



# MANEATER

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Loose Id

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Caitlyn Willows

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## Chapter One

Evan Fairfax stared at the folders and miscellaneous papers stacked on the desk before him. How was it possible to be so excited and yet scared to death at the same time? *This* was the success he and his partners had been reaching for. And yet, one screwup and it could all slip through his fingers.

He'd been at the office through the night, planning, juggling, looking for that one special something to add to these events that would continue to profile Diamond Dust. So far nothing. But at this point, Evan wasn't sure he could remember his name. Lack of sleep three nights in a row had a tendency to do that to a person.

The blinking red light on the phone drew his attention, mesmerized him. He'd be glad when Amy arrived and could answer the blasted phones. It seemed they hadn't stopped ringing since she left the day before. He glanced at his watch, wincing when the band flexed and pulled the hairs on his wrist. She was late. Thirty minutes late.

What the...?

The blinking stopped, the red light steady. Phoebe must have finally grabbed it from reception. No sooner did he think that than another light started blinking, and another, until all the open lines were flashing. His heart raced as panic gripped him. Here they were, thirty

minutes into the day, the blasted phones were ringing, and poor Phoebe was probably already close to imploding. She was a great worker but didn't handle stress well. Amy always managed to keep her centered and calm. Evan was too exhausted to deal with it.

"Where the *fuck* is Amy?" He shoved to his feet, sending his chair into the wall behind him as he did so.

"I was wondering that myself." Evan startled when he looked up and saw Richard Hall swing the door closed behind him. "Got any coffee?" He aimed for the full coffeepot in the corner. Richard poured himself a cup, then turned around. His nose scrunched up. "God, you reek."

"I pulled an all-nighter," he mumbled. It had to be a sin for anyone to be so upbeat this early in the morning. Okay...so it was eight o'clock. Still...

"Again?" Richard poured what amounted to an equal amount of sugar and creamer into the gargantuan mug, confirming Evan's opinion of what kept the man so buzzed.

"I'm worried sick over these Mardi Gras parties. How can we repeat the success we had at New Year's? This is the big time, Richard. We have to equal ourselves or do even better, especially with every other event planner in town breathing down our necks." And clients were continually weighing Diamond Dust against Random Brothers, after Random scored the biggest party of the year at New Year's two weeks before. Despite Diamond Dust's huge success, it paled in comparison to Random Brothers. Now Random Brothers was a victim of its own success -- overbooked and understaffed. Clients were swarming to Diamond Dust. Evan was determined not to turn any of them away, even though they too were overbooked and understaffed.

*Screw it. That's what outsourcing's all about.*

Richard bent to look in the small mirror perched beside the coffee station and flicked his fingers over his short brown hair until one errant strand fell into place. "Relax." He spun around and plopped into the chair behind his desk. "I have an idea. Remember that --"

“Where the *hell* is Amy?” Spencer Griffith slammed the door behind him, taking them both by surprise and shocking Evan. Their third partner was the most mild mannered of the three of them. Good God, if he was that much on edge, Evan and Richard had already fallen into the abyss. And Evan thought *he* was skittish from pulling all-nighters.

Spencer jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “The waiting room is packed with people, the phone’s ringing off the hook, and Phoebe has murder in her eyes.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Evan started for the door.

Spencer reared away from him. “Good God, not like *that* you won’t. You stink! Don’t tell me you slept here all night again.” Mr. Perfectionist passed a scathing glance over Evan’s rumpled clothing. “You did!” He tsk-tsked. “The least you could do was keep a change of clothes here. Deodorant and a toothbrush wouldn’t hurt either.”

“I have those, smart-ass.” He loved these guys like brothers. Unfortunately, they often bickered like brothers too. At times like this, sharing a large office space wasn’t such a great idea.

“Then use them,” Spencer snapped. “I’ll take care of the visitors. You go” -- he brushed his hand at Evan -- “home. Shower, sleep, do something about the dark circles and bags under your eyes. And see if you can’t find out what the hell happened to Amy. I hate to think of her in an accident, what with her being pregnant and all.”

Evan added guilt to his list of woes. He hadn’t thought of Amy being hurt, just late. She did so much to help them keep things running smoothly, and he hadn’t even considered she might be in trouble. Spencer ducked out the door as Evan pulled his cell from his pants pocket and punched up Amy’s number. A generic voice mail answered him.

“Hey...it’s us. We’re just worried because --”

Spencer burst into the room. “Hang up. Hang up *now*.”

Richard was on his feet a second later. Puzzled, and now more than worried, Evan ended the call.



Spencer jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Amy's on maternity leave. Phoebe says Amy reminded us last night."

They sank into their respective chairs, heads buried in their hands. Evan couldn't speak for the others -- well, he could but wouldn't -- but he'd never felt more stupid, more self-centered, than at that moment. If it wasn't work related, Evan had ceased to care. Getting ahead, beating the competition, building Diamond Dust -- that had been his sole focus to the exclusion of everything else. Her greatest joy, this baby, and they'd all essentially ignored her.

Of course, their behavior was nothing new. They'd been locked in work mode from the beginning. Amy worked with them every day, managing their office with a precision that came as second nature to her. She knew what they were like. But this was her *baby*. They'd be lucky if she ever came back. Yet even as he realized this, Evan couldn't help worrying about what they were going to do without her. Amy kept them functioning, well-ordered, organized. She was their glue.

"Phoebe said..." Spencer looked like Evan felt, like he was going to be sick. "Phoebe said if we don't get a temp hire in here by the end of the day, she's quitting."

"Didn't Amy take care of that before she left?" Richard asked.

"Apparently *not*," Spencer snarled and shoved to his feet. "Fix it. I'm going to go help Phoebe."

Richard was on his feet again, pacing the space between the desks. "Placate her any way you can. Offer to buy her lunch forever. Offer her a raise. Hell, give her anything she wants, but *keep her here*," he shouted after him.

Evan reached for his desk phone. "I'll call Oliver Holbrook and see what temp agency he uses." He sure as hell wasn't going to pick a name out of the phone book, and calling Amy was out of the question. They were in deep enough as it was. Evan wanted a solid recommendation he could rely on. Oliver Holbrook knew everyone.

“Wait!” Richard’s steps burned the space between them. “I want you to talk to him about something else while you’re at it. This might involve a face-to-face. There are some things Oliver won’t discuss over the phone.”

At this point Evan didn’t know whether to be scared or thrilled. “What is it?” He left the phone alone and sat on the edge of his desk. An unpleasant earthy smell arose from his pits. God...he *did* reek.

Richard put a few steps between them. “That idea I started to mention?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember the Elias New Year’s bash?”

How could he possibly forget? Diamond Dust’s events were a pale and distant second to Random Brothers’ crowning achievement for the millionaire. Everyone who was anyone was at the Elias party, including Evan and his partners...and a few very memorable ladies. Random Brothers had hired dominatrices to entertain Elias’s guests. The bevy of beauties had held court on a dais at the far corner of the ballroom. Not a one of them lifted a finger, much less a whip, to garner attention. They didn’t have to. They were damn hot. Most especially a certain redhead who had all three of their dicks hard with a mere glance, erections that lasted the duration of the party and beyond, to be resurrected, in his case, at the mere thought of her. Even now, when Evan was about as exhausted as he could get.

He eased into his chair to hide the bulge, then had to laugh. This position put him at eye level with Richard’s crotch; he had a boner of his own. Evan tore his gaze away and focused on the stack of notes he’d scribbled earlier.

“You want to hire dominatrices?” he managed to ask Richard.

“Just as the main attraction.”

“The redhead,” they said together. Evan remembered that her Domme name was Maneater. A little over-the-top but somehow appropriate, he supposed. Men and women were drawn to her. Her power and beauty were intoxicating, impossible to resist. Evan had

been forced to admire from afar. The crowd around her and her friends never stopped. He'd wanted a...private audience or nothing at all. Nothing was exactly what he'd gotten.

"Having Maneater at any of the parties we've been hired to do would be the ultimate draw." Richard perched on the edge of Evan's desk. Out of the corner of his eye, Evan saw the man adjust his erection. He wished he had that luxury, because right now, his agony grew with every beat of his heart.

"There's just *something* about that red hair..."

*And her creamy skin, that aloofness in her green eyes, that hint of a smile, the way her fingers --*

"Don't get me wrong." Richard squirmed again to find a comfortable position.

*Good luck with that, buddy.*

"The blonde and the brunette were damn hot too. If we could get each at one of the parties and then all three at the final event..."

"No," Evan slowly replied as he shook his head. "We don't want it to seem like we're copying Random Brothers. We want a higher concept. Of course, with it being Mardi Gras, we could get away with a lot more." More than Random ever dared.

"A demonstration, you think?"

Evan's body hit overload at the thought. His brain shut down. "Perhaps a private showing. Ticket holders only."

"Proceeds to charity?"

Man, they could rake in a fortune. News media would be all over it. Business would roll in. The possibilities... Oh, yes, the possibilities. They'd have to hire more staff, maybe find a bigger place -- things they admittedly needed now but had neglected to handle.

"Don't get ahead of yourself." Richard knew him too well, but then a near lifetime of friendship did have its benefits.

“Understood.” Evan reached again for the phone. “I’ll call about the temp service and see if Oliver has time to see me today.” With luck, Evan might be able to stop by after he went home to shower and change.

However, luck wasn’t with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

In all the decades Richard had known Evan, he’d never seen him go so pale. His wan complexion made his dark blond hair look brown, his blue eyes more stark. He wondered if Evan was going to hurl and briefly considered grabbing the nearest trash can for him, just in case. Evan had been worrying himself into an ulcer over the high-profile jobs coming their way. It was the culmination of all their hard work, the realization of their dreams. Richard worried too. But losing sleep over it wasn’t going to make anything better. If Evan wasn’t careful, he wouldn’t live to reap the benefits of their rewards. And Richard couldn’t stand that thought. They’d all been together too long, planned so much. Each of them knew they couldn’t have done it without the other.

His eyes wide, Evan slipped the receiver back onto its cradle, almost as if in a trance. His voice barely above a whisper, he said, “He’s coming here.”

Richard wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. “Who? Oliver? Oliver Holbrook’s coming *here?*”

“Yeah.” Evan pushed to his feet, looking dazed.

Richard could sympathize with that. At least Evan could move. Richard was frozen in place. The erection he’d sported daydreaming about Maneater fizzled. Hearing Oliver’s name did that to a man. The man had more power and control in his little finger than most men had in their entire bodies. A nod of approval from Oliver Holbrook meant everything. A well-timed *tsk* and a business might as well board up the windows. The hell of it was, Oliver did it all so seamlessly. The entrepreneurial entertainment mogul had his fingers in all the important pies just by employing sound business practices and without coercion.

“When?” Richard choked the word out.

“He’s in the area. Says he’ll be here in an hour. That he wanted to see the operation, what we’ve done to the place.”

Which would be *nothing*. Richard saw disaster looming on the horizon in big black scary letters. Once Oliver got a look at how crazy things were, especially today, they wouldn’t be able to book so much as a clown for any of their events. Amy could have covered their asses. Even eight months pregnant, she could charm the scales off a snake. But this...

“I won’t have time to go home,” Evan said. “I’m going to run to Target,” he said over his shoulder as he headed for the door, “and grab some stuff.”

“What do you intend to do about your stinkiness?” Richard shot at his backside.

“I’ll shave in the men’s room. Hell, I’ll take a bath in the sink if I have to.” Evan turned and gave him a grave look. “We can’t screw this up. I’ll run out the back door. Don’t forget to tell Spencer. And for God’s sake, make sure Phoebe’s not smacking her gum.”

Evan was totally stressed if he couldn’t remember it was their previous receptionist who’d been guilty of that habit. Amy had just about had her for lunch when she caught her. With grace, of course. The girl had left in tears and quit the next day.

Richard smoothed his tie and rehearsed the news as he walked to the outer office. Spencer manned Amy’s desk like he’d done it every day, but then, everything Spencer did was perfection. Not one hair out of place, clothing crisp and fresh, shoes shined even when he was crawling around trying to help put last-minute touches on the events they put together. It was a lovely facade. Richard smiled to himself. He’d seen Spencer sweat a million times, he just hid it well. He was fairly drenched right now. In a few seconds, he’d be drowning.

“Oliver Holbrook’s on his way here.”

Spencer's brown eyes bulged out. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Here?" His voice squeaked like a prepubescent choirboy's.

"Yes. Here."

The telephones had the courtesy to pay silent homage to the upcoming visit while he briefed Spencer on the plan. Richard doubted he processed much. He'd be worrying about the people in the waiting room -- suppliers, caterers, potential clients -- Phoebe's near meltdown, Evan's exhaustion, and the fact the three of them still shared an open office space like college nerds playing business tycoon. It was great for tossing around ideas and the occasional paper airplane and wadded notes. Not so pleasant when they were at odds.

They could have done with a little distance, more privacy -- something Oliver had recommended during his visit the previous year. Smart businesses took Oliver's advice to heart, since he didn't give it to just anyone. When he did, it was like a benediction. If you were good enough for Oliver Holbrook's attention, you were good enough for the world. That might explain why business had starting booming this last year. And here they'd glossed over that tidbit. At least they had a great conference room. He hoped that made a difference, showed Oliver they appreciated his advice. God, he could barely breathe.

"I'll make sure we have coffee, water..." Spencer's brain looked like it had gone bye-bye.

Richard cupped his shoulder. "No. Business as usual. Let's start by seeing those people in the waiting room."

Spencer nodded. They had a plan. Richard knew that was all he needed. Well, a hug might have helped, too. He wished he were brave enough to dare it. There was a time and place for the buddy-buddy stuff. Right now wasn't it. They were leaning on each other emotionally enough the way it was lately and didn't need to do so physically as well. Once this stumbling boulder was behind them, they could do the whole backslap, chug a beer, and all the bear hugs they wanted.

They plastered on business smiles and strode into the waiting room. Phoebe shoved the appointment book toward them as she continued to juggle calls. They could get through this. Deep breaths, shoulders squared, he and Spencer ushered clients into their office.

Forty-five minutes later, Evan returned and slid into his seat, fresh faced and squeaky-clean. Copious amounts of eyedrops had cleared the redness from his eyes, but there wasn't much he could do about the dark circles under them. He'd brought one of their new clients with him into the office.

Oliver Holbrook breezed into their office an hour later. His three-piece Armani suit screamed the perfection Richard aspired to. He nodded to each of them, walked to the refrigerator in their make-do kitchen, and helped himself to a bottle of water. Richard blessed Amy for the millionth time that morning for seeing they were well stocked before she'd left.

Oliver sat in a dark pink plastic chair that had once passed as red and monitored everything they did. The man missed nothing. Richard tried like hell to focus on the menu for the Talbot affair, the first in the series of Mardi Gras parties Diamond Dust had been commissioned to do. It wasn't easy, knowing Oliver judged every word, every action; in fact, their very worth as businessmen and associates.

Richard forced his attention back to his client. He followed the woman's overly long burgundy fingernail as it danced down the list she'd thrust before him, somehow managing to make intelligent choices based on their client's wants and needs. She smiled, pleased, then gathered her papers, stood, and shook his hand. He fought a wince as her nails gouged deep from her grip. Richard ushered her out to the front and tried like hell not to run back to the office. God, Oliver made him feel like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He saw that Evan and Spencer were just finishing up with their appointments as well.

Silence finally descended in the office. Oliver stretched and rose to his feet. He walked their way, ready for business. Richard blessed the man for not allowing awkward seconds to build. Of course, knowing Evan, he wouldn't have allowed that to happen. Evan would have

taken charge, led the way, scattered the quiet with his charm and confidence, whether he truly felt that way or not.

Oliver smiled...or was that laughter in his eyes? Richard almost did a double take. Laughter? Carefree? Oliver? Nah. Maybe this was the look he gave when he was about to tell someone they were a total fuckup.

Oliver stopped before they were within handshaking reach and set the water bottle on the edge of Spencer's desk. He crossed his arms over his chest and swept his gaze over them.

"I knew it would be bad when Amy left," he calmly said. "But I never expected it would be this bad this quickly."

Yep, they were screwed.

"I'll be the first to admit, we need help," Evan said.

Oliver chuckled. "That, my friend, is an understatement."

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh, to have one ounce of the style and self-confidence Oliver Holbrook possessed. Spencer could only dream. Power literally seemed to ooze from the man's pores. He had an instinct about others that some suggested was a gift from the gods, while others said it came from aliens, and still others whispered it was a paranormal trait. Oliver laughed it off, saying all one had to do was train themselves to pay attention to the world and the people in it.

But Spencer knew it was more than that. Men like Oliver earned their reputations the hard way: by learning every facet of themselves, accepting and dealing with both the good and bad qualities, and molding their personalities appropriately. Spencer was a novice, wanting to learn and be a man like Oliver but not having the tools at his disposal to do so. While Spencer was a work in progress, Oliver was the finished product. If Spencer would just admit his faults, just accept himself...



“We were hoping you might have a temp agency you could recommend,” Evan told him.

Hard to believe that less than an hour ago, Evan had looked like he’d been dragged through a keyhole. He’d thrown himself together in record time: gray slacks, white shirt, blue tie. Spencer snickered. Thank heaven for Target.

“I do.” Oliver pulled a business card from his jacket pocket and handed it to Evan.

Spencer peeked at the ivory card over Evan’s shoulder. Emerald green embossed letters stood out -- *Julia’s Gems*, it read. He’d heard of the company before. It had a sterling reputation. *Temporary hires, a permanent experience*. His nerves settled, and he breathed a sigh of relief. They’d be in good hands.

“When I knew Amy would be going on maternity leave, I suggested Julia’s service to you. Remember?” Oliver’s eyebrow arched with the question. Spencer almost snorted. Oliver didn’t even have to state the obvious; he already knew the answer.

The three of them had left everything to Amy, relying on her -- almost too heavily -- for the day-to-day operation of the business. Spencer suspected by relying on her so much, they might have worn her out. They’d be lucky if she came back from maternity leave.

“In any event,” Oliver went on, “I took the liberty of mentioning the upcoming situation to Julia Green personally. I believe Amy did as well. I believe the women are acquainted. Anyway, I wanted to ensure that Julia had the best candidate lined up for the job.” He nodded at the card Evan held. “She’s looking forward to your call.”

“Excellent.” Evan placed the card in the center of his desk without even looking at it. “Of course, this rudimentary information could have been passed along over the phone. However, there was another matter we wish to talk to you about.” He motioned Oliver forward with the sweep of his arm. “Privately, and in the more comfortable accommodations our conference room allows.”

“Intriguing.” Oliver smiled and walked that way.

Spencer had never been more proud of Evan than at that moment. The man might worry himself sick over the business, but he could really bring it to the table when called to action. Spencer waited until they cleared the doorway, then snagged the schedule of upcoming client parties and followed behind, nearly running into Richard in the process.

Scant inches kept them from colliding as Richard returned for his own notes. They stood in the corridor, neither moving for the space of a heartbeat, then ducking around each other and continuing on. Spencer slowed his pace, hoping to gain some measure of control equal to the calm Evan exuded.

Two steps from the conference room, the thought that they might actually be able to pull this off and hire Maneater and her Domme friends make him rock hard. He tried to tell himself it was nothing more than an adrenaline rush, the anticipation of the deal they were about to negotiate that had his motor running, or the promise of power within himself that being around Oliver infused. But Spencer knew it was none of those things. It was *her*, Maneater, and the thought of what she could do for him...to him. His secret obsession, his biggest fantasy, and he couldn't believe it was his two best friends who had put its fulfillment -- his getting to see Maneater, maybe even have her fuck him -- within his grasp. He wasn't about to enlighten them just how much he wanted her, either.

They'd all known each other since high school. Played football, gotten drunk, lost their respective virginities together. But there were some things even best friends and partners didn't share, and this was one of them. Spencer could be professionally aggressive when the need arose. He also had no problem pursuing the women he wanted. But once those doors closed, Spencer wanted to be the one pursued, the one who took the orders, not gave them.

He wouldn't fool himself by thinking it would be no big deal for Richard and Evan to know he had this submissive vein. Revealing that secret would change everything: how they looked at him, how they acted around him. Soon they might wonder if he had the right stuff to do his job, if he'd choke up and belly up at the first sign of conflict and confrontation.

The price of keeping who he was inside ate at Spencer's gut. He'd considered psychiatric counseling for what one girlfriend called his sickness and perversion. The risk of discovery and the fear of losing all he held dear -- his friends and business -- was too great. So, he juggled his life as best he could, kept the peace, and tried to keep everyone content, then worked his ass off to show them he had the right stuff. If either of his partners had a clue of what bringing Maneater into their lives was really doing, how it would change the dynamics between them, everything Spencer cherished would be lost. A word could halt the Mardi Gras extravaganzas they were so eager for. They'd listen. And yet, the lure of the forbidden was too great to pass up.

Richard clapped him on the shoulder. "You coming or what?" He darted around him and went ahead into the conference room.

Spencer hurried on. It wouldn't do to keep Oliver waiting. The man could make or break a person's career.

Literally.

Being the last one in the room, he shut the door behind him, enclosing them in what he and his partners referred to as "the cone of silence." Once he sat, Evan began.

"We'd like to book the dominatrix Maneater for our Mardi Gras parties." Spencer smiled. Just like Evan to cut right to the chase. He appreciated how valuable Oliver's time was. Still, Spencer held his breath as he waited for Oliver's response. He didn't dare look anywhere but at the man.

Oliver stared, unblinking. "Why in the world would you think I would know how to find and hire a dominatrix?"

Evan smiled. "Come on, Oliver. You know everyone and every business, large and small. We all know that. Your knowledge is beyond compare, your discretion coupled with your business acumen envied by all. Who else would we go to but you? Who else would we trust? Besides" -- he shrugged -- "I know you helped Random Brothers book the

dominatrices for the Elias party. I was crushed. Here I thought we were your favorite party planners.”

Oliver laughed. “Nothing like having one’s ego stroked. Thank you.” His laughter faded into a smile. “All right. Yes, I do know how to reach her. But one doesn’t exactly *hire* Maneater, gentlemen. She must decide first if you are worthy of her time and attention.” He leaned forward, his forearms resting on the high-glossed table that had cost them a small fortune. His gaze drifted over them slowly before settling on Evan. “Are you?”

Evan locked his gaze with Oliver’s. “Apparently, that’s for her to decide, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.” His smile widened. “I’ll contact her. And she will, in turn, contact you at a time of her convenience.”

They stood with him and exchanged handshakes.

“As always, a pleasure,” he said. “Don’t forget to call Julia. You could have the relief you need in a very short time.” He left as quietly as he’d arrived, without creating a disturbance. Almost as if he hadn’t been there at all.

“Now what?” Richard asked.

“We call Julia Green for a temp hire,” Evan said.

“And Maneater?” Spencer asked.

Evan’s expression tightened. “We wait and see. But I’ll be damned if we’re going to beg for her to appear, and I sure as hell am not going to let her think she’s got us by the balls. Beautiful and alluring as she is, dominatrices are a dime a dozen. She’s easily replaced.”

“Like Amy?” Richard muttered.

“Shut up.” He sliced his hand through the air. “Just...shut up.” Without another word, he pivoted and marched back to their office.

## Chapter Two

Julia Green's insides quivered as she hung up the phone. Evan Fairfax's voice was honey sweet and brandy warm, settling deep into her veins and making her want him all the more. She was so glad she'd convinced Amy to not set up a replacement for herself, to make Evan do it, to make Evan come to her.

It wasn't an easy feat. Amy had spoiled the trio rotten the last two years, and Julia hadn't hesitated to tell her so.

Amy countered by saying she lacked the skills necessary to teach her bosses what they needed to survive without her. Julia didn't know who Amy thought she was trying to fool -- maybe herself -- but Julia knew better. They'd known each other since college. Amy liked the control, liked knowing they couldn't manage without her, liked knowing they trusted her enough to let her do everything. Somehow Julia had managed to convince her to let go of this one little thing. Amy grudgingly agreed and forewarned Julia to expect Evan's panicked phone call.

