



# HEAVEN SENT 6: REVELATIONS

Jet Mykles

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# **Heaven Sent 6: Revelations**

## **Jet Mykles**

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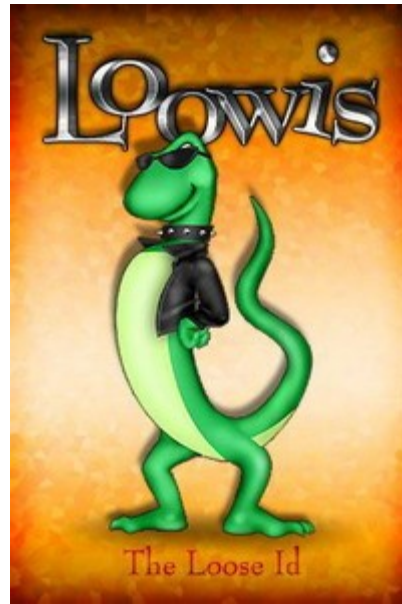
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## Chapter One

"So, you bored out of your skull yet?"

Gretchen laughed, Ellen's falsely bright tone sarcastically clear over her iPhone's earbuds. "Not at all." She sat back on her bare heels. "I'm shopping."

"Let me guess. You're still sitting in that big, empty living room, probably still in your sleep shirt even though it's after one, with only your laptop for company."

Not surprisingly, Ellen had pegged Gretchen's exact surroundings. "Hey, I'm dressed." She laughed. "But I did sleep in these shorts and tank."

"Mmm hmm. How many catalogs are sitting in front of you?"

Gretchen glanced at the colorful array spread out on her pale caramel rug. "About a dozen."

"You could actually go *out*, you know."

She picked up her MacBook and settled against the white wall that would gain color as soon as she decided on a full color scheme. "That would defeat the goal of not leaving the house." Distracted by the flash indicating she had personal mail – not work e-mail, *that* she was avoiding – she opened Gmail.

"Is the boy toy there to help you?"

Gretchen rolled her eyes, readjusting her seat in the nest of pillows she'd set up in the corner of the blank room. There was an e-mail from Todd. Todd who? "I wish you'd stop referring to him like that."

"But that's what he is."

She opened the e-mail. "That is *not* what he is."

"Close enough."

"He's your *cousin*, Ellen."

"That doesn't change anything."

"You're bad." Oh! Todd Banks. A guy she'd gone out with a few times at the end of last year. She closed the e-mail without reading any further than his "*Hi. Long time no catch you.*" There was a reason she hadn't been out with him again. Taking that as a sign she should not be reading e-mail, she shut the MacBook and set it aside. "Owen is out picking up my dress for tonight."

"Eeep, is the auction tonight?"

"It is."

"What the heck are you doing lazing around? You should be at the spa or something."

Gretchen laughed. She and Ellen had been together for so many years, it was hard for Ellen to turn off her habit of helping even though she was no longer Gretchen's personal assistant. Ellen still worked for Gretchen, but she was a manager in her own right now with two struggling bands starting to blossom in her loving care.

"I'm fine, darling. I've got hours left, and the new do doesn't take any time to fix up." She reached up to fluff her just-past-chin-length locks.

Ellen *humphed*. She had not been in favor of Gretchen cutting her long red-orange hair to shoulder length but had given up grumbling about it. Mostly. "Well, all right. You'll call me tomorrow to tell me how it went?"

"I will."

"Oh! And have the boy toy call me. I need him to check something for me."

"Only if you promise to call him Owen."

Ellen snorted. "Only to his face."

"What would your mother say?"

"She's the one who got me started calling him 'boy toy.'"

Gretchen laughed aloud. "I'm hanging up now, evil woman"

"Have fun tonight."

Still smiling, Gretchen cut the connection, then dropped the earbuds on the carpet beside the phone. Reopening the laptop, she went back to view the rest of her e-mail. There was one from Darien letting her know that he and Chris were going to be out of the country for the rest of the summer, one from Brent asking if she'd heard of a band he'd seen the previous night, and a third from Hell asking her to look up a minor legal matter for the studio he and Brent had recently set up. All three e-mails she answered gladly, intrigued by the legal matter even though she wasn't personally involved in the studio. If her boys needed her, she was there to provide. Once those were done, she was free to start browsing for furniture again. She still hadn't decided if the caramel carpet was staying or if she was going to rip it up in favor of hardwood floors. The latter would look so nice with the floor-to-ceiling windows in the east wall.

What a luxury. Sitting in her bright, open living room in red shorts and a loose Heaven Sent tank top with nothing to do for hours. Days. Weeks, even. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had so much time to herself. For years, she'd lived primarily for Heaven Sent. Since signing on to represent the boys back when they were still the house band at Purgatory, there had been little else for her than arranging their lives. Those four men—five now, with the addition of Hell—and their significant others meant the world to her, taking the place of the family she'd mostly lost during her childhood. Helping, herding, and mothering them was now second nature. But, as of last month, the boys were on hiatus for a year. By unanimous consent, they were all "on their own" until this time next year. Even her. Wouldn't mean they'd all stop working,

of course. She had her management company with a few other bands, and each of the boys had plenty to keep him busy, but the band itself was on hold. Johnnie and Tyler were deciding if they were going to start a family. Luc and Reese were planning to get married at some point. Chris had managed to arrange his affairs so that he and Darien could do some traveling. Brent and Hell were hip deep in setting up their own recording studio with the intention of producing other acts, the first being the troublesome Indigo Knights.

Given the golden opportunity, Gretchen had decided to take an extended leave of absence herself and drop off the public radar for a bit. She'd never taken such a long vacation and, damn it, she could afford it. Her little management company virtually ran itself in the capable hands of Ellen and a few of her other current and former assistants. Heaven Sent was still their largest act but was no longer the only one they represented. So, with Heaven Sent on hiatus as of the start of June, Gretchen left the business to the others for a little while to concentrate on the house she had just purchased in the Hollywood Hills. She'd never fixed up a place herself, always had shoppers and decorators take care of such things while she was busy with work. Heck, she'd never had a house of her own before. Previous "homes" were condos, apartments, or rentals. She was looking forward to a house that felt like it was really *hers*.

She was engrossed with the pros and cons of wainscoting when she heard the front door open. She smiled, raising her arms above her head to stretch. That would be Owen, the real reason she felt comfortable taking time off. He had only worked for her since March of this year and already had her life well in hand. She trusted him fully to alert her if there was anything she needed to know or something she needed to do. She'd been afraid of finding anyone competent after promoting Ellen, but her former assistant's cousin was fitting the bill quite nicely.

Rubber soles squeaked on the tiles in the vaulted entrance hall. She looked up just as he stuck his head through the double-wide arch to see if she was there. *Ah, my angel!* She knew she shouldn't think of him like that, any more than she should allow Ellen to



keep referring to him as a “boy toy,” because Owen was far too classically both. He was five feet five if he was an inch and had the build of a high schooler, which was why people often mistook him for a kid. He was not. Young, yes, just turned twenty-four. Fortunately, he only had to open his mouth to belie the naïveté suggested by his huge aqua eyes and pink, pouty lips. He had been a model in his early years of college to help pay for tuition, but those days were behind him. Too quiet and sensitive to be a hawk in business yet, but Gretchen had a feeling he'd grow into it as his skin hardened after a few years. His instincts were sound, and he was sharp enough to have gained Gretchen's full trust in less than a few months.

He grinned when he caught sight of her and stepped into the room, her dry cleaning draped over one arm, his backpack slung over the opposite shoulder. “There you are.”

“Here I are.”

“Did you find anything good?”

“I did. Come here.”

“One sec, let me hang this up for you.” He disappeared, and she heard him dashing up the stairs.

Was it wrong of her to get a little thrill at thinking of him in her bedroom? Yes, it probably was. She was ten years older than him, for Christ's sake. She had no business thinking of him in anything resembling a sexual manner. But in the privacy of her own mind, she had to admit to having dirty old woman feelings about the cute young thing who worked for her. How could she not? Given half a chance and a good reason, she'd gladly devour every creamy inch of skin on that finely toned body. She salivated when she wondered if his sweet demeanor translated to an actual taste.

Stop it now! she admonished herself, putting aside her laptop and picking up two of the catalogs that surrounded her so she could show him the furniture she was considering. By the time he got back, she'd brought her libido under control and told herself that she didn't even notice the sheen of fine gold hair on the shins visible below

the hem of his cargo shorts, nor did she smell the slight tang of summer sweat over his fresh scent. Nope. Didn't notice at all.

"By the way, that video game guy called again."

"Archer Thanos?"

"Yep." With the agility of youth, Owen folded himself to sit beside her and accepted the catalog she held out to him. "What's with him?"

"He has a game design he wants to build around Heaven Sent."

"Really?"

She blinked, watching him sparkle with excitement. "You think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's an awesome idea. Music is a big part of video games anymore. What kind of game?"

"Heck if I know. All I know about them comes from Johnnie or Hell." She cocked her head to the side, studying him. "You think I should talk to him?"

"I don't know." Owen ducked, as he usually did when she pointedly asked his advice. She was going to have to break him of that habit if he was going to go anywhere. "But their last few games have been pretty good."

"You've played their games?"

"A few. There aren't many. They're a small company."

"How small?"

He shrugged. "Pretty small. They distribute through Triad. Just one or two titles a year."

She smiled at the top of his head. "Maybe you should talk to him."

That got his attention and pointed those big blue-green eyes up at her. "Me?"

"Why not? You know more about it than I do."

"Oh no, I couldn't." He reached up to comb back his dark blond hair. "You should have Johnnie talk to him or something."

"Oh please. All the man would have to do would be to offer free games and Johnnie would give him the world."

Owen smiled. Of all the boys in Heaven Sent, Johnnie was the one he got on best with. "Then maybe Luc."

"Why not you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not ready. Oh nice." He held up the catalog, blatantly changing the subject. "That'd go great with the carpet."

Indulgently, she let him divert the topic. He was right; he probably wasn't ready yet. But his interest did get hers. Maybe she should look into the game company. "That's what I thought. I don't know that I'm keeping the carpet, though."

"You should. Would be colder in here in winter without it." His gaze strayed over to the brick section of one wall that held the largely ornamental fireplace. "You know what'd be cool would be if you got one of those art prints like you showed me by that artist you liked. One with some reds and greens in it. Let that be the color splash in the room. Maybe you can find one at the auction tonight."

She raised a brow and snatched back the catalog. "Hey." She glanced up at the blankness over the fireplace. "Hey! That's a good idea. Or maybe I can convince Reese to paint me something."

Owen blushed a little, already looking at the second catalog.

Teasing, she poked at his shoulder. "Ever thought of going into interior decoration?"

He snorted. "Not."

They shared a laugh. She knew, of course, where his interests lay. He wanted to do what she did. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the music industry already, including some talent at the piano in his own right. He was working for her to get experience enough to manage on his own someday. From what she'd seen so far, if he

could get past his shy self-doubt, she had no doubts he'd move into his own space like Ellen. Meantime, she'd take advantage of him as her assistant.

"Besides," he looked up, flipping overlong bangs back from his forehead as he grinned at her, "I'm not nearly enough of a flamer for that."

Even though she laughed with him, it made her wonder. Again. Was he gay? So far, she couldn't tell. She'd not heard of him dating anyone, male or female, or showing a preference. She'd asked Ellen but, though they were cousins, they weren't close enough for Ellen to know these things. Gretchen resisted asking Owen herself. Wasn't any of her business. Although, the mental image of him kissing a man was very nearly as exciting of the thought of kissing him herself.

Her cell phone rang, and Owen plucked it off the floor to read the caller ID. "It's Luc." He held it out to her.

She clicked the button and raised the iPhone to her ear. "You can't cancel on me."

The low voice on the other end chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it. In fact, I'm calling to find out if you want a second date."

"Second date?"

"Reese is back in town."

She grinned. "Oh yay! I thought he wasn't coming in until this weekend?"

"He missed me."

She heard the loud snort beyond Luc's voice and recognized it as Reese. She laughed. "I'm sure that's the case."

"So what do you say, toots? Want two escorts to this auction thing? One who might actually know something about the art we're going to see?"

Before she could answer, she heard a murmured tousel on the other end of the phone, followed by Reese's tenor. "Hey, Gretch."

"Hello, honey. I'm so glad you're home."

"Thanks. About tonight, if it's a problem, no worries. I don't have to go."

"Reese, darling, are you going to deprive me of walking into the party with *two* gorgeous men on my arm? I think not. Don't be silly, my dear. You're more than welcome to come with."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Like the lunk said, you'd probably get a kick out of it. Anyway, you can help me pick out a piece for my new house. That is, if I can't convince you to paint something for me yourself."

"Uh, let's discuss that last part. But I'd be happy to help you pick out something tonight." Reese sounded genuinely pleased. "So now I've got to figure out what to wear."

"You need me to send help?"

"No. I'll figure it out. Thanks, Gretch."

"Oh no, the pleasure will be *all* mine."

He laughed. "We'll see you in a few hours."

## Chapter Two

Reese held a glass of champagne for her. "Happy?"

She took it, grinning as she clinked it with his. "Very."

He chuckled and turned to face the painting she had purchased. The artist was relatively new but was someone Reese knew and appreciated. "It's a beauty."

She thought it was lovely, but having his opinion on it match hers cinched the deal. "Well, since I can't buy one of *your* paintings, this is the next best thing."

He smiled, tossing long black bangs from his clear blue eyes. "Thank you for understanding. With everything else that's going on..."

She held up a hand to stop him. "Say no more. Fully understood." He'd demurred when she had asked if he'd paint something for her. It was unfortunate, but Reese's life was so busy these days that he rarely had time for the actual creation of art. More of his time was spent *talking* about it, or doing things that were entirely unrelated. Like running the White Tiger, the nightclub he and Luc owned. Gretchen meant to speak to Luc about that. It was a crying shame to not have more of Reese's works in the world.

But that was for another time. Sipping the pink champagne, she nudged him with her shoulder. "Thanks for helping me pick it out."

He nodded. "I think it'll go great with the color scheme you mentioned."

"Mmm. I suppose this means I can't change my mind now." She laughed at his eye roll, then glanced behind him. People she knew and people she knew of milled in the open white space of the gallery proper. One particular person was missing. "Where's Luc?"

"Where else?"

"Went for a smoke?"

"Yep." He sighed. "Maybe I should have listened to him and let him stay home. He does so many of these gallery things for me, and it's really not his thing."

She faced him, reaching up to needlessly adjust his tie. He did look so nice in a suit and tie, even if it wasn't a look she was used to seeing on him. With his hair back to his normal glossy black, one would hardly tell he was the bohemian artist boyfriend of a famous rockstar. "Honey, he'd endure anything for you."

"I know. That doesn't mean I have to *make* him."

They were so cute.

Before Reese, Gretchen would not have said that Luc would ever settle down. If she'd had to peg a lifemate for him, it would have been Brent. Not that she would have ever suggested it, of course, since the two of them had barely acknowledged they were fucking on the sly, but she'd never known two closer friends. She was pleased, however, that Reese and Hell had come into their lives. She wouldn't have vouched for how long a real romance between Luc and Brent would last. Now, however, they were both deeply in love with men who loved them in return, and she couldn't be more pleased. In fact, she was a tad jealous. She'd never had anything resembling the solid relationship Luc had with Reese or Brent had with Hell.

Not that I want one, she reminded herself.

Tucking her hand into the bend of Reese's arm, she drew him away from the painting. It was late and sufficiently long enough after the auction proper that the crowd was beginning to wane. She'd have to decide with Reese and Luc soon if they

wanted to go to one of the after parties or if they'd just call it a night. Surprisingly, home sounded like the preferable option. "Have you guys set a date?"

"Not yet. We're thinking maybe New Year's. It'd be one year after he proposed." She adored the little smile that curled his lips at the very thought. He reached up to comb the hair back from his eyes. "Don't think Luc's part of the shoot will be done long before then."

She smiled squeezing his arm. "You don't know how happy I am that you two are tying the knot."

Reese chuckled. "I still don't really believe it. We don't *need* to do this. I'm shocked that he wants to."

"I'm not. He wants to make sure that everyone knows who you belong to." She gestured at a knot of tastefully – if colorfully – dressed men who were watching them from one corner. "So the wolves don't take you away."

"Ha. I believe those gentlemen are looking at the lovely woman in the slinky dress."

She smoothed a hand over her hip. "Maybe some of them, but I'm *quite* sure the one in green is looking at you."

Reese snorted softly. "He can look."

Chuckling, they reached the patio that had been set aside for the guests who smoked and, sure enough, spotted Luc in his stylish navy suit standing by a row of potted bushes, talking to a man in a silver gray suit.

The man was stunning, which was saying something when he was standing next to Lucas Sloane. Even if she was immune to the charms of the men in Heaven Sent, Gretchen was more than aware of their assets, and each of them was fantastically gorgeous. The man standing beside Luc more than held his own. He was Luc's height and build, although he might have a bit more bulk. If she had to guess, he was of recent Greek or Italian ancestry because he had that dark, dusky skin and sleek raven black hair. The hair was shaven close around his neck and ears, then moussed into a perfect



wave on top. A neatly trimmed black Vandyke beard framed a mouth that laughed openly to reveal straight white teeth. Heavy black brows shielded soulful bedroom eyes that turned out to be dark brown. She found out this last when they focused on her when she and Reese were just a few paces away.

Noting the direction of his companion's gaze, Luc turned. He smiled on seeing them. "Hey, there you two are." He reached up and patted the man's broad shoulder. "Archer Thanos, this is Gretchen Hobbes. She manages my band. And this is my one and only, Reese Schuyler."

Archer extended his hand to greet Reese first since he was closer, shaking his hand before he smiled again at Gretchen. "Yes. I know who Ms. Hobbes is."

Oh my, she thought, surprised by the quiver of excitement that made her heart pitter-pat. She hadn't felt that sudden lust in years.

She switched her champagne to her left hand so she could extend the right toward the lovely man. "Nice to meet you."

His hand was warm. "The pleasure is mine."

"I believe you've called my office. Regarding a video game?" If she'd known he looked like this, she might have called him back sooner.

He nodded, keeping hold of her fingers. "Yes. My team and I at Thanos Gaming have come up with a concept, and we think Heaven Sent is perfect for it."

Raising a brow, she cocked her head. "How fortuitous that we're both at the same function."

His grin confirmed that perhaps this meeting was not coincidental.

She tugged gently, and he let her fingers slip free of his. His gaze stayed steadily on her. Feeling warm, she glanced at Luc. "I take it you've discussed it?"

Luc chuckled, stubbing out his cigarette in a tall standing astray beside him. "Sounds cool to me. But I'm not the gamer. I already told Archer he'd have to talk to Johnnie or Hell for someone who knows all about it."

"I'd love to send the prospectus to all of you." Archer's gaze remained on Gretchen. "Along with anything else you might like."

Beside him, Luc noticed and exchanged raised eyebrows with Reese. She didn't miss the double meaning that had been directed at her either.

She sipped her champagne as Archer gave her a quick once-over, delighted he seemed to approve of the sleeveless pale green sheath that flared just a little to the hem above her knees. It happened to be a color she knew she looked good in. Gave her pale skin some color and made her orange-red hair stand out, not to mention bringing out the green of her eyes. "That would be lovely," she finally answered. "Send it to my office, and I'll have my assistant set up a time when we could talk."

He took a step closer, long black lashes partially hooding his dark eyes. "Perhaps we could talk right now?"

Heat surged in her belly. She was not normally tongue-tied and was quite used to dealing with overbearing men, so it was odd that coherent thought suddenly fled. She cleared her throat and glanced past his shoulder at where Luc and Reese were grinning broadly at her. Was that a flush she felt in her cheeks? "Well, I..."

Archer folded her free hand back into his, raising it so he could brush dry, velvet lips against her knuckles. "Please?"

She heard Luc laugh softly, damn him. Instantly, she decided not to be embarrassed. She was an adult woman. She'd played more than her share of the field during her time with Heaven Sent. Not *all* the men who followed them were gay. So what that she'd only had a handful of real dates in the last year. There was no time like the present, right?

Resolved, she stepped even closer to Archer and gave him a return smile. "I think that sounds like a *fine* idea. Do you mind if I steal him?" she asked Luc.

"Not at all." Luc's grin was broad when Archer turned back to him. "Looks like we might be talking again real soon, Archer." They shook hands.

"I hope that's the case." He offered his arm to Gretchen.

She took it, ignoring Luc's taunting toast to her behind Archer's back.

There was a narrow, open gate at the far end of the patio that led to a relatively deserted courtyard.

"This is beautiful," Gretchen murmured when they came to stop before a moonlit fountain. The water wasn't flowing, but the polished marble of the sinuous, almost humanoid sculpture in the middle shone in the pale blueish light.

Archer's presence at her side heated her blood, not that it was necessary on such a warm, summer night. "May I say that you're beautiful?"

She turned a coy look up at the man gazing down at her. "I thought we were going to talk video games?"

"Must we?"

"Isn't that your business?"

"It is. And I *do* want to discuss including Heaven Sent in my next project." He slid the backs of his fingers up her bare arm. "I find it hard, however, to concentrate when I'm alone with such a gorgeous woman."

"Flattery will not have any bearing on a decision about Heaven Sent and your game."

He shook his head. "I would hope not. Sex and business are best kept apart."

"Mmmm. Sex already?"

"I can hope."

She glanced over her shoulder toward the open gate. Two other couples were enjoying the peace of the courtyard. She put her back to Archer and strolled toward a bench in a sheltered corner. "Are you sure I'm that easy?"

He followed readily. "I'm quite sure that you are not."

She stopped, ostensibly looking at the flowers dotting the bush beside the bench. "And yet you think just like that I'm going to have sex with you?"

"Oh no." Warm hands closed over her bare shoulders, and the heat of his body warmed her back. "I expect you to make me work for it." Lips brushed the side of her neck. "What fun would this be otherwise?"

"Hmmm. You *are* rather sure of me."

"Hope springs eternal."

She laughed, tilting her head to allow him better access. "If I *did* give in to you, where would you propose we consummate?" She gestured at the bench. "Here?"

"Oh no. I wouldn't want an audience like this. They don't deserve you." He reached around to pluck her nearly empty champagne flute from her fingers, and his warmth briefly left her as he set it on a low wall of the bush's planter. "I propose to take you somewhere."

"Somewhere?"

Hands slid down her arms to encircle wrists. "My place. Your place. The hotel on the corner." He brought her arms up to cross them over her breasts, enveloping her in male-scented heat. "Anywhere you like." Lips caressed the sensitive skin just behind her right ear. "Somewhere where I can take my time making love to you."

*Oh yes.* "I don't even know you."

"There are people inside who could vouch for me."

She laughed, surprised to hear something of a girlish giggle coming out of her. "Would they now?"

"They would."

"They'd say you're a good guy?"

He paused to suckle her earlobe, his tongue toying with her diamond stud. "I doubt that. They *would* say you could trust me tonight."

She sighed, letting him hear her pleasure. "My, my. You are good at this."

Teeth gently bit the shell of her ear. "I'm even better at other things."

"Mmmm. If I give in, that's hardly making you work for it."

