usual time, Daniel was relaxed and sunk deep into a trance. His attention explored the spiritual energy about us, trying to gain some measure of control over it. I skewed my sight and watched the threads of neon through compact midnight blue and wasn't at all shocked as the violet tendrils began to emerge. The blue and violet reached out and sank naturally into the furry body lying at Daniel's back. Eventually, it looked to my magical sight like Jake's fur was shot through with gently writhing blue and violet. Other tendrils of blue and violet reached out to me, disappearing from my sight before they enveloped me. This was marvelous! Unconsciously, Daniel was binding us. His mind might deny it, but his magic was adamant that Jake and I were necessary to him.

We sat like that for hours, the only movement being mine to lie on the floor and pillow my head in Daniel's lap. I gathered some spirit energy on my own and let it drift toward him, offering him my support. I was pleasantly surprised to feel the gentle pull of him accepting my help. I'd offered this support ever since we'd started sleeping together, but this was the first time he'd accepted.

The house around us quieted.

I dozed. I often did while he was in trance. Even now, offering my magic to aid his, I could let my mind drift without worry.

Daniel woke me by softly sifting through my hair.

I blinked my eyes and yawned, turning from my side onto my back. When I looked up, I couldn't stop my smile from matching his. A real curve of his lips, enough to bunch up his cheeks even.

"It worked," he murmured.

Carefully, I sat up. Jake's head was up, and his brown eyes watched me from right beside Daniel's shoulder. I sat back, keeping my hand in Daniel's, and skewed my sight.

He was right. His aura was down to maybe an inch or so of soft, dark blue glow from his body, a far more normal size. Only a fading thread of neon blue surrounded him. Violet shimmered lightly just over his skin. He'd pulled the glow back from Jake, and an inner check of my own let me know that he'd released the energy I'd offered as support. I was intrigued, however, to see the tendrils of midnight blue that wrapped Jake's leash now actually touched the bear.

"Oh, Daniel." I reached out and ran my fingers through the blue beside his smooth cheek. It was nothing he could see or feel, but he'd know what I was doing.

"So I'm right?"

I nodded, tears in my eyes. "You're right. You've got it as much under control as anyone could."

His smile remained. He tugged my hand as he leaned back against Jake's solid weight. I went willingly and let him curl me into his lap. "It's all thanks to you, Noelle."

"No." I reached around his chest until I could sink my fingers into the thick fur at his back. "It's all three of us."

He let that hang, and I let it go. He was smiling. He was breathing deeply, calmly. Tension eased from his body. I was perfectly willing to let him have his moment.

Chapter Eight

December 19

For whatever reason, he couldn't regain control the next day. He'd maintained the normal aura that evening, even as we watched one of the Christmas specials on television. He hadn't made love to me when he'd taken me up to the loft that night. We'd only snuggled. I'm pretty sure he was afraid of losing control during orgasm. But he lost it during his sleep anyway. He felt the loss of control, and I confirmed it when I saw the riot of neon around him again. That morning, he'd demanded that Jake stay, and we resumed our positions from the previous day. But it didn't come. He kept his cool through that day, and the next. But now it was three days, and he was desperate to get it back.

"Why?" Daniel demanded, pacing behind me.

I took a deep breath and batted at the shiny blue ball that hung from one of the Christmas tree branches. "I don't really know."

"Guess."

"Maybe you weren't relaxed?"

"I'm plenty relaxed."

"You're not."

“I *was*. What was different? You’re here; Jake’s here. Why can’t I do it?”

I shrugged, wondering if he’d listen to my theory. Wondering if he heard himself.

He growled. I heard the couch creak and glanced over my shoulder to see him sprawled out, palms on his face.

I went and knelt beside Jake, who sat quietly in bear form in the middle of the rug. He swiveled his head toward me, a question in his huge, liquid eyes. Smiling softly, I put my arms around his furry neck and buried my face in it. He leaned into me gently, rubbing his cheek against the top of my head.

I turned my neck and peeked at Daniel from underneath Jake’s muzzle. He was still sprawled across the couch, fingers pressing at his eyes. His black hair was spread behind him over the back of the couch, and his sweater rode up to display a nice swatch of hard belly between its hem and the waistband of his jeans.

“I have an idea,” I said softly.

He dropped his hand and fastened those dark, slanted eyes on me. “What?”

“You probably won’t like it.”

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

I swallowed and pulled back from Jake, but I didn’t let him go entirely. He sat quietly, watching me with a lot more trust than Daniel.

“The other day, you felt closer to us than you ever had, right?”

“Yes.”

I watched my fingers sinking into Jake’s black fur rather than face Daniel. “It’s the closeness that does it, I think. You need to feel the connection to really gain control.”

“That’s not how it works for you.”

“That’s how it works for *you*.”

I peeked at him. I was right. He didn't like it, but he was listening. "We've been together the last three days."

I nodded. "I think it's time for the next step."

"What are you suggesting?"

I had a feeling he already knew, but he wasn't going to voice it.

I took a deep breath, staring into Jake's eyes instead of Daniel's. It was easier. "I think we should make love."

Jake started.

Daniel was silent.

I stared at Jake, stroking the fur at the side of his head.

"You want to fuck Jake. Is that it?"

I closed my eyes at the bite in his tone. I shook my head. "Yes, but you're deliberately misunderstanding me."

"What? I'm not enough for you?"

"Daniel, would you hear me?"

"What?"

"I want *all three* of us to be together."

He was quiet long enough that I braved looking at him. His nostrils flared, and his eyes were black from between slitted lids. "You get off on being with two guys at once?"

I stayed calm. "I've never been with two men at once."

"Grabbing your chance?"

"I've never wanted to be with two other men at once. But the two of *you* ..." I sighed. "Daniel, you refuse to understand how you and Jake are connected."

"Well, sure, he's leashed."

"It's more than that. Most leashes aren't anchored in the heart."

“What?”

“I had a feeling you didn’t know that.” I sat back on my heels, but I kept stroking Jake’s shoulder with one hand. “Most leashes are anchored in the witch’s hand, echoing a physical leash. Yours isn’t. Yours is anchored in the heart. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, it shows a deeper, emotional bond between shifter and witch. At least on the part of the witch.”

He didn’t want to believe me. I could tell. But he stayed silent. Jake stayed very still underneath my hand.

“My guess is that it was instinct. You needed someone close, and Jake provided. I don’t think he minds.” I smiled at Jake, who didn’t give me anything to work with. I couldn’t read a bear’s facial expression. I sighed. “The guardian spell would have provided you exactly the shifter that you needed. The army had you call, and everyone thought Jake was for physical protection, but I think he’s really here for emotional protection. He’s the shield for your heart.”

“Shut up.”

“Daniel, I’m not saying that you’re gay ...” No, he wasn’t ready to hear anything like that.

“Shut up!”

“I’m not saying that you want to have sex with Jake. But you might be able to be closer. Through me.”

I chanced a glance and winced at his scowl. But I was in for it now. Might as well finish it. “I love you both, very much.”

His breathing kicked up. If I’d had the nerve to let him see me look, I’d have bet there was stormy neon blue surrounding him right then. As it was, I could feel the spiritual energy like static cling on my skin.

“That’s why I came back. I wanted to be with you. *Both* of you. To help you, yes. I do want to do that, but I want so much more.”

He shook his head slowly.

“I want to help you. If it means being the conduit for you to be with Jake, I’m all for it. Use me, Daniel. I offer myself freely.”

“None of that’s true.”

“All of it’s true.”

“It won’t work.”

“Why can’t we try and find out?”

He leaned forward, about to stand. “No!”

A flash of not-quite-light beside me changed the fur under my hand to warm skin. I was surprised enough to glance over and got my first, full look of Jake in naked splendor.

Splendor it was. Daniel was achingly beautiful, true, but Jake was what you’d call “all male.” He had the kind of muscles you don’t get from working out. His came from roaming the woods every day and doing actual labor in his woodworking shop and around the house. He was certainly a lot more hairy than Daniel, with a thick mat of dark brown hair across his chest, tapering to a defined line that circled his navel and proceeded lower. His cock was thick and uncut and, presently, half erect.

He sat on his butt, long, hairy legs out in front of him in Daniel’s direction, and leaned back on his arms. “Why not?”

I was off guard enough to not quite remember what the question referred to.

“What?” from Daniel, proving I wasn’t the only one.

“Why don’t you want to find out?”

Oh, yes, my idea. That’s what we were talking about.

I glanced at Daniel to see him scowling fiercely at Jake. It was ruined by the fact that his eyes kept casting downward to the impressive organ jutting proud and full from Jake's crotch.

"Buddy?" Jake prompted.

"What? You want a threesome?"

Jake grinned. "Why not? What could it hurt? And it could help, just like Noelle said."

"You just want to sleep with Noelle."

I faced Jake to watch his reaction to that.

Jake's grin remained, open and honest. "Well, yeah. But I wouldn't mind seeing you fuck her. In fact --" His dark eyes took on a wicked glint. "-- I've been thinking about that all week."