Evan's voice had sounded anything but panicked. The tenor tone had been calm, assured, friendly, yet businesslike...and intriguing. It meshed well with her memory of the man, that brief glimpse of him at the Elias event Julia couldn't seem to shake. Odd that she'd

picked him out of the hundreds of people gathered there. She thought it was because of Amy's association with him, but quickly realized it was the woman in her wanting more, wanting *him*. It'd been a long time since she'd wanted a man just to have, and Evan Fairfax looked...delicious. His heat and sensuality poured her way. Julia could almost feel him covering her body. She thought about approaching him privately and dismissed the idea. Her Maneater persona didn't want Evan; Julia did.

She wondered if Amy realized Julia had more or less manipulated the situation for Julia's personal agenda. It seemed the perfect way to meet Evan on common ground, get his attention. Even Amy didn't realize Julia intended to handle the temp job herself. There seemed no other way. A woman didn't overtly chase a man like Evan. She allowed him to pursue her.

Julia pulled in a deep sigh and let herself daydream. His voice had settled over her, hinting at the dominance waiting to be unleashed in him. He hadn't demanded that her temp company help Diamond Dust immediately; he'd asked if there would be a way she could do so as soon as possible. His relief when he learned a temp would be there by noon faded in the inevitable discussion of salary, commission, and various other matters. Maybe he and his partners weren't as out of touch as Amy believed. Maybe the problem was Amy wanting that control and needing their complete acceptance. Julia couldn't blame her. Amy had been through a lot in life. Having control, for her, was necessary for survival and her peace of mind.

"Oh, well..." She put her desk in order while she punched the intercom to her secretary.

"I swear you have ESP," Dorothy said. "Oliver Holbrook is here to see you."

Julia smiled. The man's impeccable timing never ceased to amaze her. "Excellent. Ask him to come in. Also, Dorothy, that job I mentioned to you a short while ago has come to fruition. I'll be handling this one personally. Please have a fruit basket sent to Amelia Ruiz

today. Flowers once she delivers and assorted muffins too. If you can find them, her husband has a fondness for cranberry walnut scones. Amy loves lemon.”

“Got it. I’ll see the new parents are appropriately spoiled.”

“Thank you.” Julia clicked off the intercom and, turning, set out two china cups. She was just pouring jasmine tea when Oliver walked in. Julia looked up and smiled. “Good morning. You’re out and about early today.”

The brown leather sighed as he sank into the chair. “I stopped by Diamond Dust.” He accepted the cup and saucer with a nod and leaned back.

Julia took her tea and came around her desk to sit in the other chair beside him. “Interesting. Evan Fairfax called a few minutes ago for a temp hire during Amy’s maternity leave.” She looked at him while she took a sip of tea. “I’ll be handling this one myself.”

“Odd and yet fortuitous that you would decide to do so.”

Frowning, she tilted her head to one side and studied him. “Why? Granted, I normally don’t do this, but it is for Amelia. You know she and I discussed the possibility months ago. She’ll rest easier knowing the men are in good, qualified hands.”

“Something any of your very qualified personnel can handle.”

Julia chose to not respond. Her silence widened Oliver’s smirk.

“They want to hire your alter ego for their upcoming Mardi Gras events,” he said.

“Ah...I see.” Both her worlds meshing? Not good, when she wanted Evan so much she could barely stand it. A knot formed in her throat. It felt like reality had just slapped her upside the head. The two parts of her were intricately meshed, reminding Julia that while she might want Evan something fierce, it would be only a matter of time before she’d need something more too. What man would ever agree with that type of lifestyle?

She forced herself to take another sip and set the cup aside. The china rattled, telling on her sudden lack of control. She knew Oliver noticed. The man noticed everything.

“That does make things a bit tricky,” she managed to say.

“Or puts you in the unique position of observing them more closely.”

She forced out a small laugh. Its insincerity raised Oliver’s eyebrows. She should have known better than to try to fool him. “They aren’t hiring me for my dominatrix services, just for entertainment value.”

“No, but that’s why you decided to do the temp work yourself rather than send another person. They intrigue you. You want to know more about them.” He shifted in the chair to face her fully. “You’re bored, and it shows in everything you do. Oh, you still do it all very, very well. But your dissatisfaction with the routine is apparent. At least to me. It will be to others soon. You decided to take this job because you’re craving a new challenge. Well, now you have one. These three will keep you on your toes, but no more so than you’ll do to them. Or I should say, for them.”

At least he had it somewhat correct. Julia didn’t care to enlighten him on what he’d misevaluated.

She stared at the photo taken at Mesa Verde on the wall behind her desk, shot the previous spring during her annual girls-only vacation with Lori and Rachel. The memory centered her, made her not get defensive with Oliver. Everything he’d said was partially true, but it bothered the piss out of her that he knew even a little. One would think she’d be used to that by now. Oliver knew everything about her, a plus when mentoring her the last ten years. Now it was just a pain in the ass.

“What did you tell them when they asked to book Maneater?”

He sipped the tea, making her wait for the answer. “That I’d pass along the request and leave their balls in your court.”

Julia snickered and nudged his knee with her own. “You did not.”

Oliver laughed and nudged back. “I indicated you would contact them at your convenience.”



“Good.” She pulled her gaze from the photo and looked at him once more. “You’ve known them for a while. What’s your evaluation?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t want to prejudice you in any way...”

She mirrored that curved eyebrow of his. “Of course.”

“I’d say we’re looking at three men close to imploding. When and if that happens, they will lose everything and each other. I’d hate to see that happen.” His hot hand fell on her knee. “They need you in more ways than one, Jules. I saw how they watched you at the Elias New Year’s Eve party.”

All she’d noticed was Evan. Well...maybe she had noticed the other two, briefly. The three were fairly handsome, nicely built, and they all oozed self-confidence.

The knowledge heated her. Maybe it wasn’t the woman in her wanting. Perhaps her dominatrix instincts had scented something else -- the challenge she’d begun to crave. More reality hitting her in the face. She’d so wanted a little taste of normal, if only for a little while. For a woman like her, normal probably wasn’t going to happen. She’d never find everything she needed in one neat package.

Life...nothing neat about it.

“Is the penthouse available?” she asked, reaching for her cup. “I’m going to need to use it for a scene or two.”

“Of course. And you know the others would be ready in the blink of an eye to serve you. Our facility in Palm Springs is available if you’d like to use it for a few days.”

Julia shook her head. “Considering their workload and schedule, I doubt that would be wise and could do more harm than good.”

“True. Very true. You’ve done your homework on them well. But then, you always do.”

She’d gathered as much insight as possible in preparation for Evan’s phone call. Not that Julia didn’t keep her finger on the pulse of activity around her, both business and

personal. Oliver had taught her well. This particular situation was...personal. Warmth flushed her body once more. She prayed Oliver didn't notice and, if he did, would keep quiet about it.

Oliver drained his cup and set it on the edge of her desk. "Superb as always. I love visiting my ladies. You are the calm in the center of the storm of life...for others." He stood and braced his hands on the arms of her chair, bracketing her with his body. "A little honest self-evaluation would be in order before you walk into this next vortex, Jules. I would hate to see you sucked in. You'll do no one any good if you're floundering." He kissed her cheek. "I'm only a phone call away if you need guidance or a safety valve. Or any other equipment the penthouse might not possess," he added with a smirk.

Julia couldn't muster a smart-assed response. She merely nodded and prayed the sudden feeling of vulnerability didn't unleash that knot in her throat and bring tears to her eyes. The *click* of the door closing as Oliver left didn't spur her to action. She stared at the Mesa Verde photo, recalling the exact moment she realized she needed more, with no idea how to get it, much less where to find it.

Until the revelation manifested itself, Julia had thought she had the best of all worlds: successful business, highly educated professional, and her legendary dominatrix status at night. She had friends and associates galore. What she didn't have was...completion. Loneliness had crawled over her as she'd stood on what felt like the precipice of the world. Tears had poured down her cheeks in rivers, alarming Lori and Rachel. Words tumbled from her lips when she'd tried to explain. It all had come out garbled. Instead of comforting her, the despair had pulled her friends down too. They'd sat on the sandstone and watched the sun sink in the west, taking their hearts with it... Julia smiled at the symbolism. And they'd cried. None of them had been the same since. Nor had any of them been able to find a solution to their morass.

"Well, this isn't getting me anywhere." Julia sucked in her breath and shoved to her feet. She'd made a promise to Amy to see her office managed well in her absence. And now

she'd apparently made a promise to Oliver -- to help Evan, Richard, and Spencer. She prayed her instincts were at peak efficiency, her emotions in control, her eyes wide-open. And her libido in check.

"Was that enough self-evaluation, Oliver?" she asked, half expecting him to reply from the other side of the door. She even cocked her ear just in case, then laughed at herself. She felt better already. Now, to set her mind on her work "disguise." The last thing she needed was the men discovering she was Julia Green: owner of Julia's Gems by day, and Maneater, dominatrix extraordinaire, by night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia took the Metro whenever possible. It generally helped protect her and kept her from being followed. To her knowledge, no one had ever dared, and she tried her best to be diligent about watching for stalkers. The attire she'd chosen for the job at Diamond Dust was bland, pulling attention away from her: long brown skirt to hide her legs, tan long-sleeved blouse, a sweater a size larger to diminish her breasts, and her hair up -- she always wore it up during the day -- which helped hide the red and made it seem brown instead. Big, black-rimmed glasses made her look bookish, the green eyes within usually muted and unnoticed. Everything drab and mousy. At Julia's Gems, she opted to be more stylish; after all, she was trying to run a business. But at Diamond Dust, she'd be juggling two lifestyles. Okay...*three* lifestyles; she was already juggling two. She needed every trick at her disposal to keep her secret identity from being discovered.

She studied her reflection in the window. Men glanced her way, a few more than once. She knew her appearance represented a challenge to some men -- the hot temptress beneath the schoolmarm facade. Julia appreciated their curiosity but had long ago ceased to cater to that particular fantasy. If Evan, Spencer, or Richard developed an interest along those lines, well... A lady did have her needs, after all.

The thought made her smile. Yes, she'd gotten a lot out of that brief glimpse at the Elias affair. Enough images to carry to bed with her that night as she imagined the three gentlemen at her beck and call. Maybe even one of them breaking away from the pack and taking charge of her. Maybe Evan. Julia shivered at the thought and, under the guise of clutching closer her huge black purse, folded her arms over her chest to hide her hard nipples. Not that anyone would notice beneath the bulky cardigan.

*But I know.*

The Metro pulled to a stop, cutting off Julia's daydream. She shuffled with the masses to the exit door, not pausing once her serviceable loafers hit the pavement. Diamond Dust was still two blocks away. She'd use the walk to lock in her persona, set her horny self on the shelf.

Despite the brisk pace, Julia noted her surroundings. Target, Best Buy, and Office Depot were down the street. Fast-food places occupied nearly every other space. A dentist, a chiropractor, and an optometrist shared a brand-new building across the traffic-packed four-lane street from the Diamond Dust facility. Parking was at a premium. She was glad she'd taken the Metro.

Chin up, shoulders back, Julia slipped on her badass, no-holds-barred businesswoman demeanor and strode toward the door. All heads in the overcrowded waiting room turned when she walked in. First impression? *Too dark. These drapes need to be open.* Second impression? The receptionist was close to the breaking point, and it looked like her strawberry blonde curls had preceded her. Phones rang incessantly while she -- Phoebe, Amy had told her -- tried to deal with the chaos by winding a strand of hair around and around her finger in a desperate attempt to stay calm. And third impression...the rock music station filtering over the ceiling speakers had to go. Julia loved it with a passion, but there was a time and a place. Now was not that time.

First things first.

Julia wrapped her hand around the drapery cord and pulled. It seemed as though the hanging plants Amy had lavished such care on sighed with relief. Light scattered the gloom and despair from the room. Phoebe didn't even look above the reception counter until the second drape opened. Then her frown said, *What the fuck?* Julia was heartened. The woman had potential; she merely needed to use it to her advantage.

Julia marched over to the counter and thrust out her hand. "I'm Julia Green, and I'm here to help you."

Phoebe's mouth gaped; her eyes looked a fraction of a second away from spilling over with tears. "Thank God. I..." She turned her wide blue eyes on the phone with a look that would have cut an enemy down flat.

Julia reached over and slipped the phone receiver from her hand. She put the receiver to her ear. "Diamond Dust, please hold." Next button. "Diamond Dust, please hold." And again until all four lines were on hold.

Phoebe beamed. "I think I love you."

"I know." Julia pulled a CD from her purse and handed it to Phoebe. "Let's give the rock a rest and try a little classical music."

Phoebe didn't hesitate. Grabbing the CD, she bent down to the console beneath the counter. The rock station ended, and the soft *whirr* of the CD engaging brought forth strains of Mozart to bathe the room. Julia swore she heard a collective sigh behind her.

"Take a break, Phoebe. I've got this." She moved into place next to Phoebe's station. "Take lunch. Better yet...bring some lunch back for the men. Something from Subway across the street. Chicken breast or turkey with lettuce, tomato, pickles, and olives. No onions, peppers, jalapeños, or mayo. Mustard only. Wheat bread. No cookies or chips."

Phoebe's joy faded. "They aren't going to like that."

"Then they'll be hungry," she said with a smirk the other woman returned. "Take the money from petty cash, and don't forget a receipt."

Light speed moved slower than Phoebe.

Julia shrugged off her sweater and smiled at those gathered in the waiting room.  
“Now...what can I do to help all of you?”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I feel a shift in the Force.”

Spencer’s words might sound like bullshit, but Evan could tell by the faraway look in his eyes that he meant every word. Besides, Evan felt it too. So did the clients sitting beside their desks. Whatever had happened in the lobby was enough to halt all conversation in midstream. A flash of blonde caught his eye, then sunlight as the back door opened.

“Excuse me,” he told the supplier. “I’ll be right back.”

Panic welled up for the second time that day. Evan couldn’t believe Phoebe had made good on her threat to quit. Once he cleared the office door, he darted down the hall and out the back. Phoebe had her sneakers on and was halfway to the parking lot.

“Wait!”

She turned a smile his way and kept walking backward. “I’m going to get lunch. I won’t be long.”

“But the phone...the clients.” Had she gone nuts?

“Julia’s got that covered.” She spun around and bounced off. He’d never seen Phoebe so...buoyant.

By “Julia,” he presumed she meant Julia Green. If so, the woman was as good as her word. It’d been a little over an hour since he’d called her service, and already a temp hire was in place. The fact she hadn’t bothered to introduce herself was a little annoying; since they were up to their ears in work, he could forgive the slight. But he was still going to take a few minutes and meet her.

Evan hurried back inside. He realized the difference in the atmosphere immediately -- the shift in “the Force” that Spencer had mentioned. The rock station Phoebe loved wasn’t on. Someone had replaced it with classical music and at a volume low enough to soothe and placate a person, not blast them away. He was surprised at the difference the type of music made.

He paused long enough in his office to tell his visitor he’d be “just a few minutes longer,” then went through to the waiting room. The *empty* waiting room. Stunned, Evan stared at the vacant chairs. A woman sitting at Phoebe’s desk, juggling phone calls while she organized stacks of mail, design concepts, and sample binders, finally caught his attention. She’d opted for a telephone headset that kept her hands free yet busy. How it managed to stay in place without messing up her French twist was, he was sure, a miracle. Of course, he’d always been mystified how women got their hair to do the things they did with it.

Evan studied her as she worked, processing one call after the other with an efficiency that made Amy’s diligence pale in comparison. Finally it dawned on him what she was wearing. He’d never seen so much brown in one place in his whole life. Everything the woman wore -- everything except for those huge, black-rimmed glasses -- was some shade of brown. Her faux-suede skirt hugged her hips, then flared to her shins. Her beigeish blouse looked like it was a size too large. Nails? Evan glanced at them. Natural, he decided. Buffed, but not polished.

He had an uncanny feeling that this wasn’t what Julia Green normally looked like. The word “camouflage” came to mind. Like she was trying to hide herself. Yet, while she might be trying not to stand out physically, professionally, his first impression of her was “unforgettable.” The power radiating from her sent shivers down his spine.

God, he loved women who could kick ass.

Somehow sensing his presence, she ended the call and smiled up at him. She extended her slim hand his way. “Hello, I’m Julia Green.”

Evan accepted the handshake. It was firm, confident. More pluses. “Evan Fairfax. Julia Green, as in the owner of Julia’s Gems? I never imagined --”

“Amy and I are old friends. I promised her that if you called, we would supply the very best for her team while she was gone. Needless to say, I was glad that you did. I wouldn’t want Amy to worry needlessly. She should take her time off to enjoy bonding with her baby and firming up her family unit.”

“And not worrying about us,” he added.

“Exactly.” She pulled her hand away and handed him the stack of mail. “Everything’s sorted for you.”

He wrapped his hand around the bundle. “Thanks. I’ll go through it during lunch.”

“Which will be as soon as Phoebe returns,” she answered. “She’s bringing back sandwiches. Perhaps we can all sit in the conference room and get better acquainted, go over the schedule.”

Evan’s eyes narrowed, her take-charge attitude rubbing him the wrong way a little. She was just a temp, for God’s sake, not their real office manager. “Sounds good.”

Were her eyes brown, or did he detect a hint of green there? Hard to tell with those glasses. Did she really need to wear those ugly things? Why not contacts? She was pretty enough, and it looked like she had a weak prescription. Her eyes would really stand out without them. Or was that why she opted for glasses? To help with her little-brown-mouse routine? Her skin was flawless, her makeup light. Evan sniffed. No perfume. And such a long neck. Her pulse fluttered at the base, as if begging for his lips...

Evan mentally shook his rambling thoughts aside. He jerked his head toward the empty waiting room chairs. “What happened to all the clients?”

“I handled it. It was a mix of vendors, decorators dropping off sample designs and swatches, walk-in clients who weren’t scheduled for appointments, things of that nature. I’ll bring in all the information during our lunch meeting.”



Julia turned her back on him to answer the phone. Her apparent dismissal grated on Evan's nerves. She might be their salvation, but he'd be damned if he let her take over. He raked his gaze down her back to that shapely bottom she'd hidden behind her drab clothes. It'd been a long time since he'd had a woman over his knee. Too long.

"One moment, please." She placed the call on hold and glanced up at him, eyes bright. "Yes, sir? Was there something else?"

*Sir...damn right.* "No, we're good now." And now that he had her full attention, Evan turned his back on *her*. She still managed the last laugh, only she didn't know it.

He was hard as a rock.

## Chapter Three

Julia pulled in a slow breath. She'd wanted a challenge. She just hadn't expected it to be so soon and catch her so unaware. Seeing Evan Fairfax across a crowded room didn't give justice to the full impact of the man. He reeked testosterone. The wave came close to knocking Julia to her shaking knees. She expected him to peel her panties off with his teeth and shove his face in her crotch. Even more surprising, she was perfectly willing to let him do so. He called to that submissive side Julia rarely let others see. Or rather, rarely found anyone willing to take that command.

Just a few minutes in the man's presence and Julia could tell that Evan fit the alpha role naturally. A born leader, a Dominant in all his glory. He'd take her all right. Push her up against the wall with those firm hands, nail her there with a look, and strip her for a leisurely taste. Splay her on top of the counter before her and run his tongue over all her secret places. Then push her to all fours on the floor and stab his cock deep inside. Oh, yes. Julia found herself getting wet. And there'd be nothing she could do about it. Nothing she'd *want* to do about it, except take every blessed inch.

His blue eyes missed nothing, despite the dark circles under them testifying he needed a good night's sleep. She'd sensed him delving beneath the surface of her disguise, searching

for the woman hidden within. He wasn't dumb. Evan Fairfax had caught on right away that she was more than she purported to be. She'd have to be oh-so-careful. A momentary twinge of panic hit her. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. She could easily assign someone else to work at Diamond Dust. She'd just tell them that she'd filled in until the temp could come on board. That was plausible. As for the issue of them wanting to hire Maneater...

Indecision plagued Julia, an even rarer event than meeting a man dominant enough to tempt her.

"You must be Julia Green."

A hand appeared before her. Julia blinked and slipped her fingers into it, wondering how the man had managed to sneak up on her. "Yes."

"Richard Hall. A pleasure to have you here. We were drowning. I didn't realize how much we'd grown to depend on Amy. I hope we haven't sent her screaming from us forever. I can hear her now, 'I'd take twenty hours of labor over you guys any day of the week.'"

Julia laughed. She liked him instantly: his ready smile, his charm, his sparkling brown eyes. And the man knew how to dress. Where Evan oozed testosterone, Richard's aura projected self-confidence. She'd been expecting someone self-absorbed, since Amy indicated he spent a lot of time checking his appearance when he thought others weren't looking.

"Perhaps I can help you and your partners find some middle ground," she said. "I understand the business has grown by leaps and bounds lately. A new game plan might be in order."

"I agree, especially now when things are going crazy. A little self-evaluation never hurts."

Odd that the little phrase had come her way twice today. "We can discuss a few things over lunch."

"Wonderful. Amy's office is the first on your right, by the way."

A charmer with focus, one who wanted to get right down to work with few preliminaries. The pleasing-to-the-eye package hid a shark inside. Julia could appreciate that; however, a little tempering wouldn't hurt. Then she caught the flash of pink in his cheeks. It happened so quickly, she might have missed it if she'd blinked. Richard was nervous! Hiding inside his business mode and apparent vanity were his shields. Realizing that brought her protective self to the fore.

"Richard, you are such a slave driver." Julia started as a man appeared around the corner of her desk. "Spencer Griffith." The last partner she had yet to meet extended his hand, which she shook. He gave Richard a look. "You could have offered her coffee or water, maybe even showed her where the restrooms are." He gave a slight, disgusted shake of his head. But Julia saw the smile tugging at the side of his mouth and realized it was said in jest. "My apologies, Julia. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water? Give you a quick tour of the office?"

Another protector, quickly covering Richard's unease. A caregiver as well. He wanted everyone happy and comfortable, but he'd just demonstrated that he wouldn't do so at the cost to his partners. For him, though, they would also be his primary concern, even above his own needs. Julia wanted to lay the world at his feet.

"I'm fine. Thank you." Another firm handshake. "Although knowing where the bathroom is might come in handy."

The comment earned her a polite chuckle, yet neither of them enlightened her as to the whereabouts of said restroom. Fortunately, Phoebe's return covered any possible awkwardness.

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder -- "Everything's in the conference room" -- and slipped into the seat Julia vacated.

"Excellent." Julia gathered the work she'd collected in the short time she'd been there, hooked her purse over her shoulder, and sidestepped the men. "Gentlemen, I'll be waiting."

Evan cut her off before she could reach the conference room. “Did you see who delivered this?”

He waved Maneater’s signature invitation in front of her -- black cardstock edged in gold. She’d calligraphed the penthouse address and time on the back in her own hand. Julia couldn’t tell whether fear or excitement lit up his face. She hated not being able to read a person. This one -- Evan -- definitely threw her instincts off-kilter.

“It was delivered with the mail.” She moved the heavy sample books to her other arm. “Why?”

He flicked the envelope up between two fingers. “There’s no return address. No mailing address. Just our names.”

“What is it?” Richard took the invite from him and smiled. “Well, I’ll be...”

Spencer glanced over Richard’s shoulder and flushed. “Oh.”

Julia craned her neck. “May I know --”

“No!” they all said in unison.

Trying not to laugh at them was nearly impossible.

“I was just wondering how it arrived. Thanks,” Evan muttered.

Like boys with a purloined *Playboy*, they ducked in to their office. The last thing Julia heard before she continued on to the conference room was, “There’s an RSVP number. Call it.”