His tongue traced the rim of her ear as one hand dropped from her wrist to span her belly. Gentle pressure pulled her back so a promising hardness pressed her lower back. "I'll work hard in other ways."

She purred her appreciation. "I must admit, I'm intrigued by these *other things* you're good at."

"Shall we go?"

Oh why not? It had been so long since she'd just taken a man to bed, no strings attached. And this one was not only interested, he was one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever met. Given the company she kept, that was saying something. What could it hurt?

Gently shaking his hold, she turned in his embrace, reaching up to encircle his neck. "I mean it. No strings attached." She caught his gaze and held it so he could see that she was serious. "We might do business together eventually, but tonight is an entirely different matter."

Big hands caressed her back. "Understood."

"You'll find I can be quite a coldhearted bitch when it comes to business."

"I would expect nothing less."

"Good." She smiled; her fingers stroked the short silk of his hair on the back of his skull as she urged his lips toward hers. "Then convince me to let you take me to a hotel with a kiss."

"My pleasure."

His lips were warm and soft as he parted them and brushed hers. She closed her eyes and let him tease her, trusting he'd get to the heart of the matter in good time. He didn't disappoint. His mouth closed on hers in a gentle press, a tantalizing prelude before his tongue convinced her to part and allow him entrance. He tasted of chardonnay, spice, and deep, dark male, and she happily drank it all in.

When he pulled back, she smiled, keeping her eyes closed. "Oh yes."

His lips brushed the tip of her nose. "Does that mean I've convinced you?"

She opened her eyes. Drawing a hand from behind his head, she used her thumb to wipe lipstick from his mouth. "I believe so. I should let my dates know I won't be leaving with them."

"You don't think they have an idea?" If he was bothered by the fact that she had two dates, it didn't show. Then again, if he'd done his homework on Heaven Sent, he knew about Luc and Reese.

"They do. I'm sure they do. But Luc has my wallet and keys."

He laughed. After another brief kiss, he drew back. "Then, by all means, let's find them."

As luck would have it, Luc and Reese were still standing on the smoker's patio. Gretchen wondered if they'd been watching but decided she didn't care if they had. Lust had fired her blood, and she had a hard male body beside her ready and willing to quench it. What did it matter that they knew?

"We're leaving," she told them, the fingers of one hand laced with Archer's.

The knowing look that Luc gave her was predictable. He reached in the pocket of his jacket to draw out the slim, soft leather phone case she'd asked him to hold. "You're ditching us?"

The phone case doubled as her wallet and held her house key as well. She hated carrying purses. "I am. I'm sure you'll both survive." She rose up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Be good. Both of you." She turned to kiss Reese.

When she stepped back, she caught Luc shaking Archer's hand, sporting a proprietary look that belonged on a brother or a close relative. "This woman means a lot to me." While a bit annoying, it did warm her heart a little. Her boys did care for her.

Archer nodded, catching his meaning. "And I intend to treat her with the *utmost* care."

Satisfied, Luc's warning morphed back into a smile as he raised an unlit cigarette to his mouth. "Good. Then have fun, kids. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Which leaves you *lots* of room." Reese laughed.

## Chapter Three

There was a nice hotel at the end of the street. It even shared the same public parking garage, so they were able to walk to their destination. While Archer went to the front desk to get a room, Gretchen wandered into the gift shop. When he joined her again, she unashamedly placed a box of condoms, three large bottles of water, a cute little shorts jumper, and a pair of sandals on the counter.

Pressing in behind her, he fingered the jumper and sandals. "I understand the condoms and water," he said, uncaring that the saleslady blushed fiery red, "but I don't understand these."

Gretchen nestled her back against his chest. He was tall enough to rest his chin comfortably on the top of her head if he'd a mind to. "So I don't have to walk out of here tomorrow morning in this." She gestured at her dress.

"Ah. Smart thinking. That must be how you've come so far in the world."

"Do you need anything?" Gretchen handed over her credit card to the woman behind the counter. Although she was probably in her fifties, she acted like she'd never seen two people who were obviously going to have sex before. Gretchen sort of pitied her.

Archer wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. "Only you."



"Good answer." She kissed him, letting their lips linger together. Then she drew away so she could sign the receipt.

Archer snatched up the plastic bag with her items, blew the blushing saleslady a kiss, then whisked Gretchen out of the shop. "*You* are a gutsy lady."

Gretchen snorted—delicately—liking the weight of Archer's arm around her shoulders as they headed for the elevators. "I learned long ago not to be embarrassed. Not about sex. My primary job is to look after rockstars, after all. You find out very quickly that sex is the *last* thing to be coy about."

Archer pressed the elevator button and faced her, encircling her waist with big, strong arms as they waited. "You just get better and better by the minute."

"Mmmm." She reached up to toy with his collar. "Just wait until we get upstairs."

The *ding* of the elevator interrupted a kiss full of promise, but Archer just shuffled them into the lift to continue. It was a very short ride to the third floor, which was probably fortunate. Gretchen plucked the key card from him and led the way to their room, conscious of him studying her from behind. That was okay. She didn't work out religiously for nothing.

Once inside, he tossed the plastic bag on a chair, then snatched her phone case away to give it the same treatment. Lifting her arms to his shoulders, he bent to seal their lips together again as he let his hands roam down her sides and over her back. She wound her fingers into the longer hair atop his head as he walked her back toward the bed. He bunched up the hem of her dress until it was high enough to slide his hands underneath. An appreciative groan spilled from his throat when he discovered her thong and garters. Smiling, she congratulated herself for following her rule to *always* expect sex as a result of a party. Even if she hadn't had a spontaneous encounter in some years, just knowing she was ready gave her an extra confidence boost.

Then sometimes, it paid off.

One of Archer's hands slid up to her back while the other cupped one side of her ass. She was delighted to feel his entire hand spanning one cheek. After a good squeeze,

he let that hand roam up her back too; her dress caught on his wrists, so that it rose up. Happily, she lifted her arms and allowed him to lift the flimsy material from her body. As he tossed it aside, she made quick work of her strapless bra and let it drop to the carpet, leaving her in the few strips of white lace that made up her thong and the lace and nylon of her garter belt and stockings.

Grinning, she backed away when he reached for her. Her calves hit the edge of the mattress, and she sat, leaning back on her elbows to lift one sandaled foot toward him. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all." He took a moment to ditch his jacket, then held her foot in both hands. He took his time unfastening the tiny buckle, then slipped her shoe off. Marvelously strong fingers massaged her instep while the palm of the other hand slid up her shin to her knee.

She raised her other foot. "There's another one."

"So there is." He released her first foot to give the second similar treatment.

When he would have leaned forward to join her on the bed, she placed her foot on his chest to stop him. "I'm feeling at a decided disadvantage here." She let her gaze rake his body. My, he did fill out his clothing nicely. "Delicious as you look, I think it's time to ditch the clothes."

He raised an expressive brow over sparkling eyes as he stood up. "Delicious?"

"Oh please." She watched eagerly as he began to unbutton his charcoal dress shirt, pressing her thighs together in excitement. "You are more than aware that you're gorgeous."

He chuckled. "Will you hold that against me?"

"I wouldn't dream of it." She raised a hand to brush her fingers over one nipple. Her breasts were small with a nice, firm shape. Men seemed to like the vivid pink color of her nipples. Most of them claimed to like the freckles too, although she couldn't understand why and was thankful there weren't that many. Not as many as were on her back but, then, she didn't have to look at those.

He watched her play while he pulled off his shirt. She bit her lip, letting her appreciation of his broad, defined chest show. A sparse pelt of springy black curls obscured dark brown nipples and fine satin skin that was stretched tight over well-defined muscles. "That is not a body I've seen on any computer programmer before," she teased.

He chuckled, showing wonderful balance as he bent to remove first one shoe, then the other. "In college, I was a stereotypical skinny geek."

"What happened?"

"I got successful." He stood, hands at the button of his slacks. "I got smart. I started working out."

"Well, whatever program you're on, you should petition to become their poster model."

He dropped his pants, revealing navy briefs that strained to contain their contents. "You think so?" Calmly, he picked up his pants and turned to drape them over the back of a chair, letting her have a good look at his fine, trim ass.

"You could make a fortune."

He made quick work of his socks, then crossed the room back to stand at her knees. "I like video games."

She sat up so she could run her hands over his flat belly. It wasn't cobbled, but it was damn close. "Don't take this the wrong way, but" —she pressed a kiss to the wisps of hair just above his navel, drawing the deep, dark scent of him into her lungs— "I've lost interest in talking business."

Fingers combed through her short curls, massaging her scalp. "Okay by me."

She spread her palms over the hard meat of his thighs as she let her tongue play over and around his navel. She reached for the waistband of his briefs, then slowly pulled them down, sighing at the sight of the steely treasure that was revealed. His cock was darker than his skin, tinged purple with thick veins decorating the shaft, heavy and

thick. The fingers in her hair tightened when she placed a kiss on the tip of the smooth head, and he groaned when she licked at the tiny hole. Closing her eyes, Gretchen twisted her head and opened her mouth so she could run her tongue down the shaft, bathing it wet. She loved the texture, and the earthy male scent of him made her dizzy. She wet him down, then returned to the head so she could sink as much of him into her mouth as possible.

"God."

Peeking up, she met his dark gaze, watching her as she swallowed him down. It was that look. The look that told her he was perfectly fine with her taking the initiative. Not all men were, and the ones who weren't usually didn't end up being as good a lay as she'd hoped. But this one... This one was happy to let her explore, his grin promising upcoming retribution. Lust kicked up, and she sucked in earnest, moaning, excited by the very prospect of what he would do. Would he stop her? Would he come in her mouth? She wanted him inside her, but the taste of him was hard to give up. The fingers of his other hand found her hair to guide her mouth up and down his shaft. She laved at the tip when he stopped her there.

With a long, agonized groan, he yanked her hair, pulling her away. Willingly, she fell back on the bed as he crawled over her, meeting her open mouth with his. He nibbled at her lips and lapped at her tongue, absorbing his taste from her mouth. She gave completely, running her hands up and down his arms, his sides, his chest. She gripped his ass and pulled his groin flush with hers, the pressure pulling moans from them both.

"You're going to drive me crazy," he muttered into her neck.

"Likewise." She stared blindly at the ceiling, realizing they'd never turned on more than the lamp by the door. That one light barely chased away the dark, the room mostly illuminated by the moonlight beyond the sheers on the windows.

Sweet kisses trailed down her neck, over her collarbone, toward her breast. She whimpered when his beard brushed her nipple and dug her fingers into his back when

his lips sucked her in. Too long since she'd felt a man's touch, since someone had licked and nibbled at her like this. She squirmed, pinned under his weight as he sampled first one nipple, then the other, his big hands kneading whichever breast he wasn't tasting. She tipped her hips up, grazing his belly with her crotch. "Archer, please."

Sliding lower, he let his hands trace her sides as he kissed her belly. She willingly spread her thighs as he roamed still lower, his tongue tracing patterns on her skin until it found her thong. He eased along the sides of the lacy garment, teasing her. She was amazed the heat from her sex hadn't melted the scraps of fabric entirely. Certainly the crotch was soaked with her excitement. He nipped at her clit through the lace, and she arched into a moan, taken off guard by the jolt of electricity that shot up her spine. Spreading her thighs with his palms, he sucked at the little bit of nothing that covered her, the heat driving her mad.

"Archer." Her fingers dug into the slick navy bedspread beneath her.

His agile tongue dipped down, slipping underneath her thong to tease her opening. She canted her hips up, encouraging him further. Growling, he used one finger to pull aside the thong, then sank his tongue into her folds. She cried, writhing, fighting an orgasm that threatened to burn through her. Not yet. She wanted more before she went over the edge. But how could she keep it from coming when his tongue finally curled around her clit and he sucked that bundle of nerves into the hot cavern of his mouth? She couldn't. Heat flared up and out, filling her core and bursting through her limbs. She shattered, screaming over the fist she shoved into her mouth.

It didn't stop him. If anything, it spurred him on. The ribbon at the side of her thong unraveled, and he tugged the entire garment away. His mouth closed fully over her sex, and his tongue lashed her from hole to clit and back, not giving her a chance to settle from the first orgasm before another twisted her spine.

"Ar-cher!" she gasped, her hips humping up into his mouth as he devoured her. "Archer, God!" Still he didn't stop. She whimpered through another quaking before she reached down to clutch at his head. "Archer, please. Fuck me now."

She'd said the magic words. He pulled away and peeked up at her. A demonic grin blossomed as he licked his already drenched lips and wiped her glisten from his beard. He gave her one last, languorous lick before scooting off the bed.

She fell to her back, trying to regain her sense of the world. Every nerve ending in her body was painfully alive. A light sheen of sweat already covered her skin. She couldn't remember any other lover who'd gone down on her so enthusiastically. She needed to be careful with this one. He could be *quite* addictive.

He was back, the box of condoms open as he set it on the table by the bed. Plucking one up, he ripped into the packet with his teeth. She brought her knees up, spreading them before him as he rolled on the condom. Big hands positioned her, his fat cock teased her swollen folds; then he was inside her.

She keened, wrapping arms and legs around him as her sex stretched to accommodate him. So full. He pushed in until the curls at the base of his cock mated with her trimmed thatch; then he stopped. Braced on his elbows over her, he simply watched her face, silent until she managed to wrench her eyes open to look at him. Then he grinned, grunted, pulled out, and slammed home.

Gretchen had died and gone to heaven.

Once Archer started, he kept up a steady, hard rhythm that threatened to leave glorious bruises. She had to hang on, whimpers and cries burbling from her lips until he bent his head to take possession. She opened underneath him, tasting herself, smelling herself on him as he rocked into her. She came again, sucking on his tongue as he thrust into her greedy channel, and still he didn't relent. Not until he had brought her one more time. Not until she collapsed, exhausted and whimpering, even with her body still afire. Only then did he let loose that iron control and allow himself release, closing his eyes, throwing back his head, and thrusting those last few times as his body shuddered.

She weakly held him to her chest when he spread himself over her, breathing hard. She chuckled. "Wow."

He nuzzled the bend of her neck. "Mmmm."

"If that's what computer geeks are capable of, I've been looking at the *wrong* men."

He laughed, full and heartfelt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gretchen wrapped a robe around herself, then opened the bathroom door. Steam followed her into the hotel room as she lifted her towel to rub at her hair.

Archer sat on the couch. A continental breakfast was laid out on the low table before him as he read the paper. A shadow of stubble darkened his cheeks around his Vandyke. She thought it looked rather sexy. Of course, she was currently of the opinion that just about everything about him was sexy. Such was the magic of having really good sex with someone for the first time. You didn't know them well enough to see their flaws.

He glanced up and smiled. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning." She sauntered over, dropping the towel to the floor to drape herself over Archer's lap. He set aside his cup of coffee and newspaper as she settled, ready to slant his mouth over hers when she tilted her head back. They shared a languid kiss tasting of his coffee and her toothpaste. Not a winning combination, but she wasn't willing to do without the kiss just because of that.

Drawing her mouth from his, she twisted to reach for a croissant.

He regained his mug and surprised her by holding up her iPhone as well. "You got a call while you were in the shower."

"Oh." Taking a bite of flaky pastry, she checked the last caller. "It was my assistant." She slid to the couch beside Archer and dialed Owen. "This won't take a second."

He nodded, unfazed. He seemed happy enough to continue sipping his coffee and resume reading the business section of the *Los Angeles Times*.

"Gretchen."

She swallowed a bite of croissant. "Hello, sweetie, what's up?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm out. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's...wrong. I just...I went by your house this morning, and you weren't there."

"You did? Jesus, what time is it?" She hadn't noticed the time on her phone, and they'd managed to kick the alarm clock off the nightstand the previous night.

"It's almost one."

"Oh. Damn. Really?" She looked at Archer, who shrugged. She shrugged. "Well, no worries, sweetheart. I spent the night with a friend."

Archer chuckled.

She caressed his cheek.

One-handed, she took a bite of her croissant, leaning forward so the crumbs fell on the coffee table rather than her chest. "Was there something you needed?"

"Nothing that can't wait, I suppose. When will you be home?"

"Soon, I guess. We're just eating..." She stopped when Archer jostled her to get her attention. "Hold on, Owen." She put the phone on mute.

"Spend the weekend with me." Archer's grin was devilish as he set down his coffee. The newspaper already lay on the floor.

"What?"

He nodded.

"Where?"

"Here. I've already had to pay for another night, why not one more?"

She laughed. "Don't be silly."

"Oh come on, why not?"

*Why not?* She'd let the carefree wild girl out last night, but the practical girl in her surfaced this morning. "I don't have any clothes."



"Doesn't bother me." His hands slid up her leg, underneath the robe. "I like it better that way."

She stared at him, shaking her head.

He nodded, his look clearly a dare.

*Oh fuck it.* Grinning foolishly, she turned off the mute. "Owen, honey, I'll be home Monday."

"Monday? When? Where are you?"

"Don't worry about me, sweetie." With Archer's help, she started to shift back into his lap. "I'll be just fine."

"Won't you tell me where you are?"

"No. Call my cell, but *only* if it's an emergency." She straddled Archer's thighs, bending back against the strong arm Archer banded around her waist while he opened the front of her robe. "You take the weekend off too, honey. You work too hard."

"I don't mind."

"I know, hon, and I love you for it, but..." She gasped, losing her train of thought for a second when Archer's hot mouth sucked in her left nipple. "You need some time to yourself. Go out and enjoy."

"Right."

"Bye, sweetie."

No sooner had she hung up than Archer lifted her. She shrieked as he set her down on the plush couch and crawled over to pin her with the weight of his body.

He mock glowered. "Are you trying to make me jealous?"

"Jealous?"

He plucked the phone from her hand and set it on the table. "'Sweetie'? 'Honey'?"

She laughed. "That was just Owen."

"'Just Owen'?"

"He's my assistant."

"Mmmm. And just how cute is this assistant?"

She giggled. "He's absolutely adorable."

"Is he gay?"

"I don't know." She laughed again, fighting as he dug into the robe to tickle her.  
"Stop it!"

"And what kind of relationship do we have with this assistant?"

"Stop, stop! He's only twenty-four, for God's sake."

"Oh ho! A boy toy. Tell me more."

"Archer, stop!" He tickled her until she was crying. Or did he simply get distracted when his mouth found her collarbone, then her sternum, his tongue winding its way over to her nipple?

She sank into hedonistic pleasure as Archer set to waking every nerve in her body again. As he would all weekend. Gods, would she survive? If not, that was one *hell* of a way to go!

## Chapter Four

Owen used his own clicker to open the gate that led up to Gretchen's house. He stared at the two-level house that was nearly hidden behind lush trees as he waited for the wrought-iron barrier to roll aside.

*She was on a date.* The presiding thought of his entire weekend kept repeating in his head. *She was with him all weekend. He fucked her.* Owen didn't know who *he* was, but he hated him! He groaned, pressing his forehead to the steering wheel of his Honda. "Damn it!" He'd waited too long. He'd missed his chance.

Shut up, stupid! he told himself, lifting his head so he could drive toward the house. He hadn't lost his chance. Gretchen was a grown woman. She had needs. Of course she'd found a guy and fucked him. That didn't mean Owen had lost out. She just had yet to notice him that way at all, and he wasn't helping matters being scared. He stopped the car and shut off the ignition. He had to start making her notice him. If he had any hopes of having something with her, he had to take a chance.

No, it was too soon. "Aaagh!" He brought the heels of his hands up to push them into his eye sockets. She thought he was just a kid. A cute kid, she'd said. She didn't take him seriously. Not as a man. Certainly not as a boyfriend. How the hell was he supposed to get her to notice him? Did he just tell her he was so in love with her he

couldn't stand it? That he went to bed at night aching for her and woke up in the morning in much the same state? That she'd ruined his personal life because he didn't go out with anyone his own age because they paled in comparison to her, female *and* male? Hell, before her he'd been pretty sure he was gay. Now...? No, that was all stupid. That was all stuff that a *boy* would tell her, not anything that a man would say.

He'd yet to come up with something good, and nothing was getting done while he was freaking in the car.

He gathered up the thick pile of mail on the passenger seat, then got out. For a moment, he smoothed wrinkles from his slacks and light green dress shirt, then reached up to smooth down his hair. He'd dressed to impress today, trying to look older. It might not work, but it couldn't hurt, right?

"Gretchen?" he called, after opening the front door with his own key.

"In here."

Of course. She spent nearly all her time in the living room these days. Would she once she got actual furniture?

He was barely through the archway before she shoved a glossy flyer at him. "Look!" She actually bounced. That together with the fact that her bright red-orange hair was clipped back from her face, she had no makeup on, and she wore a T-shirt and shorts made her look like a girl half her age. Seeing the pale freckles she usually covered with makeup was a bonus. Too turned on by this, he took the flyer and gazed at it while he got his thoughts back on track.

"I bought it."

It dawned on him that the flyer showed an art print in the same colors he'd suggested the other day. "Oh hey, that's cool."

"Isn't it? I love it." She skipped over to the fireplace and held up her arms toward the empty bricks above it. "It's going to look great."

Since her back was turned, he let himself look at her cute little butt in those silly shorts. Her toned thighs shaped up into a marvelously curved ass. What he wouldn't give to get her naked and explore what was between those taut thighs. To avoid getting further aroused, he went to kneel by where her laptop sat on the carpet near the nest of pillows in the far corner. "That's great. When will it arrive?"

"They're going to deliver it at the end of the week. Oh, and I ordered the couch and chair that we decided on." She knelt beside him as he set her mail down. "Which reminds me, can you be here Friday? That's when everything's due to arrive."

"Sure. But where are you going to be?"

She sat, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm going out of town."

"Aren't you supposed to tell your assistant when you're going out of town?"

Laughing, she reached over to stroke his cheek. "I'm telling you now." She tweaked his chin before dropping her attention to the stack of mail. "I'm going away with Archer for the weekend."

"Archer?"

"Oh yes."

"Is that the guy you were with this past weekend?"

She nodded, biting her lip, which failed to hide her giddy little grin. "Mmmmm. I have so much to tell you."

"Sounds like it." He felt sick. He needed to breathe. He stood. "How about I get us something to drink first, huh? Iced tea?"

"That'd be wonderful. Oh, and an apple?"

He nodded, already on his way out the door. *This is worse than I thought.* The heavy refrigerator door was built not to slam, which turned out to be a good thing. Otherwise, he might have broken it. *Who's this Archer dude, and why's she taking him away for the weekend? Another weekend!* The answer to the second question was too obvious and horrible to contemplate. The name sounded familiar. Probably if Owen wasn't so mad,

he'd figure it out. She had to know this guy, right? Maybe an ex-boyfriend Owen didn't know about? He'd found out about a few, even though he'd been too chicken to ask Ellen for details.

By the time he had the drinks poured and hers sweetened the way she liked it, he was a little bit calmer if no less pissed. He snatched a green apple from the bowl on the counter, tugged off a paper towel, and then went to rejoin her in the living room.

"Thank you, sweetie. Oh hey" — she looked him over as he sat down beside her — "don't you look nice? Did you go into the office today?"

"I thought I'd go after here," he explained, keeping his gaze averted. He wasn't sure if his anger and despair were showing. He pulled his iPhone from his pocket and opened up her calendar. "So, tell me where you're going this weekend and who with."