"What?"

Jake laughed, shaking his head. "Damn, man. You don't understand. You two smell *good*."

I licked my lips, trying to hide my smile.

Jake winked at me.

Daniel snorted. "I don't believe this."

"Why not? What's so hard to believe about a threesome? Like she said, you and I are close. Lots of buddies do it, if the woman's willing."

Lots of buddies would do it if the woman *wasn't* willing, but that certainly wasn't the case here. I stayed quiet, realizing Jake was going to be a lot more convincing in this than I was.

Daniel said nothing for a long time.

Jake finally switched his balance to one arm, freeing a hand to reach up and brush his fingers against my cheek. His look was aching tender and amazingly hot at the same time. I

felt moisture dribble from my sex in reaction, and a long inhale from him, followed by a lazy grin, told me that he knew it.

“I’d love to watch you suck his cock.”

I heard a strangled cry from Daniel, but I was enthralled by the lazy seduction in Jake’s eyes and couldn’t look away. I licked my lips, delighted when the move drew his gaze to my mouth.

He brought one big finger around to trace the lower curve of my lip. “Please?”

Well, he asked so nicely. I smiled and nodded. I wanted to kiss him, but didn’t, not sure Daniel would accept that. I wasn’t sure Daniel would accept *any* of this, but at least he was still seated. I turned and crawled the short distance to the couch.

Daniel watched me like I was a python slithering toward him. There might have been some similarities, because I certainly wanted to squeeze the life out of part of him.

I reached him and put my hands on his knees, edging them further apart. Our gazes locked. His was negative, but his legs fell open just the same. I dropped my eyes so I could watch myself unbutton his jeans.

There was movement behind me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jake sit facing us on the other end of the couch. He was out of arm’s reach, but close enough to see everything clearly. And he was still, of course, quite naked.

I swallowed as I continued my work. I’d never been an exhibitionist, but the thought of Jake watching us had my hands trembling in excitement. I eased down the zipper of Daniel’s jeans, then carefully pulled the waistband of his boxers out and down, exposing him. I had to wrap my fingers around the shaft and carefully pull it out to lie, flushed and red, on his flat belly. I flipped my hair to one side, away from Jake, and bent my head so I could suck the smooth head of Daniel’s cock between my lips.

Daniel groaned.

Jake echoed him.

Sweet Goddess!

I curled my fingers in the waistband of Daniel's boxers and jeans and tugged them down his hips a little farther, freeing more of his flushed cock. Our talk of threesomes must have done this to him, because he was amazingly hard. The removal of the clothing had to be a relief.

I slid my lips up and down his shaft a few times, letting the moisture in my mouth make him gleaming wet. I hummed happily when his hand came to rest on the back of my head, gently brushing loose hair away from my face, making sure Jake's view was unobstructed.

Speaking of whom ... As I sucked, I glanced to the side and actually wiggled at the sight. Jake leaned back against the arm of the couch, one leg folded before him, the other hanging off the edge. He had one arm draped over the back of the couch and the hand of the other wrapped around his fully hard erection. His eyelids were at half mast, and he winked at me when he caught me watching.

Daniel's fingers pushed, and I remembered what I was supposed to be doing.

I yanked at his pants again, and he obediently pushed up to let me pull boxers and jeans down around his knees, then to his ankles. We had to shift a bit so he could get them off, but I refused to take my lips from his cock. We finally managed, and he collapsed back in relief, the fingers of one hand holding a knot of my hair tight at the back of my neck. He used it to control me, and I let him, wrapping my hand around the base of his cock so he couldn't push past my gagging point.

It was a heady thing, doing this with someone watching me. I wasn't sure I could do it with any other two men, but I'd meant what I'd said to Daniel. I loved them. *Both* of them. It was a relief to me to be able to express it in any way.

The audience proved to be a strain on Daniel's control. Sooner than usual, his breathing grew ragged and his mutters intensified. His fingers jerked my head faster, and I just

concentrated on keeping my lips as tight as I could around his shaft. All at once, he yanked my head back and wrapped his free hand around the top of the shaft. I watched his hand and hips twitch and tremble; then creamy fluid spurted from the tiny hole at the tip. Some of it painted my lips and chin. I tilted my head up and let him have the rest of his orgasm while watching my tongue lap the semen from my lips.

He subsided, and I brought my hand up to wipe away most of the rest. He groaned when I put my fingers in my mouth to suck them clean. "I would have swallowed," I assured him.

His eyes darkened with promise.

I turned my head to look at Jake.

His smile was broad and happy, his hand still slowly stroking his erection.

Without looking back to Daniel, I moved from between his thighs and crawled toward Jake.

He watched me come, but when I would have climbed up onto the couch to take him into my mouth, he used his free hand to stop me. I looked a question up at him and was caught off guard when he leaned forward, securing my head with his hand, and devoured my mouth. The kiss was wonderful on its own, but it was only when his tongue lapped at the edges of my mouth and my chin that I realized he tasted the residue of Daniel's cum. Did Daniel realize it?

Jake's eye twinkled when he pulled back. He smiled. "Can we get you naked?"

I matched the smile. "I think we could manage that."

I stood and grabbed the hem of my sweater. A glance at Daniel as I removed sweater, stretchy pants, and underwear showed me that he seemed content to watch me. His face was calm, his eyes half closed in that sleepy, sated look he got after orgasm. By the time I was nude, the hand he'd had on his thigh was on his mostly softened cock, beginning to stroke it back to awareness.

I stood before him naked. "What will you allow?"

His movements stopped. "What?"

"You're calling the shots, Daniel. You're the one who doesn't want to do this."

He frowned. "It's not that I ..." He trailed off.

I waited.

Daniel glanced at Jake, who just shrugged.

Daniel grimaced, and I had a horrible moment thinking that he would, indeed, call a halt. But then he dropped his gaze to Jake's rampant, flushed cock. He looked back at me with dark purpose. "Ride him."

I stopped the "You're sure?" that wanted to spill from my lips. Questioning him didn't seem like a good idea. Instead, I simply obeyed. It wasn't as though he'd suggested something awful. Indeed, he'd suggested something that nearly made my knees give out. I stepped toward Jake, who held out a hand. Gratefully, I took it and let him help me straddle him.

"Goddess, you're big," I murmured, feeling the stretch in my inner thighs as they spread over his.

"Too much?"

I smiled up into his caring face, certain that this sweetheart of a man would stop if I was at all hesitant. I put my hands on his shoulders and brushed a soft kiss on his lips, loving the tickle of his mustache. "No. Just noticing, that's all."

He had to help me manage. His hands cradled my butt as I reached down to take hold of his thickness. He growled at my touch, and I pumped him once, just because I could. I laughed when his fingers tightened. He lifted me, supporting nearly all of my weight with his hands, and, after I'd aimed him, lowered me onto his cock.

I shuddered, unprepared for the friction of his thickness. I pushed down and fell forward against his chest, gasping as burning shivers washed through me.

"You okay?" he asked, palms sliding over my bare back.

I nuzzled the wiry mat of hair over the hot satin of his skin. “Oh, yeah.”

I peeked at Daniel. He was watching with hooded eyes, his fingers playing idly with his renewing erection. Part of me was scared to let him see how good this felt, but I had to be honest and open if I expected the same from him in return.

It took me a few minutes to find my stride, during which I rolled and twisted my hips enough to make both Jake and me groan. Then I just curled my hands around his neck and hung on as I started to ride.

I slammed down hard on him, grinding groin to groin, and had to smash my eyelids closed as another tremor took me. Jake just hit all the right places. Or maybe it was the position. I’d never done this with Daniel or my few previous lovers. I’d been on top, but it hadn’t been comfortable and I hadn’t liked it. And Jake was just plain big, bigger in all ways than any other man I’d been with. But his hands were strong and supportive, and truthfully, I just couldn’t get enough of the feel of him. Helpless little mewls pushed from my lips as I slammed down on him, making sure that the friction was just right. I could only hope that this was good for him, because I was galloping toward orgasm and couldn’t afford to wait.

When it came, I screamed, arching my back, trusting Jake to hold me. His growl echoed my scream, and I sort of noticed his body shook along with mine.

Jake pulled me back against him as we came down, and I happily snuggled on his furry chest, listening to his heart race.

When I opened my eyes, I was startled to see Daniel up close, his face in mine, just inches away from Jake’s arm. It looked like he’d been waiting for my eyes to open. “You really want both of us?”

“Yes,” I answered, without hesitation.

I felt his hand, a hot brand on my back. Without taking his eyes from mine, he slid that hand down over the swell of my butt, his fingers trailing down the crack until one teased my back opening. “Really?”

I swallowed. "I've never done it before, but yes."

"Daniel, wait," Jake said.

But Daniel was up off the couch with a hurried "Be right back."

Jake cupped my chin and made me look up at him. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes."

"He's never --"

I smiled. "Neither have I."

He shook his head. "It could hurt."

"Yes."

"You don't have to." His concern was written all over his features.