Julia smiled when her cell phone shuddered against her ribs from inside her purse. “Here we go, gentlemen.” And she had exactly one afternoon to lock onto their personalities before Maneater met with them tonight. One afternoon to decide whether her libido needed to take a hike or go for it. Having met the three up close and personal, there was little doubt what she’d do.

She wanted them -- all three of them. And she wanted them *now*. Julia didn’t know whether to laugh or cry over the predicament. Once Maneater took the three, any snippet of

a chance with Evan disappeared for Julia. But wasn't that doomed before it started? She didn't realize she'd truly wanted a start with Evan until this moment. Now she was mourning the loss of something that had never been and never would be. Was it best to take what she could get rather than nothing at all?

She closed the door to Amy's office and locked it for ensured privacy while she called Oliver. He let the phone ring four times before he answered. She sighed, growing irritated. Teaching her a lesson, no doubt. She heard the smirk in his voice when he answered. Smart aleck.

"I'm going to need a little help tonight."

"Really? How odd."

She reaffirmed her assessment. Smart-ass.

"What can we do to help you with your...challenge?"

Two could play this game. Julia had learned that from the master himself. "Now, dearest, don't you always know exactly what I need?"

Oliver chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I do. The question is, are you ready to receive it?"

She was glad they weren't face-to-face.

"I'll see if Lori and Rachel are available. They always give a good demonstration."

"Will you be there too?" she asked.

"I'll be *around*. Discreetly, of course." He chuckled. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I have to admit, I'm impressed." Richard absentmindedly rubbed his hand over the black leather upholstery.

"I agree. The limo's a nice touch. Adds another level of cachet to the whole aura Maneater's built around her image," Spencer said.

“I was referring to Julia,” Richard replied.

“Oh. Yes...very impressive.”

Evan agreed. She had a master’s degree in business, another in psychology, and minored in drama. And a barely there tendril of hair that curled enticingly at the nape of her neck right behind her ear. Very distracting. He’d kept wanting to feel if it was as soft as it looked. Watch it drape around his index finger. Sniff just under her ear and explore her scent. It’d been a hard afternoon...literally.

Slouched now in comfort, Evan watched the city roll by. What was she doing, working for them? Julia Green had a very successful temp agency. He snorted. Talk about overqualified. He’d have to try to corner her and ask her why she was working for them and not one of her employees. Julia claimed she’d decided to do the job herself because of her long association with Amy. Said Amy had wanted only the best for them, and Julia had been happy to oblige. She apparently was also happy to make changes. She should have started with herself. Brown, brown, brown. Did she always dress in monotone? Did she own any *feminine*, and not androgynous, dressy clothes?

*She’s like a chocolate bar waiting to melt in your mouth.*

Evan cleared his throat and pushed himself upright. “She’s got no business trying to institute procedural changes.”

“It’s nothing we haven’t already talked about.” Spencer braced his back against the cushioned door and hoisted one leg onto the seat so he could look at both of them. “We’ve never made the effort.”

No, they hadn’t, because they’d been overwhelmed with work. Lulled into the fantasy that Amy would always be there, taking care of them. That bubble had popped this morning. It looked like long hours and seven-day workweeks were a thing of the past for her. They were lucky Amy’s husband hadn’t minded how much time she *had* spent at the office. Now that the baby was close to arriving, her focus would rightfully shift. Oh, she’d still be one

hell of a worker, always going above and beyond. That was just her, her work ethic. But if they wanted to keep their best asset, Amy, they also needed to treat her with the respect she deserved. What pissed him off was Julia nailing that fact home this afternoon in the “meeting” she’d called.

“I don’t like her.” He lied. He liked her too much.

“I do,” Spencer and Richard both replied.

Evan knew that stubborn tone well. They used it every time they were banding against him. There was no sense arguing.

Spencer cupped his knee. “You’re dead tired, Evan. It colors your perceptions every time. Makes you very testy.”

Evan resented the dig. They had no idea how *testy* he really was, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to give them fodder. Although considering none of them had anything that remotely resembled love lives, sharing his burgeoning interest in Julia might make them see her in a whole different light. They wouldn’t get any work done then, thinking about her spread out on their conference table, theirs to feast on until their lusts faded.

Great...purple prose on top of everything else.

“You’re right,” he finally said. “Let’s focus on this meeting. What’s our game plan?”

\* \* \* \* \*

What *was* their game plan? Spencer had been asking himself that same question since Richard told him about this crazy scheme to hire a dominatrix show for the upcoming Mardi Gras parties. He’d been expecting Richard to circle within Maneater’s orbit at some point. Richard had been fascinated by the woman ever since the Elias event. And who wouldn’t be? She exuded power with a subtlety many craved, yet few could master. Spencer didn’t know if it was the way she carried her beautiful body, the look in her all-seeing eyes, or the whole package put together. The woman was amazing. He wouldn’t be surprised to learn she’d been



a queen in another life; she sure as hell was a goddess in this one. As he'd watched her from afar, Spencer felt a kindred spirit, someone to whom he could confess anything and everything and be 100 percent accepted, not judged.

Rather like Julia Green. No, nothing like Julia Green, he amended. Julia lived in the real world. Maneater existed in a realm Spencer couldn't begin to comprehend, although he was apparently going to be getting a glimpse into that world tonight.

"What, again, is the purpose of this supposed meeting?" he asked.

"She wants to see if we're worthy of her time," Evan mumbled. He'd been like a bear with a sore ass all day. Spencer was half tempted to slip the guy an Ambien so he'd get some sleep tonight.

"I can understand that." Richard checked his reflection for errant whiskers in the silver minibar.

Spencer lightly kicked his calf. "Stop that. You're beautiful enough."

Richard settled back into the seat and mirrored Evan's posture, staring out the window. "I'm sure she has to be careful," he commented. "A woman of her caliber didn't get into that position by doing birthday parties."

"These are hardly birthday parties." As Evan rubbed his jaw he saw the rather vacant look in his eyes reflected in the window. "These are major events, and she's well aware of that. She's playing a game."

"She's doing business," Richard clarified. "If we want her, we do things her way."

"And why is it again that we want to go this route?" Spencer didn't bother to mask his puzzlement.

Evan pulled in a breath and turned to look at them. "The publicity alone would be staggering. You saw how people flocked to her and her crowd at the Elias party. It was advertised in all the papers for weeks leading up to the event, and write-ups and reports in

the paper continued to appear for days afterward. Every A-lister in town wanted to be there; several paid for the right. If we can pull off a coup like that, business will pour our way.”

Business was already pouring their way, but Spencer knew what he really meant. They couldn’t keep their clients happy with mediocre events and parties. They had to be beyond extraordinary. “Then you’d better get over your aversion to hiring more help and moving into a larger facility.”

“I’m not against those things, just against Julia pointing out the flaw to us.” Evan glared at Spencer. “Could we please stay on topic? I don’t want to talk about Julia. We’ve got a meeting to plan for.”

“Hard to plan when you don’t know what to expect,” Spencer replied. “Definitely uncharted territory for me.”

“No more so than other new clients.” Richard bridged the gap between them, his forearms resting on his thighs. “We approach this the same way. What do we each have that we can bring to the other?”

Evan snickered. “Well, it’s pretty clear what she can bring to us. What could we possibly have that she wants or needs?”

“I don’t know.” He sank back. “But we’ll think of something.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Richard wondered what the others would say if they knew he’d been waiting for this moment since he’d first laid eyes on Maneater. He’d been looking for the perfect excuse to meet her, had dissected plan after plan to try to figure out a way to make that happen. This morning he’d launched his idea amid the turmoil of Amy’s absence, catching Evan and Spencer unaware and in a vulnerable state. Cruel and devious, yes. Richard didn’t care. He had to see her in person, talk to her face-to-face.

He supposed he could have contacted Oliver sooner about hiring her for a Diamond Dust party. But Richard didn't want to risk Oliver asking Evan and Spencer about it or, God forbid, Amy. And he couldn't very well tell Oliver he wanted to meet with her personally, especially since Richard wasn't sure of what he wanted from her.

Richard smoothed his blue silk tie down his shirt. Now he was lying to himself. He knew what he wanted, even if he didn't have the proper words to formulate the request. Was it a step he wanted to take? Testing the waters with a toe before plunging full tilt into its fiery depths seemed like a sound plan. He never did anything without thorough research first.

Nervous anticipation made his cock so hard he thought it would split open. He'd never forget that first glimpse he'd had of her seated on that dais. She'd worn a black leather duster, sleeveless, cinched at the waist, dark hose, and a green satin bodysuit beneath. Long auburn hair fell over her shoulders, the ends tickling her breasts. That, he told himself, was a woman who never lacked self-confidence, never found herself at a loss for words, never felt torn in her decisions.

A little niggling voice said, *A lot like Julia*. Odd how she kept coming up in their conversations tonight. The woman was a force to be reckoned with, one of only a few Richard had seen before. He'd liked her on the spot, knew she'd be damn good for them and the business. If he hadn't already made this bid for Maneater, perhaps there might have been the possibility that Julia could help him answer these elusive questions. He laughed at himself. He wouldn't want a woman like Julia to know he wasn't all that he pretended to be.

He glanced at Evan, brooding as he looked over the passing scenery. Then he looked at Spencer, who rubbed two fingers against his temple while he contemplated the upcoming meeting. Being best friends and partners, successful ones at that, meant knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses. Yet there were some secrets that were best left close to the heart.

Weren't there?

“We’ll be lucky if she doesn’t chew us up and spit us out,” Evan mumbled.

Finally, someone had cut the tension. And just in time too. The limo pulled up to a towering high-rise: condos on the top half, businesses on the lower levels. A liveried doorman opened the back door before they’d completely exited the limo. Before they could put one foot on the sidewalk, however, a petite brunette in a little black dress approached from under the burgundy awning. A man that could pass for her twin stood behind her, suited up.

“I’m Sasha. This is Erik. We’re here to escort you upstairs.”

The couple waited as long as it took for Richard, Evan, and Spencer to step onto the sidewalk, then did an abrupt about-face and headed back inside. And it was no leisurely stride, either; it was a forced march. As if by magic, the elevator doors opened as they neared.

Richard’s heartbeat thudded in his ears. No one said a word. He wanted this to work, on all levels. A successful business arrangement for the company. His personal quest fulfilled. He worried that his erection might show, then brushed off the concern. Guys had hard-ons twenty-seven million times a day for no explicable reason. Would anyone really think anything of it, or say anything? His suit jacket covered it...right?

He glanced at his reflection in the polished elevator door and allowed a quick look to make sure. Then he made the mistake of checking out his friends. Oh, yeah. They all sported one. Nerves? Secrets? Were they turned on by kink -- as he himself was? If the übercouple weren’t riding herd over them, Richard might have asked. It wouldn’t be the first time one of them had said, “*I’ve got the boner from hell right now.*” Of course, they’d been in high school and college at the time. Then, they’d been horny guys on the prowl, not successful and well-respected businessmen like they were now -- who were walking into the den of a black widow dominatrix.

A thrill rattled down his spine. What if she tried to do something to them tonight? She was already manipulating them in her uniquely subtle way, forcing them to come to her because she knew she had something they wanted. Part of him balked at her command; the other part -- hell, it was straining -- was more than willing to comply.

The elevator doors drew open on the top floor. Ivory double doors twenty feet ahead led into the penthouse. *God, the money this must cost!*

Richard was conscious of having moved, following Evan's lead. Their escorts took the forefront. Now side by side, Richard, Evan, and Spencer walked behind, like a showdown in a Western B-movie.

Sasha and Erik wrapped their hands around the door handles. Sasha flashed a smile over her shoulder toward them as Erik sliced the key card down the lock. Doors swung open to another short hallway. Erik waved them forward. Two steps inside, the doors clicked shut. Flickering golden light enticed them forward. They didn't hesitate...until they reached the end, and the vast room opened before them.

"Holy shit," Spencer muttered. "What the fuck have you got us into, Richard?"

He couldn't answer. Sex everywhere, in every imaginable configuration. Men and women were strapped over tables, chairs, and couches. Their bare asses and backs had become reddened targets for the belts, floggers, and canes laid over them in perfect time with the bass note in the music thumping through the suite. A woman was draped on the dining room table, a feast for the men eating her pussy, sucking her tits and toes. The man at her feet fucked the man between her thighs. Clamps on nipples and testicles. Chains and ropes on wrists and ankles. Screams of pain and pleasure. Fucking, domination, discipline, submission...everywhere Richard looked.

Above the orgy, perched on the staircase landing, shadowed in the dim light, stood Maneater surveying her domain, her subjects. A black leather dress pushed her breasts upward, cinched her waist in tight, and bared those long, long legs through the slit in front.

A kitten whip dangled from her fingertips. She flicked it back and forth. Picking her target? Riding herd on her subjects? Long waves of red hair fell down over her shoulders. Even her hair didn't dare to move without her command.

He wanted to come. God, how he wanted to come! To push himself into the middle of the frenzy. To stand beside her on the landing, like the man hovering just behind her, seen but unseen. The sounds! The images! *The rush!*

Richard clenched his fists in an effort to keep them at his sides and not grabbing for his cock. He dared a look at Spencer. Richard had never seen his eyes and mouth open so wide. He was stock-still. In shock, most likely. Richard's partners were going to ream him a good one for suggesting this.

He shifted his gaze toward Evan. Arms crossed, he'd braced a shoulder against the wall. A smirk lifted one corner of his mouth. He glanced at Richard and pointed toward the landing.

"That's not Maneater. And this is a farce."

Soft laughter filtered over them from behind. "Very well read, Mr. Fairfax."

The deep, sultry tones of her voice turned their heads. *Oh, God.* Maneater in all her glory. Richard wondered how he could have mistaken the woman on the landing for her.

She wore a lacy, shin-length dress of hunter green, a color that matched her green eyes and brought out the red in the cape of auburn hair shimmering down her back. Sheer, lacy sleeves wafted around her wrists where delicate ribbons of gold gleamed against her ivory skin. Emeralds poised above her cleavage and dangled from her earlobes.

A snap of her fingers cut the music off, and the lighting slowly increased. "Thank you all. Great show, but we've been discovered."

People peeled away from each other. Flesh-colored G-strings covered male body parts. The red asses were nothing more than food coloring or makeup. The bonds, though, were

real, as were the nude women. But the rest truly was all show. And the woman on the landing? She pulled off a red wig and fluffed out her long, dark hair.

“To what do we owe the honor of a full mass production?” Evan asked.

Maneater smiled up at him through her long lashes. “Come now, Mr. Fairfax... You were expecting Sodom and Gomorrah, and I do so hate to disappoint potential associates.” She stepped in front of them, leaving the barest scent of apple in her wake. “Let’s find a more private place to talk while my friends clear the scene. Shall we?”

“By all means.” Evan tilted a nod her way and stepped into her personal space.

Her nostrils flared with a subtle yet sharp inhale. Maneater masked it quickly, put some distance between her and Evan, and led the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was impossible to not be fascinated by the sway of Maneater’s hips as she walked before them. For the real meeting she’d chosen a dress and jewels that screamed class and elegance all the way. A stunning woman in a beautiful package. The woman could have resurrected the balls on a eunuch. God knew, Evan’s balls felt like boulders right now. She had showmanship, business savvy, a sense of humor, and the self-confidence to back them up. All pluses in Evan’s opinion. Her show could have easily backfired on her. Evan doubted she’d care. The act was the perfect gauge when evaluating any future relationship. Anyone scandalized and outraged wouldn’t be a good match for her services, whatever those services might be.

Evan had noticed a lot in the space of a few minutes. He hadn’t gotten this far in business without being observant...a skill he knew this woman could appreciate.

She led them to an adjoining room and motioned them to sit on one of the four love seats. They each took one. Maneater swept her skirt aside, baring legs encased in smoky hose. She reached for the ivy-decorated china tea service on the low table in front of her.

“Tea, gentlemen?” Long fingers wrapped around the handle.

“No, thank you,” Evan replied for all of them.

The woman smiled, removed her hand from the kettle, and leaned back. “I suspected not.”

Evan matched her. “There’s no tea in there, is there?”

She gave him a nod. “There is not. I knew you would decline, and I do hate to waste good tea. Shall we cut the small talk and get right to business?”

“Please. You obviously know why we’re here.”

“I do.” She gave them an indulgent smile. “You want to hire me for one of your parties.” She lifted her palm before he could draw breath to reply. “What’s in it for me?”

She did get right to the point. Evan wished half the people they worked with and for would have a smidgen of her boldness. “What do you want?”

Maneater smiled and steepled her fingers before her. “You. I want the three of you.”



## Chapter Four

“You want us to have s-sex with you?”

Spencer gasped out the words. At least he was breathing. Evan couldn't be sure about Richard, though. Evan kept his full attention on her, wanting to see how she would play this out. A slow, steady *ticktock* filled the brief silence. He wondered if that was planned as well; another subtle manipulation on her part to imply time was running out on her offer.

“Do you *want* to have sex with me?” she replied.

A stupid question none of them had a chance to answer.

“Gentlemen, I am not a whore nor are any of my friends. If that's what you're looking for...”

“What did you expect us to think?” Evan managed to say. “Perhaps it would be best if you explained yourself rather than glorying in watching us flounder.”

She slowly crossed one leg over the other, a purposeful misdirect. Evan didn't bite, just kept his gaze on hers.

“Diamond Dust wants to hire me,” she said. “Any plan on what you intend to do with me once I'm there?”

“We had hoped to solicit your input and come up with a mutually beneficial draw. After all, you are the expert...entertainer.”

Was that admiration he saw in those green eyes?

“Thank you.” She leaned forward, forearms crossed over her knee, cleavage aimed their way. “I do have a vision. As I understand it, you’ve been contracted for four major parties, and several more private events. It seems everyone wants to do Mardi Gras this year. Each major party will have the gold, green, purple theme and all the decorative beads, whistles, masks, etc. My sister dominatrices Soleil and Raven will assist. I will attend the first party, Soleil and I the second, all of us the third. The fourth party will provide a bawdy entertainment spectacle worthy of Mardi Gras. The catch is that no one can attend the fourth party without having attended the other three...and providing a monetary donation for the charity all four hosts choose.”

Brilliant, absolutely brilliant. “And for all this, all you want in exchange is us.” He frowned. “Did you want to host an event of your own and hire us in barter?”

“No...I want the three of you. One night each. It will be of mutual benefit to all of us. My friends and I aren’t circus acts to be trotted out, Mr. Fairfax. We take our chosen lifestyle very seriously. We do, however, like to look for opportunities where our community can give back to another community. We know we are a curiosity. Why not take advantage of that lure to help others? We do love putting on a good show, too, and we aren’t above poking fun at ourselves in the process for a good cause.”

“That doesn’t explain the whole you-want-us thing.” Evan wasn’t sure if he was getting more confused or more intrigued with every word.

“It’s simple, Evan.”

She’d bridged the gap to personal with smooth precision. More kudos to her. Still, Evan waited for a trap to close.

"I like a challenge. I like helping others. Each of you has certain...needs I believe I can help you fulfill. In helping you, I am also helping my own goals in honing my psychological skills."

"Not to mention your dominatrix skills," he added.

"Irrelevant. Anyone in the community can serve those needs. You three are --"

"Fresh meat?"

Maneater laughed. The sound clenched his balls. Why weren't Richard and Spencer helping him here? Neither had moved since they'd sat down. Nor had they spoken.

"All right," he said. "So what is it the three of us need that only you can provide?"

"I didn't say I was the only one who could fill those needs. I said I wanted to help with those needs. As for what those needs are... That's a private issue for each person. Some so private we might not even realize we have the need in the first place."

"Not for me. I'm an open book. Other than a mindless fuck session with no strings attached, which I'm definitely not doing with you, I don't need anything." He flicked his hand at her. "Go on. Give it your best shot. What do you think I need?"

"For now, sleep. A good night's sleep. Several, in fact."

"She's right about that, Evan," Richard said. The first time he'd spoken since they walked in the room, and it was to back Maneater up.

"I agree," Spencer added.

Okay, maybe they had a point. "And you'll give me that," he said to her.

"Yes, tonight if you like. The penthouse is available for the time being. Why not use it? I guarantee a very wonderful sleep. And it will meet my requirement of you spending one night with me."

"I'm in." Richard scuffed his hands over his thighs.

"Me too." Spencer's voice was barely above a whisper.

What did he have to lose at this point? “All right, I’ll fall on my sword and go first.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Interesting choice of words.”

“There you go, turning it into a sexual innuendo,” Evan said.

“I did nothing of the sort. Goodness...you are horny, aren’t you?” she replied.

And spending the afternoon watching Julia Green and wondering what she’d look like naked hadn’t helped.

“To clarify...” She lifted her chin, her gaze locked and targeted on him. “I was referring to your use of words that would imply you are sacrificing yourself for others. This isn’t all about you, Evan.”

Now that pissed him off. He jerked to the edge of his seat and jabbed his finger her way. “I am *not* selfish.”

“No one said you were.” How the hell could she be so calm? “But you take everything on your shoulders...*everything*. As if the world were solely your responsibility. I know you have a deep obligation to your partners, but you’ve let that obligation supersede the one you should have to yourself. If you don’t take care of *you*, you’re hurting them more than if you took the burden completely. Imagine them without you...forever. Because that’s the road you’re walking.”

The fight went out of Evan. He didn’t bother trying to hide his sagging shoulders.

“I’ll leave you three to talk about this while I check on the status of my friends vacating the premises. You are all welcome to stay the night. There’s plenty of room. I can have your clothing cleaned and returned before you wake up. Evan, your room is through that door if you decide to remain.” She pointed to a door on the right. “A hot shower and comfortable bed are waiting. If you all agree, the limo will pick you up at nine from your office for the next three nights. One or all of you are welcome to come, but that particular night will be for one of you only.”

They stood with her and waited until she left, then sat on the edges of their chairs.

"She's right, you know," Spencer said. "If the business fails, which I don't see happening, but one never knows, we'll get through it together. But if something happens to you... It would devastate us."

"You worry about everything, Evan." Richard rubbed his hand over Evan's shoulders. "You're slowly killing yourself, and that's killing us inside. It'll all get done. That's why we're partners. We always have each others' backs."

Emotion clogged his throat. Evan cleared it with a cough into his fist. "Do you two have secrets?" It bothered him, even though it really wasn't any of his business. They'd been friends for so long; he thought they knew everything about each other. "Are you gay? I don't have a problem with that. Just tell me."

"No," they replied together.

"It's...complicated," Spencer offered. A heavy sigh plunged him onward. "I prefer for the woman to be the aggressor in the bedroom. I thought if you knew you'd both think I didn't have the stones for business. Sometimes I wonder if I do, if there's something wrong with me. I watched Maneater at the Elias party and knew she'd be the one to help me work through those issues; show me how to get what I want. She has a way about her, and not in a dominatrix-whip-handling-thing kind of way."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Richard was on his feet a second later, sitting on the coffee table before them. "Me too." He clamped his hand on Spencer's knee. "Except I want both. I want..." He pulled in a breath, then pointed toward the door to the main room. "I want *that*. That world. That's why I wanted her hired for the parties. I wanted to be closer, to ask her, to see it all. I want the balance inside I know she can help me find."

Evan had only one thing to say. "Guys, this isn't the big deal you've made it out to be." He scuffed his hand through his hair. "God...when did we stop talking to each other? When did it all turn to business? We've shoved our personal lives into a corner and locked them away. Shit, Amy's having a baby, and we barely acknowledged it. Nothing more than a brief

congratulations. No looking at ultrasounds, no checking on her welfare and progress, no presents. Nothing. All business, all the time.” And right here and now, Evan made a vow that it wouldn’t happen again.

“We can ask Julia or Phoebe to send her something tomorrow,” Richard said.

“That’s how we got ourselves into this spot in the first place. By having someone do everything for us. This is something *we* need to do.” The first of many somethings.

Without another word, Evan walked to the adjoining bedroom suite Maneater had designated for him.