She giggled. She actually *fucking* giggled! "I'm going to Palm Springs. I forget the name of the place. I'll find out from Archer and tell you later." Sitting back in her pillows, she bit the apple.

"Wow. Who's the guy?"

"Archer Thanos."

"The Thanos Gaming guy? I thought you didn't know him."

"I didn't. But I do now." The sly tone in her voice assured him of what she meant. She licked tea from the corner of her mouth, and he had to suppress a groan. "I met him at the auction."

"Friday?" Hadn't Luc and Reese kept all the wolves away?

"Yep." She balanced one bare shin on the other knee, letting her foot bounce. He hadn't seen her this...*girly* in the entire time he'd known her.

"He's who you spent this past weekend with?"

"Yep."

"That's quite a coincidence for him to be at the same auction as you when he'd been calling you."

"Not really." She picked up one of the envelopes that he'd already slit open, and extracted the letter inside. "He came looking for me."

*I'll bet.* He slowly punched in the letters appropriate for noting her weekend outing. He wanted to ask her why she was acting like a slut but didn't think that would come out very well. Besides, his emotions might be skewing his viewpoint a tad. "You sure you should be going out of town with him if you just met him?"

"Hmm?" She wasn't even looking, her attention on the letter she was reading.

"I mean, it's kind of *fast*, isn't it?"

Bright green eyes turned up to smile at him. "Oh, sweetheart, we got to know each other very well this weekend."

He felt the flush on his neck and kept his attention on the phone. "I guess Heaven Sent's doing the game, then?"

"I don't know. We still have to discuss it. You should get his prospectus sometime this week, I'd imagine. I asked him to have it delivered to the office. I want Arthur and Michelle to look at it before I present it to the boys."

"Huh? If you're dating him..."

She glanced up and smiled. "Sweetheart, first, I'm not dating him. I just met him. We're just two adults having fun."

Owen schooled his reaction, not certain he appreciated her lecturing him like a child.

"Second, if I never teach you anything else, you must never mix business with pleasure. Archer understands that. We agreed right off that our having sex would have nothing to do with our business dealings."

"But...it kind of has to, doesn't it? I mean, if you like him, you're more likely to do business with him."

"Not so. I might be more inclined to listen to him, but there are five other voices involved in a decision like this for Heaven Sent. I'm not going to pressure them to do it just because I'm sleeping with Archer."

Depressed, he went back to messing with his phone. "You going to be gone all weekend?"

"We'll leave Friday and get back Sunday."

"You need me to do anything else besides be here Friday for the deliveries?"

"Yes." She was quiet long enough to prompt him to look up. The letter was spread over her oh-so-sweet little breasts, and he wasn't sure he liked the speculative look on that fresh summer face. "Yes, there is something you can do for me." She reached over to lay her hand on his knee. "I want you to go out. I want to hear that you had *fun*."

He grimaced, sipping from his tea to give him a moment to think.

"I mean it, Owen. In the months that you've worked for me, you've not once told me about a party or a weekend away or, heaven forbid, a *date*." She smiled, poking him. "An adorable young thing like you should have a girlfriend."

He rolled his eyes. "There are other things in life."

"Yes, there are, but you're young and you're gorgeous and *someone* should be appreciating that."

*You could*, he wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat. It was nice to hear that she thought he was gorgeous, though.

"There's that industry party at Gogon Records this weekend. I think you should go and represent the company."

"Me?"

"Yes. Take Jane with you."

He frowned, thinking of one of Gretchen's other assistants. She had about a dozen, among them Arthur, Michelle, and Jane. The others concentrated on other aspects of the business, helping to be Gretchen's eyes and ears around the biz. Owen was just her



personal aide. Her personal lackey. Her boy toy, as they all called him when they thought he couldn't hear. "Why Jane?"

"Because she's your age and the two of you seem to get along."

He rolled his eyes. "She's got a boyfriend, you know."

"Does she? Well, that's good for her, but that doesn't mean you couldn't still go together. Doesn't mean you have to *be* together."

He shook his head. "I don't believe you're trying to set me up."

"Believe it, honey. If you won't do it for yourself, I'll see to it for you."

*How about you just see to me? Period.* But again, the courage to voice the words escaped him.

"Promise me you'll go?"

"I have to promise now?"

"If you don't, you won't go. I know you."

*Not nearly as well as I'd like you to.* "I don't know..."

"Think of it as practice. You need to get your face seen around town, you know, get your name out there. Start now when they don't see you coming."

Gloomily, he stared at the screen of his iPhone, scrolling back through the month and counting the number of times Archer Thanos had called Gretchen. A dozen. He'd certainly been hot on her trail.

"Owen?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"Marvelous! I want a full report about whatever girl you hook up with."

"Who says I'm going to hook up with anyone?"

There was that speculative look again. "How can anyone in her right mind not fall over you?"

*I don't know. You tell me.*

## Chapter Five

"Palm Springs?"

Owen stared at his monitor. "Yeah."

Jane sighed and perched on the far edge of his desk. "And she just met him this last week?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. What a life."

"Yeah."

"Oh God, would you stop mooning already?"

Scowling, he checked that the office door was closed. "Be a little louder, why don't you?"

She reached up to smooth a hand over her short, straight black hair. "Oh, no one's going to hear. Just about everyone's gone home."

He turned back to his monitor and tried to ignore her.

He'd known it wouldn't work. She sat up further on his desk, leaning toward him. "Owen, you know you don't have a chance with her, right?"

At times like this, he deeply regretted confiding in Jane. But they'd become good friends in the past few months, and he'd needed someone to talk to. Someone who understood. All his other friends were back in Atlanta, and they were too far removed from the business to get it. The only other person was his cousin Ellen. She was way too close to Gretchen for him to tell her anything.

When he didn't answer her, Jane shook his shoulder.

"Hey." He scowled up at her.

Her blue eyes narrowed. "She spends most of her time with rockstars, Owen. *Gorgeous* ones. She eats up handsome, successful men for lunch. She's got guys like this Archer taking her away on expensive weekends. What could you possibly offer her other than your boyish charm?"

He gave her a mocking sweet smile. "Gee, thanks."

She smoothed a hand over his hair. "I'm just trying to help you, honey. Mooning over the boss lady is just going to keep you distracted when a girl you *can* have and *should* be with comes along."

He snatched his head away. Women were always petting him, he was used to it, but that didn't stop it from being annoying when he was peeved. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Okay, okay. Let's talk about this Saturday." She clapped her hands like a giddy schoolgirl. "I'll have to go out shopping for a new dress. You want to come with?"

"Oh yeah, that's just what I want to do."

She grimaced. "You know, darling, I have to say that you're the strangest gay man I've ever met."

That demanded that he give her *the look*. "I think you'd have to call me bisexual. I like girls too, remember."

"Yeah. I guess it's not so outlandish since you work for Heaven Sent after all. Well, once removed."

Was she trying to depress him more? "Don't you have a *job* to do?"

She batted her heavily mascaraed eyes at him, undeterred. "Bored with my company already?"

"Just the topic of conversation."

"Fine." She jumped off his desk and patted the folders she'd left in his inbox. "Make sure she sees those. There's a new director whose work she should look at."

"Will do."

"See you later. We'll make shopping plans." Giggling at his scowl, she opened the door and left.

Once the door had clicked shut after her, he gave up the pretense of working. Staring morosely at his desk blotter, he began his favorite task since Monday: trying to figure out a way to make Gretchen not go away with this Archer creep for the weekend. So far, no dice. He wasn't going to do anything drastic, and no one from Heaven Sent had jumped in to demand her attention. The closest was when Chris Faith called for her, but he'd ended up calling her cell and getting his answer. Meantime, he'd had to hear about all her preparations for the trip. He'd even made calls to reserve a private table at a very chic restaurant for her and Archer.

Depressed, he tried to make himself see things a different way. This was a new thing. She hadn't dated in a long time. She'd barely talked about Archer as more than a sex toy. Maybe that's all it was. Sex. Still not something Owen wanted to dwell on, but if it was just sex, that meant it would likely blow over soon. He'd heard about her so-called relationships in the past. Nothing that lasted very long. Her career always got in the way. Maybe all Owen had to do was tough it out for a month or so; then she'd get sick of this guy and move on. Yeah, that was a better slant on it.

But it didn't change the fact that she was going away to get fucked, *repeatedly*, by this Archer guy.

What did this bozo look like anyway? Owen turned toward his computer and brought up a Web browser. He'd just typed the man's name in the image browser when

a knock sounded. He had enough time to switch windows so that his e-mail was in front before he turned to greet the newcomer.

*Whoa.* The guy who walked in was movie-star gorgeous. The epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. His golden brown skin set off jet-black hair and matching brows that matched a classy, trimmed Vandyke beard. He wore a casual burgundy shirt unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of chest hair and black slacks over endless legs.

Owen wasn't sure his own legs would support him if he stood, so he just turned toward the vision. "Hello. May I help you?"

"This is Gretchen Hobbes's office?"

"Yes. I'm Owen, Ms. Hobbes's assistant."

The man stopped in front of his desk and held out his hand. "Owen. Nice to meet you. My name is Archer Thanos."

Owen's hand was folded in a warm grip before the name was spoken. He was unable to hide his jump of surprise. "A-archer Thanos?"

"That's me."

"I, uh, Gretchen's told me about you. She said you..." He dropped his gaze to the package in the man's hand, only to realize that his own hand was still held. He blinked, confused and entranced by the sight of his light tan in contrast to the deep gold-brown of this man's skin. *Yum.* He tugged his fingers away so he could reach for the package. The angle made sure that he could check out the man's *other* package, a slight bulge in the loose slacks. *Yum.* "She said you'd be dropping something off."

Archer held the thick envelope up, just out of Owen's reach. "Yes. This. It's a prospectus for a video game." That smile was just killer. Teeth blinding white in all that darkness. "You play?"

"Huh?"

"Do you game?"

"I've, uh, some, but I'm not... Well, that is. Not much."

The gorgeous man twisted to the side so he could hitch his ass up on the edge of Owen's desk. He leaned companionably toward Owen as he set the envelope down on the desk blotter. "If you're interested, I'd be happy to send you some samples." Hands now free, he dipped two fingers into his chest pocket to extract a slim metal business-card case. A gold ring flashed on his finger as he flipped the case open and extracted a card.

Not until the card was hovering before him, held by two longer fingers, did Owen realize he'd just been watching the man move. Instinctively, he reached for the card. "Oh, I... There's no reason to give me games. I mean, I wouldn't be making a decision about this." *Jeez, Owen, get a grip!* He'd handled plenty of other people with far more class than this. Why did this man have him rattled? *Because this guy's been inside Gretchen.* Strangely, with said man sitting before him, the thought turned him on *far* more than it pissed him off.

"Oh no, my pleasure. No strings attached. Gretchen made that one perfectly clear this past weekend."

Owen swallowed, dropping his gaze as he took exaggerated care in setting the man's card down on top of the folder that was already there. "And you'll be seeing her this weekend as well." He heard the words before he could take them back.

"She told you about that, did she?"

"She tells me everything."

When there was too much silence, he braved a glance up. Another speculative look pointed at him. He seemed to be getting a heck of a lot of those lately. This one, however, made his guts quiver into jelly. "As well she should."

Owen stared into deep brown eyes, getting lost in the silent heat. He didn't know what to say, and the man didn't seem in a hurry to leave or break the silence. Finally, Owen cracked. "Actually, Mr. Thanos..."

"Please. Call me Archer."

Owen nodded as he turned toward his monitor. "Archer. Gretchen wasn't sure where you'd be going this weekend. Could you give me a location, just in case?"

The man amiably supplied not only the name of the resort, he pulled out his iPhone and forwarded the reservation information to Owen right on the spot. "Will you need anything else?"

Owen shook his head, trying to make his fingers stop trembling. "No. I think that's more than enough. Thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

He needed to be polite. Garnering his courage, Owen turned back and spread his hand over the folder on the desk. "I'll make sure she gets that."

"Thank you. Please call if you need any more information. And I mean it about the games. Take a look at our Web site. Any games you want, they're yours for the asking." He leaned forward on the desk, fingers steepled to support his weight. "You call me personally."

Owen stared at his fingers, far too frightened of what might happen if he got lost in that smoldering gaze again. He might just have to throw himself at the man. "Thank you."

"Well, then. I'll see you later. Owen."

Owen nodded and smiled, managing to raise his gaze to the man's collarbone. It was high enough for him to see the smirk. *No shit, you're acting like a simpering schmuck.* But it was the best he could manage.

Once Archer left, Owen just sat there, staring at the door, relearning how to breathe. The man was...*ungh*. No wonder Gretchen was so taken. Owen was afraid he was going to have to make use of the private bathroom in Gretchen's office unless he could get control of the hard-on in his pants. He sat back and kept breathing until he brought his heart and groin under control enough to reach over to his keyboard to bring up the image search that he'd started before the man himself had come through the door.

“There's no way,” he whispered, gazing at a smiling photograph of the man.  
“There's no way you've got a chance in hell against this guy.”



## Chapter Six

Monday found Gretchen lazing by the side of her pool, watching Archer cut through the crystal blue water. After a glorious weekend full of good food and good sex, they had arrived at her house late Sunday night. It had taken very little to convince Archer to stay the night, and it was his idea to call in to his office that morning, claiming that he was allowed to take a personal day now and again.

She lay on a lounge chair under the shade of a full umbrella, sipping iced tea as she let the warm summer air dry her skin from her swim. The pool had not been part of her intention when she'd been looking for a house, but the rest of the property had seduced her, and having a pool was a nice thing during hot Southern California summers. The upkeep was not so nice, but Owen—dear Owen—had found her a marvelous pool guy who kept it pristine. All right, he wasn't the dream cute little pool guy—in fact, he was in his early forties and looked like a throwback to Woodstock—but he was a nice guy, unobtrusive, and had proven quite reliable.

Archer interrupted her musings when he stopped at her side of the pool, folding muscular arms on the pavement as he squinted up at her. She envied the water that sparkled on his dark skin. “Not going for a tan?”

She laughed. “Darling, have you looked at me?”

"Quite a bit."

She smiled. "I do not tan. I burn." She picked up the bottle of SPF 30. "This is my friend."

"Care for some help with that?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Effortlessly, he pushed out of the pool, water sluicing down his skin as his muscles bunched. Skimpy little swim briefs did hardly anything at all to cover the bulge of pure male goodness tucked inside. "You, I see, do not have my same problem."

He grabbed a towel and made a pass over his skin. "Greek blood."

"You *are* Greek."

He gestured for her to sit forward on the lounge chair. "American born, but everyone on my father's side is Greek, as well as half of my mother's side." He straddled the chair behind her and sat.

"Sounds lovely. Where are they?"

"Indiana." He squirted some of the suntan lotion on his hands.

"How did you end up here?"

"College." Palms still cool from the water warmed quickly as they slid over her shoulders, slipping briefly under the straps of her bikini to rub the lotion all over.

She leaned forward, letting her head fall down. "USC?"

"No, UCLA."

"Ah. The *other* one." She laughed when he pinched her side.

"You went to 'SC?"

"Briefly. I didn't finish. I got a job with a record label; then I met the band, and they've dominated my life ever since."

He was quiet for a moment as his hands roamed her back. "Do you enjoy what you do?"

"Very much. A lot of it is a pain in my ass, but the rewards are worth it."

"And the band? I've heard rockstars aren't the easiest people to get along with."

"Most aren't. My boys are different."

"Is that genuine affection I hear?"

"It is." When he tugged gently, she lay back against his chest. The damp from his swim created interesting sensations against her bare skin. "It sounds cliché, but we are just one big, happy family."

"Were you ever *more* than friends with any of them?"

She chuckled. "Believe it or not, no. Something almost happened with me and Johnnie once, but we decided against it. It was a good decision."

"And he's gay."

"He's bisexual. Believe me, he's enjoyed women plenty."

"And that doesn't bother you at all?"

"Ha. If I had a problem with something like that, we wouldn't be one big, happy family."

"True." He squirted more lotion onto his hands, then went to work on her belly, chest, and arms while keeping her tucked against his body. "And where is your family?"

"I have a sister, but we don't talk anymore. She doesn't approve of what I do. She thinks I'm a slut." He growled and bit the side of her neck, making her laugh. "You're just proving her right."

He lay back, holding her against him as his hands lazily smoothed over her belly. "What happened to the rest of your family?"

"My father died when I was a baby. My mother died just as I started college." She shrugged. "She would have shared Angie's opinion of me. We were never close to any of the rest of the family."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I've written them all into my past. I have a family who loves me, and I love taking care of them. We all look out for each other."

"From what I've heard, that's not very common in your line of work."

"It's not. That's what makes it special."

They lapsed into silence, enjoying the afternoon and each other. She'd learned this about him over the weekend. Archer did not feel the need to fill all silences with words, for which she was profoundly grateful. She did a lot of talking for work, and she enjoyed the quiet times because they were usually few and far between. Often over the weekend they had just sat or lain quietly, listening to each other breathe. It was refreshing.

Because of the quiet, she heard the front door open. "Owen's here."

"Your assistant?"

"Mmm." She started to get up, but he tightened his hold. "Let me up."

"Why?"

"I told you, Owen's here."

"So? He can't see us like this?"

She frowned, her comfort of moments before dissolving. Much as she enjoyed where she sat, she was reluctant for Owen to see them like that. "There's no need to rub his nose in it."

"Interesting choice of words."

She slapped at the arms that banded her belly. "Stop it. I just mean there's no need to flaunt...us in front of him. I'm not an exhibitionist."

"Are we doing something wrong?"

She sighed. "Archer, stop being difficult."

"I'm just trying to find out if I have competition."

"Compe..." She blinked at the gentle waves on the pool in front of them. "Oh don't be silly. I'm not interested in Owen."

Archer let her go, and she leaned up off the chair to her feet. Looking up, she saw Owen standing behind the screen door leading into the dining room. Had he heard her? *Why does it matter?* "Owen." She smiled. "What are you doing here?"

He held up a stack of mail. "I thought you'd want this. I didn't know you'd have company."

His face was shadowed by the tree just outside the screen door, but the flat tone in his voice poked at her heart. She stood. "I didn't expect to, but we got home late last night and this morning..." She shrugged and laughed, wondering why she was explaining herself. She gestured at Archer, who remained seated. "Owen, this is Archer Thanos."

"We've met."

She blinked down at Archer, whose lazy gaze was on Owen. "You have?"

He tilted his head up toward her. "You told me to drop off the game prospectus at your office. I did. Didn't you get it?"

"I did." But Owen hadn't told her that Archer had dropped it off himself. She glanced back at Owen, who was giving her a look like she'd betrayed him.

The look was fleeting. He ducked his head, turning aside. "I'll put these with your laptop and leave you two alone."

She frowned after him. Archer watched her with hooded eyes.

"I'll be right back," she muttered, heading into the house.

She caught up to Owen as he was heading for the front door. "Owen, wait." He turned and she felt quite underdressed in her green string bikini. "I'm sorry about that."

His poker face was on, and he kept his face averted. It didn't hide everything, though. She could tell that he was upset. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't just barge in." The corner of his mouth quirked up in the semblance of a smile. "Who knows what you could have been doing?"

"Oh God." She covered her eyes with her hand, then peeked at him through her fingers, grinning to make it a joke.

He smiled, but it was feeble. "It won't happen again. I'll be sure to call next time."

It was better this way. He *should* call first. She'd been lax in never taking him to task for popping in unannounced. So why did she feel like a heel?

She trailed him through the living room to the foyer. "Was there anything important in the mail?"

He paused at the door. "There's something from Johnnie you should probably look at, and Ellen asked me to pass on a contract for you to go over. There's a packet from Jane with some articles she thinks you'll find interesting, and Arthur's sent you some comments on the Thanos Gaming contract." The last was mentioned very quietly.

She nodded, acknowledging it all. In the dining room, the screen door slid open.

Owen glanced past her at the sound, cleared his throat. "You should check your e-mail. I sent you notes about three meeting requests. Let me know how I should get back to them." He twisted the doorknob and pulled open the door.

"Thank you, Owen. I'll call you later."

He glanced back, but his gaze immediately slid past her. She heard Archer behind her. Owen nodded and left.

Archer spoke from the archway into the living room. "He likes you."

She turned, pulling on her bravado to hide a strange uncertainty. "He's a sweetheart." She headed toward the other entrance to the kitchen.

He reached the dining room as she stepped through the kitchen door. "No, I mean he *likes* you. He wants you."

"Don't be silly." She opened the refrigerator. "He's far too young for me."

"He doesn't see it that way."

She pulled out a bottle of flavored water and held it up without looking at him. "You want one?"

She gasped when he grabbed her from behind, pulling her up against his mostly naked chest. "You think I'm wrong?"

"Archer!" The water bottle bounced away toward the opposite wall. "Stop it."

"You think I'm wrong."

She tried to squirm out of his hold, but he proved adept at holding her. "Yes."

"You're blind."

"He works for me."

"Which means nothing."

Finally, she stopped fighting with a sigh. "Let go, you oaf."

He chuckled, nipping at the side of her throat without releasing the steel hold he had around her torso. Holding her with one arm, he slid one hand down her belly and into her bikini bottoms. She squeaked as his fingers slid home between the lips of her sex. Was she wet?

"He wants you." He stopped her protest by rubbing her clit. "And what's more, you want him."

She dug her fingernails into his arm, intending to hurt him, if only a little. "Don't be absurd."

He sucked on her earlobe. "It's true. Otherwise you wouldn't have cared how he saw us."

"That's ridiculous. I just..." She hissed as his continued rubbing built a fire low in her belly. "It's embarrassing for someone to walk in on us like that."

He hummed into her neck, walking her backward. She went, helplessly trapped by his arms and hand. "Embarrassing if he saw us like this?" His teeth digging into the side of her neck evaporated her protest into a gasp. Two long fingers shoved inside her sex, rubbing that spot just inside. "Wouldn't want him to watch us, would we?"

"St... *Angh!*" His other hand covered one of her breasts, forefinger and thumb pinching her nipple. Flaming desire burst to life within her, robbing her of sensible thought. This man *did* manage to turn her on like no other.

He spoke into her ear, his breath as much a caress as his hands. "Because he'd see your face all flushed. He'd watch you panting as you spread your legs. His cock would get hard when you took mine in."

Her hips rocked as his fingers relentlessly drove her on. Against her will, her mind summoned images to go with his words. "Archer."

"Ever had a threesome, Gretchen? Two dicks, all for your pleasure?"

In fact, she had not, but she had thought about it and summoning that particular fantasy threw her over the edge. She cried out, clutching at his arms as her body shook. He held her through it and only stopped rubbing between her legs when she sagged in his hold.

Chuckling, he kissed the back of her neck. "That did it for you, didn't it?"

Embarrassed, pissed, she fought his hold. "Let go of me."

This time he did, with alacrity, holding his hands up when she rounded on him.

"How dare you!"

The rat grinned, licking at his fingers. "What'd I do?"

"That's not funny." She yanked her bikini back into place, ignoring the thrill of delight when Lycra brushed over her swollen sex. "All those things you said about Owen."