"Yes, I do. He's testing me."

Jake scowled.

"It's okay. He needs to know he can trust me." I smiled again, reaching up to smooth the lines from his face. "He won't hurt me on purpose."

"You trust him?"

"Don't you?"

I searched his face, realizing belatedly that his feelings for Daniel may not be as open and deep as I'd thought. *Good Goddess, don't let me be wrong now!*

He said no more. Gently, he lifted me from his lap and set me beside him on the couch. By that time, Daniel had returned from upstairs with a bottle of lube.

Jake stood, hand to Daniel's chest to stop him.

Only because I was watching did I see the surprised, wide-eyed gulp where Jake did not. Daniel was all scowls when he looked up at Jake.

Jake just stared him down. "We should clean up some."

"Why? We're just --"

“Cause you should show some respect for the lady who just brought both of us off.” His tone reminded Daniel that he was older and presumably wiser.

Of course, I was older than either of them, but I chose not to dwell on that.

Daniel stood, shell-shocked, while Jake turned from him to head for the downstairs bathroom.

I reached up to smooth a hand down Daniel’s forearm. “It’s okay.”

He swallowed. “Are you ...?”

I smiled. “Really. I’m okay. Although --” I waved a hand at the semen dribbling down my thighs. “-- cleaning up a little isn’t a bad idea.”

He shut his eyes. “Noelle, this is --”

“Shhh.” I pulled him down to the couch beside me, stroking his arm, his shoulder, his chest. “I want this. I want you. I want you both.”

He let me kiss him and hold him close. We were still in a clinch when Jake returned with a wash towel. He started to wipe me clean, but I broke from Daniel to do it myself.

Jake took the towel from me and jerked his chin toward the stairs. “We should move up to that big ol’ bed upstairs, don’tcha think?”

Daniel and I stood, both in agreement.

I preceded them upstairs and sat on the edge of the bed as they joined me. “How do we do this?”

“I’m too big,” Jake declared baldly. He crawled onto the bed beside me and twisted to sit with his back against the headboard. “So you should ride me while he takes you from behind. Besides --” He stared coldly at Daniel. “-- you’re pushing this.”

“I’m not --!”

“Please!” I stopped them, kneeling up and holding a palm out toward either of them. “I don’t want you to bicker. I *want* this.” I stared at Jake. “I do.” I turned to Daniel. “But I will admit to being a little scared.”

Daniel softened. Not much, but I could see the subtle shift of his emotions now. “Noelle, we don’t have ...”

“You’re not hearing me, Daniel.” I put some sternness in my voice. “I *want to do this*.” I reached out, thrilled when he came to the edge of the bed to allow me to touch him. “I’m just asking that you go slow.”

He slid his hands along my hips, nodding. We kissed, a slow, thoughtful promise.

I pulled back and turned to face Jake. His anger was gone, visibly anyway. He smiled and reached for me.

I glanced down to see he wasn’t quite ready for a ride. So I crawled over and positioned my knees between his spread thighs. “You’re beautiful, Jake,” I murmured, sliding my hands over his chest.

He chuckled. “Not me. That’s Daniel.”

The bed behind me sank. “No, man, she’s right. You’re beautiful.”

I didn’t dare turn, so Jake’s pole-axed look had to serve for us both.

Daniel chuckled. “Hey, I’m not allowed to realize you’re a good-looking man?”

“With all your ‘I’m not gay’ talk ...” Jake protested.

Daniel snorted. “I’m not gay. But I’m not blind.”

Unsure how best to react, I chose to distract myself. I moved down and kissed Jake’s chest, right above the heart. He hummed, a hand coming up to stroke my hair. I kissed my way across surprisingly soft hair and hard muscle to the flat nipple trying to hide in the dark fur. His sigh told me he liked that.

Daniel's dry, warm hands slid over my butt, squeezing, massaging gently. He didn't seem to want to hurry things along, so I made my leisurely way across the great expanse of Jake's chest toward his other nipple.

I heard the distinctive pop of the cap of the lube bottle.

"Make sure you use lots of that," Jake's voice rumbled underneath my lips.

"I will," Daniel assured him softly.

Warm fingers slid down the crack of my butt to tease my rear opening.

I took a deep breath.

Jake's hands slid up and down my arms. "Relax, Noelle. You say the word, we stop."

"No," I murmured into his ribs. "I'm okay."

Daniel's finger circled, tickling, soothing. His other hand continued to massage my cheek. Slowly, he sank part of his finger in.

I bit down on Jake's chest.

He jumped. "Ow!"

I smiled and lapped at the hurt.

"Oh-ho, that's how it is, huh? Hey, buddy, you hurt her and she'll hurt me."

The finger inside me wiggled gently. "Ah, you're tough. You can take it."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

I was delighted when they -- both of them -- joined me.

We played that way, leisurely, slowly. I distracted myself with laving and nipping at Jake's chest while Daniel accustomed me to one finger, then slowly two. When he added the third, I had to call for a pause, resting my head on Jake's sternum.

"You okay?" Jake asked.

"It hurts."

“Want me to stop?” Daniel asked, breath and lips whispering over my lower back and the top swell of my buttocks. His voice was just as soft and caring as Jake’s.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Noelle ...” Jake started.

I gasped. I felt it. Daniel. Spirits. Energy. I braced up on Jake’s chest and looked over my shoulder.

The light was behind Daniel, but I could see the glint in his eye and the small smile of ... triumph? I matched the smile. “Daniel!”

“You feel it?”

“I do.”

His wrist twisted slowly, and my entire body shuddered. “Make it better?”

My eyes rolled back in my head. How to describe? Yes, he’d filled me with spiritual energy before, but it had always been in the throes of passion, a wild, barely controlled flood. This was different. This was like a caress. Yes, that was it. He was caressing me with his magic, with the spirits he attracted. Since it wasn’t physical, it filled my being and seeped through my skin. It warmed me, coaxing my own control to weaken. I sank down on Jake’s chest, sighing happily, pushing back onto Daniel’s fingers. What Daniel had done had relaxed my body, convincing it to accept the invasion. “Oh, yes!”

“Whoa.” Jake laughed softly. “What did you do?”

“I’m not sure I can do the same to you.”

“Don’t try. Not yet, anyway.” Jake caressed my back. “Make her feel good.”

I sighed happily, wiggling my butt to indicate that I was feeling just fine.

Daniel kept open the controlled conduit between us. I helped from my end, kind of grasping his hand and holding it, spiritually speaking. Along that “handhold,” the most marvelous warmth surged between us.

At first it was simply nice, but then it became more, until finally I was wiggling with excitement. “Daniel.”

He slid his fingers out of me, despite my whimper of protest, and I felt his lips caress my butt. “Ride Jake, baby.”

Oh, yes! Happily, I squirmed up and pretty much allowed Jake to lower me down over him. I hummed, pleased to feel him fill me as Daniel’s directed spirit energy tickled my skin.

“Noelle,” Jake breathed, rocking his hips to shuttle his cock slowly in and out of my wet channel.

“Mmmm, Jake,” I answered, braced above him, just enjoying the feel of him.

“Did you make her drunk?” Jake asked.

Daniel chuckled, and I felt his mirth echo through the spirits. “Kind of.” I felt movement behind me; then his hands were on my buttocks, gently pressing them apart, exposing me. “Noelle?”

“Yes!”

He gasped as the spirit energy rebounded back on him. “Damn.”

“You okay?” Jake asked, still slowly sliding through my sex.

“Oh, yeah.” The smooth head of Daniel’s cock rubbed my opening. He carefully pushed into me, both physically and with his magic.

I gasped. It still hurt, but not nearly as much as the three fingers had. This was a dark hurt that somehow went along with the amazing heat that was bubbling just below my belly. He forged ahead, and Jake held still, supporting me as I took both of them inside my body.

“Oh, man.” Daniel stopped when he could fit no more and simply breathed.

“Oh, yeah.” Jake groaned, starting a slow exit from my body.

I cried out, nails digging into Jake’s chest.

“Noelle?”

“Don’t stop!” I pounded an ineffectual fist on his chest. “Goddess, don’t stop.”

That’s pretty much when I lost track. It felt too good. The fire in my skin was fed by the violet energy that Daniel pressed into me as he and Jake found a synchronous rhythm in my body. I could do little more than be there, between them, taking them, making us whole. I cried, tears streaming down my face and spattering Jake’s chest. I vaguely recall his worry at that and have no idea what I said or did to reassure him. I only know that they didn’t stop. They took me, they filled me, and at some point I burst. And burst again when they didn’t stop. It turned into one long, agonizing orgasm that shattered my mind and soul before they finally found their completion.

Chapter Nine

December 24

I watched them make dinner on Christmas Eve, torn. On the one hand, it was a grand view since Jake only wore boxers and Daniel his black silk pajama bottoms. On the other, something was missing.

They didn't touch each other.