He ignored the decor -- who gave a shit anyway what color the place was -- and headed straight for the bathroom, stripping as he went. At the moment, nothing sounded more heavenly than stepping beneath the shower spray. His quick dash and dab in the office restroom might have made him more tolerable to others, but hadn’t done a damn thing for him. He was beyond exhausted and weighed down by guilt.

Evan left his clothing in a tidy pile on top of his shoes just inside the bathroom door. Opaque glass beckoned him inside a shower stall big enough for two and earned his instant approval. Evan hated feeling crowded.

Tile cooled his feet as he stepped inside and twisted on the water. Groaning with pleasure, he turned his face into the extrawarm spray and let it engulf him. Dull needles peppered his skin, rivers sluiced over him. Sweet as it felt, the sensation did nothing to quell the ache he’d been carrying around since Julia walked into their lives. Eyes closed, mind wandering to her, Evan grabbed the big bar of soap and lathered up. No preliminaries, no imagining Julia’s hands roaming his body. He went right to the source of his problem.

With one sudsy hand he cupped his hard sac, kneading and pulling at his testicles, while his other hand stroked his cock. This time, he let Julia’s image in. Her hands stroked him. She’d be on her knees before him, lips poised a breath away from closing over his cockhead. Her hard nipples would be thrust up, water cascading over them like small falls.

He'd drink the water up until he reached a perky tip; then he'd suck the tip into his mouth until it hit the roof.

Her hair -- God, how long was her hair? -- would be plastered in a shimmering mass down her shoulders. She'd look like a goddess emerging from a pool of magic. Her soft sighs would drift to him over the sound of the shower, urging his orgasm...*demanding* it. Maybe she'd toy with him, bring him to the edge, then stop and present herself to him on all fours, knowing he'd give her a fucking she'd never forget. Her pussy would be tight, hot as hell, clamping on for dear life, and he'd be captured. Hers until he'd given them both pleasure a thousand times over. His fingers would find her clit and give her a taste of her own medicine. Then they'd go at each other like their very lives depended on it, each holding out for the other. Not in a contest, not in a quest to prove who had the greatest power or control, but because they'd know it would be the best...the very best climax of their lives.

Evan thrust into his fist and shot so hard, it felt like his balls were trying to come out the tip of his cock. With the last spurt his tension abated. He braced himself against the wall and let the water work its magic. He'd definitely have no problem sleeping tonight, despite the strange bed. Masturbation was so much more rewarding when you had someone specific to fantasize about.

He twisted off the water and grabbed an extrasoft towel from the heated bar as he stepped out. His clothes were gone, most probably to be cleaned as Maneater had decreed would happen, replaced by a white microplush robe and a pair of silky blue-gray boxers. He left the robe where it lay and pulled on the boxers. Everything he could possibly want waited on the counter by the sink: comb, toothbrush and paste, floss. The woman couldn't have anticipated any of them would stay the night. That meant she prepared for every eventuality. Evan supposed in her line of work that asset was a must. Considering the cost of a penthouse, Maneater was obviously very, very good at her profession.

*"I am not a whore nor are any of my friends."*

No money was exchanged for sex then. That did make him feel better about hiring her. The last thing they needed was to have Diamond Dust associated with something clearly illegal. Of course, Oliver would never have put them or anyone else in that situation. But there was no convincing him that sex wasn't eventually part of the package. They were dancing a fine line here. Trust between partners was never more important, and Evan did trust them implicitly, despite the one deep, personal secret they had each kept from one another. In the grand scheme of things, maybe Maneater could give them all the things they needed most. Was that why they'd been drawn to her initially? Some instinct called to them?

Evan studied his reflection. Her assessment of him had been dead-on. There was no denying the bloodshot eyes or dark circles and bags under them. The three of them were right. He was worrying himself into an early grave. What good would success do him then?

A humorless chuckle pulled him away from the sink and toward the bedroom. Soft tones of Tchaikovsky filtered his way as he opened it. Recessed lighting had been turned down low. Maneater finished folding the bedcovers down and smoothed away any residual wrinkles. She wore a sage green gown that flowed with her every move, revealing much in what it also hid. He found something oddly familiar about the way she worked, the curve of her hips, the precision in her long fingers. This was a woman who missed nothing.

A woman very much like Julia.

"Shower feel good?" She fluffed a pillow and leaned it against the headboard.

"Yes." He narrowed his gaze. "Why are you here?"

"I'm going to help you relax." She smiled. "In a nonsexual, nonthreatening way. A massage." She swept her hand toward the bed in invitation. "I know erections are common during a massage, but I promise, you won't need to worry about that tonight. I know ways to help keep those randy penises in check."

*Uh-huh.* "And if not?"

"Trust me. I am a professional." She grinned.



“At what?” he asked with a smirk.

“At everything.” Again she waved him toward the bed. “You aren’t the only overachieving, anal-retentive, type A personality in the room. The difference is that I’ve learned balance, and *that* is something I can help you find as well.”

Evan had nothing to lose at this point. If Richard trusted her reputation enough to see that they got to this point, all Evan had to do was accept. Besides, he was standing before this beautiful woman, and his cock hadn’t bothered to lift its head for a peek. Not interested, or still appeased from coming? He wasn’t going to waste time evaluating it.

Maneater stepped aside as Evan stretched facedown on the cool, soft sheets. He settled quickly, his head nestled on the pillow with his hands tucked under it.

“Since you are on a bed rather than a massage table, my maneuvering abilities are somewhat limited.” She rubbed her hands together, releasing a hint of lavender. “I’m going to be sitting astride your hips in order to reach you appropriately.” Without another word, she did just that.

So much for a disinterested cock. It awakened the instant her knees trapped him.

“Don’t worry. It’ll go away soon,” she said.

*How the hell does she know?*

“Because your butt cheeks clenched,” she replied.

“What are you? Psychic?” he mumbled.

“Body language says a lot, as you already know.” Her hands dropped to his shoulders but went no farther. In seconds Evan felt the heat from her touch ease into his muscles. A sigh came out of its own volition. Maneater took that as her signal to move.

Gentle fingers kneaded him, urging the tension from inside. Each downward stroke melted him further and further. She left no muscle group untouched. All the tight muscles caved under her talented fingers. His erection subsided as well, content to enjoy the lull into

sleep. Evan felt himself drawn deeper and deeper. The music volume grew lower until it faded completely.

“Feels so good,” he mumbled.

“Shh...relax,” she whispered.

And he did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia had promised not to turn this into sex, to not turn him on, but she hadn't promised herself that. The strength and power beneath her fingers sent little shock waves to her pussy, swelling her clit with each stroke. Evan called to her on a primal level, something few men had ever done. She wanted him to roll her beneath him, wedge his knees between hers, and thrust his cock deep inside. To fuck her senseless. Never had her promise been this difficult to maintain. Yet somehow, she did so. Her responsibility to Evan was to give him what he needed, and he needed sleep so badly it pained her.

She worked downward in soothing strokes, loving the feel of his muscles slowly relaxing, the texture of his warm skin, the scent of him that permeated the lavender oil she used to help calm him. And every inch she covered drove her want higher, until she thought she'd go crazy from the ache.

When she reached Evan's feet, Julia eased from the bed and sank into the armchair to watch him sleep. She'd cover him soon, after she'd had her fill of admiring him. Evan was a beautiful man, something she'd realized the instant she'd seen him at that New Year's party. Each second that ticked by reinforced that opinion. God, she wanted him. She wanted them all, yes. But Evan would be the reward she gave herself.

The thought made her laugh to herself. No, she couldn't chase after this man and hope to score. Evan would have to pursue her. Julia knew that would never happen in her Maneater persona. But as Julia...

*You're dancing a fine line.*

She knew that, and it broke her heart a little. Her worlds couldn't collide that way. It would never work. If not for her obsession with Richard and Spencer, something might... She shook her head. Why was this so hard?

*All you have to do is walk away.*

Julia knew she couldn't do that either. She draped one leg over the arm of the chair and slid her hand into her panties. Her clit sighed in relief with her touch. She imagined it under Evan's fingers. He'd toy with her, make her wait. Maybe she'd find herself over his lap, her ass warmed with a good spanking for a change. Not that one of her friends couldn't accommodate her, but it wasn't the same when laced with true lust.

She cupped her breast. Her nipple was as hard as her clit and just as demanding. She yanked herself free of the demi bra and pinched the nipple. Her pussy clenched. What would Evan do right now if he woke up and saw her playing with herself? Stroke his cock as he watched? Stalk and claim her? Demand she kneel before him and suck him off? Haul her to her feet, force her facedown on the bed, and strap her ass until she squirmed?

Julia thrust her fingers deep into her cunt and rubbed the heel of her hand over her clit. An earlier glance at his erection became fodder for her fantasy. Long, thick, and pulsing. It'd be furnace hot and steel hard. He wouldn't come quick, not a man like Evan. She'd get the fucking of her life. He'd bind her to the bed and drain her of a year's worth of orgasms.

She rubbed harder, wanting to keep her eyes on his perfect body but unable to keep them open. Head tossed back on the chair, she gave herself up to the images. One man became two as Richard joined them, his cock armed and ready to take her ass. Two became three when Spencer walked in, hesitant but hard and dripping. He'd stroke himself, wanting her mouth but waiting for permission to join. She licked her lips, thinking of him...of them...of Evan pounding away while Richard slid slowly home. A gasp would call Spencer forward, and she'd close her mouth around him.

Julia clenched her teeth against her climax. It surged up, exploded, then rolled through her body. She sagged into the chair in the aftermath. Hard breaths pulled her back to present time. She wouldn't have any trouble sleeping tonight.

Forcing herself to her feet, she walked to the bed and pulled the covers over Evan. Only that tight rein of self-control Julia so prided herself on kept her from crawling into bed with him. Staying put was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

## Chapter Five

“Wow...I can’t believe they all bought off on the concept.” Richard stared into space.

Evan tried not to laugh at his awestruck tone. He understood it well; he felt the same way. It was the googly-eyed look on Richard’s face that was so funny.

“Of course they did.” Julia shuffled the paperwork and notes into their respective folders. “Your plan was well presented, nonconfrontational, and greatly inspired.”

Richard’s chest puffed up a little. Evan was flat-out relieved. Telling Julia had been harder than the conference calls to their clients. He’d expected her to at least be embarrassed by the news they were hiring a dominatrix and her friends to entertain. Julia never blinked an eye. In fact, she started organizing at that very moment, setting up the calls, preparing talking papers to keep them all on track. She was...magnificent. They’d barely seen her all day, they’d been so wrapped up in work.

“I’ll call our design team and get them started.” Richard started to shove away from the table. “I suppose this is where you tell us in-house personnel would be of great value.”

Julia glanced up from over the top of her black-rimmed glasses. Without the glass deflecting them, Evan noticed her eyes looked more green than brown. A small furrow pulled her eyebrows closer while she dissected the statement.

“Perhaps I was premature in my evaluations yesterday,” she said. “I think Spencer was correct in pointing out the pros and cons of such a move. I apologize for being so impulsive in my assessments.”

“We’ll put a pin in it for later review,” Spencer said.

“Sounds great.” Julia smiled, and Evan’s heart took a little tumble. “The biggest thing now is to keep organized. I’ll brief Phoebe and start researching charitable organizations for the clients to consider. I think guiding them toward a unanimous decision would help alleviate any problems. Give them one or a couple of worthwhile organizations rather than many.”

“Great. I’ll review guest lists and keep on top of those,” Richard said, then left without another word.

Evan couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen any of them this excited. Motivated, yes. But the excitement had sort of died with their drive to succeed. It was great to have it back.

“And I’ll work with the caterers and lock on the musical entertainment.” Spencer paused for a breath, as if considering his words. “Do you want to handle any incoming clients or the smaller events we have scheduled?”

Evan weighed his decision. Until last night he would have said he’d take care of both and run himself down in the process. “For now I’ll make sure the smaller parties don’t feel swept off in the rush. I think Julia’s right. If we stay organized and continue to brief each other daily, we’ll all be able to handle the workload equally.”

Spencer smiled. Another honest-to-God smile. Then it was just Evan and Julia left in the conference room. She was smiling too. It felt damn good. Evan tried to busy himself by gathering his notes, but his gaze kept wandering to her, to that little curl by her ear. She’d worn all black today. The color was an improvement over the drab brown outfit. He still wanted to peel it off to see what treasures she kept hidden.

“You surprise me,” he said, leaning forward.

She glanced up, an eyebrow arched. A look he’d seen on a lot of people lately: her, Oliver, Maneater.

“How so?” she asked. “Because I concur with your party plans?”

“Because you admitted you were impulsive in trying to get us to make changes.”

This time she did flush...barely. Evan longed to follow the pink rush down her neck to see if her breasts were covered as well. He glanced down to find her nipples tenting the baggy silk blouse.

“I’m not infallible.” She used the folders to cover his view.

“Nor am I.” He tilted a nod her way. “I’m also much more agreeable when I’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

“So I can tell.” She laughed lightly. The sound shot sparks to his balls and hardened his cock.

“Have dinner with me tonight.” Now that was impulsive. Evan couldn’t help it. He wanted her. He wanted her bad. Dinner was a much more reasonable alternative than what he really wanted to do to her right now, which was to hoist her onto the table and bury first his face in her crotch and then his cock.

Her mouth worked but it took a second or two for words to follow. “All right. An early dinner, please. I promised to help a friend with something later tonight.”

“It’s a deal. We’ll leave right from work.” Evan didn’t give her a chance to say no. He left before he could give in to the impulse and kiss her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia hugged the folders to her chest. She could hear blood roaring in her ears. He was coming for her, claiming her, making her insides melt and gush out between her thighs with his soft-spoken yet firm demand she join him for dinner. Amazing what a good night’s sleep

had done for his energy, not to mention his demeanor and focus. Evan was a man who went after what he wanted, and he'd clearly decided he wanted *her*.

Julia couldn't be more delighted. Her body shivered at the thought. She couldn't remember the last time she'd dated. Even further beyond her grasp was the memory of how long it'd been since she'd had a real relationship. She wasn't unlike Evan in that respect, focused on her business to the exclusion of all else. Julia was no stranger to sleepless nights, which made it easy to spot similar traits in others. Juggling Julia's Gems, her dominatrix role, and the little side jobs like this one... It was a rewarding but lonely life.

She laughed at herself and ordered her nipples and pussy to back off. It was a dinner, not a lifelong commitment. The most she could hope for was some rousing sex, and that wasn't going to happen tonight, no matter how much her body wanted it. She had her later session with Spencer or Richard -- Julia had let them decide which one it would be -- and that's where her attention should be. Once she had Evan in her bed, she wouldn't want him to leave anytime soon.

Besides, just because she was ready to spread-eagle beneath him didn't mean he wouldn't have to work a little to have her. They'd both appreciate the chase, not to mention the reward.

Good things come to those who wait.

Patience when it came to her own pleasure had never been one of Julia's strong points. It took the hands and skills of a true Master to rein her in. And yet here she sat, quivering for Evan's attention. The other two men Julia knew she could control. Evan? She shook her head. That's what made her want him so badly. If she was smart, she would take a rain check on dinner until she was in better control of her wants. Her curiosity, coupled with what could only be termed a primal mating urge, refused to let her. The scent of him was imprinted on her soul. The feel of his muscles beneath her fingers already memorized for eternity. She'd go all right. And the hell of it was, Evan knew she'd never refuse. He was alpha male in all his glory, and he knew he had her.



Julia wanted him to know she was indeed worthy of pursuit, wanted him to realize the gift she was giving him. Few men charged her battlements and lived to tell the tale. Evan would definitely work for her favors.

But not too hard, she thought with a smile.

Three hours later, sitting across from him at a dimly lit Black Angus, Julia seriously rethought her stand. In the short drive over, they'd used the shield of business talk to soothe any awkwardness. But the moment they'd arrived at the restaurant and his fingertips had grazed the middle of her back as he helped escort her, Julia had creamed her pantyhose and knew her resolve was screwed. All Evan had to do was crook his finger, preferably against her clit, and she'd be all his.

"Wine?" He flipped the list open with that long finger Julia craved somewhere else.

"No, thank you. I'll be driving later." She kept one fist in her lap while she perused the menu. It was dark enough. Could she manage to sneak in a small, silent orgasm?

Too risky, even for her. Although she sure wouldn't mind if Evan closed the distance between them on the half circle of booth and replaced her hand with his own.

"I'll make sure you get home safely tonight," he said. "I'll even be glad to drive you to your friend's."

"Thank you, but it's a private matter. I wouldn't want my friend to feel uncomfortable." And one glass of wine would annihilate any remaining resistance whatsoever.

They closed their menus at the same time -- the signal the waiter had apparently been waiting for, since he swooped down on them. Julia waited a beat to see how much control Evan would attempt to wrest from her. Some issues were deal breakers. A screwup on his part would give her the distance her libido needed, but she still prayed he wouldn't overstep.

"What would you like?" His smile glowed bright.

*Be still my...heart.* "Salmon and rice pilaf."

“Sounds great.” He glanced up at the young waiter and gave a nod. “Make that two. Iced tea for me and...” He looked back at Julia.

“The same, please.” She heard herself giggle. Great, reverting back to her virginal days. Julia wanted to die on the spot. She lifted her water glass to hide her lapse, then nearly choked on a sip when Evan chose that moment to close the gap between them.

“Why wear glasses when you don’t need them?” He twisted toward her as much as the booth allowed but didn’t invade her personal space. “Is it to hide the fact you’re a beautiful woman? It goes well with the rest of your disguise.”

Julia’s heartbeat tripled. “Why would I need a disguise?”

He shrugged. “Maybe you weren’t taken seriously at first, and this is your way of making sure others see you for your professionalism and not your beauty.”

His theory had its merits...and its hint of truth. Julia breathed a little easier, knowing he hadn’t uncovered all her secrets. “Interesting observation.”

He smiled. “I might not be a psychology major, but I do pride myself on being able to read and understand people. Once I’m rested, of course.”

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “It’s nice to see you were able to get a good night’s sleep.”

“And you? Did you sleep well last night? You do look a little tired today. Working for us and trying to manage your own business is a lot to juggle. Something’s got to give.” His eyebrows arched. “Is that what the glasses are for? To hide puffy bags from lack of sleep?”

Evan was determined to see her eyes. Julia decided to indulge him, since the light was dim in the restaurant. She slipped the frames off and folded them on her lap. “That better?”

“Much.” His voice was soft. Awestruck? God, she was reverting to her teenage years.

“Puffy?” she asked, trying to throw a little innuendo his way.

Eyes narrowed, Evan leaned in. “Hmm...let me get a close look. The light in here is so dim.”

Julia smirked and lifted her chin his way. She loved a man with a sense of play, a sense of humor.

“Maybe a little right...here.” He traced his finger along the apple of her cheek.

Her breath caught. A tiny shiver tightened her nipples. He followed the line down her cheek until he reached her chin; then he crooked his index finger beneath it. Her lips parted, eyes locked onto his mouth.

*God, Evan, just kiss me!*

“Just as I thought.” The sound of his voice trickled into her blood. “Your eyes *are* green. The candlelight really --”

“Your salads.” The waiter slid the plates in front of them.

Julia started at his untimely arrival and wished him into the cornfield. Evan eased away and thanked the man.

“Sorry about that,” he said when they were alone again.

Julia stuffed her glasses in her purse. “Which ‘that’?”

His gaze singed her clothes. “Don’t play games, Julia. It’s beneath you.”

God, he made her ache. She didn’t have to ask what he’d do to a woman who played games. She knew the answer: walk away and never look back, or turn her over his knee. Her ass heated at the thought.

She wrapped her fingers around her fork. “I’m sorry we were interrupted too.”

“There’s always later.” He stabbed a cherry tomato and brought it to her lips.

Julia resisted the urge to curl her tongue around it and tease Evan. She wouldn’t promise something she couldn’t deliver tonight. Instead, she closed her mouth around his offering and pulled it in. Flavor exploded with the first bite.

His nostrils flared with his slow intake of breath. “I keep reminding myself that patience is a virtue.”

“And virtue is a case of insufficient temptation,” she said around a mouthful of food.

Evan laughed. “Then I’m good. I have no patience and am sufficiently beyond temptation. But there is your friend tonight.”

“Yes, there is that. Besides” -- she speared the tomato on her plate and waved it before his eyes -- “I’m easy, but I’m not *that* easy.”

The devil gleamed in his eyes. “If you’re not easy that must mean you’re hard. I know I am.”

Julia burst out with a laugh she knew turned heads their way. She didn’t care. “That has got to be the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard.”

“Nah, I have a lot that are worse than that.” He nudged her knee, snapped his lips over her fork, and stole the tomato.

“There you are.”

They jumped at the sound of Richard’s voice by the table.

“I saw your car in the parking lot. I thought maybe you’d stopped in for a drink and thought I’d join you.” He didn’t waste any time doing just that, sliding into the booth next to Julia.

Wedged between the two men, her libido kicked into overdrive. Considering how the two moved in on her now, surrounding her with their heat, she didn’t think they’d mind sharing. Drunk on the testosterone filling the air, she imagined being impaled on both of their cocks, their hands exploring parts of her she never knew existed while her skin screamed for more. They’d take their time, making her come over and over again while tongues and teeth ignited what their fingers had brought to life.

“Nice to see you relaxing for a change.” Richard snagged the last tomato on Evan’s plate.

“That point was made fairly clear to me last night,” Evan replied. “Where’s Spencer?”

“Went home to shower and shave for later.”

So, Spencer tonight. Julia would need some time to gather her wits, calm down. Having a submissive under her control tonight, especially a new submissive, could go very badly very quickly if she wasn't careful. Spencer was depending on her to help him transition, even if he wasn't fully aware of that now. He trusted her enough to come to the penthouse tonight, to share his need with her. Tonight was about him, not her own cravings. She'd learned long ago that this wasn't all about her; it was about serving the needs of others. She already knew she was going to break her Julia Green rule of no sex with clients; she was going to break it big-time. But her Domme rules *had* to remain in place.

"I think he's nervous," Richard said.

"Aren't you?" Evan asked.

The other man shook his head and helped himself to Evan's cucumber slices. "No, I've wanted to take this step since..." He cut a glance Julia's way. "Never mind. Let's talk about something else. So, kinda cool you two winding up at the same place for dinner."

Evan looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "It wasn't a coincidence. We came here together."

"You should've said something. We could have all come in the same car."

Julia covered a laugh behind a drink of water.

Evan snorted. "You weren't invited."

Richard shifted a gaze between them. Finally, the light dawned. "Ohhhh...it's a date. Oh man, I'm so sorry." He scooted away. "I'm outta here."

Julia found herself reaching for him, but it was Evan who said, "No, buddy, stay. It's good." He smiled. "We're all good."

There went her heart again. Her stomach followed up with a somersault.

Richard eased into his seat. "You're sure?"

"Positive." He pushed his salad Richard's way. "You might as well finish it, since you picked all the good stuff off. I'll take your salad when it arrives."

And he could have her panties in the meantime. Julia offered him her cucumber slices. “Will this tide you over?”

The gleam in his eyes stripped her naked. “I think it just might.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Evan liked her. A lot! Everything about her: Julia’s efficiency and professionalism while at work, the ease with which she slipped into relaxed social mode, the sparkle in her eyes, her humor, the way she flirted, her loyalty to her friends, and her compassion. Though Richard had interrupted their impromptu date, neither of them was mean enough to tell him to get the hell out of there. His feelings were as important to Julia as they were to Evan. Other women might have shot laser-eyed holes into Richard. Not her.

Evan wanted her and made no secret about it. And she wanted him right back, equally as obvious. But she wasn’t going to give it away either. He liked that too. A little pursuit made the final prize sweeter. The fact she could easily segment her work and personal lives was another plus in a long column of positives.