"None of it was meant to be funny."

"He does *not* think of me like that."

"He does."

"And I don't think of him like that."

He laughed. "Who are you trying to kid?"



She glared. "This is not a topic of discussion, do you hear me? If you're going to keep it up, you can just leave."

Dark eyes hooded under darker brows as he studied her. He was rock hard inside his little bathing briefs, but he didn't seem to notice. *She* noticed and fought not to show it. He licked his lips. "Would you like me to leave anyway?"

She should say yes. It would make her point. In the past, she would have said yes to any other lover. The truth of the matter was, she wanted him there. If just for a little while longer. At least until she rode that cock to her supreme satisfaction. "No. But I won't tolerate any more. Do you understand me?"

A smile grew on his oh-so-gorgeous lips as he stepped toward her. Again she was enveloped in those warm arms and gathered close to his beautiful chest. "Understood." He bent to brush his lips over hers, pausing to tease her lips with his tongue. "Can I take you upstairs and fuck you now?"

She tightened her hold around his neck. "You'd better."

## Chapter Seven

"You know, your boss is playing hooky. That means you can too."

Owen broke his attention from the monitor to see his cousin standing in the doorway to his office. He smiled. There was six years between their ages, and they'd grown up on different coasts, but he'd always liked Ellen. Her mother and his weren't the closest of sisters, but the families had seen each other time and again while he was growing up. He was glad that the girl who used to like pushing him off his bike had grown into less of a bully.

"I know. I'm actually working on something of my own."

Interest piqued, Ellen advanced into the office. She wore a navy pantsuit with the jacket folded over her arm. A thick briefcase spoke of a full night ahead of her. "Oh? What's up?"

"Just looking into a new band."

She peeked over his shoulder. "Never heard of them."

"Hence the term 'new.'"

She swatted at the back of his head. "They any good?"

"They could be, with a new lead singer." He played one of the clips featured on their MySpace page.

Ellen listened with a critical ear, watching the grainy video. "You know, you're probably right. The singer's wrong for their sound. You going to contact them?"

"I was going to show them to Gretchen."

Ellen shrugged. "Okay. But if she's too...distracted" —the last was said with an evil grin— "I'd be willing to help you out."

"Really?"

"Sure. Work up something on them and let's go out to dinner." She laughed. "You can tell me all about this Archer character."

Owen tried to suppress his grimace and knew he failed, so he turned toward the monitor, hoping she wouldn't notice.

No such luck. "Huh. Don't like the guy?"

He shrugged. "Don't know him."

"But you've met?"

"Yes." He succeeded in not squirming as his skin tingled.

"And you don't like him."

"He's okay. She's happy."

"Uh-huh. But?"

"What? No but."

She set her briefcase on his desk and crossed her arms over her chest. "Owen, you don't have a thing for Gretchen, do you?"

It was like ice stabbed through his heart. He tried to cover it but spluttered. "I... No."

"Honey, if you're going to be in this business, you need to learn to lie better."

He lied just *fine*. Talking about Gretchen and Archer just threw him off, that's all. He glowered at his monitor, caught.

She smoothed a hand over his shoulder. "Not a good idea to get hot for your boss, Owen."

"I know."

"It's probably not going to go anywhere."

"I know that." He felt her gaze and looked up, frowning. "I do. Just... Don't tell her."

She shook her head. "I won't. You need to talk?"

"No."

"Okay. I'm here if you do. Promise I'll be objective."

She wouldn't, but he appreciated the thought and dredged a smile for her. "Thanks."

She headed back for the door. "Don't work too late."

"I won't."

She left and he helped himself calm down by turning his attention back to the band. Maybe he should try and contact them on his own. Maybe if he showed a little independence, Gretchen would notice him more as a man and less as a boy toy. Because he really needed to do that. He needed to work on making himself more attractive for when she was done with Archer.

Of course, he couldn't figure out *when* she'd be done with Archer. After those first two weekends together, Gretchen hadn't seen Archer as much, but they were still dating at least two or three times a week. Although, he used the term "dating" loosely. Since Archer worked most of the day, their dates often consisted of just a night of sex. Owen wasn't even sure they bothered with dinner. She wouldn't point it out, and Archer was usually gone by the time Owen got there, but he could tell the nights when the man had been there. She *looked* freshly fucked after he'd been there, and ridiculously content, like a pampered house cat. It drove Owen nuts to know how often the man was

at her house merely for the purpose of sating her sexual needs. Could she be falling in love with him? God, he hoped not!

He went back to idle surfing of the Internet, loath to go home. His apartment was empty, and it would only make him think more. He didn't have enough friends to just call someone to hang out. Maybe he should work on that too. When the door opened a little while later, he thought it was the cleaning lady. Until it dawned on him that she usually announced herself. He looked up to find Archer Thanos standing on the other side of his desk, smiling down at him. He blinked, tongue tied by a surge of lust that fired low in his belly.

"Hello, Owen."

He shot to his feet, glancing at the darkness beyond the window to his left. What was Archer doing here so late? "Mr. Thanos. May I help you?"

"Yes, you can." Without another word, he stepped around Owen's desk and headed for Gretchen's door.

"Hey, you can't go in there." He didn't care if the man was dating Gretchen, this office was *his* domain, and Gretchen had not given Archer access to it. Yet.

He rushed after the larger man, only to watch him blithely continue inside until he stopped at the picture window. They were on the third floor and the building in front of them was one story, so the busy street two blocks away dominated the scene. Beyond Archer and the shine of lights, downtown LA stood as distant silhouettes against the sky.

"Mr. Thanos, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Archer tossed a large package onto Gretchen's desk as he turned around. Hands free, he propped his ass on the windowsill and crossed his arms, still smiling at Owen. "I thought I asked you to call me Archer?"

"It doesn't matter what I call you. You still have to leave."

Man, his arms were fine! His T-shirt molded around them to emphasize the perfect shape, big and solid without being bulky and overdone. "Don't like me much, do you, Owen?"

Owen blinked. Didn't he just have this conversation? "I wouldn't say that." Regardless of his feelings, he didn't want the man who was sleeping with his boss as an open adversary. Odds were, he'd lose.

Archer nodded toward the package on the desk. "I brought you some video games. You never called to tell me what you liked, so I had to guess."

"You didn't have to do that, sir."

"Oh. Now it's 'sir'?"

Owen consciously unclenched his fists. "Gretchen doesn't like people in her office when she's not here."

Unconcerned, Archer looked around the room. "Nice digs. But then, the lady has excellent taste."

Like never before, Owen wished he were a big man so he could haul the man out of the room. As it was, Archer was taller, wider, and heavier than him with a lot more muscle tone. Owen wasn't a slouch, but he would never have that kind of bulk. Archer could probably hold him down with one hand and not struggle too much with it. "Mr. Thanos, please..."

"Archer."

"Fine. Archer, I have to ask you to leave."

Archer pushed from the window, letting his arms fall to his sides. The gray T-shirt stretched tight over the breadth of his chest, tucked at his narrow waist into worn jeans. "Why's that? You expecting someone?"

God, what he wouldn't give to lick the long line of the man's neck. *Ack!* "Huh?"

Archer took a slow step toward him. "You expecting anyone? That why you're working late?"

"No. I..." He stood his ground as the man approached, fighting a feeling of unease. It was like facing down a looming thunderstorm; there was nowhere he could run. "Why are you here?"

Archer spread his hands a little to the side, a gesture of innocence that Owen didn't buy for one second. "I came to talk to you."

"To me?"

"Yes." Dark brown eyes perused Owen's face, then dropped lazily down his body before dragging back up. Owen could almost *feel* that gaze like a hot caress on his skin. Suddenly, his slacks and dress shirt chafed. "Since I haven't caught you at G's, I had to come and find you."

G. That's what he called her. How did a single letter sound so intimate? But then, almost everything that came out of Archer's mouth sounded rare and erotic. Was his kiss as good as his sound?

Alarmed at both the man's approach and his reaction to it, Owen took a step back. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

Archer stopped, three paces away, his eyes darkly intent. "You want her. Don't you?"

*Oh God!* Owen froze, mouth ajar, completely unprepared for the accusation.

Archer grinned. "I knew it."

"I, uh, no! I don't... We don't have a... I mean, our relationship is just... No!"

"It's all right, Owen. I can't say that I blame you. G's an amazing woman. You're a healthy man. I could tell you wanted her even if she'd convinced herself that you don't."

Owen backed away. "No. You're wrong."

"Oh come off it. How many times has she teased you with bikinis or shorts? She's paraded braless in front of you. She had you pick up her clothes. Did she undress in front of you? She's got a nice body, doesn't she?"

Owen shook, closing his eyes as treasured memories of Gretchen wearing very little surged unbidden into his mind's eye. The man needed to stop talking now.

He stumbled when his back came up against the wall beside the door to the outer office. Archer was there, looming over him, close enough to touch. To punch. To shove. To kiss. Owen's gaze locked on the man's cruel smile, fascinated by the sharply trimmed edge of the Vandyke around that smooth, generous mouth. Was the beard soft or scratchy? "Want me to tell you how delicious she is?"

Owen bit his lip. He should...he should move. He should say something. What was happening? He should...

*Oh God, he smells good.*

The warm, subtle scent of Archer's cologne surrounded him, filled his head, and made him dizzy. He kept his gaze on Archer's mouth as the man's pink tongue peeked out to swipe that full bottom lip. Unthinking, he mimicked the action.

"Know what else I think?" Archer's hands came up to brace on the wall to either side of Owen's shoulders. He leaned even closer. "I think you want me too."

Warm lips closed over his, and Owen kissed back without thinking. Not since he'd left Atlanta almost a year ago had he kissed anyone romantically. Too many months of abstinence together with the frustration of obsession crumbled any sense of reason. Loneliness didn't sit well with Owen. He loved to be touched. He adored kissing—women or men, he didn't care. He melted and opened his mouth to Archer's questing tongue, twining his own around it. Soft. The beard was soft where it barely brushed his skin. Only when he heard his own whimper fill the air around him did a spark of sanity return.

What was he *doing*?

His hands came up, palms spread on Archer's broad chest. He shoved and must have caught the bigger man off guard, because Archer ended up in the center of the room, teetering a little to regain his balance.

Not that it seemed to bother him. He laughed. "I love it when I'm right."



Owen brought up one hand to scrape the back against his lips, trying to erase the velvet feel of the man's lips on his. His heart raced, and the reaction in his pants was pulsing. "What the fuck?" His voice was far too breathy, and he couldn't get a handle on the throb in his throat.

"What's wrong, Owen? That your first kiss?"

"No!"

"First kiss from a guy?"

"No!"

Archer's eyes widened in delight. "Yes, right again! G wasn't sure if you were gay or straight. She'll love hearing you swing both ways."

"You've talked about me with her?" His voice cracked. Rage boiled up to help him fight the lust.

"She talks about you all the time. She'd have jumped you a long time ago if you were older."

"Damn you!" Owen wasn't the type to physically lash out, but his emotions got the better of him. He charged Archer, not at all clear on his method of attack, just spurred on by the tumble of feeling in his chest.

Archer blocked his punch and cursed when he kicked his shin, but somehow managed to use Owen's impetus to trip him face-first into the plush leather couch across from Gretchen's desk. Within seconds, Archer's weight pinned him and ruthlessly strong hands held his wrists up above his head. "Hit a nerve, did I?"

The words poured directly into Owen's ear from Archer's mouth, less than an inch away. He closed his eyes, squelching a groan.

"How long's it been, Owen?" The man's free hand yanked Owen's dress shirt from his pants. "When was the last time you were fucked up the ass?" Hot fingers massaged his ribs. "When's the last time those gorgeous lips sucked cock?"

*Too long.* Owen gritted his teeth, knowing that he'd embarrass himself if he tried to talk.

"It's got to be amazing," Archer taunted, his breath hot on the back of Owen's neck. "Pretty thing like you. God, I wanted to fuck you the minute I first saw you."

Owen gasped when Archer pressed his groin into Owen's ass. He'd seen the man in bikini briefs. He knew there was a luscious cock there. He'd thought about it more than once, late at night when he could pretend with himself that he didn't want the man. He wanted Gretchen. He had no business feeling this at all.

Quick fingers dug underneath Owen and cupped his hard on through his slacks.

"What do you say, beautiful? Want my cock in your ass?"

He squirmed, seeing stars. He wanted exactly what Archer said so bad it hurt, but he managed to find his voice. "Gretchen! Wh-what about Gretchen?"

"Mmmm." Fingers massaged him. "That's the best part. You and me, right now. Then you, me, and her."

Shock blinded him. Images flooded his brain. Only in his remotest dreams had he ever thought he'd participate in a threesome, much less with Gretchen and Archer. "What?"

During his shock, Archer got his pants open and burrowed past his fly and into his briefs. The man's broad palm and fingers wrapped around Owen's cock, pulling an aching moan out of his chest. There was *nothing* like a man's hand around his cock, so different from a woman's.

"Yeah. I wanna see it," Archer purred in his ear. "I want to watch you suck on her. I want to fuck you when you're eating her out. I want both of you to scream when I pound you into the mattress."

Owen screwed his eyes shut, trying to think even as he lost control of his body. He twisted his wrists, but Archer held them firm. His hips rocked eagerly into Archer's hold, his cock and balls near to bursting.

"What do you say, baby? Don't you want to have her sucking your dick while I fuck her?"

Owen was so overloaded with sensation, he couldn't make much sense of what Archer was doing. All that was important was that the heat remained over his back and that wonderful hand kept milking his cock. Archer's words blazed painfully erotic images in his brain. He tried to form a question he was sure he needed to ask, but coherent thought was impossible. He barely heard the rip of plastic, the zip of jeans. He gasped back to stunning clarity at the unmistakable poke of a sheathed cock between the cheeks of his bare ass. Although Archer had released his wrists, Owen's fingertips dug into the couch's arm, firmly planted.

"Let me fuck you, Owen," Archer murmured, breath back to taunt Owen's ear. The tip of his cock rubbed Owen's opening, the spread of his free hand spanning Owen's hip. "Tell me you want it."

There was something he should say. He had an inkling that this should stop. But his body overruled him. "Please, yes," poured from his lips.

"That's my sweetheart." He maneuvered Owen's hips just right. The slippery head of his cock prodded for entry.

Owen whimpered at the bite of pain as his opening stretched for the first time in a while.

"I know, baby, it's been a long time, hasn't it? Relax and take me in."

Owen pushed back, needing this more than he needed to breathe. The stretch hurt, but he'd always kind of liked that in the few times he'd been fucked. It made him feel alive, overwhelmed, filled. He moaned as Archer's thickness abraded the muscles inside him as it slid endlessly in.

"Oh God, yeah. Sweet thing." The hand on his cock stilled. He didn't mind, too absorbed with taking Archer inside. "I knew it. I knew you'd be tight." Archer's fingers dug into Owen's hips as he dragged the younger man that last little bit so ass rested in the curve of hip.

Owen moaned, clutching at the couch and burying his face in a pillow. All thoughts scattered from his head, and he became a vessel of feeling. He gasped when Archer pulled back, then slid home again. How had he done without? He couldn't live without this.

Archer moved slowly until Owen's muscles relaxed. Then he draped over Owen's back and started pumping in earnest. His hand found Owen's cock again. "So hard, baby," he growled. "You like getting fucked, don't you?"

Owen just whimpered, shoving back into Archer to keep him moving. He cried again, trying to keep from coming. Fire burned in his balls. The hand on his cock and rod in his ass wouldn't let him gain any control. "Gonna..."

"Yeah, baby, come for me. I'm not gonna last long. Not with this precious ass squeezing the life out of me."

The grunted words were Owen's undoing. Clutching the couch, he came hard, his spine detonating as his balls burst.

Dazed, he breathed into the pillow as Archer strained over him, inside him. Archer's grunts filled the air; his scent mingled with Owen's; his cock swelled inside. With a muffled growl, he pumped raggedly and came.

Owen kept his face hidden as sanity trickled in. His body felt fantastic, weary, sweaty, and sore. His mind, as it reassembled, started to race. What the *fuck* had he just done?

Without a word, Archer pushed away from him. The heat and weight of the man's body left, his gentle sigh filling the air. Owen heard the soft *snap* of latex and shuddered. He turned his head just in time to see the man disappear into Gretchen's private bathroom.

*Gretchen.*

Panicked, Owen sat up. With shaking hands, he pulled up his pants and managed to fasten them just as the toilet flushed. He looked up when Archer appeared in the bathroom doorway, leaning on the frame. The fly of his jeans gaped open, revealing no

underwear, just dusky skin and black hair and a peek at the cock that had just been inside him.

*Oh God!*

"Think a little louder, would you?"

"What?"

"Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it." He held up a finger to stall Owen's outburst. "I asked."

Owen gaped, remembering that Archer had, in fact, asked to fuck him. "Oh God," he groaned, dropping his head into his hands.

Archer laughed softly. "Oh stop. You loved it."

"That's not the point!" Owen took a breath at the end of his shriek, trying to maintain some kind of control. "What the hell? What the *hell*?" He glared at Archer. "What about Gretchen?"

"What about her?"

Owen glanced around the office, feeling the walls closing in on him. "You're dating her!"

"I know that."

"You just cheated on her."

"A mere technicality. Don't worry. I fully intend to tell her."

"You can't *tell* her!"

"Now who's being dishonest?"

"Oh God. Oh *God*! This can't be happening."

Archer pushed from the doorway and casually zipped up his jeans. "It was the threesome idea that got you all worked up. I can make it happen."

"You...you've *discussed* this with her?"

"No. Not seriously. I had to make sure of you first." He winked. "I just did that."

"You fucking bastard."

"Oh come on. What's wrong? Afraid of getting exactly what you want? You want Gretchen. That's as plain as the nose on your face. With my help, you can get into her bed." There was that broad demon grin. "What's the harm if I'm watching?"

"You can't be serious?"

"I'm deadly serious. Now, I'd love to kiss you silly, but you're a bit too worked up, so I'll just say good night."

"Wait!" Owen surged to his feet and was almost on Archer before he stopped himself. He curled the fingers of the hands he held out toward Archer, clutching the air. "What, I mean, when...what are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know yet."

"Please. Don't. I-I'll lose my...everything."

Archer's expression softened just a little. "I doubt that."

"No. You can't. It'll ruin my life."

He cocked his head to the side, watching as Owen slowly lowered his hands. "Tell you what. If she does fly off the handle and fire you, you can come work for me."

"Damn it! You can't do this to me."

"Can't I?"

"Please. Don't."

"You'd rather we lie to her?"

He scowled at the rug. "Yes."

Archer clucked his tongue. "Shame on you, sweetness. I expected better of you."

This time he did close the distance, gathering handfuls of Archer's T-shirt. "No!"

Archer caught him off guard by not defending himself. Instead, he reached up to cup Owen's jaw, tilting his head up. Their lips were sealed before Owen knew what was happening.

The kiss was quick. Owen forgot that he wanted to punch Archer's lights out and didn't remember until Archer had pried his shirt loose and taken a step back.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't tell her tonight."

Owen rushed to the doorway leading to the outer office as Archer crossed it. "When?"

Archer stopped at the main door, tossing a grin over his shoulder. "Soon."

"Archer!"

"You'd better clean up the couch."

Panic turned Owen back into Gretchen's office, so he missed Archer leaving. Sure enough, his spunk had made a splotch on the brown suede. How the hell did you get semen off leather?

## Chapter Eight

Owen slept in fits that night. He'd almost gone straight to Gretchen's house after spending an hour trying to get the stain out of her couch. Best to own up to his mistakes, right, even if he wasn't quite sure what had happened? Even if his body was still tingling from Archer's touch. But then he'd chickened out and headed for his own apartment. He was too raw to meet up with Archer again, so he couldn't chance it that Archer would be with her. He paced his bedroom, endlessly fighting with himself. More than once he picked up his keys, intending to drive to her house, regardless that it was the middle of the night. One moment he was desperate to talk to her first, and the next, cold fear made him want to pack his bags and move back to Atlanta that very night. Running he could do. He'd done it before. He'd run from modeling; he'd run from college; he'd run from Atlanta. He wrote a resignation letter, then deleted the file. He wrote her an e-mail, then discarded it, then panicked as he made sure he hit Delete and not Send. There was no reason to run. Not yet. At least, that's what he spent the entire night trying to convince himself.

Then there was the fact that underlining all this was the fact that he'd just had the most amazing sex of his life. He'd enjoyed the sex he'd had previously with men, but Archer was above and beyond any of the young men he'd been with. Before things had



been careful, clumsy, and fun; this had been raw and explosive. When he closed his eyes and let himself remember it, his blood burned and his cock started to rise again. What the hell was he supposed to *do*? He couldn't *not* want that again, but Archer was dating Gretchen. He couldn't possibly be serious about the threesome thing? Could he? He must. Otherwise, why would he have seduced Owen?

Exhaustion crumpled him in his bed somewhere around three o'clock in the morning. He shut his eyes and somehow slept in fits but woke long before his alarm went off at seven a.m. He stared at his ceiling, overcome with sense memory of Archer's touch. If it weren't for Gretchen, he'd be finding out where the man lived and camping out on his doorstep, begging to be let in and fucked again. Well, no, probably not, but at the moment he was tempted. If that's the way Archer made love to Gretchen, he could easily see why she was so taken with him.

At a little before eight, Owen logged on to his work e-mail and sent a notice to the office saying he was staying home sick. Didn't much matter since his boss was out of the office until the end of July anyway. *And I'll probably get fired before the day is out.* He wondered if he had enough in his account for a plane ticket to Atlanta. What would he do with his stuff? Maybe Jane would help him out.

At nine, Gretchen called his cell. He let it go to voice mail, waited a few minutes, then dialed in to hear what she had to say. *"Owen, I just saw your e-mail. What's wrong, sweetie? Call me."*

So. Archer hadn't talked to her yet. What was he waiting for? Or was he just torturing Owen?

At eleven, a strange number called his cell. Again, he let it go to voice mail. This time it was Archer. *"Owen, you have one hour. If you're not here at G's by then, I'm telling her without you."*

"Bastard!" Owen yelled at his phone. He almost called back, but it sounded like Archer was at Gretchen's. Did she know he'd called Owen? What was his game?

Out of options, he tore at his hair and whimpered for a few minutes, then gathered himself up and took a shower.

Might as well be clean for when his world collapsed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Archer was being strangely coy. He lay with Gretchen on her bed, kissing languidly and stroking her through her tank and shorts. He resisted all her efforts to remove any clothing: hers or his. She managed to get his polo shirt off, but he refused to take off his jeans.

"Don't you *want* to fuck me?" she asked, teasing. Okay, mostly teasing. He had her riled up, and she'd really like to get to something more exciting. Making out was nice. Fucking was better.

He smiled, toying with her nipple through her tank top. "Eventually."

"But...?"

He kissed her nose. "Patience, darling."

She drew back and studied him. There was something different in his customary smug expression. He was excited about something, and it wasn't sex. "Did something happen at work?"

That seemed to take him off guard. "Why do you say that?"

"Something's up."

Laughing, he rolled over her, pressing his groin to hers. "Always, when I'm with you."