They stood side by side at the counter, Jake humming to "The Little Drummer Boy" as it played on the stereo, Daniel mashing the potatoes. Both were relaxed. Daniel even wore the small smile that had become an almost frequent feature on his face since the three of us started sleeping together. But when Jake moved to open the oven to baste the turkey that'd been driving us crazy with its smell all day, Daniel moved aside. Earlier, when Daniel had been peeling the potatoes, Jake had calmly enough moved around him, but there was none of the casual brushes from before all the sex had started.

I doubted either of them noticed.

But I did. They did it when we had sex, too, so very careful to only touch me and not each other. So very careful not to give even a hint of an impression that they were attracted

to each other. I suppose that would be ideal for most women in my situation, but it wasn't what I wanted. *Have I brought us closer together or further apart?* I nursed my tea, wrapped up in a quilt on the recliner. "Can I help?" I offered for the umpteenth time.

"Sweetheart," Jake drawled, crossing the room toward me, "you need your rest."

I grimaced ineffectually at him as he leaned down to my level, hands braced on the arms of my chair. "I'm rested."

His eyes twinkled. "Sore?"

I squirmed. "Well, yes."

He nodded. "You've been taking a lot lately. Let us take care of you." With that, he leaned in to briefly kiss my nose and then walked back to the kitchen.

As soon as Jake's bulk moved aside, I could see Daniel. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been eyeing Jake's butt, although he hid it well, transferring his gaze to me, smiling slightly because he knew it dazzled me.

I sighed, mind reeling. How could I make them *see*?

Frustrated, I grabbed the universal remote. I switched off the stereo and punched on the television. I did have to get up to find a DVD, since the heavy snowfall outside had yet again thrown out the satellite. I found and put in *It's a Wonderful Life* and returned to my nest in the chair.

Dinner was ready to eat by the time the dance scene and the fall in the pool happened. We arranged ourselves on the couch, the boys on the outside and me curled up between them, to watch the rest of the movie. Before we'd been sleeping together, we wouldn't have fit, but lovers can find wonderful positions that involve a lot of touching to make such close confines work. We finished eating shortly after Clarence and George met up, and the boys wouldn't let me help with the dishes, so I lay staring at the Christmas tree until they came back. We watched the rest of the movie with me lying between them, my head on Daniel's

lap, with Jake gently rubbing my feet. I actually started to doze, but woke with a start when George started yelling “Merry Christmas” while running up the street.

Jake shut off the television after the end, and we sat for a moment, listening to the soft crackle of the fire in the stove. All the lights were out except for those on the tree.

“Do you ever wonder?” I asked softly, staring at the white and blue twinkles.

“What?” Jake asked.

“What life would be like if you’d never been born?”

Daniel sniffed, but kept stroking my hair. “Useless to wonder. My parents would have been happier.”

“I wouldn’t have been,” Jake said. I glanced over to see him with his head tilted against the back of the couch, eyes closed. “With you gone, I mean.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said. “It’s been okay having you around, too.”

Jake snorted.

I smiled.

Again silence descended. I wondered if I dared the idea that came to mind, but then I figured it was now or never.

I sat up, startling both men. They watched as I swung my legs over the edge of the couch, then turned so I was seated on the coffee table. I faced Daniel. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

His relaxed expression tensed, and I was sorry for that, but this needed to be said. I think.

“Your aura has changed. You’ve gained control, and it’s down to a manageable level around you, but the colors are different than when we first met. It’s still neon blue some, but it’s faded into this midnight blue.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think it means you’re more settled. Like I’ve told you, not everyone’s colors are the same, and the colors don’t mean the same on different people.”

He nodded. “Settled is good, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But there’s something else that’s strange about the darker blue.” I had to pause. Here started the part that he’d either accept or deny. “It reaches down your leash toward Jake.”

He frowned.

Jake tilted his head, eyeing me carefully.

“Is that normal?” Daniel asked.

I shook my head. “No. I asked around while I was gone. I even asked some spirit witches I’ve been in touch with who have shifters. They say it’s not normal. Of course, their leashes are based in the hand, not the heart, like yours.”

I left that. I could see by the look on Daniel’s face that he was drawing his own conclusions.

“There’s more.”

“Why have you waited to tell me this?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to hear it.”

“I take it you have theories on what this means?”

I nodded.

He stared at me.

“Do you want to hear the more?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“There’s a violet color that’s come into your aura since you and I made love. It’s gotten stronger since the three of us have started sleeping together. I can’t see it when it melds with my aura, but I’m pretty sure it’s that color that you push into me during sex.”

“And?”

“And the violet has been reaching for Jake in the last few days.”

He stared at me, showing me no reaction whatsoever.

“Noelle?” Jake asked. “What are you saying?”

I didn’t answer. It wasn’t for me to verbalize the conclusion. That was Daniel’s decision, both to acknowledge what I was implying and to say it aloud.

Daniel’s eyes narrowed. His lips twisted into the grimace that I’d hoped he’d lost. “She’s saying that I want to fuck you.”

“Huh?”

Daniel stood, his face a cold, beautiful mask. “But she’s wrong. She’s projecting what she wants to see onto me. Am I right, Noelle? You one of those women who gets off on watching two guys fuck?”

I kept my gaze steady, even though my heart hurt. I knew he’d lash out at me if he didn’t accept. That was his way. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, it’s not going to happen. We’re not like that.” He turned away. “She’s all yours tonight, Jake.”

Jake turned on the couch as Daniel rounded it on his way to the stairs. “Hey, wait, hold on a minute.”

“No,” he said calmly as he reached the stairs. “Noelle’s obviously not content with having two of us. She wants something unnatural.”

“I want what *you* want, Daniel,” I called after him. “If you’re honest with yourself, you’ll know I’m right.”

He froze, glaring at me over the banister. “Are you *determined* to ruin what’s between me and Jake?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to ruin it, Daniel. I want you to be true to it.”

“You’re a perverted bitch, that’s what you are.”

“Daniel!” Jake barked.

Daniel shook his head, starting up the stairs again. “Forget it. Merry fucking Christmas.”

Jake spun back to face me, face intent. “Explain this to me.”

I glanced at Daniel, but he didn’t stop. Sighing, I lowered my face into my palms. “Maybe I was wrong.”

Big hands grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Noelle, explain.”

I lifted my head to look at him. “You’ve heard us talk about auras.”

He nodded.

“His has been doing exactly what I said. It’s been reaching for you. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Are you sure it’s about sex?”

“The violet only appeared after we had sex the first time. I don’t see what else it could be.”

Jake stared up at the loft. Daniel’s hearing was merely human, and his magic powers outside of manipulating spirits were sadly neglected, so there was little chance he heard our low voices.

I grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry, Jake. Maybe I should have just told him and left you out of it. It just seemed ... I was so certain I was right.”

“But you’re not sure,” he said softly. Thoughtfully.

“No.” I watched him as he stared upstairs. “Jake?”

Quite suddenly, he grabbed my arm and pulled me up to my feet.

“Jake? Eeep!” The last because he picked me up and headed for the stairs. “Jake, no.”

Daniel appeared at the top of the staircase, glaring up a storm as we climbed toward him. "Get the fuck away."

Jake just kept right on climbing. "No."

"Jake, she's not right."

"Okay, she's wrong. Doesn't mean *I* have to be punished, does it?"

Daniel frowned.

Jake pushed past him with me, toward Daniel's big bed.

"What do you mean?"

Jake dumped me on the bed -- relatively gently, but I still bounced -- then turned to Daniel. His fingers landed on the waistband of his boxers. "I'd rather have sex with the three of us." He yanked them down.

Distracted by Jake's tight, bare butt, I missed Daniel's initial reaction. By the time I thought to look, he was scowling.

"We're not gay," he insisted.

Jake waved the notion away, sitting on the bed. "I know that." He leaned back on his elbows, displaying his mostly hard erection. "But we've been having plenty of fun, the three of us. Why stop?"

Daniel kept scowling.

"C'mon, buddy. Just 'cause she said what she did about your aura thing doesn't mean we can't fuck, does it? She told you what she thought." He shrugged. "She's wrong. You okay with that, Noelle?" He turned to me and smiled.

I matched the smile. "Yes."

"See?" He turned on the bed, putting his butt toward Daniel as he crawled over me. "So let's have some fun."

I lay back under Jake's looming presence and glanced at Daniel as Jake's fingers started on one of the buttons of the pajama top I wore. He watched, skeptical, until Jake had the top open and had leaned in to take one of my nipples into his mouth. Whether it was Jake's lips sucking at my breast or my arched back that got to him, I don't know. But Daniel's hands went to his pajama pants and he dropped them, revealing that gorgeous erection.

He knelt on the bed by my head and sank his fingers into my hair. Eagerly, I opened my mouth as he guided it to his cock.

"I'm not gay," he told me, locking gazes with me as he slid between my lips.

I nodded, humming happily as my eyes slid shut. After a bit, my neck started to hurt, so I tried to turn toward him to ease the sharp twist. The bulk of Jake's body had me pinned, though, so I couldn't shift far.