The three of them traded stories over dinner. It wasn’t until the check arrived that Evan realized he and Richard had done most of the talking. Julia had masterfully avoided talking about herself, although there was mention of a recent trip to Mesa Verde with friends. She knew how to make people feel good. She’d put her psychology degree to good use tonight. There’d be time to learn more about her as their relationship grew, because Evan was damn determined to have a relationship beyond work with her. A very long one, at that. Julia Green was definitely a keeper. Whether she felt the same way about him... Well, he’d have to make sure he put his best foot forward. He had a feeling there’d be no second chances with a treasure like Julia.

“I got this.” Richard snagged the check. “In honor of our first date. You can get the check on our second date.”

Julia's husky laugh did things to his body Evan was sure had to be illegal in public. "Sounds like a deal. You heading home now?"

"No." Humor faded into a slight frown. "I think I'll head back to the office and keep Spencer company until it's time for his appointment."

"You know what?" Evan tossed a healthy tip on the table. "I'm going to run Julia home, and then I'll join you."

"Actually..." Julia curled her fingers over his forearm, the first time she'd touched him all evening except for the press of her thigh against his. The woman wasn't a tease, yet another plus. "The traffic is insane more times than not. We both have places we need to be. But I will take a ride to the Metro stop. My car's waiting at the other end for me. It'll be quicker for both of us."

Everything considered, it was impossible to argue with her logic. "All right."

Richard tsk-tsked. "A real man would ride the Metro with her and at least walk her to her car."

Julia's gaze settled on Richard. Her fingers grazed Evan's arm down to rest on his hand. "A real man knows when to pull back the reins on temptation when his lady has indicated a prior engagement." She tucked her fingers ever-so-slightly around Evan's. "I'm ready when you are."

A double entendre if ever he heard one. He dropped his free hand to his lap, tucked it under the napkin, and readjusted his erection. Then he slid from the booth, gently tugging Julia with him.

"See you in a few," he told Richard, then dropped his hand to Julia's back and escorted her out. She stood closer than she had when they'd entered, a clear signal to anyone looking that she was with him. Pride filled his chest. Raw sex clawed at his belly. He tried to argue that he felt this way because he'd been too long without sex.

That was a lie. It was all for Julia.

She shivered a little when they stepped into the cool evening night. Instead of pulling her light jacket from her tote bag, she wrapped her arms around herself and stepped closer into his warmth. Evan pulled his suit jacket open and drew her under the protection of his arm. He swore he could smell her arousal above the exhaust from the passing cars. A blizzard would have melted against the body heat they generated. He imagined what it would feel like when they were skin to skin; he imagined it only too well.

Somehow he forced himself to be a gentleman and open the car door without mauling her. It wasn't easy. Evan wanted to wedge her against the side, shove a knee between her thighs, press his palm to her breast, and kiss her until they set off smoke alarms in all the buildings around them. Julia swung into the seat. A sudden gust of wind blew in with her, lifting her skirt and teasing tendrils of hair from her twist. The long strand drifted past her shoulder. He clenched his fist to keep from touching it. God, how he'd love to see it all down, his fingers trapped in its mass.

She tucked the wayward lock back into place, then folded her hands on her lap. Were they shaking? Was she nervous? Afraid? Excited?

"Julia?"

She glanced up, green eyes wide, vulnerable. "I'm good. Just...cold. The wind."

"Sorry." He shut the door and hurried to the driver's side.

It didn't take long to drive to the nearest Metro station, but the silence made the trip feel like an eternity. Evan racked his brain for something to say and came up short. Something had upset her. He wished he could figure out what the hell it was.

As he pulled to a stop, Julia retrieved her jacket from her tote. He expected her to grab the door handle when he put the car in park. Instead, she turned his way.

"Thanks for dinner."

"My pleasure." He shifted around. Their hands rested on the console.

"Well...almost." Her smile put joy on her face.



Evan grinned. “Julia?”

“Hmmm?”

“It’s later.” He slid his hand around her neck and kissed her.

Her lips parted under his without hesitation. She sagged, then clutched his shoulder to pull him closer. What he meant to be simple and soft exploded under its own momentum. She met each thrust and parry of his tongue with equal force, kneading his lips as hard as he did hers. Groaning softly, she unsnapped her seat belt and wiggled closer. He was trapped behind the steering column. Evan slid his hand down her shoulder, spanning her ribs, then traced them forward until he could cup her breast. Julia’s whimper demanded more. She strained forward, rubbing her hard nipple into his palm.

A mother screaming for her kids to slow down shocked both of them back to reality. They pulled apart and touched foreheads. If Richard weren’t at the office, Evan would haul her back there, push her onto the conference table, and fuck her like nobody’s business.

“I’ve gotta go,” she whispered.

“I know,” he managed to reply. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Julia nodded and reached for her things. She started to put the jacket on, then stuffed it back into the tote. “I could use a blast of cold air right about now.” She winked and left the car.

Evan laughed. “I hear you on that one.” He rolled down both windows and admired the sway of her hips as she walked away. Once she was safely inside the station, he drove back to the office, loosening his tie to get more air on his skin. It didn’t help the fire down below. Looked like it was going to be him and his hand tonight, and soon.

He anticipated a quick run to the men’s room when he walked into the office. Instead, Richard rushed him the minute he heard Evan’s keys jiggle in the lock.

“We’re fucking screwed!” he shouted.

Evan took a step back. He'd never seen Richard so wild-eyed before. Spikes of hair stood out here and there from where he'd worried it with his fingers.

"What's wrong?" Evan wasn't sure he wanted to know. Not tonight. He didn't want anything crowding out thoughts of Julia tangled in his sheets.

"Spencer bailed on tonight. He said he changed his mind about the whole deal. What the hell are we going to do?" He paced a frantic path in front of Evan, his hands moving a mile a minute. "We spent the day locking in the clients. Plans are in place and rolling. Everyone's excited."

Not everyone, apparently. "What upsets you more, Richard? That this throws a wrench in the party plans, or that this screws up your personal agenda?"

Richard's shoulders squared. Jaw clenched, he glared at Evan over his shoulder. "I don't know."

At least he was as honest as he could be. The fact that Evan was calm and Richard was the one freaking out already gave Evan his answer, but he had to ask anyway, if only to try to diffuse his partner's upset.

"So go instead."

Richard blinked. "What?"

Evan shrugged and bypassed him. "You go tonight."

Richard followed him down the hall. "But what about tomorrow?"

"We'll worry about tomorrow when it happens."

"Wow..." He stopped dead in his tracks. "Talk about a turnaround. What the hell did she do to you?"

"We had a great dinner, I took her to the Metro station, and that's it." Richard didn't need to know about the sweltering kiss or anything else.

He uncharacteristically rolled his eyes. Evan had thought Richard's days as a drama king faded long ago. It looked like they'd only been hibernating. They picked a hell of a time to wake up. "I meant Maneater."

Evan felt his face heat. He had a laugh at his own expense. "Oh...her. I showered, crawled into bed, and she gave me a massage. Ten minutes max at the most. I went dead to sleep. She never touched me in any other way or suggested anything like that."

"Oh." Richard stared over Evan's shoulder. Evan couldn't tell if he was relieved or disappointed.

"It was what you and Spencer said that helped me see what I was doing to myself, the business, and the two of you. I took your feelings to heart...finally."

"Good to know." Richard tried to smooth his hair. "I wasn't ready to do this tonight. But now..." His gaze met Evan's. "Come with me. Help me get through the door without seeming like I'm so desperate."

"Sure thing, buddy." He added a pat on the back for more moral support. "And don't worry about Spencer. Once he sees we've both managed to survive a night with her, he'll be good to go."

Richard shook his head. "I hope you're right."

Evan hoped so too. Failing that, he prayed Maneater's rates were within their price range.

## Chapter Six

In all the years he'd known Richard, Evan had only seen him this rattled one other time. The man was like a ticking bomb, pacing, clenching and unclenching his fingers, constantly checking his hair, adjusting his tie whenever there was a reflective surface in which to do so. Right now it was the elevator's mirrored wall.

Evan didn't know why Richard still wore the tie. Or maybe he did. Richard liked the comfort of business to guard him, and tonight was very much business to Richard, maybe more personal than work related, but business still the same. Evan had removed his tie at the office and left it there; he kept the jacket for warmth. He'd have much rather preferred wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt.

There were no escorts tonight. The limo driver had given them a key card to access the elevator and the door to the suite once they arrived on that floor. Apparently, no one else would be here tonight but them and her.

"I'd prefer to ring the bell rather than walk in," Evan said. "We are her guests. I'd like to extend some measure of respect."

"Even if she's given us the key card?"

"Yes. Being polite never hurts."

Richard picked imaginary lint from his pinstriped jacket. "I think I liked it better when you were falling to pieces, and I was the calm one."

Evan caught his gaze in the mirror. "No, you didn't. You like when I'm in control. It's your safety zone." Odd that he would understand that now. He wanted to kick himself for past lapses. His frequent meltdowns had hurt them all. Never again. They'd always depended on him to lead the way, to be in control. Evan wouldn't disappoint them.

"I just don't think it's wise to force a dominatrix to come to us." Richard returned his attention to picking off fake lint.

"I'm going with my gut here, Richard. Trust me." He didn't wait for the door to open fully before exiting the elevator. Richard wasn't far behind. Evan half expected him to dash ahead and open the penthouse door himself. He stayed in step with Evan, though, his breathing growing more rapid the closer they got.

Evan curled his fingers over Richard's shoulder. "I don't have a paper bag, buddy. Don't hyperventilate on me."

A nod was all the man could manage.

Maneater didn't keep them waiting. Evan respected the woman for that. By now she would know who the chauffeur had picked up. She might even suspect a serious case of nerves for her private guest tonight.

Her smile when she opened the door stopped Evan's heart. *Familiar. Too familiar.* The draft from the hallway into the suite stirred her hair, brushing tendrils against her cheek. His gaze darted to her eyes...green eyes that sparkled in the light from the hallway...until she saw the recognition in his face. Her smile faltered. She dropped her gaze in a submissive manner Maneater wouldn't have dreamed of, but Julia had...tonight...when his lips had come near hers the first time.

Evan didn't know what to think, much less do. No wonder she hadn't blinked an eye when they told her about hiring Maneater. After all, it was hard to object when *she* -- Maneater -- was one and the same.

She'd certainly caught him off guard. Judging from her body language now, he'd done the same to her. That put them on equal footing, despite his... What? Confusion? Curiosity? Evan didn't know. They were both aware Julia's secret was out. No need to confront her now with the obvious. He decided to ride the wave and see where it took them.

"Gentlemen." An elegant sweep of her hand ushered them inside. She'd gone with an ivory lace dress tonight. It enhanced the glow in her skin, deepened her green eyes, and made her auburn hair brighter. Tiny pearl buttons down the front of the dress just begged to be ripped off.

One at a time.

With his teeth.

His words last night haunted him. "*A mindless fuck session with no strings attached.*" They were thrown at Maneater to give him some distance and let her know he had standards. Those words mocked him now. He didn't want Julia thinking that's all she was to him. Evan wanted so much more. Hours in her bed, sheets and limbs tangled until they didn't know whose were whose. And strings? Hell, yeah -- anything to bind this extraordinary woman to him. He should have been pissed she'd deceived them, but he only wanted her more.

Richard charged in before him. "I'm your man tonight."

"Really?" She shut the door behind Evan. Neither glanced at each other. Obviously she knew Richard was lying. They'd had dinner with her only hours before. She knew Spencer was the man tonight.

Evan had a "duh" moment. Spencer... Julia's friend she had to meet.

“Now why do I suspect that’s not how it was planned?” She slowly strolled toward the living room suite and the nest of four chairs clustered around a small square table. Evan couldn’t resist admiring those hips as she walked. If not for Richard’s presence, Evan would have her bent over the nearest chair and be homesteading inside her pussy right now.

Richard whirled around. “Why would you think that? And what does it matter if it was? You said one night each. Don’t I qualify?”

Julia motioned him into the nearest chair. Evan took the one across from Richard, giving himself the perfect spot to watch this play out. That left Julia with one of the chairs between them. She parked her elbows on the armrests and steepled her fingers before her. Evan removed his jacket and draped it over the arm of the chair. Richard sat on the edge of his seat, ramrod stiff, like he had a steel pike up his ass.

“You qualify, yes, but not in your current state of mind. ‘Cat on a hot tin roof.’ ‘Nervous as a whore in church.’ Pick your cliché.”

Richard’s lips thinned and whitened around the edges. Evan braced himself for the imminent explosion.

Julia lifted one finger. “Listen, Mr. Hall.”

From somewhere behind him, Evan heard a steady *ticktock*.

“Let it calm you,” she said. “Let your heart catch the rhythm.”

So, it *was* a tool. She’d used it during last night’s meeting too. Clever, but it could also be a double-edged sword, calming one time and driving a person nuts the next, like it was doing to Richard right now. Evan forced his smile away; twenty-fours ago, that was him.

Richard clenched his fist on his thigh.

“I suppose that’s a start,” Julia said.

“You don’t understand...”

“Ah, but I *do* understand. It’s my duty to understand. You want to be a part of all this. I could tell by the look on your face last night. I’ve been there before. I know.” She crossed one leg over the other. “But first, you have to learn calm and some measure of patience.”

He pulled in a breath and loosened his fist. “I doubt Spencer will agree to his part of the bargain. I’ll pay whatever your fee is to keep to the original plan. We’ve contacted our clients. Everything hinges on --”

“Stop.” She lifted her hand, palm out. “I’m more concerned with what’s going through Spencer’s mind right now. I can perceive his refusal in a couple different ways: he might mean he wants me to come to him, or he might be scared to death. If it’s the former, the scene’s in play. If it’s the latter, he needs to be reassured.”

“I won’t have him cornered. I won’t have him hurt,” Richard snapped.

Julia’s glare chilled Evan, and it hadn’t been directed his way. “I would do neither. If that’s what you think I’m about” -- she jerked her head toward the door -- “leave.”

Richard scrubbed a hand down his face.

Julia looked at Evan for the first time since they arrived. “Call Spencer, please. Put him on speaker so there are no misunderstandings on anyone’s part.”

Evan obliged, placing his cell phone in the center of the table so they could all hear. Julia leaned forward, elbows on knees. It gave him a great shot of her cleavage. Richard didn’t notice. His pose was similar to hers but not nearly as relaxed.

Spencer picked up on the second ring, most likely because caller ID indicated it was Evan.

“I believe you were to be my guest this evening?” Julia’s tone invited shared confidences with no hint of confrontation.

Spencer’s sigh drifted over the line. “I don’t think we’re on the same page.”

“That’s possible.” She lifted her shoulder in a shrug. “That’s why we talk. We discuss what you want, what I think you need, and plan accordingly. You need to know that Evan



and Richard are here with me now and listening. They, too, are concerned for your welfare. Are you concerned their opinion of you might fall?"

"No," he quickly replied. "Not after we talked last night. We all know where we stand. We're all supportive of each other. It's... I..."

She stayed silent, giving Spencer the time he needed to find the words.

"I don't think I'm into the whole bondage and discipline thing. That does nothing for me. Well, maybe a little light bondage, but..." Another sigh. "The thing is, you said it wasn't about sex last night. Well, it is for me. It is all about sex. It's about what I want in sex."

"To submit rather than dominate," she said. "I understand. I can give you that. There can be sex, if that's what you need."

"Really?" A few seconds of silence. "Wow...but..."

"I scare you," she said with a smile.

Spencer laughed. "Yeah, you do. I think you'll hurt me."

"Not unless you want me to." She laughed too. "But there's more that makes you hesitant. Is it because you don't know me?"

"Maybe a little, but I'm not stupid. What uncommitted man is going to turn down sex with a beautiful woman he knows is safe? Take me off speaker, please."

She shot Evan a glance and picked up the cell phone. "Go on."

Evan heard Spencer's voice but not the words. Julia nodded, darted another gaze toward Evan, and -- blushed!

"Yes, I think that *might* be doable, but give me some time to work out the intricacies of the scene and think about it. I have to consider my comfort level as well. You'll know it's time when I show up at your door. I can't promise it will be tonight, but one never knows."

She ended the call and slid the phone Evan's way. "All resolved."

"And since you're free tonight, it's *my* turn." Richard's finger punctuated the word.

Julia's left eyebrow arched in a castrating glare. "I beg your pardon?"

"I need this! I need this now!"

"You definitely need something," she calmly replied. "But I'm the one who decides what that is and when you get it."

Richard vaulted to his feet. Evan launched himself in front of Julia, ready to take down his longtime friend if necessary to protect her. Julia stood behind him, fingers resting lightly on his back. She wouldn't stand down -- considering all her skills, she probably had a black belt -- but she was also willing to let Evan be her hero.

Richard pulled in ragged breaths and stabbed his fingers in his hair. "God, I...I need a drink."

Julia slid her fingers down and away from Evan. "I'll brew some tea."

"A drink!" Richard screamed. "I need a fucking drink!"

"What you need is someone to take you aside and smack some sense into you." And it was all Evan could do not to do that. "What the *fuck* is your problem? This isn't like you."

"You don't understand. You don't understand." He collapsed into the chair and buried his head in his hands.

Julia edged around Evan, then squatted down to Richard's level. "I do understand. I know how much you want this. The hunger for it is obvious. But this isn't the way to get it. You've made me very angry. If we did this now, I might hurt you. I *would* hurt you. There's only so much control a person can summon under an attack like this. This is not only for your own good, but mine as well." She patted his knee and stood. "Tea calms. Alcohol can make you...nasty."

God knows, they didn't need that.

Head high, shoulders straight, Julia walked out of the room to where Evan presumed the kitchen was located. Evan followed and found her with her hands braced against the

counter, as if that could ward off the world. She straightened when she heard him and poured water into the well of the coffeemaker in front of her.

"It's not a teakettle, but it will do," she said.

"And you think a little chamomile will help this?"

"It won't hurt. I've discovered the ritual of tea often diffuses a situation."

"As long as the rampaging beast doesn't hurl the hot liquid on you."

"Well...there is that," she admitted.

"Occupational hazard?" He stepped farther into the room until he was beside her.

"I guess you could say that. I'm trained to handle a lot of situations, but martial arts can only go so far."

"True. At least you've done all you can to be safe."

"Oliver trained me well."

Of course...Oliver. Evan should have seen that one coming. His air of command, the way he got things done, knew everything about everyone. And then there was this penthouse. The money had to come from somewhere. Oliver definitely had the funds. "Are you going to have sex with Spencer?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Why?"

"Because that's what he needs. It's my responsibility to see he gets that."

Evan combed her hair away from her neck. The little curl that so intrigued him peeked out from behind her ear. "And what about you? What do you need, Julia?"

Her shoulders sagged. "I need all three of you." Those green eyes looked up. "But I *want you*. I want you so badly, I can't think straight."

Her gaze fastened on his lips, begging him to take what he wanted. And in about three seconds, she was going to be stripped naked and under him on the floor.

“I said some things last night --”

She gave him a small smile. “Which I recognized right away as just talk.”

“Good. I also told you at dinner, no games.” And right now, he didn’t give a damn.

“This isn’t a game, Evan. It’s very serious to me. It’s a part of who I am. The two identities keep my worlds separate for my safety and survival.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“Yes,” she breathlessly replied. “You can’t begin to imagine the trust it takes, the trust I instinctively have with you, to have let my guard down. No one is more shocked than me.”

He gave a halfhearted laugh. “I doubt that. I’m surprised Richard didn’t recognize you.”

“He’s not himself.”

That was an understatement. “They have to know who you are, Julia, before this...before we go any further.” Because they were going to go further, as far as they could. She’d been in his blood since the moment he set eyes on her weeks ago, and then again yesterday. He wanted all of her, both of her...

“I know,” she whispered. Curling her fingers into his jacket, she pulled herself up on tiptoe until her lips were a breath away from his. “Good God, Evan.” She gasped. “Kiss me, please.”

From the hard-on wedged between them, she had to know he wanted to do more than kiss her. He cupped her jaw and tilted her head back until his face loomed over hers. Her lips parted more. “If I kiss you now, I’m going to be fucking you too. And it’ll be hard, sweetheart. Clothes ripped to shreds and raw, crazy sex. And it won’t be quick. It’ll be over and over again until our bodies give out.”

He felt her pulse pounding against his hand, heard her hard swallow as she awaited her fate. She didn’t know how hard it was for him to say the next words. Or maybe she did but needed to hear them from him.

“But there’s a man in the next room who is falling apart. He needs us, needs an anchor. Neither of us can neglect our duty to him, either as a friend or whatever it is you want him to be in our lives.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia could barely hear herself think over her heartbeat. Evan understood! No posturing. No chest thumping. No jealous tantrums or demands. He understood. But would Richard and Spencer?

Evan pulled in a breath, wrapped his fingers around her shoulders, and put a little distance between them. “Make tea, honey. Find your center of calm. I’ll see if I can do the same for Richard.”

He rubbed soothing circles with his thumbs, then walked to the other room. Her hands shook too much to fill the tea ball with loose tea leaves. Her body quaked inside and out. Screw *the tea*. Her center of calm waited in the living room. She tossed aside any show of decorum and hurried after Evan.

Evan held up a piece of notepaper when he heard her enter. “He left.”

So she noticed. She’d thought he’d gone to the bathroom.

“Said he behaved like an ass and thought going home was the best thing right now.” He let the paper flutter to the floor. “For many reasons.”

Julia couldn’t agree more. Shivers of anticipation hardened her nipples and raised goose bumps over her skin as Evan stalked her way. It’d been ages since she’d felt like a virgin sacrifice. Okay, make that never, even when she was a virgin. She stood rooted to the spot, out of her element for the first time in years, and never more thrilled.

“These buttons keep the dress on?” He traced his finger down the row.

“Zipper in the back.”

“Then I’ll save wear and tear on my teeth.” He cupped her ass and hauled her close. “Maybe use them to peel off your panties.” His eyebrow arched. “You are wearing panties, right?”

God, he felt hot and hard against her! What a sweet sin he was. “Not for long.”

One hand ripped her zipper open while the other palmed her breast when the dress fell away. Julia gasped, and his mouth covered hers. His tongue danced with hers, annihilating her senses, while he stripped the dress away. When it puddled around her feet, she kicked off her heels and stepped free.

Evan caught her around the waist and lifted her higher, tilting her off balance. He draped her over the back of the nearest chair, hooked his fingers in her panties, and slowly peeled them down. Julia wiggled her hips, anxious to be free of them. A hard swat to her thigh stilled her. Another had him swallowing her groan. He eased the panties to midthigh and slowly raked one finger through her pussy lips.

She grabbed his shoulders and arched her hips higher, begging for more with each thrash of his tongue. He kneaded her lips harder with his own, drove his tongue deeper, and thrust his fingers inside her heat. Julia moaned and writhed into the heel of his hand. He pulled free, slid his finger farther back, and dived into her ass. He ground the heel of his hand against her clit for a stroke or two, then slipped his thumb into her pussy and rode her hard. Each roll of his hand scuffed her clit, teasing her to the edge of orgasm, then relentlessly pulled away to make her wait. And still he kissed her like he owned her...because he did.

Julia flailed her legs, trying to lock around him and keep him in place where she needed it most. She half expected to find herself facedown over the chair with his hand blistering her ass for her efforts. The thought poured her juices over his fingers. Instead, he groaned, like he could read her mind. He peeled his lips from hers and raked his mouth down her throat.

She lifted her breasts, offering herself and praying he'd take it. Teeth gripped the lacy edge of her bra and yanked it down. Her breasts surged free, hard nipples seeking the heat of his mouth. With a muffled groan, he captured one and sucked deep.

"Oh, God!" Julia stabbed her fingers into his hair and clutched him to her chest. Hard suckles flashed down to her clit and back again, a never-ending echo only a climax could stop...and then only temporarily. It'd leave her craving him again and again. Ah, sweet addiction. And she knew she'd never get enough.