She took the opportunity to wrap her legs around his waist. At least he was closer to where she wanted him, even if he did still have his jeans on. "No, it's more than that. Tell me."

He glanced at the clock on her bedside. "Soon." He rolled away, his weight helping him escape her hold. "I'm going downstairs to get something to drink."

Scowling, she glanced at the clock as he left the bedroom. Eleven forty-five. Was something going to happen soon? She lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. What was the man up to?

Her front door opened. She sat up. *Where's he going?*

She scrambled out of bed and sped down the hall to the top of the stairs. That's when she heard the other voice and froze. They didn't speak loud enough for her to make out words, but someone else was there with Archer. A male voice. Higher. Softer. It was Owen.

Perplexed, she returned to the bedroom to replace her sleeping tank and shorts with a T-shirt and shorts. Then she rushed back downstairs. She tried to walk slowly and overhear what they were talking about, but they were speaking in tones far too low for her to hear until she was at the bottom of the stairs. They were in the living room separated by her wide couch. Archer stood in front of it and Owen behind, gripping the back like he was using it as a shield.

Archer caught sight of her and smiled. "G, look who came to see you."

She gave Archer a frown, then hurried to Owen's side. "Owen, sweetie, are you okay?" She reached up to feel his forehead. "What are you doing driving when you're not feeling well?"

"It's not that kind of sick," Archer told her, smirking.

Owen stared at the back of the couch, white-knuckled fingers curled tightly over the cushions.

"Archer, hush." She rubbed Owen's back. "What's wrong?"

Instead of looking at her, Owen tilted a questioning stare at Archer.

Who laughed. "I'm giving you a chance to spin it your way."

"What?" She glanced between them, not understanding the heat between them. As far as she knew, they'd barely spoken. "What's going on?"

Archer cocked his head.

Owen dropped his gaze again. "I...can't."

"Oh come on, buck up, gorgeous. It might go okay."

Owen growled softly, which just made Archer laugh again.

She glared at the tall man on the other side of the couch, not liking his smirk one bit. "Archer, what are you up to?"

Finally that dark gaze settled on hers, his eyebrows raised. "You assume it's me?"

Owen snorted.

"Okay, it's me. But I *am* trying to be a little nice here." He focused on Owen.

Who kept his face tilted down, staring at the couch.

Archer smiled wider. "Ticktock, pretty boy."

She rubbed her palm over Owen's back, scowling at Archer. "Stop it!"

Shaking his head, he kept his focus on the young man beside her. "Owen?" Wait, had he called him "gorgeous" before?

"We had sex."

Why was Archer calling Owen "gorgeous" and "pretty"?

She froze, eyes still on Archer although Owen's words startled her into temporary blindness. Did he just say what she thought she'd heard?

Ignoring the triumphant gleam in Archer's eyes, she turned to regard Owen's profile, the fingers of her left hand still resting on his shoulder. Or what she could see of his profile, since his head was down and his hair was long enough to obscure his profile. "What did you say?"

"Last night. Archer. And me. He..." Shook his head. "*We* had sex."

Slowly, her hand slipped from Owen's shoulder as she turned to look at Archer.

He nodded, still grinning. "Surprise."

Too many questions popped into her head. Curiously devoid of emotion, she tried to sort them out by priority. She finally had to settle on: "I don't understand."

Archer used his long legs to step over her coffee table and knelt on the couch before them. The sunny ambience of the room brought out the golden tones in the brown of his chest and shoulders. Surprisingly tender, he lay his hand over one of Owen's, but he looked at her. "Interested in a threesome?"

Her right hand cracked on the side of his jaw before she even knew she was going to do it. "What did you do?"

He recoiled out of reach as she drew her hand back again.

Owen reached across her, gripping her wrist. He met her gaze, big aqua eyes pleading. "Stop. It's not all his fault."

She gaped. The fabrics of their T-shirts were not thick enough to shield her erect nipples from the brush of his chest. She gazed up those two or three inches he had on her and couldn't remember a time when she had been more aware of him. They had hugged; she had kissed his cheek. Somehow this hold on her was more charged than any time before. She couldn't decide if it was anger or lust or a lethal combination of both. She was not capable of lashing out at Owen. *He had sex with Archer?* "Explain."

He swallowed, letting her wrist go and retreating a step. "Archer guessed I was attracted to you. He guessed I was attracted to him too. I'm..." A scrumptious shade of dark pink flushed up his neck to his cheeks. "I've always liked men and women both, and I've been obsessed with you since I met you." He reached up to tuck some of his dark blond hair behind his ear to reveal that it, too, was pink.

"Me?"

He swallowed, peeking at her from beneath long lashes. "Yeah."

She shook her head, unable to comprehend all the very important facts just revealed to her. She picked one at random. "You're obsessed with me, so you sleep with him?"

Owen winced. "It wasn't my idea."

Of course not. She turned to face the instigator himself, who stood just out of arm's reach on the other side of the couch. The red mark from her palm stood out even on his dark skin. Archer spread his hands. "You want him. You want me. He and I want each other. What is the *problem*?"

"The problem?" No, she wasn't angry. Not enough. Shouldn't she be furious? Maybe it was shock. She tried for a scowl to match what she felt she should be feeling. "You *slept* with someone else." Even if they had not gotten to fidelity in their relationship, it was common courtesy not to sleep with someone else. At least, so she thought.

He was completely unrepentant. "I did. Fully intending to bring him back to share with you. Ask him."

"Ask him?"

"Getting a chance with you was a big part of the attraction." He grinned at Owen. "Wasn't it, baby?"

Her head spun, and her skin tingled, too aware of both of them to fully concentrate. Owen? Good God! Her imagination swam with thoughts of what the two of them were like together. Managing Heaven Sent had given her a fine appreciation of gorgeous men touching other gorgeous men, and two such specimens were in the room with her.

She rubbed at her face, trying to organize her derailed thoughts. "You son of bitch." She wasn't quite sure who she was addressing.

Archer assumed it was him. "Oh please. He's here. He wants you. Believe me, having him is a treat."

She peeked at Owen, to find his hungry gaze on her. "Owen, honey, I'm way too old for you." That's it; try one of the reasons that had kept her hands off him to this point.

One side of that pouty mouth curled down in a frown as he scoffed. "No way. You're perfect."

So cute. She had to reach out and pet his cheek. Smooth as a baby's bottom. He must have shaved before coming here, not that he needed to shave much. "Oh, honey." He was so *young*, never mind the fact that he was delicious.

He caught her wrist and pressed his cheek into her palm. "I know it makes our working relationship kind of weird, but we can work something out."

She brushed a thumb over the curve just below one of his huge, imploring eyes. "You *want* this?"

Stark need burned through those eyes into her. "More than anything."

She was drowning in that gaze. The heat of his body called to her. She wanted to know what it was like to rub against him like a cat. "*Having him is a treat.*" She'd been able to keep her urges tamped before, but now that she knew he wanted her, now that she knew he'd *slept* with Archer. *God, I want to see that.*

But reason should prevail, should it not? She shook her head, letting her hand drop from Owen's face. "I'm sorry. We really shouldn't..."

"Oh come on." That from Archer, who rounded the other end of the couch to stand behind Owen. "Don't be stupid."

She frowned. "I'm not being stupid. I'm being sensible." Even as she tried to build the walls, she felt them crumbling at their base. Archer stood a head taller than Owen, his body was a shadow behind him, looming like some dark god.

"Please." He placed his hands on Owen's shoulders, and she didn't miss the smaller man's slight tremble. "I've been watching this stupid 'don't notice' shit that the two of you have been living in for weeks now. You both *salivate* over each other, and it's stupid. Why keep avoiding it?"

She drew up. "I do not..."

Archer pointed at her, icy resolve in his expression. "Don't. Lie."

She stared at him, feeling terribly exposed.

Sliding a hand down over Owen's shoulder, he stepped closer to press them back to chest. "There is no problem here if you both would just go with it." Owen's eyes hooded, perfect white teeth sinking into his thick lower lip. Archer kept his attention on her as his palm spread over one of Owen's pecs. "I happen to think you're both hotter than hell, and I *really* want to watch you fuck." He squeezed an ever-so-slight whimper out of Owen.

If she had been wearing panties, they would have been soaked. As it was, her shorts were in a sorry state. It was a good thing they weren't all that tight. Archer tilted Owen's head aside so he could nuzzle his ear. She loved it when Archer did that to her. Judging from Owen's gulp and the flutter of his long, pale eyelashes, so did Owen. *Sexy.*

Archer watched her, taunted her as he drew his tongue up the shell of Owen's ear. "C'mon, G. We're all adults. What's the harm?"

She knew there were reasons against this. The good ones escaped her at the moment. "Owen, you really want this?"

He nodded, reaching up to grip Archer's wrist with both hands. Aqua eyes focused on her, filled with pure need that sparked an answering call low in her belly.

What could she do? If she refused, she would very likely lose them both. Owen looked quite at home in Archer's arms, and if Archer had enjoyed Owen as much as it seemed, he wasn't likely to give him up. Would it be so *bad* to take this opportunity to get her jollies with two willing, gorgeous men?

Archer used her silence to taunt her further, rubbing his palm over Owen's chest to make his nipples poke at his T-shirt. He bent down to sample Owen's neck. Owen tried to keep his focus on her, but then Archer bit his neck and his head fell back, lips open in a gasp. God, he did have the *prettiest* mouth. Before he could recover, Archer's free hand came up to grip his chin, turning his head so they could kiss.

It was Gretchen's turn to bite her lip. *So beautiful.* A gentle meeting of lips only, a sweet, lingering brush of plump skin on plump skin. Amazing how a kiss between men could be so tender, but that was one of the things she loved about watching such a



thing. Archer's dark skin was stark in contrast to Owen's, a shadow over Owen's light. Owen moaned, and she heard herself echo him. When Archer raised his head, Owen's head remained tilted to the side and back, exposing his throat.

Archer caught her looking and gave her that demon grin of his. He held out a hand. "Come on."

A number of tart comments knocked at the back door of her brain, but she discarded them all in favor of closing the distance between them and her. Owen slowly tilted his head back down, eyes opening to focus on her as he licked his lips. She reached up to thread her fingers in the hair behind his ear and stepped into the warmth of his body. With Archer there, it was like stepping into his embrace as well. Owen's hands found her hips, a tentative pressure to urge her still closer. She closed her lips on his. *Oh yes*. Soft. Sweet. Like rich strawberry mousse. With an eager little moan, she licked the seam of his lips. He opened for her, and their tongues met. So very sweet. His tongue slid over hers as she tilted her head just right to seal them together. Starving, she drank him in, amazed by the zing that coursed through her blood. This isn't a good idea, a tiny voice in the back of her mind chided. It's already happened, she argued. Archer won't let it lie.

Archer. His hand gently smoothed her hair, his other hand slid down her back and around to her back. Just like he had embraced her many times in the past few weeks, except Owen was between them. Oddly, it felt right. Too right. God, she was almost coming from just a kiss! She peeled her mouth from Owen's and tilted her face up toward Archer, who captured her wet bottom lip between his teeth. Kissing one man while holding another between them. Lovely. She may have lived with rockstars, but this experience was new to her. Her debauchery had been limited to one partner at a time. Archer cupped the back of her skull and took command of her mouth. Owen nibbled at her neck, one of his hands slipping underneath the hem of her shirt to caress her bare skin. Then Archer's bigger hand closed over Owen's and pulled, pressing her hips into Owen's promising erection. Archer swallowed her moan.

"There's this huge bed upstairs," Archer murmured against her lips.

"Wait." She tried to disengage herself as he used his superior strength to walk them all toward the stairs.

"No waiting."

"We should talk."

"Too late for talking."

She stumbled again, and Owen steadied her. She grabbed his shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Oh God, who am I kidding?" She grinned.

Owen grinned.

Archer smacked her butt. "Upstairs. Both of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Oh God.* Owen lurched when Archer shoved, but the bigger man yanked his arm, both to keep him from falling and to get him moving. He watched Gretchen's firm, round ass sway as she led the way to the staircase, following those little green shorts like an anxious puppy. *Is this happening?*

On the way to Gretchen's, he'd made a decision. If Archer could make the threesome happen, he would jump at the chance. It was likely his only chance to ever sleep with the woman who dominated his dreams. True, it could all crash and burn. Still, man, what a ride! It hadn't eliminated his anger, just changed the state of the storm in his gut. When he'd seen Archer, then Gretchen, it had gotten worse. Unable to stand Archer's teasing, knowing it might just make Gretchen more angry, he'd spilled the beans.

She'd given in far more quickly than he'd expected.

At the stairs, Archer brushed a quick, smiling kiss over his lips before pushing him up after Gretchen. The other man kept him off his guard by tugging at the back of his T-shirt, pulling it from his waistband. He stepped up his pace, trying to outdistance the other man. It didn't work. As a result, when he stumbled over the threshold of

Gretchen's bedroom door, Archer was practically riding his back, his hands underneath his shirt, already lifting it to his armpits.

He hissed, batting at Archer's hands. "Hey!"

The T-shirt lifted to obscure his vision and trap his arms.

Then he heard Gretchen's soft laugh. "Don't fight him, Owen." She was so close, right in front of him. "When it comes to sex, it turns out that he usually gets his way." Nails gently scraped at his nipples, igniting a full-body shake, stopping his struggles. When Archer finally yanked the T-shirt up and away, Owen blinked back focus to see her smiling face, those green eyes sparkling. "If it's any consolation, it's usually worth it."

She spread her palms over his chest and leaned forward to connect their lips again. He opened, not bothered in the least when she took the lead again. Most of his fear melted. She seemed to have settled into the idea of a threesome. Nerves leaped into the void left by the fear. *Oh shit! This is really happening.* He put his hands back to her hips, mostly to steady himself as he concentrated on the warm, heady taste of her mouth. The soft yet taut curves underneath his palms demanded that he squeeze to test their firmness.

Archer's presence warmed his back as big hands reached around to make quick work of the button and zipper of his jeans. A little maneuvering to get his cock clear of his briefs; then the jeans and underwear were shoved down his legs. His erection bumped Gretchen's belly, and he nearly died at her little purr of pleasure. One of her hands dropped down to palm his cock just as Archer again caught him off guard by sliding his hands up the outsides of his legs. The man murmured something that he couldn't understand; then warm lips brushed over the curve of his ass. Caught between them, Owen could only cry in distress. Chuckling, Gretchen nibbled at his bottom lip, one of her soft hands cupping his jaw while the other stroked him. Her touch was firm and sure, not like any of the younger girls he'd ever been with, more like the men in fact. She nibbled at his mouth while Archer's wicked tongue traced patterns over the

cheeks of his butt. When one of Archer's hands reached between his legs to cup his balls, an entirely undignified squeal poured out of his mouth, withering into a sigh as Gretchen gave a good pull on his prick.

"I gotta sit down," he gasped, sure his knees were going to give out immediately.

Gretchen backed away from him, letting her hold go slowly. Backing toward the bed, she quickly lifted her shirt off. Her breasts were small, true, but oh so very perfect. They'd fit into his hands exactly, he was sure. And those bright pink nipples...

"Whoa." Chuckling as he stood, Archer held Owen back from rushing toward the beautiful sight. "Shoes first, pretty boy."

Scowling, he glanced down to find his jeans banding his ankles. Impatient, he dropped into a handy chair so he could bend down to get his shoes as instructed. His jeans got in the way. Peeking up, he tried to take care of his own clothes, watch Archer strip out of his jeans, and admire Gretchen as she stepped out of her shorts, then lay back on the wide sleigh bed that he'd wanted to see her in for months.

Archer had just knelt on the mattress beside Gretchen by the time Owen was free. He stayed in his seat for a moment, very quiet, watching them maneuver into a slow kiss. Their touch spoke of lovers with practice. They knew each other's bodies now. *What am I doing here?*

The question was rolling in his head when they broke the kiss and turned to him. Gretchen lay on her side, putting some space between her and Archer. She met Owen's gaze. "Come here." She patted the rumpled yellow sheets beside her.

He got up, his heart pounding. Any moment now he was going to wake up. *But until then...* He crawled up between them. Archer caught him off guard by flipping him onto his back. Before he'd recovered, Gretchen cupped his jaw, leaning in to suck on his bottom lip. Archer smoothed first a hand, then his lips over Owen's chest, finding a nipple to nibble on. Owen squirmed, frustrated that he couldn't arrange his arms to get a good hold on either one of them. But then Archer's attentions drifted lower, and Owen was able to twist a little and cup one of Gretchen's breasts into his palm. She was

just as soft and firm as he'd thought, and her sigh of appreciation was a beautiful thing. Her mouth opened more over his as she leaned into his touch, her hand now sliding over his chest. *Heaven.*

He jumped when Archer palmed his cock. "You're even pretty down here," he heard the man murmur, just before wet warmth closed over the tip of him.

"God!" He didn't mean to take himself out of Gretchen's kiss. The exclamation was all reaction.

She nuzzled his cheek as he tried to remember how to breathe. "Feel good?"

*Too much!* He couldn't find his voice. Not with her sucking in his earlobe while her nails lightly raked over his nipple. Not with Archer swallowing him down to the root. He writhed, trying to get away from both sensations even though both were amazing. "Too..." he gasped. Words required too much thought. "I can't..." It was all the warning he could give, and it wasn't enough. His balls drew up, and fire shot out of his cock and down Archer's throat.

"Mmmm, that was hot." That was Gretchen, sounding amused.

When he could open his eyes, Gretchen and Archer were grinning at each other over his body. Archer was still licking his lips as he crawled up Owen's body. "Wonderful thing about young men." He braced his beautiful, massive chest over Owen and presented his lips to Gretchen. "They recover fast."

Laughing softly, Gretchen opened her mouth to Archer's. Owen could only stare up at the beauty of them, marveling that he was there to see it, up close and personal.

Without breaking their kiss, Archer shifted. Gretchen melted into the bed on her back beneath him. Owen could just see the black hair on Archer's chest brush the peak of Gretchen's breast. Archer released her lips to trail down her neck. She arched into him, manicured nails digging into the meat of his shoulder as he made his way to one nipple that was almost the exact shade of cotton candy. Nip, suck. Practiced little moves that set her to writhing. He peeked at Owen and grinned around his mouthful before kissing his way across her sternum to the other nipple. After licking a wet circle around

the stiff peak, he cupped the other breast in his hand and twisted so the nipple pointed Owen's way. "Come here," he growled when Owen didn't get the picture.

*Oh!* That's right. He was a participant in this. Eagerly, Owen scooted closer. Archer released Gretchen's breast and threaded his fingers into Owen's hair to pull his head down to that succulent nipple. Owen didn't need any more instruction. He opened his mouth and took in the hard little nub. Gretchen gasped, her fingers replacing Archer's in his hair. Happily, he suckled, snuggling his body against her side.

Archer abandoned his nipple to kiss his way down Gretchen's belly. Owen shifted so he could watch without abandoning his treat. Archer's lips and tongue looked somehow brighter framed by the darkness of his beard, dusky pink skin wet with his own saliva, painting random patterns over the freckled cream of Gretchen's skin. He toyed with her navel and nipped at the curve of her hip. Her thighs parted for him, and he settled between them. His big hands splayed to either side of her groin as he traced the trimmed edges of the dark orange curls above her sex. Looking up, he speared Owen's gaze, smiling as he bent his head, thrust out his tongue, and drew it through folds Owen couldn't see but he had often imagined. Shudders shot up through Gretchen's body, flattening her stomach, tilting her hips to meet Archer's mouth. Archer grinned at Owen, then did it again. This time, he kept his mouth there, at the apex of her sex. Owen could barely see the bottom half of his face, but he knew from the moan that pulled out of Gretchen and the way she arched her back that Archer had to be sucking her clit. Archer's eyes closed, his brow relaxed as he seemed to truly enjoy what he was doing.

Gretchen certainly enjoyed it. She writhed under Owen, her fingers restless in his hair and at the back of his neck. Tearing his attention from Archer, Owen twisted to look up at her face. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her lips parted. A gorgeous flush gave a pink cast to her skin, highlighting the tiny little dark flecks of freckles across her face and neck. He edged up to caress her jaw, watching as her eyes parted just enough to gaze up at him. He smiled over the lump in his throat. *So beautiful.* He kissed her

open mouth, not even caring that she barely kissed back. He wanted her to be overcome with the same feeling he'd had when they were paying attention to him before. He wanted to drink her in as she shook with pleasure. He felt it swell in her, welcomed the bite of her nails in his back as her moans grew more urgent. When she came, she screamed into his mouth.

The mattress shook as Archer moved. Owen gasped when the larger man grabbed him, hauling him up and into another kiss. The scent of woman overwhelmed Owen's senses, and he clutched at Archer, lapping inside Archer's mouth for more. Archer pulled from the kiss, urging Owen toward him as he knelt back. He lowered his hand to Gretchen's sex, rubbing her with his thumb to make her moan again. "She tastes even better at the source."

Owen didn't hesitate. He'd been dying to taste Gretchen for months. Although he didn't have tons of experience with women, he had discovered a taste for pussy. It had kept his few female lovers *very* pleased with him. Archer moved aside to give Owen room. Owen settled onto his belly. He glanced up at Gretchen to find her hot smile urging him on. Tingling, he looked down at her gorgeous folds: plump, pink, and oh so wet. Her clit stood out from its hood, just begging him to taste. He did. Closing his mouth over as much of her as he could, he swiped his tongue up until he could trap that bundle of nerves between it and the back of his front teeth. She groaned his name, her hips rolling. He let the movement dislodge his mouth, dragging his tongue down to her opening.

"Good?"

He glanced up to see Archer on his elbow beside Gretchen, watching her with a huge smile.

"Oh *so* good," she moaned, twisting, stretching while her hips continued to move with Owen.

Owen lost himself in his task, focused solely on the taste of her, the smell of her, the sound of her. She was everything he'd wanted her to be, and he intended to enjoy to the fullest.

But there was more. While Owen was distracted, Archer was busy. As Owen was concentrating on keeping her thighs from pressing together and smothering him, big hands pulled his hips up and manhandled his knees apart. Fingers closed firmly around his renewed erection.

"I knew it. Hard again." Archer chuckled, talking mostly to himself since both Gretchen and Owen were very distracted.

Owen sucked harder as Archer stroked his cock. He moaned, letting his breath caress Gretchen when Archer slowly sank two wet fingers into his ass. He thrust his tongue into Gretchen as Archer massaged inside him. Archer found *that* spot, and Owen transferred his own excitement to Gretchen, sucking so she came again.

The fingers withdrew from his ass. He lapped at the damp bend between Gretchen's thigh and groin as he heard Archer preparing a condom.

"I'm going to fuck him now, G. Do you want to watch, or do you want him inside you?"

Owen looked up. Gretchen was watching Archer, biting her lip. She glanced down to meet Owen's gaze. And smiled. "I want you inside me."

Owen damn near came from hearing those words.

Before he could think to move, Archer reached around to hold his prick again. While Archer's hot body curled over his back, his steel-hard cock nestled in the crack of Owen's ass, his nimble fingers rolled a condom onto Owen's erection. When he was done, he knelt back, slapping the outside of Owen's thigh. "You heard the lady."