Jake decided that we needed to move. He reared up and, with two strong hands, flipped me over onto my belly. "Daniel, sit up there," he directed, nodding toward the headboard.

Daniel complied, and Jake positioned me on my hands and knees, face right over Daniel's lap. Happily, I took him back into my mouth, much more comfortable in this position. Daniel's fingers sank into my hair, guiding me again as he settled back in the pillows.

Jake trailed hands and lips down my spine, licking the top of the crack of my butt before he licked his way back up. He took hold of my hips, adjusting them, then reached down. I groaned around Daniel's cock when I felt Jake pressing at my sex. He sank inside, torturing me by going slow. I squirmed, trying to get him deeper faster, but he held on and refused to alter that slow, brutally wonderful slide inside my body. But finally he was in, and I took Daniel as far into my mouth as I could to mirror the feel for him. The men echoed each other's groans. I pulled up as Jake pulled out and chanced a look up at Daniel to see his head thrown back, a sure sign of his pleasure.

Jake set a steady rhythm, stroking inside me, twisting a little as he slammed home to make sure he caused the most friction. I moaned and sucked Daniel, rewarding him for how good Jake was making me feel. I came, my scream muffled by the cock in my mouth. Daniel hissed, clutching my hair and shoulder, tense as he held back his own orgasm. I sighed as I came down, releasing Daniel's cock with a gasp.

Another hand gripped my hair over Daniel's and pulled gently but insistently. Head muzzy from a fierce orgasm, I fell aside with only a small cry of surprise as I was shoved slightly forward by the weight of Jake's body draping heavily over my back. My cheek pressed into the side of Daniel's hip, just under his belly.

"Wha-- Shit, Jake!" Daniel cried out.

My eyes bugged out to see Jake's mouth descend over my shoulder and take in the head of Daniel's cock. Flushed, pale skin eased past Jake's dark pink lips. Jake's eyes were closed, his expression showing every indication that he enjoyed what he was doing.

Daniel's hand in my hair fought with Jake's, but Jake kept both hands right where they were. Daniel's other hand shot toward Jake's head, but for all I could tell, Jake caught that one, too. He was stronger and heavier than either of us and had both of us quite effectively pinned.

"Jake!" Daniel cried out, hips thrusting up as he tried to wiggle out from under us. "Fuck, Jake!"

Jake hummed and shook his head sharply.

A ragged groan pulled from Daniel's chest at the move. "Shit, Jake, what are you doing?" His voice was hoarse, ragged.

I looked up, concerned. I realized that Jake could very well be doing this just from what I'd said and that I really could be wrong. Daniel's mouth hung half open, and his exquisite face was deeply flushed. His nostrils flared, and his eyes glittered from beneath

half-closed lids. He frowned, confused, conflicted. “Jake, *Goddess!*” Jake must have done something particularly wonderful because Daniel’s eyes closed completely and his bottom lip disappeared between his teeth.

Jake thrust his hips, vividly reminding me that his huge cock was still buried in my body. I shook as he started his rhythm again, this time sucking Daniel’s cock himself.

Caught between them, I could only watch and feel. This had to be good. This had to be right. I convinced myself of that, knowing that the leash between them made it impossible for Jake to really do something Daniel didn’t want. At any time, with a mere thought, Daniel could throw Jake off of both of us and keep him away.

But he didn’t.

“No!” Daniel cried. His hips bucked beneath me, but I don’t think he was quite the master of their movement. “Damn it all, Jake!” His voice was husky, the tone making a mockery of the words. “Fucking stop!” His hand fell from my hair, but Jake kept a grip on his wrist.

Jake didn’t stop. He held Daniel’s wrists to the mattress, trapped his legs with our bodies, and pounded me into an orgasm that hit seconds after Daniel roared and shot semen into Jake’s sucking mouth. I tried to watch, even as I was coming, because the sight of Jake’s bearded cheeks hollowing, of Daniel’s hips pumping helplessly, was too amazing to miss.

Jake sucked Daniel until he was soft, then finally slid his lips all the way up to the tip and off. A dribble of semen that Jake hadn’t managed to swallow still connected cock and lips before Jake tilted his head back to look at Daniel.

I looked up, too. Daniel’s eyes were half closed and slumberous, his pale cheeks flushed. It was a look I’d grown fond of. It was Daniel’s sated look and one I worked hard to put on his face. To know that Jake had put it there ...

“Why?” he asked, eyes locked on Jake’s. He didn’t look mad, but he did look confused.

Jake grinned. “You said you weren’t gay. I never said *I* wasn’t.”

Daniel's eyes went wide; his mouth fell open. "But you ..."

Jake sat back, carefully releasing Daniel's hands. He put his hands on my hips, easing out of me as he went.

He was still hard, but he ignored his erection for the moment, staring at Daniel. "I saw from the start that it bugged you if anyone thought we were gay, so I figured I wouldn't say anything."

Daniel swallowed. "But I thought ..." His voice trailed off as he stared at Jake in helpless confusion.

Jake's smile was dark as he carefully lifted my leg and eased me to my side. "Scuse me, sweetheart." He winked at me before turning back to a dumbfounded Daniel. "You think too much."

I scooted aside and lay very quietly to watch Jake lean in to Daniel. He kept eye contact the entire way as he slowly closed the distance between their mouths.

Daniel's only movement was the more rapid rise and fall of his chest as his breathing sped up.

Jake stopped with his lips a breath away from Daniel's. "Buddy?"

Daniel swallowed. He closed his eyes. Then, very slowly, he tipped his head to the side and up.

Jake closed the distance.

They kissed.

I fought not to squirm at the gorgeous sight. Two men kissing had never really turned me on before, but *these* two men kissing ... This was what I'd hoped for. This was what I was convinced Daniel needed.

At first it was a simple meeting of lips, a soft how-do-you-do. Then Jake parted his lips and pushed a little. Daniel's head tipped farther, and his jaw fell open slightly. I actually saw

Jake's tongue slide from his mouth into Daniel's before he pushed in a little more to seal their lips. It lasted forever. Daniel lay quietly, moving only in response to some sign from Jake.

Jake moved forward so he could balance on his knees between Daniel's legs. His huge hands came up to frame Daniel's face. Only then did he allow their lips to part. Eyes closed, he continued to nibble and lick at Daniel's lips, tasting and exploring them the same way I had the first chance I'd been given permission to do so.

"So beautiful," Jake murmured. "I've wanted to do this for years."

Daniel swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut. Despite that, I saw the trickle of tears down the cheek I could see. Jake must have felt it hit his hand because he angled Daniel's face so he could trail his lips up the younger man's cheek to kiss his eyes.

I felt like a peeping tom, but I couldn't have moved from my spot if I'd wanted to.

Jake inched forward again. He nudged his knees under Daniel's thighs, forcing him to move them up onto Jake's legs.

Daniel's eyes shot open. He reached up and grabbed both of Jake's forearms. "Jake!"

"Shhhh," Jake soothed, kissing his lips lightly. "I'm not going to do it. Not if you don't want me to."

Daniel sagged a bit, his watery eyes locking with Jake's. "Jake?"

Jake grinned. He released one hand from Daniel's head and dropped it to Daniel's cock.

Daniel groaned, his eyes falling shut.

"Yeah," Jake crooned, fondling Daniel's renewed erection. "I've been wanting to do this forever."

Daniel squirmed, his hands reaching up to clutch at Jake's shoulders. "Shit."

"Easy, baby." Jake glanced at me, a huge, delighted smile on his face. He winked, just to let me know he remembered my presence, then returned his attention to Daniel. Gently, he rubbed his bearded cheek against Daniel's smooth one. "Easy."

Daniel moaned. He switched his hands from Jake's shoulders to his head and yanked Jake's lips back to his.

I squeezed my thighs together, trying in vain to ease the empty ache between them.

Jake nudged forward some more, curling Daniel's body before him. I didn't realize why until he took hold of his own cock and held it in the one hand with Daniel's. *Goddess, that's hot!* He used his hand and rolled his hips. He freed his far hand momentarily to scrabble on the nightstand for the bottle of lube. Blindly, he poured some on the cocks he had imprisoned in his tight grip. Daniel grunted, no doubt at the feel of cool liquid dribbling over hot skin, but when Jake started to pump their cocks, he went wild. His hips started to buck, and his kiss at Jake's mouth grew sloppy. Jake thrust as well, clearly losing control. They strained together until they fell away from the kiss and landed cheek-to-cheek as they both thrust into Jake's fist. Daniel came first, splashing cum onto his belly. Jake followed within seconds, moaning low into Daniel's neck.

Jake held them there as they caught their breath.

Daniel recovered, moaning. His hands fell down beside him, and he tried to push up. His eyes came open, and he twisted his head so he could see me.

I smiled huge. Only then did I realize tears were streaming down my cheeks, matching the ones that streaked his own.

Jake eased back, giving Daniel room to unbend from what must now be an uncomfortable curl.