He deserted her nipple. Before she could protest, he seized the other one. Fingers pushed as deep into her ass and pussy as they could, and he rolled his wrist over her clit. Julia clamped her thighs around his hand, determined to keep him in place. This time, Evan let her have her way, urging her slowly to the peak, drawing out the sensation until she clenched her teeth and growled at the oncoming release. It hit her hard, shaking her like she was a rag doll, then tossing her limply across the arm he still had around her back.

Evan yanked his head up -- "Bedroom... Now!" -- and set her gently on her feet.

Julia's legs could barely hold her upright. He steadied her until she found her footing, then kept a protective arm around her hip as she led the way. The scent of him -- raw, sexual musk -- drifted beneath her nose, calling to her, driving that desperate want of him back to the razor's edge. She turned on him, pushing him against the wall and plucking at his shirt buttons.

"How can you still be dressed when you are so damn hot?"

Evan's groan rumbled over her tongue as she licked the well of his throat. His fingers dug into her hips, nailing her against his rigid cock. One button after the other released its hold, like tiny orgasms. Julia pressed her lips and tongue to each inch of flesh she uncovered, inhaling Evan's scent, imprinting it on her soul. His chest was perfect, but then she'd had no doubt. A man like Evan Fairfax didn't settle for anything less than perfection. They were so much like each other.

She skimmed her fingers over his solid shoulders, taking his crisp white shirt with her. No hair blemished his well-defined chest. His puckered dark brown nipples topped pecs that had to be blessed by genetics, since she knew he had little time to work out. The fact Evan could be so naturally perfect did things to the woman in her Julia never imagined could exist. She didn't just want to fuck him. She wanted to mate with him.

She kissed one nipple and rolled it between her lips, looping her tongue over the very tip. Evan moaned and cupped her head, working deep, long strokes through her hair and over her scalp with his fingers, the pressure and intensity letting her know, *yes, yes, more, more!*

Cuffs stopped the shirt at his wrists. Julia left the shirt hanging there, trapping his arms behind him, and ran her fingers along the waistband of his trousers. Heat welled up. The genie in the bottle of lust they'd uncorked. Her tongue traced the valley down his torso, her breasts raking his body as she knelt before him. The line of hair above his navel showed her the path to buried treasure. Buttons snapped when he yanked his shirt off the rest of the way; then he braced his hands on either side of her head. Thumbs circled through her hair, those long fingers tunneling in deeper. She could feel his heartbeat in the thud of the ridge against her throat, smell the hint of semen ready to burst free, taste the salt from his skin as she twirled her tongue around his belly button.

Julia forced herself to take her time. For once, it wasn't a matter of pride to draw out the sensations; it was a matter of the heart. She unhooked the fly clasp and feathered her tongue into the small gap. Evan gasped and thrust forward. She grabbed the zipper with one hand and used the other to expose her target. Julia nestled her face against his springy, dark hair. Lips guarding her teeth, she nibbled up the length of his cock when it finally bounced free.

Evan groaned and smacked his head back against the wall. She wouldn't tease, she couldn't, not when her fingers cupped his balls and she felt how tight and hard they were.



The man was in agony. She knew that feeling well, and that only one thing, one person, could relieve the ache.

She flashed her tongue across the tag of flesh under his cock, then looped her lips over the head and sucked him deep. Evan's grip tightened. He shook from the effort not to thrust like she knew he wanted to. She corkscrewed his testicles, kneading them together, then teasing them apart, urging him to let go. With a strangled cry, he snapped his hips forward, stabbing his cock deep down her throat. Julia sucked hard, cushioning the under-ridge on her tongue, then tickling it up to the tip and sucking him deep again. Precum salted her mouth. His arms quivered, still trying to maintain control. Julia dug her nails into his ass, urging him to fuck her the way he wanted. She squeezed his balls, pulling them away from his body until she could loop thumb and forefinger around the top. Then she nudged her little finger against his anus.

"*Goddamn*, woman!" Nailing her head in place, Evan unleashed his inner caveman, fucking her mouth in a frenzy that made her juices flow. And she took every pounding inch.

He came in a torrent of jism. Julia swallowed it all, milking his testicles for more until he sagged into the wall and grew flaccid.

Evan combed her hair away from her face and urged her to her feet, then cupped her face between his hands and kissed her so sweetly, Julia wanted to cry.

"I love the taste of me in your mouth." He spread his hand to her ass and anchored her to him. "The only thing better would be the taste of your pussy, and I'm going to have it just as soon as I can untangle my feet from my pants."

"Here...let me help with that." Julia stepped on the pants' crotch.

Evan smiled and pulled his feet free. His shoes came off with the clothing. He used his toes to peel off his socks.

"Impressive skills." Smiling, she traced her fingernail around his nipple.

"Tip of the iceberg, sweetheart." He gave her butt a pat. "Bedroom?"

A wiggle of her finger beckoned him to follow. He played with her butt the whole way. Once they cleared the threshold, Evan scooped her into his arms and tossed her lightly on the big bed. Julia's laughter turned into a little squeal when he knelt at her feet and sucked her big toe. Fingers of fire zinged up her leg. She clutched the pillow beneath her head and spread herself wider.

"Everything we need and want nearby?" He licked her second toe and kneaded her calf.

"Drawer." She flopped her hand in that direction, then dropped it to her breast.

"That's it, baby. Play with your tits. Make your nipples good and hard. But save that hot, tight pussy for me." He latched onto her other toe, twirling his tongue around and around, skills he'd be using soon on her clit.

Julia plumped her breasts, trying to draw his attention up closer to where she wanted. Evan glanced, grinned, and moved to her next toe. Her whimpered protest got her little notice. He merely draped her free leg over his shoulder while his mouth wandered slowly up her calf. Teeth grazed her skin. She jumped at the tiny nip behind her knee and grabbed the pillow again, inviting him to taste her with a lift of her hips.

Evan licked his lips and left a hickey on her inner thigh. She felt the draw in her clit and tossed her other leg over his shoulder. Her heels digging into his back, Julia shamelessly opened herself to him. His low *mmm* told her he approved, but he still took his own sweet time working up her thighs. A kiss. A lick. A small bite. Each promised his tongue soon, a sucking she'd never forget.

Breath held, she waited...and waited until he had her trembling with anticipation. The man was missing his calling as a Dominant in her community. He was a fucking natural. That's when she realized...*this* was Evan's secret, something she doubted he even knew about himself. Julia would let him enjoy the discovery; she knew she would.

“I love the smell of you.” His voice rumbled near her pussy. The vibrations sent her humming. “Love how swollen and ripe you look. How wet.” He feathered the backs of his fingers over the top. “So smooth. But not too much. Still natural. I like that.” Down the crease of her thigh. “Do you know what I wanted to do when I met you?”

Julia shook her head and managed a breathless, “No.”

“Turn you over my knee and paddle your backside.”

She smothered a groan and squeezed her thighs around his neck. Juices poured from her.

“There’s a wooden ruler at the office with your name written all over it, baby.” He spread her labia and licked up the valley of one lip.

Julia arched into the caress.

“I’ll bet I could find something here just as effective,” he said. “A wooden hairbrush. A paddle. A belt. What’s your *pleasure*?” He dodged her hard clit and licked down the other lip. “What do you need?” Another lick up. “What do you think you deserve?”

She could barely think. How could he expect her to answer?

“I think when you least expect it.” He screwed his fingers into her vagina and pressed up.

Julia gasped when he hit her G-spot.

“When you think you’ve come as much as you can so your clit and pussy get nice and swollen from a good, hard spanking. Then you’ll come all over again, all over my fingers and lap.” He thumbed her clit. “But no bruising. I wouldn’t want to hurt my baby, only get your ass furnace hot and that pussy boiling over.”

“Evan, please...” She grappled for his head, then tossed her arm back over her head.

“Is that like ‘Good God, Evan, kiss me’?” He pressed his lips to her inner thigh.

“Exactly like.” Julia hoisted herself to her elbows. “I don’t kiss just anyone.” She let her smirk tell him there were other things she shared infrequently. His answering grin told her he got the message.

He cupped her ass and angled her hips toward him. “Relax, sweetheart.”

She eased down, forced the tension in her legs to loosen. His gaze locked on hers. Lips parted. Tongue extended. He stopped a bite away from her clitoris, watching her breasts jiggle with every ragged breath she took. Then he licked over the hood.

Crying out, she arched into him, fighting the urge to grab his head and ride his mouth. Evan took his time, teasing her clit, making it swell all the more. The rise was sweet, building slowly, hovering on the edge of bliss. He didn’t suck her orgasm to the forefront; he beckoned the shy maiden forward, promising completion, fulfillment, safety...maybe even love.

Julia let the emotions build with her rising climax. She didn’t question that it was too much to hope for; she accepted that part of what she’d been missing in life was now within her grasp. One piece to the whole of her soul lay between her thighs, nurturing her, caring for her, giving and not taking.

Her breath caught. Body locked tight. So near. So sweet. Orgasm blossomed. A full-body experience Julia never knew existed. Evan stayed with her over the peak, then eased her down with dotted kisses over her labia. She melted into the bed, too spent to do more than drop a lazy hand on his head and whisper, “Wow.”

He kissed her hand and sat up on his heels. His hard cock waved at her. Evan leaned toward the drawer, raking the milky tip over her stomach as he grabbed a condom. Precum smeared in the wake. Julia wiped it up with her finger and brought it to her mouth. Lust smoldered in his eyes as he watched. And yet he still took his time. She could have been bound and gagged and still wouldn’t have felt more captive.

Her heart ached. Her body craved his. He sheathed himself with barely a glance down. Every look was for her. Julia reached for him when Evan settled between her thighs. She wanted his weight on her, that bone-hard erection inside her, his warmth, his comfort...his everything.

She whimpered at the first touch of his dick to her pussy. God, how could he take his time? His control...God, his control! Inch by inch he possessed her, spreading her wide, making her his. Julia smiled to herself when she noticed his clenched jaw and gloried in the fact he wasn't as unaffected as he might want her to believe. She could take charge, roll him over, and fuck him royally. She doubted he'd protest, but had a feeling the action might earn her that promised trip over his knee -- a temptation in and of itself, and yet not enough of one to steal this moment from either of them.

She hugged arms and legs around him, nudged her nose against his, begging for his lips. Evan pushed to the hilt and froze. Power rippled through him. His eyes closed while he fought for control. She felt the battle in the throb of his cock. It felt harder and larger with every second that passed.

He pulled in a deep breath through his nose and let it out through his mouth in a slow hiss. The sound woke her clitoris. It swelled into him. Evan's eyes opened to hers, then dropped to her mouth. He dusted his fingers over her cheek and kissed her. Julia stabbed her nipples into his chest and dug her short nails into his back. Evan groaned and kissed her harder. A roll of his hips readied her, yet nothing in all her experience prepared Julia for the thrust he nailed into her.

She broke the kiss on a hard groan. Evan grabbed her hands and pressed them to the pillow. She laced her fingers through his. He grunted his approval and thrust again. Julia locked her heels around his thighs.

"God, Evan, ple --"

A tongue-lashing kiss cut the words. The smell of herself on his mouth, the way he possessed her inside and out. And then he moved, really moved, pounding into her with a force she never dreamed was possible, physically or emotionally. There was desperation in the hard fucking -- hers. She needed this, needed him. How in the world could he hang on, driving into her like a jackhammer? How could he bear being so hot, so hard?

Her pussy burned. Her clit felt like a damn stone wedged between them. Evan shoved his hand between them, pushing his thumb on her clit so it felt every stroke his cock slammed into her. She panted and gasped, rocking, riding him as hard as he did her. Harder and hotter still. His cock demanded she come with him. Her muscles clenched around the steel, bonding them.

And then they came. God, they came! Never, *never* had she experienced an orgasm this intense, this encompassing, this...

Blessed release eased them down. Julia feathered her hands over his shoulders, his face, awestruck that he'd been able to give her something she'd never had before. He kissed her everywhere he could reach without breaking that bond until physical demands made them part.

Evan eased his weight from her and removed the spent condom. "I had visions of whipping this off, hauling on another one, and going at you doggy-style, but I think I need a little turnaround time," he said with a laugh.

Julia chuckled and brushed her fingers down his chest. "That makes two of us."

He snapped the sheet over them and pulled her into his arms. She cuddled there, drawing lazy circles over his torso while Evan played with her hair.

"I can't remember the last time someone made love to me," she confessed.

He squeezed her shoulder and kissed her forehead. "Same here, sweetheart. Crazy as it sounds, sometimes you just know when it's the right person. I've been told that a lot, but never believed it until you."

“Yes.” She nodded. “That’s it exactly.”

“But as perfect as this is, as I think we are for each other...”

Julia held her breath, waiting for the harsh words that would end it all before they could truly begin.

“By your own admission, you need more. I’m willing to see you get that.”

She jerked back to look at him. “Oh, my God! You really *do* understand.”

Evan shook his head. “Not yet. But I sure am willing to try. I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep us together. As long as you don’t hurt me,” he quickly added. “Even then I’ll try anything once. Maybe even twice.”

Julia laughed...and then tears sprang to her eyes. Happy tears. Tears of overwhelming emotion. Evan didn’t shush her once. He held her tight and let her have a good cry.

“Want me to brew some tea?” he asked when she wiped the last teardrop away and blew her nose.

She laughed and nudged his shoulder. “Now you’re toying with me.”

“You found me out.” Devilment gleamed in his eyes. “I’m just disappointed that I got a good cry out of you without having to spank you. I was so looking forward to it.”

She straddled his body and tweaked his nipples. “You’ll get your chance.”

“Hope so.” He pinched her clit. “So...tell me what Spencer wants that had you blushing. I have my suspicions it includes me or Richard. Me, I suspect, based on that awkward glance you gave me while you were talking to him.”

“It does. It does indeed.” She applauded his instinct with a slight nod. “Care to guess why?”

He stared over her shoulder for a second or two while he thought. “He wants me there because he wants to feel safe. You scare him, but he wants this. He knows I’ll have his back.”

“But not Richard?”

Evan shook his head. “Not in this situation. He can’t depend that Richard won’t get carried away in the moment. You saw him tonight. He became like a ticking bomb once Spencer told him he didn’t want to do this.”

“Impressive and perceptive. Ready to put your money where your mouth is?”

“No time like the present.”

That was a surprise. “Now?”

He sat up and cradled her astride his lap. “I don’t think Spencer can take much more waiting. As for Richard...” He shrugged. “He can’t either, but he needs to calm down.”

“Wow, you do have the makings of a first-class Dom.”

Evan laughed. “One thing at a time, sweetheart.” He gave her bottom a swat. “Let’s not keep Spencer waiting. I’ll be following your lead. Tell me how you envision the scene will play out.”

Julia locked her hands behind his neck. “Know that whatever happens, I will kiss only you.”

He circled his thumbs over her hips. “And know that whatever happens, I will always be making love to you.”

Her heart tumbled a little more. Julia cupped his face and kissed him.



## Chapter Seven

Spencer pounded out another mile on his treadmill. That brought his total tonight to ten miles. Rock music shook the windowpanes. The run did nothing to alleviate his hard-on. The music only made it worse; the beat and heavy guitar licks reminded him too much of sex.

He'd been like this since Maneater's call. Images of what the woman might do filled his head with scenarios that alternately scared the shit out of him and made him horny as hell. Her promise he'd be safe was all it took to rouse his penis to life and keep it there. Despite his desire to be "cocked and locked" when and if she came to his house, Spencer had jerked off twice. Nothing made his erection go away for long. He could have beaten his cock to a bloody pulp and it wouldn't rest.

Woven into his greatest fantasy come to life was the reality that the chances of her convincing Evan to come along were zero. If Spencer wanted this to happen, he had to do it alone. He had to trust the word of a woman he barely knew, and then only by her scandalous reputation. Spencer tried to tell himself a wise man had backup. And every time, the nagging voice of doubt called him a coward. The same voice that had stunted him all these years.

That's when he realized that he'd used Evan and Richard as an excuse. It wasn't being less of a man in their eyes; it was being seen as less of a man in his own.

Spencer had always gone after what he wanted in life: friendships, business, running marathons. But this? No. Because he didn't want to go after it; he wanted it to come after him.

He punched the cool-down cycle, mopped the sweat from his eyes, then draped the towel around his neck. Spencer didn't bother monitoring his pulse rate. It was racing a mile a minute before he'd even started his run. He grabbed the bottle of water from the holder and chugged it down. He crushed the plastic in his grip, then tossed it aside with the other four empties. The music, perfectly timed to his routine, died. In the silence he heard someone's throat clear.

"What the fuck?" Spencer punched off the treadmill, stepped down...and stopped short. Maneater and Evan stood in the doorway, each braced against the jamb, watching him. She'd done it, convinced Evan to come with her. And in that thought another encroached: *Oh, my God, this is it!* His hard-on strained the confines of his jockstrap.

"How the hell did you get in here?" A stupid question, since Spencer knew Evan had an extra key to his house. They all did, just in case.

Evan jingled his key ring. "We did knock. With the music blaring..."

"So...this is it." He could scarcely breathe. Maneater studied him from head to toe. Measuring his worth? Putting the scene in play? Spencer wasn't sure and didn't know how to ask.

"If you want it to be." Her arms were folded under her breasts, lifting and deepening her cleavage. Spencer imagined his tongue there, or better yet, his cock, encased in the valley while her thighs clamped around him.

"I do." At least his body was ready, more than ready. As for his mind... Evan's presence helped a lot to calm his nerves. But the fact remained that Maneater was a stranger, a very tempting stranger, but a stranger nonetheless.

"It's me, Spencer," she said. "Julia."

The confession snapped him into awareness. A "duh" moment. Now that he knew, it was obvious. Spencer applauded her daytime "disguise" and her evening temptress, both intricate parts of who she was. Worry sloughed from his shoulders. It was Julia, and though he didn't know her well, they had spent the last two days working in close proximity. He trusted her, liked her. Yes, this was going to happen.

"Thank you." Should he fall on his knees before her in gratitude? Only if she told him to do so. She was in charge. He thought of the way she worked at the office, calmly setting things to rights, making sure everything was in order, fixing whatever was wrong. And now she was here. His. Or did that make him, hers?

"Now what?" he asked.

"A few ground rules." She stalked toward him, then walked a slow circle around him. "Always, always have a safe word. Simplest thing to remember is *yellow light* when events are bothering you and *red light* when you want it to stop completely."

Easy to remember. "I don't think I need Evan here anymore."

"I do, unless you are safewording out. He's going to be a very big part of what we're doing here tonight. You've asked me for this; you must trust my judgment in giving you what you need."

"He's not fucking me. No way. Red light."

Julia smiled. "Good to know you aren't afraid to use the safe word. That makes me feel much better." She slithered the towel from around his neck and slowly blotted sweat from his chest. "Evan will be joining us in bed for a ménage, but he won't be fucking you. He'll be fucking me. *I* will be fucking you. Just. The. Way. You. Want." She rasped the terrycloth

over his nipple, but it was the way she pulled her lower lip between her teeth that nearly brought him to his knees.

A giant step away put unwanted distance between them. Spencer reached for her. Julia playfully slapped the towel over his hands. "Try that again, and it won't be a love pat. There will also be no kissing. That right belongs to Evan only."

Spencer frowned. "Why? Is that a Dom/sub thing?"

Evan cupped his shoulder. "A lot's happened in the last several hours. Julia and I are a couple."

That blew his mind and spawned a thousand questions. Spencer tried to take a step back. Evan's hand on his shoulder and Julia's at his waist kept him in place. "Then this --"

"Is what we all need." The gentle command in Evan's voice calmed him as did the openness in Julia's face. Spencer's tension eased. Offering them a smile, he nodded.

"Good." Julia patted his hip. "Now, into the shower. I abhor sweaty men."

Spencer started for the door, then stopped when she followed. "Do you intend to watch?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Absolutely," she purred. "I might not care for sweaty men, but I enjoy the hell out of watching them bathe." She stepped in front of him and gave Evan her back. "Evan, be a dear and unzip me, please. I like to be prepared for *anything*."

She smiled at Spencer, then looked up at Evan. Her hand dived into his pocket and retrieved a barrette. Spencer's breath hitched as he watched the dress fall away from her back. She secured her long red hair up, then dropped her shoulders. When the ivory lace puddled around her feet, she toed off her heels and stepped free. All that remained was a demi bra and tap pants covering the most exquisite woman he'd ever seen.

Julia cut a sly gaze toward Evan. "You could do with a shower too."

Then she extended her hand to Spencer. "Shall we?"

Dumbstruck, so hard he'd come at the merest touch, Spencer took her hand and led her to the bathroom. She perched on the small counter and motioned him into the shower. "Leave the curtain open so I have a good view. Make sure you leave room for Evan."

Spencer almost accused her of joking, but he knew she wasn't. One leg crossed the other, slowly sawing back and forth, while she waited for him to undress. She braced her hands behind her, pushing her breasts upward. Her gaze never left his chest.

Pulling in a breath to steady his nerves, Spencer pushed his shorts and jockstrap down. He watched her watch him, then knew real triumph when her eyes widened at the sight of his erection bobbing before him.

"Come here," she ordered.

Two steps put him within her grasp. She curled her hands around his dick and stroked lightly. "Very, very nice." Her thumb smeared the precum over the head. She released him just in time. A second more and he would have filled her palm.

She flicked her fingers toward the shower, ordering him away. Spencer jerked the curtain back and twisted on the cold water. Something had to shock his system to a manageable level. He took the blast as long as he could, until the size of his goose bumps rivaled his nipples. Julia's gaze followed the soapsuds up and down his body. He wished they were her hands.

Evan's appearance in the doorway did what the cold water hadn't accomplished: brought his erection down a notch. He was naked, erect, and heading Spencer's way. Evan paused beside Julia.

"May we see your breasts while we shower?"

"I'll consider it." She jerked her head toward the tub. "Spencer, I doubt Evan will appreciate icy water."

Eyes riveted to the minor power play between the couple, Spencer twisted the hot water on. Steam billowed, hiding things he didn't want to deal with, but unfortunately, also

those he craved to see. Evan stepped in beside him and grabbed the soap. He lathered his hands and kept his focus on Julia.

Apparently pleased, she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. Her breasts surged free, and Spencer's cock rose to full staff. She flicked on the overhead vent and cleared the steam.

"Much better." Long fingers traced her upper thighs. She parted her legs ever-so-slightly. A hint of moisture peeked from her panty crotch. "Stroke yourselves."

Spencer hesitated and watched Evan from the corner of his eye. Evan had no qualms. Feet braced shoulder-width apart, he gave Julia what she demanded. Spencer followed his lead and nearly laughed at an old memory: the three of them as horny teenagers seeing who could jerk off the fastest.

"Something amuses you, Spencer?" she asked.

"The foolishness of youth." It was the truth.

"I see." She gave a slow nod. "You may stop now." She hopped to her feet. "Back-to-back, please."

Shower spray beat his shoulders and chest, giving Spencer a distraction he desperately needed. He watched her kneel on the floor beside them and reach for both of them. She skidded her hands up through the remnants of suds on their thighs, over their hips, then stomachs. A groan tore from Spencer's throat when she lathered his pubis. Around and around the base of his cock, then down to his aching sac. He butted against Evan accidentally and didn't give a damn. Anything to have her keep doing that, to have her fist his cock and stroke the cum from it.

She traced the under-ridge up to the tip, circled her finger over the top, then followed the curve to the base once more. "Now, show me those fine asses of yours." Her husky tone nestled against his balls. "Hands braced against the wall."

Spencer turned with Evan. Evan smacked his palms onto the wall and scooted back. Spencer mirrored his position. The touch of her fingers down the cleft of his ass earned her another groan, one Evan echoed. The fact she did to his friend what she did to him, that Evan even allowed her to do so, that they both allowed Spencer to be a part of what they were becoming, bolstered his ego.