Owen crawled forward into the arms that Gretchen held out for him. He fit himself into her embrace and reached down to palm his own cock. She curled her fingers around his jaw, urging him to look at her. His gaze locked with hers as his cock found her juicy opening and he slid slowly in. Her eyes shuttered, dark orange lashes



sheltering green eyes darkened with lust. He had to pause partially inside just to take a breath to keep himself from losing it.

"So good," she murmured, pulling him closer so she could nuzzle his cheek. "Owen."

"Gretchen," he breathed, pushing the rest of the way into her clutching channel.

Archer's hands smoothed over his back, gently massaging their way down his spine as Owen started to slowly thrust. It took nothing away from the excitement of being inside Gretchen. Rather, it heightened it. To know that this man was there, was watching. This man who he'd recently known as a rival and suddenly found to be an amazing ally. When Owen shifted to get better leverage, the insides of his thighs brushed Archer's legs, reminding him further that the man was there.

Those big hands cupped the curves of his ass, squeezing gently, moving with Owen as he thrust deep into Gretchen's core. Then Owen had to have him. As amazing as it felt to be inside Gretchen, he *needed* Archer to fill him. He glanced over his shoulder to find Archer's gaze, pleading with his eyes.

Archer read his mind. Grinning, he wrapped fingers around his own cock and moved between Owen's legs. Owen spread as best he could. He gathered Gretchen's thighs up around his waist to give him room. She adjusted willingly beneath him, her arms wrapped around his neck. A peek at her showed a hungry expression on her face as she watched Archer over his shoulder.

Then Archer was there, filling him. Owen had to pause, freezing all movement so he could breathe through that pain/pleasure of initial penetration. Gretchen's palms smoothed over his back, soothing and exciting at the same time. Archer pushed in, the warmth of his big body descending over Owen's back, pressing him into Gretchen, who welcomed their combined weight. The three of them meshed, fitting together beautifully, with Owen happily squashed in the middle.

"You okay?" Archer murmured into the back of his neck. Muscular arms braced the bed on either side of them, holding some of his bulk off Owen.

Owen could only nod.

Archer started to move, and Owen let him guide. His thrusts pushed Owen into Gretchen, who started making amazing moaning sounds.

"God, that's incredible." She whimpered, digging her fingernails into Owen's sides. "More."

Archer grunted at the end of a thrust. "Owen?"

Owen adjusted to brace himself. "Yeah. More."

Archer took him at his word, pulling out to put more strength behind his thrusts. Gretchen went wild, transferring her clutch to the pillows beneath her head. She dug her heels into the mattress, doing everything she could to shove up at Owen. Trapped between them, Owen's movements were barely his own, but it didn't matter. Yet again he succumbed to sensory overload. He gladly relinquished control and let them rock him between them. In the confusion of his thoughts, it occurred to him that they were almost fucking each other through him, an amazing thought in itself. Caught up with that, he rode the wave between them. Gretchen shattered, screaming underneath him, her channel clutching him relentlessly. He nearly came, but he managed to hold it, distracted by the slam of Archer's cock in his ass, the ragged tear of Archer's breathing. He was close, and Owen wanted it. He squeezed, slamming back into Archer, catching the other man off guard. With a curse, Archer lost it, his cock swelling as he came. Only then did Owen let himself go. He braced over Gretchen, milking willing little whimpers from her as he thrust home to find his own release.

They collapsed. Archer managed to pull both himself and Owen onto their sides. Owen got his condom off as Archer did the same. Then Archer took them both and rolled off the bed to the bathroom. Gretchen stretched, then rolled over, putting her back to Owen and nestling back into the curve of his body.

Archer returned to curl around Owen's back, pulling them both close. He nuzzled Owen's neck. "She's going to sleep for a while now."

Gretchen grumbled, wiggling into Owen. "Shut up," she murmured. At least, that's what Owen thought she said.

Archer chuckled, his breath tickling the back of Owen's ear. "Such a guy. Fuck and sleep. Not even a cuddle afterward."

She batted weakly at the wrist draped over her waist. "Fuck you."

Owen smiled, breathing in the scent of the red-orange curls in front of his nose. "Sokay with me." He yawned.

She reached back to brush his jaw with her fingertips. "Such a sweet boy."

He heard Archer's fond chuckle but not much else. Sleep sucked him in.

## Chapter Nine

Contrary to what Archer liked to believe, Gretchen didn't *have* to sleep after sex. She just liked to. What better way to drift into slumber than when your skin tingled and your blood hummed? Considering the sex she'd just had, she expected to succumb for a while. But after drifting for maybe an hour, her eyes opened.

*What have we done?*

She stared at the golden box of sunlight that was marking time across her bedroom carpet, trying not to panic. Her losing her head would serve nothing. What had happened had happened. Owen's arm was draped over her waist, his fingers tucked just under her breast. His breath was a soft caress on her neck and shoulder. Archer's bigger hand was spread on her hip, reminding her that both of them were there, forcing her to realize that he was curled around Owen's naked body. She closed her eyes and vividly recalled watching them kiss, watching Archer's mouth on Owen's cock, feeling Owen's weight double when Archer leaned in and took him from behind. Owen's sexy moans of pleasure left no doubt he'd enjoyed it. The expression of release she'd seen on Archer's face over Owen's shoulder matched the one she'd seen when he'd fucked her. Man, did he fuck him. She had never had the pleasure to actually

watch two men having sex. The mere memory forced her to squash an excited squirm that wanted to twist her body.

But after a few minutes, she realized she had to get out of bed. She wanted to think, and waking the men wouldn't accomplish that. Being in their warmth was short-circuiting her brain. Carefully, she rolled forward, letting their arms slide off. Owen's hand twitched but quickly stilled. She sat up and, against her better judgment, glanced back at them over her shoulder.

*Oh my God.* They were too beautiful, light and dark all wrapped up in each other. With her gone, Owen burrowed farther into her pillow, twisting partly onto his belly. Archer adjusted, his leg sliding up to snug up under the pale curve of Owen's ass. She watched Archer's face, wondering if he was awake. She hadn't known him to be a heavy sleeper, but he continued to breathe heavily. Perhaps sex with two partners had worn him out in a way sex with only her had never quite managed.

Disturbing thought.

She pushed to her feet and headed for the bathroom. Rejecting the idea of a shower, she settled for a quick once-over with a washcloth. After taking her time, she returned to the bedroom to find the boys hadn't moved. Unwilling to disturb them, she grabbed her shorts and a tank top and headed downstairs. Picking up a bottle of water on her way through the kitchen, she nursed it as she stood at the sliding door leading to the patio, watching the afternoon sun on the pool water.

She had trouble putting together her thoughts. Owen claimed to be in love with her. She hadn't missed that even if it had been couched in a lot of other surprising revelations. Well, he was young and idealistic and that tempered the love part, but that he was attracted at all was cause for worry. How was she supposed to handle that without hurting his feelings? She liked him, certainly, but love? She'd only entertained the notion for herself a few times in the past, and she'd always been proven wrong. She was no longer convinced she had one true love. The last thing she wanted was for Owen to be hurt. She didn't worry so much about herself or Archer, but Owen was

much more vulnerable than either one of them. Should she stop this now? That would be a shame. Quite honestly, she'd enjoyed sex with him. Not surprisingly, he was quite attentive, and the sounds that he'd made were simply to die for. He was also a dream to watch, so expressive. Usually she preferred more aggressive, rougher lovers—like Archer—but there was something to be said about the gentle touch. Especially when aggressive was right there in the bed with you. Having both the gentle and the rough was... She closed her eyes, leaning on the cool glass door as she had to give a moment's homage to the sense memory of four hands and two mouths on her body. What was Archer up to? How long had he planned this? *Had* he planned this? She hadn't been able to figure out what made him tick yet, hadn't gone beyond the having fun stage of their relationship. But now...?

"Think louder, why don't you?"

She jumped, spinning around to see Archer in the kitchen doorway, scratching his bare belly. He wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, so his every delicious attribute was on display as he leaned in the door frame, smiling languidly. "You scared me. I didn't hear you coming."

"Of course you didn't. You're too busy worrying."

"What do I have to worry about?"

"Good question."

She stared. He stared. *Damn it.* "Then what am I worrying about?"

He pushed from the door toward the refrigerator. "I've got a few ideas, but you tell me."

"Archer, stop. You can't take this lightly."

"Just what, exactly, am I taking lightly?" He opened the refrigerator door, and she managed to not ogle his tight butt.

She stormed closer so she could lower her voice. "Why didn't you tell me you're bisexual?"

He straightened and snagged the magnetized bottle opener stuck to the fridge for his Rolling Rock. "That's not what you want to ask."

"And yet, I did ask."

He gave her a sharp look, then shrugged. He took a healthy drink, swallowed. "I didn't tell you, because it wasn't relevant."

"The hell it wasn't."

"It wasn't." Casual as you please, he stuck the bottle opener back on the fridge. "If we're just having fun and I wasn't sleeping with anyone else, so what did it matter to you that I've slept with guys before?"

"It matters."

Another shrug as he sauntered past her into the living room.

She dogged his heels. "You come back here."

She got there just in time to see him drop onto the couch. "I'd rather be comfortable for this."

Taking a stance on the other side of the coffee table, she glared at him. The fact that he was deliciously naked was a tad distracting, but she did her best to ignore it. "Have you always been bisexual?"

He sighed. "Why don't you get to what you really want to talk about?"

"I really want to talk about this."

He shook his head as he sat back. "I've known I was bi since college. Had a very accommodating roommate who liked threesomes."

"Do you date women more than men?"

"I've yet to have what you'd call a relationship with a man. Of course, my relationships with women have been short-lived too, so..." He shrugged.

"You should have told me."

"You know now."

"You let me know by bringing a man into our bed?"

"It was Owen."

"That makes it right?"

His grin was just downright evil. "Yes."

"How?"

"You want him just as much as I do. I wouldn't have bothered otherwise."

She opened her mouth to deny it, but his look withered her words. No sense closing the gate after that long-gone horse. "Why didn't you ask me first?"

"It just would have pissed you off."

"I'm pissed off now."

He chuckled. "Yeah, but we've already had sex."

She growled her frustration and resisted the urge to pick up the crystal vase that sat on a nearby shelf and throw it at him. Instead, she put her back to him and walked to the fireplace, then spun and returned. She wasn't *exactly* pacing. "I don't understand you."

"I don't see why not. I'm very a very simple man."

"Really?" She let the sarcasm drip.

"Yes. I want something, I go for it. I want someone, I make a play for them. It's a complete waste of time to worry about what bad things could happen."

"What you did might just have ruined my relationship with someone very important to me."

He hesitated at her words, then smiled over the mouth of his beer bottle. "Or improved it."

"Not your decision to make."

"Perhaps not. But believe me, the kid was near to bursting for you. He wasn't going to last much longer before he made a play for you and thus—what did you say?—'ruined' the relationship himself."

"Still not your decision to make."



"Oh come on, what are you pissed about? That I got you something good? That you got to sleep with two men? Oh boo-fucking-hoo."

"You are such an arrogant prick."

He propped one ankle on the other knee, which just opened his groin and reminded her that he was naked. "I've been told that from time to time."

She wondered if the mind-blowing sex and promise of much more to come convinced her to let it go. She should argue. She could call him to task for being an ass. But she wasn't in the mood for that bitch session, frankly. Despite it all, she felt...good. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all. "Fine. So what happens now?"

"I suppose that depends on whether you're going to think it to death. Or call it quits because you're scared."

That stopped her. "Why would I be scared?"

"Of the unknown."

"Oh please."

"Fine." He upended a good slug of his beer into his mouth, then leaned forward, elbows on knees, to set the bottle on the coffee table. "You've got a few choices."

"Enumerate." She bent over to slide a coaster underneath the bottle. Hey, it was a *new* table.

"You could quit your bitching and just enjoy what happens."

"I'm sure that's your preferred option."

"It is."

In truth, that's how she was leaning, but she was curious to hear his other reasoning. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Next."

"You can do what you think you *should* do, be mad at me, or throw me out. That would leave you alone with Owen, but perhaps that's what you want."

Truthfully, that option scared her a little so she kept her face still, waiting.

"Or you can tell Owen that it was nice but you don't think this is something you want to continue. By now, he might have convinced himself that this afternoon was all that he'll get anyway and be reasonable about it." He twisted his neck to call over his shoulder. "What do you think about that option, Owen?"

Gretchen dug her fingernails into her biceps, glancing up in time to see Owen slink around the corner. Of course he was there. She'd let herself be distracted into not thinking about it. Besides, he could be absolutely silent when he wanted. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and stared at the floor behind the couch. "Not the choice I want to hear, but I'll accept it." Unlike Archer, he'd taken the time to put on his jeans. His smooth torso was bare. Sense memory reminded her what his warm skin felt like against hers.

Her heart fell at the carefully bland look on his face. He expected her to reject him. She felt like a complete heel knowing that option would seem likely to him. "Owen—"

Archer cut her off. "G, it's not like we're talking undying devotion here. We all came into this as adults, and no promises have been made. Can't we just enjoy each other for a while? See how we like it?"

She stared at him. True, the two of them had made no promises and asked for no commitments. That they hadn't been seeing anyone else was their separate choice and the reason they continued to practice safe sex despite the fact she was on the Pill. "All right. Maybe with three of us it's time to discuss promises."

He hesitated. "Such as?"

"Are you willing to commit to seeing no one else?"

"Just you two?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm concerned that you're going to bring someone else into the mix."

That made him laugh. "I don't think I could handle more than you two."

*Likewise. "So?"*

Again he hesitated. "It's still kind of early, don't you think?"

"Not if you're going to complicate things."

"That's not quite fair to Owen."

She looked up. The younger man had crept forward, now standing behind the far end of the couch, close enough that he could watch Archer's profile. He peeked up at her and jumped to see her watching.

"Owen? Are you okay with just seeing me and Archer?"

He blinked. "Are you kidding?"

"No."

A small smile curled one side of his full lips. "Yeah. I'm okay with that."

Back at Archer, who was slowly licking his bottom lip as he thought.

Her bravery gave away so she put on a flip tone and arched an eyebrow. "I'm not asking for undying devotion, just a commitment of fidelity."

He dragged his thoughtful gaze from her and pinned it on Owen, whose eyes widened. They stared at each other for a few seconds before Archer's grin turned up the corners of his luscious mouth. "All right. Just the three of us." His gaze returned to her, calculating. "But that doesn't mean it always has to *be* all three of us."

She caught his meaning, glancing at Owen. "No. I don't mind if the two of you pair up once and a while."

Owen's chest swelled with rapid breathing, and a gorgeous blush crept up his neck. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Archer watching him as well.

She couldn't resist adding to his distress, smiling. "As long as I get my chance with him too."

Owen's jaw fell open, and his eyes glazed a little.

Like a bee to a flower, she closed the distance between herself and the young man of her fancy, trailing her fingers along the back of the couch until she was standing in

front of him. She didn't touch, not yet. She got close enough that she could imagine feeling the warmth of his blush against her skin, that the flimsy cotton of her loose tank brushed his chest. She tilted her head so that her lips were right there for a kiss. "Would that be all right with you?"

His breath fanned her lips, the tension in his body palpable as he held still. "Yes."

She kissed him, the only touch between them. He sighed into her, opening his mouth to suck in the tongue she tapped to his lips. She thought it would have been him; instead, it was she who finally could no longer bear the standoff. She pushed into him, approving of the way his arms came up to wrap around her while her fingers explored the muscles of his back. She started to form the opinion that she could happily feast on his mouth for hours. When he began to press his hips into hers, making her aware of a delicious treat in his jeans she'd yet to taste, she changed her mind.

He whimpered softly when she pulled away. Smiling, she put her fingers to his lips, loving how he immediately took the tips between his teeth. It almost got her to put her mouth to his again, but she was strong; she took another step away. Gesturing toward the couch with her head, she smiled. "Sit."

It took a beat for his brain to switch gears. Then he turned to the couch. There was Archer, sitting quietly in the far corner, languidly stroking his cock with one hand.

"Archer?" she asked as Owen knelt on the couch, his hand high on Archer's thigh.

Archer leaned forward to swipe a quick kiss over Owen's mouth. "Yeah?"

"Do we need a condom?"

That stopped him. One hand still wrapped around the back of Owen's neck, he looked up at her. "What?"

She sat on the coffee table. Quickly, she pulled off her tank top and tossed it aside while she settled her attention on Archer. "Do we need a condom?"

He cocked his head to the side, far too sharp to not catch her meaning. "I'm clean."

She nodded. It was a decision she hadn't made in any relationship for more years than she cared to admit, even to herself, but this felt important. "I'm clean too. And on the Pill. Owen?"

Wide eyes darted from her to Archer and back again.

"You don't have to, honey." She used the motherly tone commonly employed when dealing with her boys. Seemed kind of inappropriate since she was topless, but it was too late now. "There's no reason you have to..."

"No. I'm clean."

"So, do we trust each other?" She was asking more than just that. This was a big step.

Archer knew it. She'd decided to trust him, *really* trust him. Would he decide to trust her? Was he trustworthy? She thought so, and she was rarely wrong.

He nodded.

Did Owen realize what she was asking? She suspected he did. He wasn't *that* naive. "Yes."

She grinned. "Good." Leaning forward, she nudged them apart so she could get between them. "It's my turn to be in the middle."

Archer chuckled as she climbed onto his lap, facing Owen. "You were in the middle to start."

She leaned back into him, twisting her neck so she could grin up at his face. "Not really."

He arched a brow. "When do I get a turn?"

Startled, she blinked at him, images of just how he *could* be in the middle intriguing her. Then she kissed the side of his jaw. "You're next." As he laughed, she turned to Owen. Looked like he was still digesting the idea of Archer being in the middle too. Laughing, she pushed him so he toppled onto his back. Without hesitation, she crawled forward to reach the fastening of his jeans.

On her knees now, she worked on Owen while Archer slid her shorts off her hips. She got Owen's jeans down to his knees by urging him to scoot back on the couch; then she stood to finish the job for both the jeans and her shorts. Tossing both garments aside, she knelt low between Owen's parted thighs, sliding her arms under his legs as she braced on her elbows. She kissed the satiny skin just above his navel, then glanced up his torso at the glazed eyes he had fixed on her mouth, her mouth that hovered over the weeping tip of his cock. She licked her lips, aware of Archer's palms sliding over her hips and ass. The fingers of one hand found and traced the slippery folds of her sex, teasing her as she kissed her way down farther into Owen's groin, letting his cock graze her cheek as she aimed for the base of it. She nuzzled the pelt of dark gold hair at the root of him, drinking in the scent of sex from before, then let her wet tongue slide up his shaft, tracing the thick vein underneath until she reached the circumcised head. Owen shuddered underneath her, hips jolting. She grabbed his waist to steady him as she teased the head with her lips, gently biting, then laving to soothe any sting. Meantime, Archer sank a finger into her sex, not more than a tease since even one of his thick fingers couldn't begin to fill her.

Owen's fingers combed into her hair, gentle pressure on the back of her skull coaxing her, pleading silently for more. She happily gave him more, taking the tip of him into her mouth, then sinking down. She heard his groan of mixed relief and torture and had to echo it with a similar sound of her own as Archer not only joined the one finger with another, but his thumb found her clit. *So good.* She sucked Owen's cock like a big, warm Popsicle, and Archer rewarded her by working her button, making her squirm. It gave a different dimension to giving head. This way she could gladly give as she got, and that made the heat spike so much faster. She tried to draw it out, but soon both she and Owen were writhing, his hips doing all they could to shove him farther into her mouth, and her hips shoving back into Archer's fingers.

Then Archer moved. Without dislodging her from Owen, he knelt behind her and pulled her hips up. Despite her earlier bravado, she was acutely aware of what he was about to do and that there was no protective barrier between them. She felt the head of

his cock at her entrance, felt his pause. It made her pause, her lips just over the tip of Owen's dick. Warm hands smoothed over her back. "You sure, G?"

She pulled her head back, letting Owen's cock slap wetly on his belly. "Yes."

Archer took her at her word, pushing forward that first, glorious inch. She caught her breath, savoring the feel of him, relishing the catch in his breath. She had to wonder when was the last time he'd fucked anyone bare or even *if* he'd ever done it, male or female. He pushed inside slowly, and she had to close her eyes and enjoy the slide of bare skin over steely hardness.

Strong fingers dug into her shoulder as he used his grip there to pull her flush into him. It shoved a groan out of her, and another one when he drew back for another extended thrust. She let her head drop forward, her forehead on the flat of Owen's belly, his cock rubbing against the side of her face as her whole body shook to the tune of Archer's thrusts. Owen's palm smoothed over the back of her shoulder, and he sat up so he could reach underneath to find one breast. She cried out, clamping down hard on Archer when Owen pinched her nipple.

Archer froze. "Fuck. Whatever you just did, do it again."

Owen laughed, and Gretchen breathlessly echoed him.

"You mean this?" He pinched again, and she consciously squeezed as Archer thrust.

"God yeah."

"Hmph." She brought her hands up to palm all she could of Owen's tight butt cheeks.

"Gah!" Owen tensed, fingers now digging into her ribs as she swallowed down his cock. Since he wasn't as long as Archer, she could get most of him inside her mouth.

"Come here." That was Archer, his voice rumbling somewhere above her back as he paused his thrusts. When she heard the wet smack of lips, she knew they were kissing. Kissing above her while both of their cocks were buried inside her. The mere

thought was far too exciting. The orgasm took her completely unaware, her scream muffled by the cock in her throat. She managed to turn the scream into desperate sucking, the fingernails of both hands digging into the meat of Owen's ass.

They both managed to hold back even as she did all she could to transfer the spill of her pleasure into them. Owen trembled, very nearly losing it, but he held it as she subsided, as she let his cock slide from her mouth so she could breathe.

"Oh fuck," he groaned.

She glanced over her shoulder to see them braced against each other, foreheads pressed together. Owen clutched both of Archer's shoulders while Archer's dark hands spanned either side of his rib cage. Both of them had their eyes closed, mouths open, lips wet and swollen from kissing. She wiggled, and Archer groaned, his hips involuntarily thrusting the steel rod of his cock inside her.

One of Archer's eyes opened to catch her watching. He grimaced and gave her a hard thrust.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she collapsed back down, her cheek pressing Owen's cock to his belly. "Fuck me, damn it."

Archer growled. Switching his hold from Owen to her hips, he knelt up and gave her exactly what she asked for, apparently done with teasing. Quite pleased, she maneuvered Owen's cock back into her mouth and nursed on him, forcing him to whimper for her.

Owen fell back, his control shattering. He gripped the couch to either side of his hips and shuddered. She sucked harder, determined to bring him over. Her fingers slipped on his skin, soaked by both his sweat and the saliva that had seeped from her mouth during her efforts. She used it. Thankful that she kept her fingernails unfashionably short for typing, she traced behind his balls, searching, seeking, finding the clutching pucker of his anus. Knowing if he could take Archer's cock he could certainly take her fingers, she breached him with two fingertips. That's all it took. She didn't even get to explore. He tensed, cried out, and salty spunk shot into her mouth.



She did her best to swallow, but Archer chose that moment to yank at her, to lose his rhythm and his control. Owen's cum dribbled from her mouth as she was forced to hang on to the couch for dear life. He slammed into her, getting her to cry out once more before he pulled out. She heard wet, furious slapping for a few seconds; then thick, liquid warmth splattered her back.