Suddenly thinking to be useful, I rolled off the bed and hurried into the bathroom to run a washcloth under some warm water. It took a while for the water to warm, so by the time I got back to them, they were in a completely different position. Daniel lay on his back in the center of the bed. Jake was propped on his elbow at Daniel's side, his big hand spread over Daniel's heart. They were kissing lightly.

I stopped at the edge of the bed, unsure. On one hand, I very much wanted to keep watching. They were so beautiful. On the other, I felt like an intruder.

Jake broke the kiss and sat up. "Thanks." He smiled, reaching for the cloth.

I remained standing at he wiped pools of milky white from Daniel's cobbled belly. "Should I ...?" I cleared my throat. "I should go downstairs and leave you two alone."

Jake chuckled. "You don't want to go all the way down there."

"Well ..."

Daniel reached for my hand. I met his gaze. He still looked shocked, confused, but momentarily content. "Please stay," he said softly.

Jake nodded, rising from the bed with the cloth as I knelt. I watched him cross around the foot of the bed toward the bathroom.

Daniel took my hand and drew me down. Our gazes met. He shook his head. "Not right now." He closed his eyes. "Please?"

I nodded and lay down beside him.

Jake came back. He made us move so he could pull the covers down; then he got into bed on Daniel's other side and pulled the sheets and quilt over us. He twisted to turn off the lamp, leaving us with only the dim light from the Christmas tree below for illumination. I watched him settle beside Daniel, one hand spread across Daniel's chest. Eyes still closed, Daniel brought his hand up to lie over Jake's.

Jake smiled and winked at me over Daniel's body.

Not sure what to make of this, I simply closed my eyes and slept.

Chapter Ten

December 25

The sight of Jake devouring Daniel's mouth was my first sight when I woke up Christmas morning. Sweet Goddess, what a gift! Daniel's pale hand stood out against the darker skin of Jake's shoulder. The sheets and quilt were draped low over Jake's hips as they lay pressed half atop Daniel. Jake's hand was wrapped firmly around Daniel's morning erection, pumping it slowly in time to the gentle rhythm of his hips grinding against Daniel's thigh.

It took me a moment to realize that Daniel was protesting. Weakly. The hand on Jake's shoulder was pushing, not pulling, and the movement of his head indicated that he was trying to free his mouth.

He finally managed it by twisting his head toward me. His eyes were closed. "Jake, stop."

Jake bent his head to nip at Daniel's neck. "No."

"Jake, damn it." Daniel reached down to wrap his hand around Jake's wrist.

Jake didn't stop. "Why?"

Daniel gritted his teeth. "Jake."

For the first time since I'd met them, Daniel used the leash. I wasn't looking magically, so I couldn't see it, but I saw the immediate effect. One moment Jake was half draped over Daniel, the next he yanked back, eyes wide, making a choking sound.

Daniel scrambled forward, shooting off the foot of the bed as Jake landed on his back.

"Daniel!" I called, sitting up.

He didn't look at me. He snatched up the jeans and sweater he'd worn the day before from the chair by the head of the stairs and took them with him on his mad dash to the main room below.

I glanced at Jake. "Are you okay?"

The corner of Jake's mouth curled in a rueful grin as he fingered his neck. "Yeah. He hasn't done *that* for years."

I turned to start off the bed. "We should go after ... ah!"

I fell across Jake's chest as he yanked me down. His hand closed around the back of my head and drew me into an engulfing kiss. I was helpless to do anything but respond.

"He's not the only one I want," Jake huffed when he released me. His gaze bore into mine. "You hear me?"

I swallowed and nodded.

He nodded and released me. "Let's go."

He stormed naked down the stairs. A bit more modest, I grabbed Daniel's oversized pajama top and put it on as I followed.

Daniel sat in one of the chairs by the dining table, pulling on socks that must have been stuffed somewhere in the clothing he'd picked up. The jeans were already on, the sweater waiting on the table. His boots and the front door were not far away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jake demanded.

“Away from you.”

“Running?”

Daniel spun in the chair and reached out to grab his boots. Underneath the fall of loose, silky black hair I could see the panicked look in his eyes. “Yeah.”

I stopped Jake halfway across the room.

He frowned down at me, but stayed put as I approached Daniel.

“Daniel,” I said softly.

He didn’t look up, stomping into one boot.

“Daniel, the storm picked up last night. You can’t go anywhere.”

He froze, hands hovering over the laces of his boot. Hands that trembled violently.

I stepped closer and reached out to brush aside some of his hair. “Daniel --”

He jerked away from me, back ramrod straight against the back of the chair. Wide, panicked eyes looked at my hand like it was a viper. “Don’t.”

I pulled my hand back and took a step in reverse.

He glanced at the window in the kitchen, clearly seeing the haze of gray and white. Yesterday Jake had told us we were pretty well snowed in, and he certainly hadn’t taken any time to shovel us out since then. Daniel knew that. Clearly, his panic had made him forget.

His hands closed into fists on his thighs, but that didn’t stop the trembling. “You’ve felt like this all along?” He continued to stare out the window.

It was obvious he wasn’t talking to me. I glanced at Jake, who stood naked not far from the staircase, arms over his chest and feet braced apart.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And have you react like this?”

Daniel shut his eyes, pushing new tears down his cheeks. Given their positions, I don't think Jake could see the tears. I could, though, and it sparked tears of my own.

"You never gave any indication ..."

"No. I didn't. You made it obvious that you weren't gay, so there was no hope."

Daniel's chin tilted down, and he brushed at one cheek with his bare shoulder. "I've seen you with women. We've dated *women*."

"I like women, too."

Daniel shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Why not?"

"You either like men or you like women. You can't like both."

"I'm sorry, buddy, that's just not true."

Daniel swallowed. "Have you ... been with a guy since we ...?"

"I haven't been with a guy since you leashed me, no."

"Because there wasn't a chance? Have you ... wanted ...?"

"No. I met you and pretty much found what I wanted in a man."

Daniel cringed. "Me?" his voice was barely a breath.

"Yes."

"Even though ...?"

"Even though."

Daniel's face crumpled, and his mouth opened in a silent sob. His fingers clawed into his thighs, and he bent over, silky hair falling forward to hide his face from view.

I wanted so very much to take the two steps between us and wrap my arms around him, but I didn't. This had to happen. This was important, painful as it was to watch. I glanced at Jake to see him a few steps closer, tears slowly tracking his cheeks into his beard. He met my gaze, and I saw that he knew it, too.

I clutched Daniel's pajama top closed between my breasts and turned back to him just as shuddering sobs started to tear from his chest. I chanced to look at him with magical sight and nearly gasped. A three-foot aura surrounded him, ablaze in midnight blue and pulsing purple. Tendrils writhed halfway down Jake's leash, reaching for him, then retracting. I saw the ghost of similar tendrils reaching for me.

"It's not right!" he gasped, voice broken. "It's not ... right. You ... can't ..."

I swallowed a soft sob of my own. "Can't what, Daniel?"

He propped his elbow on the table beside him and dropped his face in that hand. "You can't feel this way about two people! And one of them *can't* be a guy. It's just not --" He broke off, and the sobbing took over. Groaning, he brought his other hand around and tore at his temples with both hands, succumbing to the teary storm.

As one, Jake and I closed the distance to him. I knelt beside him, sliding one hand up his side and the other over his thigh. Jake came up behind him on the other side, arms wrapping around his shoulders. The move forced Daniel up against the back of the chair, exposing his face and the wreck the pain had made of his sculpted features. I grabbed his hands and held them when he would have brought them up to claw at his face. Held between us, between the two people who loved him most in this world, he completely fell apart. I put my face to the hands I held in mind, the hands I held on his thigh, and cried with him.

There's only so long a person can cry, however. No matter the pain, there's only so much time the body can succumb to body-wracking sobs. His wailing eventually ceased and the tremors subsided. I looked up to see Jake's arms still banding his chest, Jake's face buried in the side of his neck. Daniel's face was turned the other way, hair partially hiding his features as his cheek pressed Jake's arm. He was a mess. I'd never seen him look so awful. From what I could see, his eyes were puffy, his cheeks and nose were red, and snot and tears drenched his face.

I released his hands and stood, using the cuff of the pajama top to blot at my own tears as I turned to the sink. Quietly, I grabbed a few paper towels and ran half of them under the water. The men hadn't moved by the time I returned to the table. Gently, I brushed damp hair from Daniel's face and used one of the wet towels to blot at his cheeks and nose.

He sniffed and opened his eyes.

I smiled, knowing it was watery.

He reached up and wound an arm around my waist, pulling me close. I went gladly and wound my arms around the head that he buried in my cleavage.

Jake lifted his head. His cheeks and beard were damp from tears.

I offered one of the towels, and he unwound one of his arms from about Daniel's shoulders to take it. He blotted his eyes and nose.

I reached out to comb my fingers through the curly hair at his temple.

"I love you."

Jake and I both froze, unsure we'd heard the words from Daniel's mouth, muffled as they were by my cleavage.

Daniel reached up with his free hand to clutch at the forearm Jake still had banded about his shoulders. He rolled his head aside some so his voice was more recognizable. "Goddess, I love both of you so much. How is that even possible?"