She kneaded his cheeks until his cock fucked air. Spencer spread wider, hoping she'd do the same to his balls. When he felt her hand slip downward, Spencer was certain he'd gotten his wish. Too late he realized her true purpose. Before he could shout "yellow light," she thrust her fingers into his ass. His protest died on a hard moan.

"God, I didn't realize it could feel so damn good," he gasped out.

"Please stop, sweetheart," Evan groaned. "It feels too good. You're going to make me come. I want to wait. Please."

"Of course." A final thrust and she pulled free. Kisses dotted Spencer's ass. "You are both just so...beautiful," she finished on a whisper. She smeared more soapsuds over his ass and up his spine. "I can't wait a second longer. Spencer..."

She nudged his hip as she moved away, a clear indication he was to follow. Spencer pulled in a breath as he straightened. When he turned he found her holding a towel out for him. He reached for it as he stepped out.

Julia held on. "No. I'll dry you."

He caught Evan's gaze in the mirror's reflection. The clatter of curtain rings cut off the view and gave him the illusion of privacy with Julia. Spencer had no idea if it was Evan's doing or Julia's. At that point, he no longer cared. Having Evan here, being with Julia, felt more natural than anything else in his life. Not like it was meant to be, but as if it had always been this way.

He watched her blot him dry through a half-lidded, sex-drunk gaze. He expected her to take her time, toy with him a little, drive him crazy with lust. Instead she scuffed the towel

over his body with an apparent indifference that made him wonder if she'd lost interest. His cock deflated a little and with it the rampant ache that consumed him.

"Better?" she asked.

Spencer smiled. So that's why she'd done it. To give him some measure of control. "Yes. Thank you. I'm ready now."

"Good. Me too." She lightly snapped the towel against his ass. "Move. I want you in that bed and prepared by the time I get there. If you aren't, then you'll have to sit out tonight and watch while Evan and I have all the pleasure."

Spencer wasted no time. His erection reawakened with every stride. Candles lit his bedroom. The bedspread was gone, and he could see the sheets had been changed. Condoms and lubricant lay on both night tables. Evan had been busy setting the stage for seduction in that brief time before joining them in the bathroom.

He snagged a condom, ripped it open, and seated it as he rolled into place in the center of the bed. Just in time.

Slow, measured steps carried Julia through the door and toward him. She'd left her hair up. Damp tendrils clung to her neck. Other curls were damp as well -- the small reddish patch at the apex of her thighs. The woman could tempt a saint and win. And to think she was coming for him. *Him*.

Spencer's cock weighed five tons against his stomach, and he was fairly certain threatened third-degree burns. He flexed his fingers into the sheets, fighting the need to stroke it, the urge to reach for her and pull her beneath him. He'd thought this would make him feel helpless. Nothing was further from the truth. Power raced through his veins.

He spread his legs when she reached the foot of the bed. Her smile approved. She crawled between his legs, raking her breasts up slowly until they cradled his balls. She rubbed into them, urging his thighs farther apart. Spencer bent his knees and let them flop to



the sides. Slipping lower, she kissed his testicles, suckled gently, tongued them apart. He closed his eyes and soaked in the sensation.

Breasts captured his cock, stroking slowly up and down. Julia squeezed them tighter. “Fuck them,” she whispered.

He thrust into heaven, gasping when her tongue circled his cockhead with every stab. Too quickly she stopped and continued her upward crawl. Pussy juices dampened his torso. His mouth watered for a taste. Instead she offered her nipple.

Spencer clamped on, laving the hard flesh under his tongue, showing her how well he could love her little clit. She rode his stomach, spreading more juices over him, inundating him with her arousal. She eased her breast from his mouth, and he groped for the other one. Julia edged away and spread her pussy for his gaze.

Spencer moaned and thrust into air.

She shifted higher, bracing one hand against the headboard, and pressed her pussy to his mouth. He caught the fruit between his lips and thrust his tongue as deep inside as it could go. Her muscles clamped around him. A muffled cry told Spencer he’d hit just the right spot. He suckled harder, grinding his face into her heat.

Julia writhed into him, seemingly caught up in the moment. He wanted to keep her there, make her come again and again. But when he grabbed her hips, she jabbed her fingers into his hair and pulled him away.

A nipple offered swallowed his garbled protest. It was better than nothing. He sucked so hard, he knew she’d feel it in her clit. Her clenched thighs confirmed it. Then she claimed victory as she seated herself on his cock.

Spencer cried out. His body bowed into hers. He ground deep, fighting not to come yet wanting to so badly it hurt.

“Easy,” she whispered and rubbed soothing circles over his chest.

He pulled in hard breaths and let her calm him. Movement nearby opened his eyes. The bed dipped with Evan's weight. Spencer glanced over Julia's shoulder. Evan didn't even spare him a look; all he saw was her. She arched into the caress Evan drew down her back and lifted her ass as high as she could.

Spencer cupped her head and pulled it to his chest. She settled with a sigh, then gasped as Evan's fingers lubed her anus. Spencer sympathized. If this was how Evan's fingers felt, he couldn't begin to imagine what the man's cock would feel like against his when only one thin membrane separated them.

He spread wide to help accommodate Evan. The mattress dipped a little more. Spencer kissed Julia's forehead, then jerked back when he remembered her no-kissing rule.

"That kind is okay," she whispered. "It's okay."

Was she telling Spencer, or giving Evan the go-ahead? Spencer closed his eyes, afraid watching Evan join with them would put him over the edge. He could feel, and that was damn fine enough.

He breathed in time with Julia. Holding back sound was impossible. Inch by slow inch Evan slid his cock into Julia's ass and against Spencer's dick. Evan's body shook from the effort it took to take his time. Heat bathed them all, engorging their genitals. Hell, *welding* them together.

Finally, Evan was in to the hilt. All one. United. Balls to balls. Nothing had ever felt more right.

"I won't last long," Evan said in a rush of breath.

"Me either," she said on a sigh. "It feels so sweet, caught between the two of you."

Spencer could barely think much less talk. A "same here" was all he managed.

Evan pulled in a breath and pushed it out. Spencer dared a stroke. He couldn't hold back any longer. Julia's nails dug into his chest. Evan's thrust kept her in place.

"God, yes," she cried.

They grunted in unison and took her. Slow glides melted into a steady rhythm that carried them along on its own momentum. The squeeze of Julia's cunt, the stroke of Evan's cock, heavy balls cushioning his. And the heat...God, the heat! Every second they got harder. Spencer worried they'd split Julia with their fucking, worried their cocks would explode from the pressure.

Julia tossed her head back, her lips seeking Evan's while her hand grappled for his head. Somehow Evan managed to kiss her. The beauty of it burst through Spencer. He couldn't hold back, couldn't wait.

"Can't. Stop." He shoved deep and came.

Julia clamped around him, and he felt the waves of her orgasm yank even more cum from him. Evan reared back, slamming his body inside her and rolling with the force of his climax. It felt like minutes, felt like hours, felt like they were suspended on that eternal plane of wonder, then they dropped in slow motion back to solid ground.

They sagged as one and eased their weight from one another. But that was as far as any of them went.

"That" -- Spencer couldn't see straight for the stars dancing behind his eyes -- "was amazing."

"Oh, yes," Evan seconded.

"Definitely yes." Julia curled into Evan's arms, butted against Spencer, and pulled him close. "Definitely."

Spencer released her barrette and combed his fingers through her thick, soft hair.

Julia sighed like a contented cat.

"Hot and fulfilling as this was, you do realize Richard won't be satisfied with something this..." Words escaped Spencer.

"Tame?" Julia glanced over her shoulder.

"Yes."

"I know." She returned her head to Evan's chest. "I'm prepared."

"Are you?" Evan asked. "You saw how out of control he was tonight."

Spencer tugged up tight to Julia and rested his hand on her hip. "He exploded when I told him I didn't want to meet my end of the bargain."

"And it was a downward spiral from that point on," Evan told him. "I haven't seen him like that since Louisa Parker dumped him right after prom."

Spencer flashed back to high school and Richard's raging freak-out episode.

"Hmm." Julia rolled to her back and stared at the ceiling. "I would call that behavior 'spoiled.' A classic tantrum when one can't have their way or what they want. Good to know."

Evan pushed himself to one elbow. "And I'd call it dangerous."

Spencer wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger. "I agree. I do *not* want you alone with him."

"Agreed," Evan added. "I don't trust him not to hurt you."

Julia looked from one to the other. "Then trust me to know what I'm doing." When they didn't answer, she cupped their faces. "Trust. Me." She followed the request with a kiss to their cheeks and resumed her former position cuddled between them.

Spencer and Evan looked at each other over her head. The silent communication was clear. Julia might consider the discussion closed, but they'd be damned if they let her have her way on this. Somehow, Spencer suspected she already knew that. It was going to be an interesting battle of wills.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evan feigned sleep. Julia was up to something. She'd dismissed their concerns too easily. He almost called her on it but realized making a full-on issue of it wasn't going to do

any good. Julia would dig her heels in more and shut them out completely. He'd be damned if he would let that happen.

She almost had him fooled when she cuddled against him once more. Spencer fell asleep within minutes. Evan wasn't far behind when he realized Julia hadn't relaxed. If anything, her body became tenser, alert for action. She waited for something. So did Evan.

Julia finally made a surreptitious move when Spencer rolled to his other side. Peeling the covers back, she eased from Evan's arms and slithered from bed. He waited on the off chance that she might be heading to the bathroom. A flash of ivory lace told him she was dressing.

Evan tiptoed to the doorway in time to see her fish his car keys from his pants pocket. She clutched them in her fist to hide the jingle. Hooking her fingers in her shoes, she crept toward the front door and stepped outside. He hurried to the window and peeked out. Halfway down the walkway she stabbed her feet into the heels, then hurried toward his car. The engine purred to life. She backed out slowly, hitting the headlights when she was certain they wouldn't reflect in the windows.

"What's going on?" Sleep roughened Spencer's voice.

"She lifted my keys and left."

"Richard's?"

"I'd bet money on it." Evan let the curtain fall into place.

"I'll get dressed."

Evan grabbed his trousers from where he'd draped them over the chair. He'd worry now and deal with her subterfuge later. All he cared about at that moment was her safety.

## Chapter Eight

Richard had left Spencer's house as quietly as he'd entered. To think he'd been worried about Spencer, scared something was wrong. Why else wouldn't Spencer answer his phone? Why else was Evan's car parked outside?

Why else indeed.

He probably should have left well enough alone and not used his key to enter Spencer's house. After all, he'd already made an idiot of himself hours before. Not as big a one as he felt now, though. The signs had been there, if he'd bothered to look. Any fool could tell Julia and Maneater were the same person. Maybe that was the key -- fools weren't officially "briefed."

Their conversation reverberated in his head. Leaden feet carried him to his car. They didn't trust him, were afraid he'd hurt Julia. He thought he'd lived down the Louisa Parker incident. He'd been barely eighteen at the time. Eighteen-year-olds did stupid things. Apparently, so did thirty-two-year-olds, judging from his behavior tonight.

How could he face them tomorrow? He'd have to say something. He couldn't look at them without seeing them bound together in perfect harmony. Couldn't function knowing his partners lacked this particular measure of trust in him. Couldn't forgive himself for having his dream so close at hand and letting old, childish behaviors steal it away.

Richard pulled into his garage when the automatic door opened. He didn't remember the drive home. He wished he could wipe the whole night from his memory.

"I need a fucking drink." Or two or three. He had a six-pack in the fridge calling his name and promising temporary forgetfulness.

He tossed his keys and wallet on the kitchen counter when he walked in the door. Sweat beaded over his forehead. His hands shook. Embarrassment and shame overwhelmed him, followed closely by isolation and loneliness.

*"I do not want you alone with him."*

*"I don't trust him not to hurt you."*

He yanked the refrigerator door open and reached for a beer.

*"Tea calms."*

"Tea," he said with a snort.

*"Alcohol can make you...nasty."*

Richard sighed and shut the door. He couldn't believe he was considering this. "Ah, what the hell. Nothing ventured..."

Though it wouldn't have Julia's elegant and refined touch, he pulled down a box of Lipton and nuked a mug of water. Once it was boiling, he held the mug in one hand and bobbed the tea bag in the water with the other. He had to admit the ritual did calm him a little.

"Will wonders never cease?"

Richard started at the sound of Julia's voice. Before he could demand to know how she'd gotten into his house, she held up Evan's key ring.

"I borrowed these." She placed them on the counter next to Richard's. "I don't suppose you have another mug handy."

"Take this. I'll make another."

Julia curled her fingers around the mug and thanked him with a nod. "I saw you at the house."

"Yes." No sense denying it. Richard put the second mug of water in the microwave. "Now we can officially add voyeur to my list of idiosyncrasies and faults."

"Ah, well, there's a little voyeur in all of us." She shrugged. "Yours was unintentional."

"I sure walked in on the unexpected. An eye-opener on many levels."

"You weren't kept uninformed for any overt reason." She sipped her tea as the microwave dinged. "Evan realized who I was the second he walked into the penthouse tonight. You would have, too, if you hadn't been so panicked."

A polite way of putting it. Richard watched the water darken as the tea dispersed. "Is the penthouse yours?"

"It belongs to the community. We have another facility in Palm Springs. That's where you'll train when the time comes. I'll make the necessary arrangements when you're ready to make that step."

He looked at her from under his eyebrows. "I'm surprised you'd agree after the way I behaved tonight."

Julia's green eyes lit with her smile. "No one's perfect, Richard."

"Evan and Spencer don't trust me alone with you. They're afraid I'll hurt you. Shit, they've known me for twenty years."

"And yet they didn't know this private need of yours. Evan and Spencer can't trust you if you don't trust yourself. None of you understand the complexities yet of what you want, Richard. Not yet. But you will."

He lifted his chin and tried not to gape like a fish. "You'll still help me do this?"

"Of course." She took another sip and set the mug aside. "This isn't a lifestyle you jump into. It takes time, patience, and experience. Each step of the way you'll be able to decide if



this is right for you before you proceed. You can decide for yourself what you do and do not want to do.”

“I want to be like you, like Oliver. But after tonight...” He had no business trying to master anyone if he couldn’t master himself.

“Consider it a valuable lesson learned. No one’s perfect, Richard. We all make mistakes. In this community your mentor will help you correct those mistakes so you can be all you wish to be.”

“Will you be my mentor?”

“Most likely, yes. But let’s take this a step at a time.”

“And what would be the next step?” Odd that he would feel so calm, instead of jumping for joy that this was going to happen. “It’s a quiet thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s control in its purest form. The control you give to another or another gives to you.”

“The tea. The clock ticking.”

“All things to help you center. I was trained to the metronome, and you will be as well. The ticking clock is less obvious, though,” she added with a smile.

“And the next step?” he asked again.

“We’re going to sit down and enjoy our tea while we discuss boundaries and issues. After that, if you wish to continue, then your first introduction will begin.”

“Repercussions for tonight?”

“There are always repercussions.” She picked up her mug and waved her hand toward his living room.

Richard led the way. Side by side on his small sofa, they talked of things he never could have anticipated: his goals and expectations, his no trespassing issues and hers, responsibility to himself and others, safety and support. He already knew safe words, that to be a good top he had to spend time as a bottom, that subs were a dime a dozen and a good Dom was rare.

He wanted all of it. Then they discussed his present needs -- not what he wanted, but what Julia felt he needed. And she was right.

"I'm ready," he said when the last word died.

Julia took his empty mug from him. "Then let the scene begin. I'll wash these while you prepare. Don't dawdle. I expect you ready and positioned when I enter your room."

"Yes, Mistress."

Richard went through his private ritual quickly. He'd done this for years, imagining what it would be like to be with another person this way, too afraid of ridicule to ask it of a girlfriend-of-the-moment. He tossed his clothing in the laundry basket in the closet. Heart racing, he retrieved the soft leather belt from its hanger and draped it over the edge of the bed. His erection anticipated the events to come, the discipline that would swell it to impossible proportions. Richard pulled a condom from the bedside table. In due time he'd come for her without one if she demanded it. For tonight he needed the dignity it would give him; no spewing cum to deal with.

Legs spread, he braced his hands on the edge of the mattress and waited. He wished he were bound and at her full mercy, to know what it really felt like, to prepare for the day this role was reversed. He smelled her walk in. Sex clung to her, reminding him of how beautiful the three of them looked all twisted in the throes of orgasm. He'd love to have been a part of it. *Soon.*

His cock lifted when his belt snaked from the bed. She traced the tip down his spine and let it rest over the crack in his ass.

"You lacked control tonight, Richard. Lost your temper when you should have had compassion for what your friend was going through. Attempted and rightfully failed to top *me* with demands you had no right to have. Frightened your friends with your behavior. That cannot be tolerated, can it?"

"No, Mistress."

She slid the belt away and replaced it with her hand. "I see you've administered self-discipline in the past. How often?"

"Daily, Mistress."

"And yet...here we are. It's clear you need a firmer hand." She smacked her palm over his backside. "You will not move. You will not come. If your hands lift off that bed, the count will restart. Your punishment tonight is one hundred."

His knees buckled at the thought.

"Legs straight." She hand-smacked him again. Her breath tickled his ear. "I think you'll discover that while one hundred is child's play when self-administered, they are quite memorable when given by another."

The first strike hit him. Its gentleness surprised him. It was barely more than a tap. So was the next and the next. Disappointment crushed him. It wasn't what he wanted. Richard drew breath to call an end to the farce. The next breathtaking stroke took the words away.

"Thought I was playing, didn't you?" she said, swinging again. "Never go in cold. Warm the bottom first and build, build, build." She whipped his ass with each word.

Fire raced over his ass and spread to his groin. Pain morphed into pleasure. He rode the high and lost count of the times the belt connected. Wanted more and more. Thought of the day he'd be wielding it and prayed for the skill to give this experience to another. Top to bottom, one right after the other, every inch of his butt was covered. And when he thought it couldn't go any further, she strapped the crease between his ass and thighs, then the tops of his thighs.

He cried out and forced himself not to move, not to grab his aching cock and beat off. She was in charge. She would take care of everything. All he had to do was enjoy.

Then she fisted his cock. He thrust into it while more fire lit his ass. She grabbed his balls and squeezed hard. "Be still," she hissed. "Do you want me to start at one?"

God help him he did. He struggled for the right answer and gave her the only one he could. "Please, Mistress."

"I'm sure you do." She draped the belt on the bed in front of his fingertips, then sat against the headboard and opened her arms. "Come here."

If he could get his arms and legs to cooperate. Richard huffed out a breath and crawled between her thighs, then nestled his back against her. She wrapped her arms around him. Fingers feathered over his hard nipples tickled the hair on his chest and down the middle.

"You took your first time well. I'm very pleased." She nipped his earlobe and grabbed his cock in the same motion.

"God, J...istress!"

"Jistress?" She grabbed his testicles. "I'll let you have that one slip this time." She rolled his balls between her fingers, then palmed them and pressed circles into the sensitive spot right behind them.

He pumped into her fist and gripped her thighs. Julia rubbed her breasts into his back. He damned the ivory lace that kept him from feeling how hard her nipples really were.

"You want to come," she whispered. "Will I let you, or will I tease you and choke it off?"

He couldn't think straight, not with her hands squeezing tighter and tighter. "I...I..."

"It's okay." Faster and faster. Harder and harder. "It's been a difficult night. No more waiting. I'll give you what you need. Remember how it feels. Remember your obligation when I'm the one sprawled between your legs and desperate to come. Come, Richard. *Come.*"

His hips snapped upward into her fist. He snarled with the force of his orgasm, shooting so hard, he swore the force broke the rubber. She milked his balls for more, and he gave it, spurting more jism than he thought his body could hold. Another wave hit him, shaking Richard down to his bones. He collapsed in her arms, too spent to move.

Richard knew she'd leave now; that was part of tonight's scene. She'd left Evan and Spencer without a word, and he also knew that neither would appreciate waking and finding her gone. He hated to see her go, but there'd be other times. Times for all four of them, times for just the two. Nothing felt more perfect. From what he'd seen earlier, his friends agreed, and Richard knew it could never be any other way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evan and Spencer ducked out of Richard's house and hurried to Spencer's car. They hadn't done anything differently than Richard had by sneaking in. Their concern had been Julia's welfare, as his had been Spencer's. Somehow, touching as the scene had been, Evan still felt they'd violated their friend's privacy.

"She's safe, it's all good, and that's all I care about." Spencer started the engine and headed home.

"I know but I still feel..." He shook his head. "Never mind. Clearly we should have trusted her judgment. However, she should have trusted us with her decision and not taken off without so much as a note."

"How do you want to handle it?"

She had Evan's car and had to bring it back tonight. At least that's what Evan was counting on. This wasn't going to be a normal relationship. Working things out as a couple was hard enough. This involved all four of them. It sounded crazy, but it felt damn right. Julia had said it herself -- she needed all three men, yet her heart wanted one. If Evan was going to keep her heart, he had to take care of her in all ways, and he was damned determined to keep her. So he asked himself one question: what would Julia do if their situations were reversed?

"We're going to confront her tonight, but deal with it tomorrow."

"Calmer heads and a good night's rest?"

“Yes.” It’d also give her time to think about her inconsideration and anticipate how they planned to deal with that behavior.

## Chapter Nine

Light glowing behind Spencer's front window warned Julia her absence had been discovered. She wasn't surprised. They'd be upset as well, especially since she'd taken Evan's car without permission. They might also suspect she'd gone to Richard, maybe they'd confirmed that assumption with a call to him. Fine. Better to have it all out in the open anyway. Seeing Richard watching them from the other room told her that he, too, needed her tonight, and Julia took her responsibilities very seriously. They'd have to understand. That was the bottom line.

She pulled to a stop in the driveway and walked up to the house like she owned the place. The front door swung open when she neared. She expected Evan's glower; she got Spencer's instead. Evan sat on the arm of the chair watching. Both had dressed. Mugs of tea steamed on the battered oak coffee table.

"Sit." Evan pointed to the sofa.

The command raced her heart. Firm, no nonsense, yet his tone still calm. The man definitely had missed his calling as a Dom. Well, not missed it -- was just now coming into it.

She had a feeling she knew what would happen next and didn't know whether she anticipated it with glee or dreaded it. Maybe a bunch of both.

She clutched the strap of her tote with both hands and sat on the edge of the cushion.

"Tea?" Spencer lifted a mug her way.

Julia wrapped her hand around it and forced herself to place the bag on the floor.

"About tonight --"

"Not. Yet." She felt Evan's gaze boring into her. "We wait."

Very well. She'd wait them out, let them have their moment. At least he hadn't made her assume a submissive position. Although... Spencer hadn't moved from the front door. Evan still perched on the chair arm. Both felt like they hovered over her. Maybe this was their version of a sub position. It was beginning to feel like it with every passing minute -- them unmoving, watching her, and Julia trying to sip the tea. She hadn't anticipated they'd be so skilled at unnerving her, or that she'd care as much as she did.

She set the mug on the table and folded her hands in her lap to keep from reaching for the limited comfort her tote bag provided. The wait was too much.

"I don't appreciate or have time for games either." She lifted her chin Evan's way, hoping it added weight to her words.

His sardonic smirk told her it was a sad attempt to wrest control into her own hands. "At the risk of echoing your earlier words... This isn't a game. It's very serious to us."

Outside a car door slammed shut. She forced herself not to look toward the door, to keep her gaze locked on Evan. Judging from their demeanor, she expected Oliver to walk in. Relief sagged her tense shoulders when she discovered it was Richard.

"Now we'll begin," Evan declared.

Julia jumped when he snapped to his feet and started her way. She expected him to grab her wrist and haul her over his lap for a spanking he'd think she deserved...and she wanted it more than she could say. Instead, he moved the mugs and jerked his finger to the coffee table.

"Sit."



She slid to it, pulling her tote with her. Evan, Spencer, and Richard sat on the sofa in front of her.

"I think we all agree this involves all of us," Evan said.