Archer crumpled to his knees. The absence of his warmth told her that he'd fallen backward toward the other side of the couch. Owen was a boneless heap underneath Gretchen, who was quite content to lay with her cheek on his sweaty belly.

All right, she told herself as she drifted happily, this may only be temporary, but we can make it work for a while.

## Chapter Ten

"What?"

Gretchen dunked her corn chip in the spinach artichoke dip, pretending nonchalance even though she did wince at Ellen's volume. "A little louder, hon."

Ellen remembered where they were and took a quick look around. No one at the bar had given them a second glance. They sat at a narrow table on high, rickety chairs in a relatively quiet corner, in full view of the rest of the bar in case they saw someone they should talk to and far enough away from the bustle that they could talk. Gretchen hadn't been sure that she should confide in her friend, given that one of her new lovers was Ellen's cousin, but she *needed* to talk to someone, and Ellen was the closest friend she had.

Ellen ducked closer, trying to catch Gretchen's eye. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Just this weekend?"

"Yes?"

"*Both* of them?"

Gretchen couldn't help the grin that curled the corners of her mouth. Just thinking of her amazing weekend did that to her. "Yeah."

Ellen whistled softly. "You *have* been busy. No wonder you haven't called me. How did it happen?"

Gretchen took a deep breath. "Archer."

"That figures."

"What do you mean by that?"

Ellen arched a brow. "From all you've told me about him, he's a pushy bastard."

She waved and smiled at an acquaintance sitting a few tables away, but thankfully, the woman stayed with the man with whom she sat. "He's just very sure about what he wants."

"Uh-huh."

"What?"

"It was his idea?"

"Yes."

"So, is it a *true* threesome, or did he just bring Owen in for you to play with?"

Gretchen grimaced at Ellen as she crunched another chip. "For your information, it turns out that Archer is bi. He's as interested in Owen as I am."

Always sharp, Ellen caught a meaning in her words that Gretchen hadn't really meant to let out. "You're interested in Owen?"

She barely managed not to flinch. "I told you that I was attracted to him."

"And you also told me that you wouldn't do anything because he's just a child."

"He's not a child."

"Your words, not mine."

"I never said that."

"I'm pretty sure you did."

Gretchen frowned at her friend, who frowned right back. "Well, that was stupid of me to say."

"Oh yeah, *now* you say that."

"Shut up."

"How was he?"

"Ellen!"

"What?"

"He's your cousin."

"And he's obviously very much an adult now that he's slept with you *and* Archer." She giggled, sipping at her drink straw. "I guess that answers our question about his being gay."

"It certainly does."

"I'll have to tell my mom."

"Don't you dare."

"Is it a secret?"

"If it is, it's *his* secret, and don't you use me to open family closets."

"So to speak. Okay, fine, you're right." Ellen sighed and got a faraway look in her eyes. "Two men. Was it gorgeous?"

In private moments, Gretchen and Ellen had admitted to indulging in girlish, detailed fantasies about the men of Heaven Sent and their lovers. They were, after all, merely human, and the men of Heaven Sent were certainly worthy of such fantasies and more, as were their significant others. Gretchen and Ellen confided in each other so they didn't slip up around the boys themselves.

Gretchen heaved her own appreciative sigh. "*So* gorgeous," she admitted.

"Archer and Owen," Ellen murmured.

"Yes."

Ellen fingered the collar of her blouse. "With you between them."

"Yes."

"I hate you."

"Love you too, hon."

They laughed. Gretchen caught the eye of their waitress and waved her over. There was a pause in the conversation as Gretchen ordered another cosmopolitan and Ellen nodded yes to another mojito.

Ellen sucked at the dregs of her drink, then set her glass down. "So, what now?"

"With Archer and Owen?"

"Yeah."

Gretchen shrugged, paying too much attention to the bowl and her chip as she scraped up the remains of the dip. "We're dating each other."

"All three of you?"

"Yes."

"How does that work?"

Gretchen crunched her chip over a sigh. "Honestly? I don't know. It just happened this weekend. Archer thinks I worry too much."

"You talked to them about it?"

"Some. We talked. We agree to be monogamous among the three of us." She frowned. "Can you be monogamous in a threesome?"

"Who knows? You agreed that it's just the three of you?"

"Yes."

"Archer agreed to that?"

Huh, so Ellen was surprised about that too? "Yes."

"Wow. So you get more of a commitment out of him now that there's another guy involved." She pulled the straw out of her drink and chewed on the end. "Interesting."

"I didn't ask for a commitment before."

"Also interesting. You think you would have gotten it? Before?"

Gretchen blinked and got a few minutes to think when the waitress returned with their drinks. Gretchen ordered some Southwestern egg rolls and watched as the woman cleared away the empty glasses.

Ellen expected an answer when the waitress left. "So?"

"Archer brought another level into the relationship by bringing Owen into it."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

"Stop that. What are you getting at?"

Ellen sipped her drink, watching Gretchen with a thoughtful amusement that made Gretchen's eye itch. "Interesting that you'd see it that way."

"Why?"

She set her drink down carefully, fingering the cocktail napkin beneath it. "Most women would assume that bringing another person into a relationship meant he was bored with just the two of you. But you think he's making things more serious."

Gretchen stared. That made perfect sense, didn't it? At least *now* it did, but when talking to Archer she'd seen things in a different light. "It...wasn't like that. He..." She thought about it. Shook her head. "It's hard to explain."

Ellen folded her arms on the table, leaning forward. "Try."

"Owen was...is...he really wanted to share Owen. It wasn't like he was trying to replace what we had. At least, it didn't occur to me."

"Interesting."

"Stop it."

"But it is. I would not have thought you'd react this way."

When looked at through Ellen's eyes, neither would Gretchen. "He'd seen that I was attracted to Owen. He saw that Owen was attracted to me. According to him, he was bringing us together."

"How oddly romantic."

Gretchen chuckled, now playing with her own napkin underneath the drink she'd yet to touch. "It was, actually."

"Oh man."

Gretchen peeked up at her friend. "What?"

"Who would have thought that the way into your heart was to bring a boy toy into your bed?"

"Oh stop."

"Of course, the problem now is, how do you feel about the boy toy?"

"I care very much about Owen."

"More now?"

"Yes." She couldn't hear her own soft answer above the general hubbub of the bar.

Ellen got her meaning. "Gretch?"

"Yes."

"Are you falling in love?"

"Don't be silly."

"Am I being silly?"

"Yes."

"You don't think you're falling in love?"

"It's far too soon for that."

"Well" – Ellen sipped her drink – "you might want to give it some thought. You would never have been this accepting with any of the other men you've been with since I've known you. Any hint of something remotely like this, and you would have kicked him to the curb. Both of them. What's different here that you're accepting it?"

Gretchen tossed her bangs from her eye. "Maybe I just wanted to know what it was to be the meat in a hunk sandwich."

Her joke fell short when Ellen didn't laugh. "Maybe. But I think there's something different about these two men."

She scoffed. "You can't be in love with two men, Ellen."

"Mmmm. And just who are you trying to convince of that?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh my *God!*" Jane reached over to slap his arm. "You dog! No way!"

Owen knew the fall of his hair didn't hide his grin as he hung his head in mock chagrin. He still wasn't sure he should have told Jane, but he'd simply *had* to confide in someone one. Jane had proven a good enough friend that he was pretty sure she'd keep his secret.

She sat beside him on his living room floor, the cards in her hand and the movie on the television above them completely forgotten thanks to his news.

Owen brought his head up to look seriously at her. "You can't tell *anyone*."

"Yeah, yeah. I promised. Oh man." She sat back against the front of the couch, jaw unhinged as she stared unseeing at the television. "Oh, *man*. So you *are* gay."

He laughed. "No. I'm bi."

She slanted her gaze at him. "You've slept with guys."

"A few."

Her eyes raked him up and down. He'd seen that heated look before. What was it about certain women and gay guys? How could that possibly turn them on? But it did, and he'd played on that a few times. He had cause to be very thankful that Gretchen was one of those women. Just remembering how she'd watched them was enough to make his cock fill.

"And you slept with the boss lady?"

He took a breath, mentally calming himself so that he wouldn't have a reaction that was visible to Jane. "Yeah."



"Shit. I have *no* life."

He laughed. "Paul might take exception to that."

She waved aside the mention of her boyfriend, with whom, he happened to know, she was very much in love. "So, how'd it happen?"

He shook his head. "I'm still not really sure. Archer started it."

"That's the Mr. Hunkalicious she's been dating?"

"Yeah."

"He started it?"

"Well" — Owen blushed — "you *swear* you won't tell."

"I won't tell already. Spill."

"He came by the office Thursday night, and...we...did it."

"Get. *Out!* At the *office?*" He was glad the walls of his apartment building were rather thick. There was a chance his neighbors didn't hear her shriek. A chance. "Where was I?"

"Everyone had gone home for the night."

"Shit, if that isn't a reason to work late, I don't know what is. In your office?"

He gathered the cards they were clearly no longer interested in. "Gretchen's office," he muttered.

"No shit." She hooted. "Does she know?"

"Yeah."

"'Course, I guess it doesn't matter now since the three of you... Oh man, really? All three of you?"

"Yeah."

"And you and Archer...?"

"You're stuck on that, aren't you?"

"Sue me. I work for Heaven Sent. I like hearing about men together."

That made him laugh. "Okay. Yeah, we did."

"He just came to the office and...?"

He even felt a little tingly recalling that night. Now that he was past the anger and fear of it, he could remember it as hot. "Pretty much."

She melted into a slouch, rolling her eyes up into her head. "You just killed me. I'm dead."

He put his cards down and picked up her empty Coke can. "Okay, I'm getting another drink. You want one."

She didn't open her eyes. "Yes."

When he got back, she was still in the same position, but her eyes were open, staring thoughtfully at the bookcase beside the couch. She sat up as he set another can down beside her along with the bag of chips he'd retrieved from the kitchen. "So, how does that work?"

"I'm not going to describe the sex to you."

"I didn't mean *that*. Although, it's quite cruel that you won't."

He rolled his eyes as he popped open his own drink.

"No, I mean how does the relationship work now that there's three of you? Or is it a relationship? Was it a onetime thing?"

Could you call most of the weekend "one time"? Actually, you could. He sipped at his drink. "I don't know."

"You don't know how it works?"

"I don't know it's a relationship. I don't really know how long it'll last."

"What?"

"They say they want to do it again, but..." He shrugged. "I don't know. They were already in a relationship. I'm just a third wheel." He chose not to tell her about Gretchen's commitment of fidelity. He was of the opinion that was mostly so they could stop using condoms. He got another tingle remembering just how *that* had felt.

"You think that's all it is?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it? I'm the 'boy toy,' aren't I?"

She scowled at his use of the label, opening her own drink. "I guess so. That sucks. But you don't know, right?"

"No. I don't know."

She rummaged in the bag of chips for a handful. "Is Gretchen coming back to work soon?"

"She's back." Jane had been out of the office for the first half of the week.

"Got bored? Even with all that sex?"

"Yeah, even with that." He chuckled. "Most of the work she wanted to do on her house is done, and she's bored at home. Archer just got hit with a ton of work this week, so she decided to come back to work too."

"She didn't decide to give you some 'time off'?" Jane waggled her eyebrows on the last two words.

He flushed. "No. She was real serious that our personal relationship shouldn't affect our working relationship. So no paid time off for that."

"Too bad." She gave him an evil leer. "So no doing it in the office?"

"No!"

"Oh don't tell me you haven't thought about it. Not after you had sex with Archer there."

He squirmed. "She's been really busy getting back into the swing of things."

"Not even kissing?"

He bit his lip.

She hooted. "Okay, so there's been *something*."

He nodded, determined *not* to mention the spectacular blowjob Gretchen had given him just that afternoon after coming back from lunch. He'd be unable to look at

her desk in the same way again. He refused to believe that much kissing and groping equaled “sex” in the office. This afternoon was the furthest they'd gone.

“Oh man. That's hot.”

He couldn't argue with that.

“Well, I hope you know what you're doing. I wouldn't dream of telling you to stop, you understand, but” —she crunched some chips, studying his face— “you be careful, okay?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“I don't want you to get hurt.”

He tossed his hair from his face, reaching for the cards. “Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.”

At least, he was pretty sure he would be.

## Chapter Eleven

In her second week back to work full-time, Gretchen managed to arrange a time to get all of Heaven Sent together to discuss the Thanos Gaming contract. Although she'd had Owen send it to them last month and had her people read it over, they had yet to discuss it as a group and come to a decision. That simply wasn't fair to Archer, although he'd been a doll and hadn't mentioned it except over the past weekend. She'd gotten the feeling that he'd really like an answer soon, so she'd called the boys. Johnnie and Luc were both in town, and Friday morning proved to be a good time for Darien, Brent, and Hell to call in.

She had Luc in the conference room with her and was discussing Darien's trip with him on the conference bridge when Johnnie breezed in.

He beamed, tossing his loose ponytail back over his shoulder. "Am I the last to arrive?"

"Surprise," Luc murmured, sitting back in his chair.

"Good." Johnnie closed the door, then sat in the chair across from Luc. He leaned toward the conference call bridge. "Brent? Darien? Hell? You guys all there?"

"Yep." Darien was in England with Chris, so it was later in the day for him.

"We're here." Brent and Hell were in Chicago to check out yet another band.

"Excellent. Before we start" — Johnnie turned to Gretchen, who sat between him and Luc at the end of the table — "where's Owen?"

She frowned. "At his desk. Did you want him to be here?" It wasn't unheard of, but the group decisions tended to be made with just the six of them.

"No. Better that he's not." He folded his hands on the shiny glass tabletop and leaned toward her. "I want to hear about you, Owen, and Archer."

Her eyes went wide, and she gaped before she could think to school her reaction. "How...?"

The evil man grinned from ear to ear. "A little birdie told me that Gretchie's not only dating one man but *two*. Is it true?"

She scowled. "Who told you?"

Luc jumped forward, instantly interested. "Oh, man, it's true?"

Johnnie's grin grew. "Not only that, rumor also has it that said men are *also* dating each other. I smell ménage à trois."

"What?" Darien's voice blared loud and clear over the conference bridge.

Hastily, Gretchen reached toward the device to tap down the volume. "Let me guess. You saw Ellen on your way in?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters that I'll kill her."

He laughed. "Oh come on, you didn't tell her to keep it from *me*." He blinked the gorgeous emerald eyes that made millions swoon. Not for the first time, she believed those eyes should be classified as weapons. They were dangerous. "We're all family here. You know *our* secrets."

"I seriously doubt that I know all your secrets."

"You know the big ones."

She sighed and sat back, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "I would really rather this not become a thing."

"Jesus H. Christ, it *is* true!" Luc hooted, slamming his palm on the tabletop. The three bottles of water on the clouded glass surface jumped. "That's awesome."

"Jesus," Brent's voice drawled over the connection, "is Owen even *legal*?"

"He's twenty-four," she snapped, glancing to make sure the conference room door was closed. Owen was only down the hall, after all. She was *so* glad she'd decided to take the call here rather than in her office.

Satisfied with himself, Johnnie leaned back in his chair. "Go, Gretch. Can't say I blame you, though. He's adorable."

"Wait, wait, wait." Luc turned on her, a quizzical brow raised. "The other guy is Archer?"

Gretchen smoothed a hand down the front buttons of her blouse, clearing her throat. They all knew she'd been dating someone, but only Luc had met him.

He took her silence for the answer it was. "Ho-ly shit, he's gay?"

"Hardly, if he's sleeping with me."

"But he's sleeping with Owen too?"

She sighed. There was no help for this. "Yes." If she was honest with herself, this was kind of fun. Usually they were telling her about their escapades. It was a neat turn to be the one with sordid news.

"Fucking A." He looked at Johnnie. "Have you seen this guy?"

"No. Looker?"

"Shit. He's fucking gorgeous."

Gretchen had to blink at Luc.

Who smiled. "What? He's not my type, but I can appreciate." Again to Johnnie. "The guy's got 'top' written all over him."

That made her laugh. She couldn't even be upset with Ellen for spilling the beans. Ellen knew very well that her boys should know. Reaching up, Gretchen smoothed back

her hair and smiled at Johnnie. "All right. How much do you need to know before we can get on with the business at hand?"

"When do I get to meet Archer? Is he coming to dinner with us tonight?"

"No, he's not."

"Poo."

"Why? Are you planning on stealing him away from me?"

"Yeah, right, Tyler would slaughter me. But I need to check out this guy you lured into a threesome."

"I'll have you know I did no luring."

Johnnie grinned. "His idea, then? Now I've really got to meet him."

She laughed again and slid a copy of her contract notes in front of him. "Well, if you decide to do this game, you'll meet him."

"Is that why we're doing this?" Darien asked. "Because you're dating him?"

"No. In all seriousness, guys, don't do this just because I'm with Archer. I have been painfully clear with him from the very beginning that our relationship has nothing to do with your acceptance of this."

"Of course." Johnnie nodded, scanning the one-page brief. "But the game idea is pretty cool. You read it, Hellion?"

"I have," Hell's bright tenor piped in. "I like the idea. It's like..."

Hell proceeded to name a few games that Gretchen only thought she recognized, and Johnnie responded in kind. The other boys had more of a notion what they were talking about than Gretchen, so she mainly listened, explaining what she knew of the deal from the contract and from Archer. They had all read at least her summary, and it sounded like Johnnie and Hell had read the entire thing and done some additional research on their own. Both of them had questions, which she dutifully wrote down to follow up with Archer, but in the end it sounded like they were all in favor of the project.



"This'll work," Johnnie said, righting the papers in front of him. "I'm jonesing to do something again."

Gretchen glanced between him and Luc, who was nodding his agreement. "Should we discuss that? The agreed-upon hiatus will be up in January. Should I look for something around New Year's? Sooner? Genesis would be happy to have us back. They've asked."

Luc raised a hand. "Actually, beginning of the year is out. You guys'll get your official invites soon, but Reese settled on New Year's for the wedding."

Gretchen beamed, as did Johnnie. "That's fabulous. Has he decided where?"

Luc laughed. "He has. Funny you should mention Genesis."

"What a cool place to get married!" Darien sounded more excited than Luc looked.

Not that Luc didn't look very, very happy. "Yeah."

"Are you honeymooning?"

Luc shrugged. "Hell if I know. He won't tell me what we're doing. But I'd guess we'll be gone for a month or so."

Gretchen reached over to squeeze his arm. "That's wonderful. Congratulations."

He thanked her, and his happy little grin warmed her heart.

"So, that puts us as early as February for doing any gigs? Or we could try for something pre-holiday season?"

"I'll be back next month, so whatever," Darien replied. "We're doing Christmas at our house with our families, but nothing before December."

Luc chuckled. "Sounds serious."

"Could be."

Johnnie and Luc exchanged smiles but made no more comment.

"Brent?" Gretchen asked. "Hell?"

There was a pause. Lack of sound indicated that the other two had the phone on mute. Gretchen looked at Luc, who shrugged but didn't seem concerned.

"Yeah, okay." Brent's voice was back. "We can start looking at dates come February, but nothing earlier. And we should start thinking about recording some new material."

That did seem to surprise Luc. "You guys ready for that?"

"Yeah. It's been too long."

"What about the Knights?"

"Who knows?" Gretchen could picture Brent rolling his eyes. She'd heard some of the trials involving the Indigo Knights, but she was certain she hadn't heard them all. What she had heard was that things weren't exactly easy. "If things come together before then, great. If not, we'll make arrangements."

Gretchen nodded. "All right, then. I'll put out the feelers for February and beyond. Brent, you'll let me know what kind of arrangements you have in mind?"

"Will do."

"Good. Meantime, I'll discuss the game deal with Archer and e-mail you all with details."

They wrapped up the meeting with the usual touching base. One of the things Gretchen loved most about working with this band was that although they were playful and laid-back, they were also extremely professional. Only rarely did their personal lives get in the way. It was a rarity among rock bands, and she treasured the fact that her boys were not the normal spoiled rockstars.

They had hung up the phone, and Luc had disappeared for the restrooms. He, Johnnie, and Gretchen were due to meet Reese and Tyler in the marina for lunch in just under an hour. As Gretchen stuffed contracts and notes into a manila folder, Johnnie kept his seat, hands folded quietly on the table before him. When she was done, Gretchen gave him an expectant look.

He grinned big. "Back to the men. You are okay, right?"

She chuckled, shaking her head. "I should have known. Yes, I'm fine."

"How long's it been going on?"

"The three of us? A little over a week."

"So it wasn't just a onetime thing?"

"It's been both weekends for the three of us. We're all getting together tomorrow."

"Do you see each other when it's not the three of you?"

"Johnnie, really, it's not that organized."

"Humor me."

She sighed. "I haven't seen Archer outside of the last two weekends. He's loaded under work. And frankly, so am I. I've only seen Owen at the office."

Thankfully, he didn't ask about office nooky. "Is any of it serious?"

She ran her fingers along the edges of the folder and loose papers in front of her, needlessly straightening them. "I don't know. I care about both of them. It's too new. Owen's been with me all year, and Archer and I were dating before it happened, but...I don't know."

"You're glad it happened?" Not many people would realize just how caring Johnnie was beneath all that bravado.

"I am but..." She shrugged. "I don't know where it's going. *If* it's going anywhere. I wasn't sure how long-term Archer and I were before it happened. Now with Owen...?"

"Do you love him?"

"Who?"

"Either of them. *Both* of them?"

She stared at the tabletop. "It's way too soon for that."

Johnnie reached over to squeeze her hand. "I've heard that it *is* possible to be in love with two people, but it's not easy."

She nodded.

"A little easier if they care for each other too."

She gave him a bright grin. "Always looking on the bright side, you."

Laughing, he stood, using her hand to draw her to her feet. She gladly let him fold her into the warmth of his embrace.

"I don't have any advice, but I'm always willing to listen. If I'm not in town, I'm a phone call away."

She squeezed him. "I know."

He stood. "Besides, you have to fill me in on all the sexy details."

She stood as well, gathering her papers. "Not going to happen."

"Oh come on! I can only live vicariously through you."

"Are you saying you need more than Tyler?"

"Don't you try and get me in trouble. I am *quite* happy with Tyler. Doesn't mean I can't enjoy through you."

Papers in hand, she faced him. "Again, not going to happen."

"Spoilsport. I'd tell you."

She laughed, leading the way into the hallway. "Yes you would. Even if I asked you *not* to." At Ellen's office, she stopped to stick her head in the door.

Ellen raised her head at the sound of Gretchen's knock.

"Tattletale." Gretchen stuck out her tongue.

Ellen laughed.

Gretchen stopped Johnnie and pointed into Ellen's office. "You wait here."

"Why?"

She held up the contract. "I'm going to give this to Owen and get my purse. Then we can go."

Anyone who didn't know him might buy his look of feigned ignorance. "What? I'm not allowed to talk to Owen?"

She happened to know him very well. "Not right now, you aren't."

"Oh God, you're kidding?"

She pointed again. "Stay."

Only once she was sure he wouldn't follow did she continue to her office.