Unsure how to answer, neither Jake nor I did.

But Daniel didn't seem to want an answer. Not yet anyway. "Noelle, you're such a pushy woman."

I barked a laugh. Jake grinned at me.

Daniel continued. "Always making me do things. Think things." The arm around my waist squeezed. "I wanted you before, but I didn't think it was right. I didn't think you'd want to ... stay."

I bit my lip and sifted through his hair. “I want to stay,” I assured him softly.

He squeezed Jake’s forearm. “And you.” Daniel reached up and found Jake’s cheek, his ear, the hair behind his ear. He grabbed hold and dragged Jake’s face down closer. “I’ve always ...” He swallowed. “From the first ... Gah! But wanting another guy is wrong.”

“Who told you that?” Jake asked softly.

Daniel laughed. *Laughed*. He tilted his head back, resting it on Jake’s shoulder, and couldn’t stop.

I exchanged an alarmed glance with Jake, but we stayed quiet. The maniacal laughter, like the sobbing, was clearly a needed release.

“My mother!” Daniel finally managed to tell us. “My mother. My father. The army. Goddess, why would I listen to *them*? My parents have never been right about anything. *Anything!*”

Jake used his free hand to brush at the renewed tears on Daniel’s cheeks. He kissed Daniel’s temple. “I love you, buddy.”

Daniel’s laughter subsided, and he tilted his head to rest against Jake’s, eyes closed, his face almost peaceful. “Goddess,” he breathed, lips brushing Jake’s beard. “I love you, too.”

Jake straightened up, beaming

Daniel opened puffy eyes. Smiled.

Jake chuckled. “You know, beautiful as you are, you look like shit.”

Daniel laughed softly. His eyes turned to me.

I smiled. “He’s right. You do.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and tried to lean forward.

Jake and I both released him and stepped back, allowing him to get to his feet.

He accepted one of the paper towels I offered and blotted his nose. He leaned on the table briefly to balance while toeing off the unlaced boot he'd managed to put on before. "I'll be right back."

I watched him walk down the hall until he turned in to the bathroom.

Jake came up beside me and gathered me into his arms. "You sure you want this?"

I tipped my head back to look up at him. "It's a bit late for second thoughts now."

He grinned. "Yeah." His eyes searched my face. "Goddess, you're beautiful. Are you sure you're all ours?"

I absolutely adored the way he said that. No doubt that this was a three-way deal. I went up on tiptoe to brush his lips with mine, loving the tickle of his mustache and beard. "As long as you're sure that you're both mine."

He held me against his chest, arms firmly banded around me to hold me up. Our kiss deepened to a meeting of tongues.

The bathroom door opened, but neither Jake nor I broke immediately from the kiss. We took our own sweet time about it, reluctant to part ... just yet.

When we did, I glanced over to see Daniel leaning in the arch that spilled the hallway into the main room, a smile on his newly washed face. "That was hot."

Jake chuckled, pulling the pajama top up my back to expose me below the waist. "It can get hotter if you come over here."

Daniel pushed from the wall and sauntered over. "I can do that."

He came up behind me, his hands going to my hips to fit my rump against the crotch of his jeans. In front of me, Jake's cock twitched and poked me in the belly. Jake's hands left my back, and I can only assume they found Daniel's shoulders or back. Jake leaned in over my shoulder, and I twisted my neck to see him take Daniel's mouth.

"Mmmmm," I purred, pressing my cheek to Jake's chest. "Merry Christmas and happy birthday to me."

They broke on a laugh, but we stayed in that marvelous three-way hug for precious moments.

Daniel's hands wandered first. They slid around the front of my hips. Jake hissed when one of those strong-fingered hands wrapped around his cock and pulled.

"Let's move upstairs," Daniel suggested.

No one argued.

I dropped the pajama top at the head of the staircase, and Daniel quickly doffed his jeans and socks while Jake pulled the covers down from the bed. We all crawled on the mattress and met in a jumble of hands, mouths, and bodies. Jake ended up on his back with both Daniel and me attacking the wealth of skin that covered his hard muscles. I dove for his cock, eager to have the thick, steely length in my mouth.

Daniel hovered over his mouth, then eased down to explore his chest. Then -- I think to everyone's surprise -- Daniel crawled down beside me. I popped Jake's cock from my mouth and, still holding it, ducked down to gently suck at the hairy sacs of his balls. Daniel's hand closed around mine, and I glanced up to see him lick his lips to wet them before sliding his mouth over the head of Jake's cock.

Jake's moan was like to rattle the rafters. I saw his fingers thread through Daniel's hair as Daniel sucked him down.

I freed my hand from underneath Daniel's and used both hands to spread Jake's thighs just a little wider so I had more room to torment his balls and the sensitive skin behind them.

Jake rocked under the dual assault, muttering and pumping underneath us.

I gave in to an impish desire. Thoroughly wetting my index finger, I trailed it down and found Jake's tight little opening.

"Noelle!" I heard my name on a gasp.

I wiggled my finger in to the first knuckle.

"Oh, shit, yeah!"

I wiggled it around, searching for something I'd heard about, not sure what I'd find since I'd never done this before.

"Goddess, I'm --"

I glanced up at Daniel, whose eyes were on me even as his cheeks were hollowed from sucking Jake hard.

-- gonna come!"

I think I found what I was looking for. If not, whatever I did, combined with the suction of Daniel's mouth, did it for Jake. He roared and came. I was amazed at how tightly his back hole clutched my finger, pumping rhythmically.

Daniel sputtered, clearly not expecting either the taste or the amount of cum that spurted into his mouth. He caught some, but lost hold on Jake's cock in the middle so that salty sperm splashed both his face and mine.

Jake sagged beneath us with a sigh.

Daniel and I grinned at each other.

I yelped when Daniel dove at me, pushing me down on the bed safely away from Jake's thighs. "Time to fuck you, birthday girl," he told me.

I giggled, happily splaying my legs. "If you insist."

He aimed and sank his entire cock into me in one hot glide. "I insist," he groaned, settling on top of me.

I framed his face with my hands and lapped at the cum spattered on his chin and cheeks, groaning from his near frenzied attack on my pussy. Not that I minded. I happily writhed underneath his assault. The conduit between us flared open and pumped spirit energy into me, making my skin sizzle with awareness. I came in a rush of blue-white heat and yanked Daniel into bliss right with me.

We lay together an hour or so later, still in bed. We'd barely bothered to rearrange ourselves before falling into a doze. I lay on my back with Daniel pressed against my side, head on my chest. Jake lay pressed against his back, his arm long enough to drape over my waist.

I wasn't really asleep, just happily drifting. I don't think I'd ever been so happy in my life. I had not one but two wonderful men in my life when I'd begun to think that I'd never find anyone I wanted to be with forever. And I did want to be with them.

Forever.

Daniel stirred, his hand lazily coming up to cup my breast. I looked down to watch the hand, slightly paler than my medium tan, curl around the handful of my flesh and squeeze.

Things low in my belly tingled.

Jake's hand moved, sliding down my belly to the curls between my legs. I shifted my far leg away to give him room, and he obligingly sought further. His fingers easily slid into my wet depths.

I groaned.

"I want my Christmas present now," Daniel announced solemnly.

Jake and I froze.

"We didn't do presents," I said.

"Mmm, not that kind."

He shifted, and Jake had to take his fingers from my sex to allow Daniel to get to his knees. He moved until he was kneeling between my thighs and shifted his dark gaze from Jake to me and back. "I want both of you."

Jake chuckled. "You've got us."

Daniel smiled, and it was a beautiful, unfettered thing. I wondered if Jake's heart thumped like mine at the sight of it. "No. I want to have sex with you --" His eyes locked on Jake's. "-- both. I want you inside me."

I glanced at Jake, who stared intently at Daniel.

“Are you sure, buddy?” Jake asked quietly. “We don’t have to.”

Daniel’s eyes dropped to Jake’s cock. He reached out and quite deliberately wrapped his fingers around it.

Jake hissed.

“I want it.” His eyes flew up to Jake’s. “I’ve wanted it for years.”

Jake grabbed his wrist to stop him. “What?”

Daniel licked his lips. “I’ve wanted you; I just didn’t *want* to want you. I was ...” He shook his head. “I thought there was no way you’d return my feelings and if I mentioned what I felt, it could make our relationship ... bad. And I’d already done so much to ruin your life.”

Jake pushed up to sit, his hand going to Daniel’s shoulder. “Fuck, man. You’ve never done anything to ruin my life.”

Daniel slid his hand from Jake’s cock up his chest to finally thread his fingers in Jake’s beard. “Fuck me. Fuck me while I’m fucking Noelle. Let me have you both at once.”

How could either of us deny that raw plea?

Jake pulled Daniel into a kiss that lasted forever and for brief moments. I got wetter just watching Daniel’s plump lip disappear into Jake’s mouth and the brief glimpses of their tongues as they devoured each other. Not to mention that they were both growing hard just from the kissing.