Julia wouldn't dispute that. It pleased her to know they acknowledged it.

"Why?" he asked.

She thought of being coy and asking, *Why what?* Sarcasm would get them nowhere. "Richard needed me." Pure and simple.

"I can only presume you made that assumption based on the fact you saw him watching us. And, yes, he told us everything when we called and asked him to come over now." Evan's penetrating gaze kept hers in place, that and years of training. It wasn't easy. His nature alone made her want to kneel before him. "Richard also knows we witnessed your session with him, so everything's all out in the open now."

The admission caught her unaware. How had she not seen them? Julia lifted her chin a tad. "Yes, I saw him watching and knew he needed me."

"And yet you didn't tell me or Spencer. You left." Evan snapped his palm up. "And don't insult us by saying you didn't want to wake us."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she sarcastically replied.

Richard and Spencer leaned back. Now Evan would pull her over his knee. Julia braced herself, more than ready for the moment. She'd make sure they were all back in Spencer's bed within five minutes. A few well-placed groans, a couple of bare-assed wiggles...

"You showed little consideration for our feelings on the matter, Julia. You showed little consideration for Richard's situation by not sharing his presence with us. Your lack of common respect was intolerable, selfish. We will deal with this issue later when we've all had some rest and you've had time to think how your actions have hurt us all. Frankly, it's not something we expected from a woman of your caliber. Also, though I hate to bring up business when we are dealing with such personal issues, you've left me little choice." He

pulled in a deep breath. "From a business standpoint, it seems as though you've reneged on our agreement and have cheated both Spencer and Richard out of the full night they were required to spend with you."

Julia hated being scolded. It threw her off, made her feel bad, guilty, like she should be apologizing and asking forgiveness. The hell of it was, Evan was right about everything.

Evan picked up her tote and put it on her lap. "It's late, and we all have work tomorrow. I'll be taking you home now."

They were dismissing her? *They* were dismissing *her*?

"How dare you," she laced the words with venom.

*She* was the dominatrix. *She* was the one in charge. They were...they were...

"I'll find my own way home. I don't need your help." She thrust a shaking hand inside her tote, searching frantically for her elusive cell phone. "I have a limo at my command. I have...people." Goddamn it, she was starting to cry! "I don't need you. I don't need any of you." She blinked, desperately trying to clear her vision. Where was the fucking phone?

Evan's hands closed gently over her forearms. "Yes, you do, Julia. You need us. You said so yourself earlier tonight."

"Don't throw my own words back in my face!"

"Tantrums now?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. Tears escaped anyway. Her chin quivered. Damn him! That was twice in one night the man had made her cry. Well, she wouldn't give him the pleasure. She wouldn't!

"Come here." He scooped her onto his lap.

Julia curled into his arms despite herself. Tears...again. She was helplessly submissive where this man was concerned, and falling hopelessly in love.

Someone moved, and Evan shifted to the end of the sofa to better cradle her. "I'm sorry," she blubbered. "You're right about everything. I was thoughtless, irresponsible." She

was so fearful of losing him -- them -- and being rejected that she couldn't think straight. To think she could be so human after all.

Sitting beside them, Richard pulled her legs onto his lap, slipped off her heels, and rubbed her feet. Spencer shoved a tissue in her hands, then offered her the mug of tea. Julia hiccuped and thanked him for both. All the while Evan combed his fingers through her hair, kissed her forehead, and rubbed soothing circles into his back.

"We can't make this work if we don't talk to each other," Evan said. "We all have to understand and communicate."

*God, please, no more lecturing.*

"I know. I agree." She hoped that was enough to end the discussion.

"We all agree," Spencer added.

*The end. No more. Stop.* She'd be crying herself to sleep tonight as it was, and probably alone. The thought didn't appeal to her.

"Now, drink your tea." Richard kneaded the ache from her toes. "It'll make you feel better. Then Evan will take you home, and we'll all get a good night's rest."

"But don't expect this to be the end of it, Julia." Evan gently pulled her head up to look at her face. "There will be repercussions for tonight's actions."

She sniffed. "Repercussions?"

Richard cleared his throat. "Didn't you tell me there are always repercussions?"

Her words as weapons against her. Great. Oliver had said they'd keep her on her toes. He didn't lie, but then, he never did.

"Yes, I did." Heaving a sigh, she nestled her head onto Evan's shoulder once more. "I'm sure the three of you will be thorough and inventive. But please don't leave me alone tonight." Despite all her years of purposeful isolation, Julia couldn't stand the thought of being by herself.

"Sweetheart" -- Evan kissed her head -- "I don't plan to leave you alone any night."

Julia clung to him, afraid it was all a dream, afraid if she let go, the something she'd been subconsciously looking for all these years would be lost. She dredged courage from the depths of her soul and with it the strength she needed to take a chance.

When she lifted her head, Richard slipped her heels back on. He kneaded her calves, then smoothed her dress into place, leaned forward, and kissed her cheek. Julia touched his face and managed a smile. He winked and swung her feet to the floor.

She drained her mug and gathered the others. The mundane task wasn't her responsibility, but it helped put order in her fractured brain. Spencer followed. She expected him to interfere since it was his kitchen, but he leaned against the counter and crossed his arms.

"I might prefer a submissive role in the bedroom, Julia, but I don't appreciate being made to feel like I'm nothing and what I say doesn't matter. It's been my biggest fear in taking this step. Tonight you showed me it didn't matter by bringing Evan to the bed with us. And then you took it all away when you walked out without a word. I want to make sure you understood that."

"I do," she quietly replied.

"Good. I'd hate to go through that again." He wrapped a tight hug around her and kissed her cheek. Then he retrieved a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and took it to the other room.

Julia closed her eyes against another rush of tears. So much for control tonight.

"Ready?" Evan asked from the doorway.

Nodding, she dried her hands and joined him. No one spoke, though the men exchanged nods. Evan opened the car door for her, then slipped behind the wheel. The only words traded were when she gave him directions to her house. Tension locked her muscles. She had the headache from hell. Sleep wasn't going to come easy tonight. Julia would keep running their scolding through her head, torturing herself over and over again.

Hidden security lights clicked on when Evan pulled to a stop in her driveway. Lighting tucked beneath the low lilac bushes against the house guided their way inside. At the door he slipped the keys from her fingers and unlocked it.

"You have no clothes for the morning," she suddenly realized.

"And your car is still at the penthouse." He swung her front door open. "We'll take care of both in the morning. For now, let me take care of you. Go run a bath for yourself. It'll help you relax."

She kicked off her shoes and started in that direction. "Will you be joining me?" she asked over her shoulder.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Julia started to ask what he'd be doing in the meantime, then decided she didn't care. A hot soak sounded like heaven, especially if he was going to be in the tub with her. She dropped her dress in with the other dry cleaning and piled her hair up while the tub filled. Mountains of bubbles greeted her return. Steam fogged the mirrors. She groaned with pleasure as she crawled in.

"Oh, man, I could fall asleep right here."

"Wait for me." Evan was gloriously naked, a glass of chardonnay in each hand. "I'll make sure you don't drown in the process." After setting the wineglasses beside the tub, he slid in behind her.

"Thought we could both do with this." He handed her a glass and took the other for himself. "Courtesy of Spencer, although I did notice you have a bottle already chilled."

Julia sighed and leaned into him. He wrapped a loose arm around her waist. The wine went down cool and smooth. Another longer sip and she felt the tension fade. Her lips were poised for another gulp when Evan took the wineglass from her and set it aside.

Before she could protest, one hand covered her breast. The other cupped her pussy. Julia dropped her head back. He kissed her ear, her neck, and rubbed slow circles over her

clit. His cock wedged hard against her back. She ground her hips into him as the pressure below mounted. Evan rocked with her. They came together on a sweet high that had none of the frenzy from before, yet all of the passion.

A sigh nestled them into after-bliss.

“Oh, yes.” She wrapped her arms over his. “This is exactly what I needed.”

Evan retrieved their glasses. “I will always take care of you, sweetheart, and see you get what you need. Always.” He sealed the promise with a kiss she felt all the way to her toes and back.

## Chapter Ten

“I met with Oliver today.”

Julia choked on her water. None of the men offered her their help.

If Evan was going for surprise attack, he’d definitely won.

The four of them sat around a lovely meal in the penthouse, chatting about everything and nothing in particular after a long day at work. Spencer had even managed to help her take care of a few things at Julia’s Gems. She knew they’d come to the penthouse to deal with those “repercussions” from her actions the night before. But when the meal had been delivered within minutes of their arrival, she thought the issue delayed once more. Dead even. Never in a million years had she expected Evan to contact Oliver.

If there was any doubt what the men had talked about, the sudden appearance of Evan’s wooden ruler confirmed it. Julia was screwed. At this point she found herself lucky Evan hadn’t produced Oliver’s hated cane. Now *that* was punishment. Occasionally he’d follow it up with the equally despised black snake -- a length of stiff black rubber that hurt like hell and made even the most stubborn of Oliver’s protégés snap into line. One stroke was all it took for a memorable experience.

The ruler wouldn't be so bad. She wanted the ruler, wanted to be over Evan's lap. Her pussy creamed at the thought. He'd make it sting and burn too. Build her up until a wisp of air across her clit would have her coming. If these were the repercussions, bring it on.

But...he'd talked to Oliver. Julia knew there would be more.

"Just cut to the chase," she told him. "Better yet, let's just get it over with." She pushed away from the table.

"He said you'd try to take control. I'd like to finish eating first." He skewered a piece of chicken and popped it in his mouth.

Richard and Spencer watched them and said nothing. They wouldn't. Evan was the leader, the alpha...*her* Dom. And now he knew it.

"Oliver thought you should be caned royally," he said as he chewed. "But that's beyond my skill level...for now."

Julia squeezed her thighs together.

"I actually learned a lot from our conversation this morning. Very enlightening." He speared a new potato. "About your standing in your community, and how disciplinary measures against you could affect your interaction with other Doms and subs. That such measures might be handled privately between you and your mentor. However, this isn't exactly a community issue. This is personal for the four of us. Oliver agrees that you wronged us all, and all of us should witness the correction."

Richard and Spencer would also learn from it for their own benefit. It would bond the four of them. It also would very clearly establish their respective relationships in all their minds. The knowledge soothed Julia.

She gave a nod. "It's as it should be. I accept it." *I want it. I need it. I need all of you.*

"Good." Evan slid the ruler her way across the table. "Hold it in your lap while we finish eating."



Julia did so, but eating any more was beyond her. Her stomach roiled with anticipation. Discipline had never been more exciting. “Oliver’s not going to burst in with his fucking cane, is he?”

They chuckled.

“No,” Spencer said. “You really hate that, don’t you?”

“It hurts like hell and burns like fire,” she readily admitted. “Everyone experiences it at least once, just to know what it feels like.”

Richard was forewarned. She watched his face flush and suspected his dick was rock hard at the prospect. They probably all were imagining what was about to happen.

She brushed her fingers over the smooth ruler. The wood warmed under her touch. She saw herself at the office, sprawled facedown on the conference table, her bottom bared and ready.

“It amazes me what we’ve learned about ourselves and each other since you walked into our lives, Julia.” Richard pushed his plate away and reached for his water glass. “I know we all have a long way to go, but it’s a nice start to learning.”

“The learning never stops” -- she picked up her fork, more for something to do than to eat -- “for any of us.”

“Amy won’t recognize us by the time she gets back.” Spencer snickered. “I checked on her on the drive over, by the way. She’s climbing the walls waiting to go into labor.”

Julia smiled. “Patience has never been one of her strong points. She doesn’t like it when things are out of her control.”

“I think we can all sympathize with that feeling,” Evan said. “How’d you two meet?”

“College.” It was as simple as that.

The easy camaraderie returned. They laughed, shared stories, and before Julia realized it her plate was empty and they were drinking the green tea Spencer had brewed. An hour had flown by.

Evan dropped his hand over hers. "It's time."

He opened his palm. Julia placed the ruler in it. Richard and Spencer moved to the main room. Evan followed. Julia knew her role well, what was expected of her. She didn't dawdle. In the room designated as hers, she undressed and slipped on a white plush robe. She left her hair up. If Evan wanted it down, he could order it done. Juices trickled down her thighs with every step she took, she was so turned on. Finally, she was getting the spanking from Evan she'd been craving. She hoped he didn't disappoint. Julia found the men sitting in the chairs, waiting for her. They looked relaxed after a long day. Well, except for the erections tenting their trousers. What a beautiful sight, and they were all hers.

Evan stood when he saw her. He clutched the ruler in his hand. She undid the robe and let it drop when she was halfway across the room. His gaze caressed her from head to toe. Her heart started thumping. Any second now, he'd grab her arm and pull her over his lap. Her swollen labia massaged her hard clit. She almost came from that alone.

Evan pointed to the big chair. "Hands braced on the arm, legs back and spread." He grinned. "I understand you have a habit of writhing during a spanking until you come. I'm afraid I can't let that happen tonight. You come when we're ready and not a moment sooner."

Julia shot him a dirty glare and made a note to tell Oliver to mind his own business from now on.

"Isn't there something you want to ask Richard and Spencer?" Evan asked when she started to assume the position.

She felt her cheeks heat, knowing her backside would soon match. Facing the men, she folded her hands together. "Would you please witness my punishment?" *And promise one of you will at least make me come quickly?*

"Yes, Mistress," Richard said. "Thank you for the opportunity to learn from your experience."

The words empowered her.

“You may indulge yourself during the process,” she told Spencer.

He smiled and unzipped his trousers. “May I make you come first?”

She gave him a nod and assumed the position.

Evan’s hand glided over her hip, holding her in place. “I made a promise to you, Julia. I will never break it.” He brushed the ruler over her ass.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Eyes closed, she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, and waited...and waited. Silence. Anticipation. Want. Need. Arousal filled the air. And then...a steady *ticktock*. She groaned and lifted her ass.

Evan didn’t disappoint her.

She gasped with the first tap and the second. Sweet heat started to spread, and his force increased, timed perfectly to the ticking clock. He spanked her like a master, stoking the fire.

“God, did you take a crash course with Oliver in Spanking 101?” she cried out.

“No need.” He landed an extrahard whack that took her breath away. “I love a well-spanked bottom. I just regret that I can’t feel your juices soaking my thigh. But whose fault is that, Julia?” Two quick swats followed.

“It’s mine,” she cried out. “All my fault.”

“That’s right.”

Steady, methodical, hotter and harder strokes hit her ass until she squirmed from the ache, cried out with each one, until she wanted to sob for release.

Julia felt the loss of his body heat first. She wanted to grab him and pull him back to her, demand more. The whisper of clothing coming off kept her quiet.

Evan took her arm to help her balance. “Spread yourself in my lap and show Richard and Spencer how wet you are.”

Half blind with lust, she wasted little time. She glanced at Spencer and Richard and saw that they were nude, their hard cocks encased in condoms and ready for *her*. Evan brushed the ruler over her inner thighs, then across her nipples. Julia gasped and arched into the touch.

She squealed when someone's mouth closed over her pussy. A glance down confirmed it was Spencer. Evan tapped the ruler over her nipples. Her brain shut down. She pumped her hips furiously, desperate for an orgasm, and Spencer still took his own sweet time. He traced up one side and down the other, then nibbled her swollen labia like he had all the time in the world.

"Goddamn it!" she screamed. "Suck it now!"

Spencer glanced up at her. "As you wish." He gave her a grin and latched on.

Julia exploded with the first suckle. She didn't get time to enjoy it though. Spencer pulled away and returned to his seat.

"Show him, honey," Evan said against her ear. "Suck him off. Give him a taste of his own torture."

Julia crawled over the small coffee table to reach him. She felt like a wild thing on the hunt. Spencer reached for her. She grabbed his wrists and nailed them to the cushion, then sucked his cock deep. There was no play for him. No buildup. There was no need. They were all hot as hell and ready to come. He pumped into her mouth. Julia deep throated him and drew hard, flashing her tongue, threatening with her teeth. She raked her breasts over him for extra measure and felt his balls clench. His body trembled, warning her. Then he thrust forward and came.

Julia yanked free and shoved his hand where her mouth had been. "Finish it for yourself and see how it feels to be left in the lurch. And don't you ever do that to me again, or I'll bind you and fuck you without release until your eyeballs float."

Richard was next. His eyes were glazed, and his cock waved hard and ready. She started to crawl toward him. Evan's hand around her ankle held her in place.

"Sure you're ready?"

Without another word he hauled her over his knee and spanked her some more. Julia blessed him for it. Each stroke built her up again, making her more than ready to fuck Richard. Richard gripped his chair arms, his fingers flexing to keep from stroking his cock.

"Enough?" Evan asked, pulling her up.

"Perfect." Julia straddled his lap, grabbed his face, and kissed him hard. His cock throbbing against her was too much to resist. She lifted and seated herself.

Evan growled. Shaking fingers grabbed her hips and hauled her off. "Soon, sweetheart."

"God, I think I just might love you!" She kissed him again and went after Richard.

He met her halfway, reaching to turn her away from him. Julia obliged, then sighed when he sank his cock deep inside. She knelt on the coffee table and kept her eyes on Evan, how beautiful he looked sitting there watching.

Richard's fingers glided over her clit. She rolled her hips against him, taking control. He fucked her deep and hard, worked her pussy to the breaking point. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the rush, the power, the force growing inside.

"You wait for me," she commanded, remembering her role. "Don't you dare come before me, or you'll be tasting more than the ruler."

Richard groaned. His body quivered with the effort to obey. Any other time she might have tormented him. Not tonight. Not now. She let go.

Orgasm washed over her. He held out for a second or two longer, then came with her aftershocks.

Julia reached back and petted him. "Very good. Very, very good."

And now...

Her heart embraced Evan before her arms could reach him. He opened his arms and she crawled astride his lap and joined them together once more. She expected more spanking to help bring her back up to the breaking point. It didn't happen, but then everything with Evan was so unexpected.

She drowned in his kisses, melted into the feel of his hands roaming her back and ass, sighed and squeaked when he sucked her nipples, until her body was ripe to come again. Fingers clutched her hips, urging her to ride with him. She lifted her arms and released her hair, shaking the curtain of red down her back.

Evan groaned and thrust harder. She pushed her hand between them and shoved her clit down until it kissed his cock. Every pounding stroke pulled her closer. She marveled in his heat, his power, that he could get so impossibly hard. She clamped her muscles around him, dug her fingers into his shoulders. Lips covered hers. Then they froze and...

She jerked her mouth from his and tossed her head back under the force of her climax. She cried out like an animal unleashed. He seated himself hard and came with her. The force reverberated in her womb. She rolled into a miniclimax and felt him spurt again. Other groans reached her -- Richard and Spencer had come again too. She allowed herself a smile and sagged into Evan's arms.

"I think I just might love you too," he said. "Crazy, but true."

She dotted kisses over his shoulder. "Stranger things have happened, or so I've been led to believe."

"Something happened when we saw you at that New Year's party, Julia," Richard said. He squatted on one side of Evan's chair, Spencer on the other. "Something more happened the day you walked into our office. I don't want to analyze it or pull it apart or anything like that. It is what it is."

"It works." Spencer rubbed his hand over her back. "Whatever the four of us have going on here, it works. That's all that matters."

Evan pulled her head up until he looked her in the eye. “I will always take care of you. No matter what. Always.”

He didn’t realize how much he said. None of them did. Or...maybe they did.

Julia let her smile touch each of them. “Need goes both ways. None of you will ever be without.”

## Epilogue

### *Six Weeks Later*

“Oh my God, what did you do to my guys? They are considerate, reasonable...” Amy ticked off the points on her fingers. She was dressed as a gypsy wench for the last of the Mardi Gras parties and took full advantage of her fuller breasts, thanks to the arrival of her son four weeks before. Her doting husband wasn’t far from her side.

Julia waved off the compliment with a flick of her long red nails. “They just realized how much they missed you, how much they valued you, how much they took advantage.”

Amy glanced around and leaned closer. “You didn’t take them to some dungeon and whip them, did you?”

Julia fanned her hand against her throat and laughed. “Can you imagine?”

Evan’s hand against her back saved the moment. He bent to her ear. “Everything’s ready, Maneater.”

He could barely say the name without a smirk. They knew who was really in charge -- and it definitely wasn’t her when it came to Evan.

“Your friends are set. Soleil and Raven are waiting for you to enter the room.”



"I'm on my way." She resisted the urge to kiss him, snapped her hunter green velvet skirt, and let those commanding strides Maneater was famous for take her to the room where the show would be presented.

Oliver intercepted her halfway and fell into step beside her. "Superb event, but then I expected no less. I believe I heard over one million dollars was raised for the National Marrow Donor Program."

"Perhaps a little more," she said. "The clients were thrilled. Great parties, great publicity, and a great cause. There's talk of putting together a marrow drive as well."

"I told you they would keep you on your toes."

Julia felt her face heat. "They do."

"The challenge you were looking for?" he asked, his voice low.

She turned a smile his way. "All that and more."

"I told you. 'Good things come to those who wait.'"

"You did," she said with a laugh. "You did indeed."

"I always knew it would take one hell of a dominant male to win your heart, but I never anticipated it would be someone outside our circle. I've never seen someone with such natural talent."

The two men had spent a lot of time talking the last six weeks.

"It pours from him. One doesn't need to see him in action to know it either," Oliver said. "You know everyone's salivating, hoping you'll grant them one time with the man."

"Sorry, not going to happen." Julia tried not to gloat. "There's always Richard."

Oliver's nod concurred. "Great potential there. A diamond in the rough. He's being watched, too, with growing interest."

"When he's ready..." Julia left the rest unsaid. Oliver knew what she meant.

“Spencer is the enigma, though. His self-confidence has grown, thanks to you. His development will be interesting to watch. Still waters and all that... Ah, here we are.”

They’d reached the other two women. Julia took her place between Lori and Rachel. They stood before Oliver as they had so many times over the years, waiting for his approval.

“Beautiful, ladies. Exquisite. Ravishing. You do me proud.” One by one he lifted their hands and delivered a kiss, his seal of approval, then opened the door for them.

The women stepped into a scene similar to the one they’d performed for Evan, Richard, and Spencer the month before; it was the same scene they’d done hundreds of times over the years. Bawdy, outrageous, over-the-top fun. And harmless.

Maneater, Soleil, and Raven took their places on the dais, perched on the chaises that were their thrones. Queens surveying all within their realm. Green, gold, and purple. Julia, Lori, Rachel. Women drawn together by a common thread, bonded by friendship.

“Have you told anyone yet this is your last appearance?” Rachel asked.

“Not yet.” Julia tugged her bustier a little lower. “I didn’t want anything to take away from the night.”

Lori fluffed her long blonde hair. “Never thought I’d see the day when one of us would fall in love again. I think I’m jealous.”

Julia laughed lightly and wrapped her fingers around a flogger until the tails dangled over the side of the chaise. Rachel gave her kitten whip a practice snap.

“Speak of the devil. Or should I say, devils?” Rachel jerked her chin toward the door. Evan, Richard, and Spencer had taken their places in the receiving line with the party’s hosts. Their gazes went right to Julia.

“Okay,” Lori said, “now you’re just showing off. Yes, I am officially jealous. We both are. Now tell your admirers to back off.”

Rachel tsk-tsked. “Or share one for the night. How is it fair that you have three when some of us don’t even have one?”

Lori tapped Rachel's thigh with her riding crop. "Like you'd be happy with just one."

Rachel snickered. "Right now, one is better than none."

"Relax." Julia spread her skirt and eased back, shooting a wink to her men while blowing a subtle kiss to Evan. "Good things come to those who wait."

Julia licked her lips and a serene smile lit her face as she looked over her three men. Oh, yes. Definitely good things.

 THE END 

## **Caitlyn Willows**

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same award-winning quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be steamier and more over-the-top. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

Visit Caitlyn on the Web at [www.caitlynwillows.com](http://www.caitlynwillows.com).