Just as I was contemplating sitting up and taking hold of both of their cocks, Daniel pushed away. “Get the lube,” he rasped.

Jake nodded and turned.

Daniel leaned in over me, grabbing hold of my thighs to press them open further. He slid gentle fingers through my sex, finding and rubbing my clit. “This okay with you?”

“Oh, yes!”

“You really want both of us?”

I held open my arms, and he came into my embrace. “I *love* both of you. Please believe that.”

He kissed me gently, guiding his cock to my entrance. “I’m trying to believe it,” he murmured against my lips, slipping into me. “Work with me?”

I giggled, wrapping my arms around him. “I’ll do that.”

He rolled his hips, kissing me as he filled me. The conduit between us opened and established contact through spirit magic, making my skin tingle. I dragged my nails over the smooth muscle of Daniel’s back, smiling when he moaned.

Jake came up behind Daniel, bottle of lube in hand. “You two are fucking hot,” he assured us, pouring clear liquid on his fingers. “How did I get so lucky?”

Daniel’s movement slowed when Jake’s hand lowered. I felt him tense and decided Jake must have put a finger in. “Must be that bear dick of yours,” Daniel answered, tossing his head to clear his silky hair from one side.

Jake chuckled. “Is that so?”

Daniel sighed and pulled back from me, which must have pushed him onto Jake’s fingers. “Yeah.”

Jake leaned in, bracing his dry hand on the mattress beside my shoulder. He kissed Daniel’s shoulder. “Been wanting my bear dick for a while, have you?”

Daniel twisted his neck so he could look at Jake. Tendrils of his hair brush my cheek. “Oh, yeah.”

Jake’s eyes lit with fire. He grinned.

Daniel tensed, hissing.

The spirits between us jolted, making me gasp.

Jake glanced at me, his grin growing. “Oh, yeah.” He leaned in until his mouth was right beside Daniel’s ear. “You pumping Noelle full of magic, buddy?”

Daniel groaned, his hips twisting. “Yeah.”

“Goddess, Noelle. Dick and magic. What do you need me for?”

I reached up to grab his hair, making him look at me. “I need you to fuck him.”

That got to them. I rarely, if ever, used the word. It wasn’t one of my favorites. But I did realize that it could be quite effective in the right circumstances.

Like now.

Jake’s eyes lit up and his nostrils flared. He shoved forward.

Daniel hissed, arching his back as Jake’s action pressed him into me.

Jake groaned and leaned down as I lifted up so we could devour each other over Daniel’s shoulder.

I’m sure Jake was doing a pretty good job finger-fucking Daniel, because the man between us started to rock and whimper. The cock inside me hit that spot that made me writhe, and I moaned into Jake’s mouth. The spirit energy between me and Daniel simmered.

“Now, Jake,” Daniel begged. “Please, Jake, now, Jake, please!”

Jake tore away from me and reared back on his knees. As Daniel pumped into me, Jake snatched up the bottle of lube and poured a generous amount on his palm.

“Jake, please!” Daniel begged.

“Please!” I echoed, picking up Daniel’s desperation.

“Fuck,” Jake groaned.

I heard the wet slapping of palm on cock as Jake leaned in.

Daniel froze.

“Push back, buddy,” Jake murmured. “It’ll hurt less.”

I don’t think Jake meant for Daniel to push *quite* as hard as he did.

Daniel arched on a cry.

Spirit energy surged between us.

I gasped.

Jake growled. "What the *fuck*!?"

I stared up at Daniel, unable to see much of Jake. Daniel's back was arched, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. I couldn't decide if the look on his face was pain or pleasure, and it probably didn't matter. Slowly, he pushed his rock-hard, swollen cock into my depths, then just as slowly pulled out. I can only imagine what it felt like to have his cock leave the warm confines of my pussy and his ass fill with the steely heat of Jake's cock.

"Oh, shit!" Jake cried.

My eyes dropped to stare in amazement at Jake's hands where they grasped Daniel's hips. It wasn't my imagination. His fingernails had changed to thick, black talons, and fur coated his fingers and hand, extending up his forearms as far as I could see. I'd heard that shifters could lose it during particularly good sex, but I'd never seen it.

Daniel's head dropped down. He was breathing hard as he pushed forward and pressed back again. Was he seating himself on Jake's cock?

"Goddess, Daniel, what ...?"

"Magic," Daniel growled.

My eyes opened wide. Was Jake feeling the spirit magic? But that made sense. It happened whenever Daniel was inside of me; why wouldn't it happen when Jake was inside of him?

Daniel rolled his hips again, his movements a bit freer. He still moved slowly, but I was pretty sure he'd gotten a feel for as much of Jake's length as he could take and was now figuring out how best to move.

I groaned.

Daniel peeked up at me, his face flushed with pleasure. His dark eyes sparkled above a wicked, happy grin.

Jake fell forward over us, banding an arm around Daniel's chest. Claws threatened the skin just above one of Daniel's nipples, and the feel of it pushed a cry from Daniel's lips.

"Sorry," Jake muttered, and I felt the jolt of his hips bucking into Daniel's. "I can't --"

"Don't be," Daniel snapped, shoving back at him. "Love it. Fuck me."

Daniel bent his forearms, dropping both of them down on top of me.

I grunted happily under the weight, writhing as the position scraped Daniel's pubic bone against my clit.

Spirit energy sizzled around us.

"Fuck me," Daniel demanded.

"Don't want to hurt you," Jake muttered, but I felt the pump of Daniel's hips into mine that didn't feel exactly like his movement.

"Hurt me," Daniel growled. "Want it. *Fuck* me."

Jake couldn't hold back. The fur of his forearm brushed my nipple as he held on to Daniel and started an achingly slow, pounding rhythm that pressed Daniel's cock into me as he pressed his cock into Daniel's body.

"Yes, Jake," Daniel moaned.

I cried out, writing beneath them in a mini-orgasm as spirit energy burbled beneath my skin.

"Fuck." Jake growled, his voice lower than a human's could possibly go.

Jake picked up the pace, breathing heavily. Daniel gasped and groaned, clutching the pillows beneath me, braced between us.

My eyes crossed, and violet lit up the air around us. It pulsed and writhed as Jake strained at the top of the heap.

“Can’t hold ...” he grumbled.

“Don’t!” Daniel snapped.

Spirit energy erupted.

I screamed, clutching at Daniel’s shoulders.

Jake roared, rearing back, talons digging into Daniel’s shoulders as he held on.

Daniel shuddered between us, mouth open on a painful, silent sob.

We stayed in that tableau for trembling, aching moments, afraid to move, still overcome by shattering release.

With a small groan, Jake pulled back. His arms and hands were again fully human as he sat on his heels, then toppled over onto his side.

Daniel sagged over me, his hair trailing over my chest.

I lay trying to remember how to breathe.

Spirit energy settled back down, and I skewed my sight just in time to see Daniel swallow up and dissipate the extra energy as he slowly pulled out of my body.

He sat back on his heels, raising trembling hands to brush damp hair from his cheeks. He was disheveled and flushed, and I thought he’d never looked so beautiful.

He glanced from me to Jake and back, smiling. A wide, possessive smile. “That was the best damn Christmas present I’ve ever had!”

We all laughed.

Epilogue

December 26

“It’s something, isn’t it?”

“It is that.”

“Who would have thought?”

“Certainly not me.”

Meg’s chuckle came through my cell phone. “So what now?”

“I’m going to take them to a solstice party Aunt Henri’s throwing the day after tomorrow.” I settled into the recliner, warm and toasty with the comforter wrapped around me. “I figure it’s as good a time to introduce them as any.”

“How do they feel about it?”

“They’re surprisingly game.” I chuckled. “I don’t think they realize what they’re in for.”

Meg laughed. “Yeah, well, you’re lucky.”

“Yours don’t want to meet the family?”

She was silent long enough for me to prompt her. “Meg?”

“They want to meet them. I’m not sure I want the family to meet them.”

“Why not?”

She was quiet for a long time again. “Meg?”

She sighed. “Oh, nothing. It’s just they’re all going to get excited because of who Michael is, that’s all.”

“Meg, you’ll have to deal with it sometime.”

“I know. I know. But not now.”

“Maybe we’ll come and visit.”

“That’d be nice. I’d love to meet the two men you think deserve you.”

“Likewise.”

We laughed.

“Noelle, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. I’m happy for you.”

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. And Merry Christmas to you.”

She laughed. “And happy flippin’ New Year.”

 THE END 

Jet Mykles

As far back as junior high, Jet used to write sex stories for friends involving their favorite pop icons of the time. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art.

Only recently, through the wonders of the digital age, has Jet, a self-proclaimed hermit, been able to really share this work with others. It was through a series of images posted to the erotic art website Renderotika and encouragement from the fabulous Angela Knight that she finished and submitted a story to Loose Id.

In real life, Jet lives in southern California with her boyfriend of nine years, his daughter and father and nine cats. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.

Visit Jet on the Web at www.computerotika.com.