Owen turned from his monitor at her entrance. Just the sight of him in his sky blue polo with his hair curling over the collar turned up the corners of her mouth. His return smile for her eased away the set of concentration he'd worn when facing the monitor. "Hi."

"Hi." She let the door close behind her as she crossed the room.

He stood halfway as she leaned over his desk so their lips could meet somewhere over the haphazard stacks of papers on his blotter. For a moment, she sighed into him, savoring the soft warmth of his lips on hers. He smelled vaguely of the fruity shampoo he'd used that morning but more of the light, earthy scent that she'd come to recognize as just "Owen." Reluctantly, she stopped their kiss, reaching up to thumb lipstick from his lips. "There's a chance Johnnie's going to barrel through that door any second."

He glanced at the door as he resumed his seat. "Why?"

"He knows about us."

"You told him?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ellen did. That's what I get for confiding."

His eyes were back on the door. "Just us, or...?"

"Or. He knows about Archer too. The entire band knows now."

He blinked, caught between a laugh and a jaw drop. "It's okay. Isn't it?"

Circling the end of his desk, she gave in and let her fingers comb through his soft curls. So cute the way his eyes closed halfway. She wouldn't have been surprised to hear him purr. Her kitten. As compared to Archer, the mountain lion. Mountain lion? No, wrong cat. He'd have to be a black leopard, wouldn't he? "Of course it's all right." She kept her cat analogy to herself, deciding Owen might not take kindly to being called a kitten. "I'm not ashamed of what we have, I just..." don't understand it, she finished in her mind. Outwardly, she shrugged, curling her fingers around the back of his neck. "It's just so new that I'm not ready to deal with the questions yet." She sighed, stepping back from him. "But I'm going to lunch with Johnnie and Luc now, so I guess I'll get some practice."

Those huge aqua eyes fastened on her, full of the utmost confidence in her. "You'll be fine."

She tugged his earlobe gently, smiling. "Thank you." Shifting back, she pointed to the contract she'd dropped on his desk. "I need you to write a summary listing the questions I noted. Then this goes back to Archer."

Eagerly, he reached for the folder. "Did they agree to do it?"

"If the answers to the questions are right, yes."

"Awesome! Archer's gonna love it!"

"Johnnie and Hell in particular are looking forward to it." She grinned, letting herself feel his enthusiasm as she went into her office to retrieve her purse. She returned to his office to find him glancing over her notes on the contract. "Okay, I'm off. Call me if my scribbles are illegible."

He snorted, shaking his head. They'd had this discussion before and he'd always managed to decipher her chicken scratch just fine.

"You'll finish those notes and the calls we talked about earlier?"

"Calls almost done." He stood to kiss her, sliding an arm around her waist to encourage her to linger a little longer. "Is it okay if I take the contract to Archer's office?" His breath fanned her lips as he'd barely pulled back far enough to speak.

She spread one hand over his heart, content to remain close for a moment. "Want to see his reaction, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. Tell him I'm looking forward to tomorrow." She grinned, patting his chest. "Although, maybe I should drop by later and see if I can find you guys in a compromising position."

As she expected, the blush crept up his neck. After all they'd done, he still managed to blush. She loved that.

"We're not going to have sex in his office," he murmured.

"Why not? You had sex in mine."

His jaw dropped.

She laughed. "Archer told me."

His eyes shut tight. "Oh God."

"I must say that whomever you had clean my couch is damn good."

To cover his embarrassment, Owen kissed her again. His mouth opened and his gently questing tongue went a long way toward persuading her to be distracted. "Don't need to do it in the office when we'll be together tomorrow. Don't you want to watch?"

She wiggled, still unbearably excited even at the thought of the two of them fucking. If nothing else, Archer had certainly called her on that particular enjoyment. *So beautiful.* "Yeah."

With a very male, quite confident grin, he kissed her again.

The door opened.

"Ha! I knew it."

Groaning, Gretchen parted from Owen. "Johnnie!"

The singer lounged in the doorway, a huge grin on his face. "What?"

Behind him, Luc filled the remainder of the doorway, arms crossed, with a matching grin.

She shook her head. Lunch was going to be an adventure. "Nothing. Never mind."

"Don't stop the good-bye kiss on our account," Luc drawled.

She brushed Owen's lips. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Stepping back from his warmth, she turned to stalk toward Johnnie and Luc.

"Out, you two."

Johnnie laughed. "See you later, Owen."

"Catch you later, Owen," Luc called as Gretchen pushed at his chest.

"See you later, guys," her young lover called from behind her.



## Chapter Twelve

Owen had not been to Archer's office before, but he knew where it was. The building was quite nice, a typical business park with a blocky silver, black, and gray edifice set in the midst of a parking lot and landscaped hills. Owen parked in one of the few visitor spaces in front of a shielded glass door with THANOS GAMING stenciled across it. He entered a tiny reception area with a door, a plant, two chairs and a tiny desk with a sign behind it that said DIAL 1 FOR SERVICE. On two of the walls were framed posters of the best-known games that Thanos Gaming had produced. Seeing no other option, he dialed and briefly spoke to a male voice that asked who he was, then told him to hold on.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Archer himself appeared. "Owen, what are you doing here?"

Owen's heartbeat sped up at the sight of the tall man. He hoped his smile wasn't too starry-eyed as he held up a thick manila folder. "I brought you this."

Archer frowned, cocking his head. He looked delicious. Owen, of course, preferred him naked, but if he had to be clothed, Owen loved his mode of casual dress. Even in jeans and a royal blue T-shirt, he still looked classy. It might be that his black hair was short and thick enough to never really look mussed or that his Vandyke was

always perfectly trimmed. Or maybe it was just that nature wouldn't dare let Archer look less than perfect. He stepped toward Owen, keeping a hand on the heavy inner door. "What's that?" He beckoned with his free hand for Owen to come closer.

Owen did. "A contract."

Instead of reaching for the folder, Archer's hand rose up to curl around the side of Owen's neck. About to bend in for a kiss, he stopped. "Contract?"

Owen grinned and nodded.

The hopeful light in his eye stripped years from his face. "Is that *the* contract?"

Another nod. "There are a few requested revisions, but I think you'll find them acceptable."

He was unprepared for Archer's *whoop!* of excitement. Laughing, he stumbled back as the bigger man rushed him, abandoning the door to cup Owen's jaw with both hands. Before either of them could say more, Archer's mouth slanted over Owen's for a thorough kiss. Owen nearly dropped the contract when he had to clutch at Archer for support. Instead, he wrapped his arms around the bigger man's waist and happily succumbed to the kiss.

"You don't know *how* welcome this news is today," Archer breathed as he pulled back. "Thank you."

Owen's own breath stuttered. He licked his lips to catch the last of Archer's taste. "I didn't do anything."

Archer's hands still bracketed his neck. His thumbs brushed the curve of Owen's jaw. Dark brown eyes studied his face as a warm smile curled his lips. "You're my angel."

Before Owen could process those words properly, Archer laughed and spun. Grabbing Owen's hand, he used the other to punch a code in the lock on the door. "Come on back and meet the guys."

Beyond the door was another world. It was a combination industrial warehouse, bachelor's living room, and nerd's paradise. Two of the unfinished walls were lined with cubicle desks, each crowded with huge LCD monitors, keyboards, mice, tablets, and all manner of storage devices. A third wall supported a massive wide-screen television atop two consoles that contained a gamer's paradise of equipment. The middle of the room was crowded with old but comfortable couches and chairs with tables laden with snacks. The fourth wall was taken up mainly by floor-to-ceiling windows, currently shuttered to block the light so not to interrupt the intense competition going on at the television. Beside the windows was the open door to an office.

Three men occupied the couch and one chair. One was using the game controller and the other two were watching intensely. Owen judged two of them to be about his age, the third somewhere between his and Archer's. Archer led him to the back of the couch and motioned that they wait.

Owen glanced down at his fingers, still laced with Archer's. So, he wasn't going to hide his male lover from his employees. That was a relief, even if it did surprise Owen. Did they know about Gretchen? Surely after all the time Archer and Gretchen had spent together, she'd been here? Owen couldn't recall her mentioning it, but there were some things they'd done that he'd not been aware of. Not many, but a few.

Something happened in the game that made the men groan and caused an appropriate pause. They turned to face them and Archer introduced Owen to Brad, Ali, and Victor. He didn't use the term "boyfriend," but only one of the men looked askance at the way Archer continued to hold Owen's hand. They were all friendly enough, greeting him with smiles.

"And this" – Archer held up the folder he held in his other hand – "is the Heaven Sent contract."

Three whoops of joy matched Archer's original whoop, and Archer released Owen's hand to receive congratulatory hugs. *Nice*. Owen had gotten the feeling that Archer got along well with his employees, but it was good to see evidence of it.

"I guess this means we stay in business after all, huh, boss?" said Brad with a big smile.

"That's a relief," added Ali.

*Stay in business?*

Archer slapped Brad's shoulder, grinning. "Things are looking up." He gestured back at the game. "Now, get to work. That last sequence needs major tweakage."

Archer turned and gestured Owen toward the open office door while the men went back to their work. The office was small and dark, despite the half wall of floor-to-ceiling windows to match the one in the main room. The dark was mainly due to the abundance of wood paneling and the green wallpaper above the wainscoting. Vertical blinds were half-shut, and the trees in the courtyard beyond sheltered the window so there was a pervading shadow. Archer had a desk, a couch, and two guest chairs, all in wood to match the paneling. He gestured Owen toward the chairs. "Can I get you something to drink or anything? Or do you need to get back to the office?"

"Nope. Boss went out with Johnnie and Luc. She doesn't plan on coming back." Owen dropped his gaze to the dark green carpet, suddenly shy. "She said I could come give this to you."

Archer grinned, perching on the edge of the desk as Owen sank onto the arm of the couch. "You don't have to go back?"

He'd not been alone with Archer since that night in Gretchen's office, and he'd become very aware of that during the last few hours as he'd finished up his work so he could come. Eyes still averted, he nodded.

Something dropped on the surface of the desk; it sounded like the contract. "Come here."

Owen looked up to see Archer beckoning to him. Biting the inside of his lower lip, he rose and crossed the small space. Archer gathered him close, his thighs pressing the outside of Owen's legs. Owen glanced toward the door to make sure it was closed.

Archer reached up to cup Owen's cheek, turning him so they were face-to-face. "Don't worry about them. They know about me."

Owen slid his arms around Archer's waist and accepted a brief, sweet kiss. "What do they know?"

"They know about you." He kissed Owen's cheek. "They know about G." He trailed back to Owen's ear.

Owen arched his neck to give Archer easy access to it. His eyes hooded as Archer licked his pulse. "And they're okay with that?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

Owen blinked at the door. "The three of us? It is kind of...odd."

Archer chuckled, his big hands roaming Owen's back. "Odd is my middle name."

"I thought it was Giancarlo."

For that, Archer smacked his butt. "Smart-ass."

Laughing, they kissed again. Owen cherished this. It was so much nicer to enjoy Archer than to resent him. He recognized that some of his resentment from before had to do with his own attraction to Archer, which had amounted to confusing jealousy of both him *and* Gretchen. It was a relief to be able to let the envy go and act on what he felt. Besides, Archer's body was a wonder to touch. So big, so strong and hard in amazing places. Owen had never touched a back full of such intriguing curves. He'd never been with a fully grown man before. *So* much better than a kid his own age. He pressed into Archer, opening his mouth to that delicious, questing tongue. Archer's hands roamed his back, one of them sliding down to cup his ass. Too soon, Owen found his hips rocking, rubbing his hardening cock into an answering ridge inside Archer's jeans.

"Uh" —he turned his lips away and tried to ease up with his hips—"we need to stop or I'm..."

Archer took two handfuls of his ass and squeezed again. "Yeah, me too."

"We can't..." Owen pushed at his shoulders, glancing toward the big window to his right. No one was there to see them, but the odd chance threw him off. "Not here."

Archer sighed. "Unfortunately, you're right." He let his hands slide away from Owen, releasing him slowly. "Did you eat yet?"

"No."

"I'm starved. How about we go have an early dinner?"

Owen's heart leaped. He hid his reaction by turning toward the couch. "Sure, sounds good."

"Great. Let me look over the notes you mentioned. Then we can go." Archer rounded the desk to his chair. "How about you stay the night at my place?"

Caught off guard, Owen dropped clumsily into his seat. "Huh?" He winced as the change of position made his pants squeeze his cock too tight.

Seated, Archer glanced up at him with a small grin. "You and I should get to know each other better, don't you think?"

Owen swallowed as he adjusted to a more comfortable position. Archer's suggestion wasn't helping any. "Okay, sure." He wondered if Archer could hear his heart racing.

"You don't have to."

"No, no. I want to." God, did his voice have to get all raspy like that?

Archer chuckled. "I'm not going to hurt you, little pig."

It took Owen a second to get the reference. Then he laughed. "That's what all big bad wolves say." He took a chance and tried to be brave. "Besides, maybe I want you to eat me up."

Contract halfway out of its folder, Archer paused to arch a brow at Owen. "Oh, now you *have* to come home with me. Maybe we'll skip dinner."

"Oh no, you have to feed me first."

Archer stared, and Owen's bravado melted into an embarrassed flush. "Deal." He dropped his attention to the contract. "We can go by your place first, if you like. That way we can go straight to G's tomorrow."

Owen's belly flipped. First a night alone with Archer, then another day – maybe another whole weekend – with both Archer *and* Gretchen? Had he died and gone to heaven? "That'd probably be a good idea," he muttered, tucking himself into the corner of the couch as he tried to calm down. Wasn't easy. His vivid imagination started picturing Archer giving him a blowjob while Gretchen was giving him one of the same and... No, that was not helping at all. Trying to distract himself, he picked up a game box that sat on the table beside the couch. He shook out the manual and started to read it. It did the trick. His head got more into the idea of the game than sex. He considered taking Archer up on his offer of any games he wanted.

That reminded him. "Archer?"

"Yeah?"

"What did Brad mean? About you staying in business."

Bent over the papers, Archer hesitated. Then sighed. "Business isn't doing so well."

Owen waited but had to prompt him when Archer didn't continue. "Are you in trouble?"

"Not yet." He shook the contract. "This will help."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Archer chuckled softly. He glanced up. "No. But thanks for asking. Oh wait."

Owen hesitated in turning the page of the manual.

Archer's smile had faded into a serious look. "Don't tell G."

Owen startled.

"I mean it. I don't want her to know."

"Why not?"

"It's not her problem."

"Is it a problem?"

"Not one that I can't handle." He frowned. "Seriously, Owen, don't tell her."

"O-kay."

Archer nodded, bending back over the papers. "Good boy. Thank you."

Now Owen frowned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Archer's condo was terrific. On the third floor of his building, it had windows that looked out over a lush, green park with a small, man-made lake. The predominant colors of the condo were tans and greens, but unlike his office, the tan won out with generous whites thrown in to make it far more light and airy than his office. The cleanliness of the living room and kitchen made Owen strongly suspect there was a cleaning person who saw to it. But there were enough little details that made it individually Archer. The framed poster of what Owen knew to be his first hit game, for one. A stylized mask hanging in the middle of one otherwise blank wall. Owen got the impression that Archer had been there for some time.

Archer plucked Owen's backpack from his hand as they entered and immediately disappeared down a short, dark hallway into the open door at the far end. Instead of following, Owen wandered toward the balcony beyond a heavy oak dining table. He was stuffed with Korean food and a bit light-headed from the Korean beer Archer had insisted he try. He hadn't had much, but since he was a lightweight, he was a little dizzy. Opening the patio door, he stepped out into the refreshingly cool late-July night.

Dinner had been terrific. Archer had steered clear of discussing business and Owen, not knowing how to pry, had let it go. Archer knew his business better than



Owen did. If he said things were okay, Owen had to believe him. Besides, once they were in Archer's car, it really had been like a date. Archer had asked him about himself and had been perfectly forthcoming on the questions Owen asked in return. Owen found out where he was from and was still trying to reconcile Archer as a skinny computer nerd. He'd decided he would need to see pictures to believe that one.

It was very easy for Owen to understand why Gretchen was at ease with Archer. Ellen had told him that she'd had failed relationships in the past, namely due to jealousy of her job. But Owen didn't think that would be a problem with Archer. He had his own interests and his own life, both of which he was generous in sharing, even with a naive kid like Owen. The two of them were, in fact, very much alike. Both sure of themselves to the point that they didn't much care what others thought of them. Both filled with a confidence in their own abilities that wasn't overbearing, it was just simple fact. He'd loved that about Gretchen since he'd first met her. He was drawn by the same qualities in Archer.

Does he really want me? Owen asked himself yet again. Or does he want me as part of being with Gretchen? Does it really matter? The answer was not forthcoming.

"What are you doing out here?" asked a gorgeous, low voice before strong arms slid around him from behind.

Owen kept his hands on the painted wooden railing but did snuggle back into Archer's embrace. "Just clearing my head."

Warm breath gusted over his neck just before lips brushed his skin. "Not hiding from me?"

"No."

One hand teased his polo shirt from the front of his pants. "Good."

Immediately, his cock reacted. He'd been half-hard through most of dinner, just knowing he was going to be alone with Archer all night.

The silky texture of Archer's beard caressed the back of his ear. "Your head clear?"

Instinct twisted his neck to make his lips available to the taller man. "Um...sorta."

Chuckling, Archer took the invitation and kissed him. So gentle. The man could fuck like a bull, but he also managed to be sweetly attentive. Their lips played together for precious moments before Owen's tongue stole out to try and taste Archer. That's when the other man stepped back, his hold on Owen forcing him to come along. "Come with me. It's time for dessert."

At the sliding door, Archer turned him around, then marched him back into the bedroom. A huge bed dominated the room, which was lit by one bedside lamp and the moonlight streaming through the shuttered doors to the right. The covers had all been pushed down toward the footboard with more pillows than were necessary for one man strewn across the mattress nearer the headboard.

Releasing his shoulders, Archer went to sit on the edge of the bed. He opened the nightstand drawer to pull out a half-empty bottle of lube. *Half-empty? He use it himself, or has Gretchen been here lately?*

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Owen obeyed the crook of Archer's finger and went to stand before him. Grinning, Archer pulled his shirt from his pants and kissed his belly. Owen pulled his polo up and off while Archer unbuttoned him. Strong hands eased pants and briefs over Owen's erection, then dropped them down to his ankles. Fingers closed around Owen's shaft, and he had to reach forward to clutch Archer's shoulders for support.

"God, you're gorgeous." The words were serious, spoken to his cock as that firm male grip stroked him up and down.

"T-thank you."

Urging him closer, Archer bent to put his mouth to Owen's dick. His free hand snaked around Owen's hip to squeeze his buttocks. Thick fingers kneaded their way between his cheeks as Archer swallowed him down.

"Fuck." He tried to spread his legs farther, but the pants around his ankles hampered him. "Archer, wait."

The bigger man didn't listen, eyes closed, intent on his task of driving Owen wild.

Owen dug his fingers into the thick silk of Archer's hair. "Archer," he rasped, doing his best to maintain control even when that gorgeous tickle was building in his balls. "Clothes."

Archer popped his mouth off Owen's cock but didn't let Owen move away. Aiming a devilish grin up at Owen, he licked the fingers of his free hand until they glistened with saliva. "Come for me first."

Owen groaned, unable to form a protest before his cock was again deep in Archer's mouth and those wet fingers were wiggling their way into his ass. "Damn, wait." No use. He knew this. Gretchen had warned him a number of times the previous weekend that it was just better to let Archer have his way. "*It's almost always worth it.*"

He succumbed, letting Archer fuck him forward and behind. When he came, Archer's groan of pleasure nearly had him coming again.

He sighed, collapsing on the bed when Archer finally released him. "Do you have to make me come first each time?"

Archer laughed, rising to his feet. "Yeah. The taste of you turns me on."

Owen rolled onto his back, pausing before he got to his shoes and pants, to watch Archer remove his shirt. In the moonlight, he looked like some dangerous creature right out of an adventure movie. He finally sat up after Archer had bent to pull off and toss aside his low boots. The jeans came next, and Owen had to appreciate the snug fit of his light gray boxer briefs.

"Do I get to taste you?" Owen asked after he'd toed off his shoes.

The boxer briefs came off, and the cock that sprang free was definitely a dark denizen of the night. Archer leered. "Oh, you bet." He circled around the foot of the bed to the other side as Owen discarded the last of his clothing. When Owen turned, Archer had crawled up and dropped down on his back. "You can do whatever you like, baby."

*Whatever?* Owen stared into Archer's dark eyes but didn't have the courage to ask if Archer *really* meant that. Instead, he knelt at Archer's side and spread his palm over the man's sternum. Archer's skin was a dark backdrop for Owen's paler complexion. The body hair under his palm was surprisingly soft, an interesting contrast to Archer's hot, satiny skin. Leaning down, Owen braced his weight on the mattress just to Archer's other side, positioned so he could take a taste of one dusky nipple.

He took his time, and Archer didn't complain. The man's fingers rose to tease at Owen's sides, but nothing more. He seemed content to wait, to let Owen explore him, so Owen took advantage. He thoroughly tasted every inch of the man's upper torso before the trail of black hair led him down the center of Archer's belly. He nuzzled Archer's cock and took the invitation of the spreading of the man's thick thighs to adjust his position so that he was lying between them. Archer's scent filled his head as he ducked down to suck on his balls. The sigh of Archer's moan and the slow rock of his hips assured Owen that he enjoyed the attention.

Owen wrapped his fingers around the base of Archer's shaft and paid due homage to every lovely inch of the man's cock on his tongue's way up to the tip. As Archer had done for him, Owen did his best to drive the man crazy. But Archer's control was better. Although he certainly enjoyed, he never took to writhing like Owen was wont to do, nor did he start wiggling as a sign of impending release. His breathing picked up, and when Owen peeked up at him, his eyes were closed to a look of heated bliss.

Reaching down, Archer wrapped his hand around Owen's at the base of his cock. Owen nibbled at the tip, watching Archer pluck up the bottle of lube and pop it open with his thumb. "Get up here and ride me," he ordered, loosening his grip to free Owen's hand.

Owen swirled his tongue around the head of Archer's cock, buying time. He'd never done what Archer was asking. His limited experience consisted mostly of doggy-style and once or twice with him on his back.

Archer moved his hand up his shaft until he dislodged Owen's mouth. "Come on, baby."

Slowly, Owen got to his knees, eyeing the cock Archer held up for him. Was it bigger than before?

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He smoothed his hands over Archer's thighs, watching as Archer poured clear liquid over the head of his prick. It did look tempting.

"Bullshit. What's wrong?" Archer's tone, while teasing, brooked no nonsense.

Owen bit his lip. "Never done this before."

It just took Archer a second. Then he smiled as he clicked the lube cap closed. "Never rode cock before, sweet thing?"

Owen frowned, which only made Archer laugh

Archer watched Owen as he pumped his wet fist over his gleaming cock. "Just how many times you been fucked before?"

Owen shrugged. "Just a few."

"Now that's not right. What self-respecting man would let sweetness like you go?"

"Okay, cut it with the 'sweet' crap."

"All right." Archer grinned, delighted. His hands still worked his shaft and rubbed over the head. "Don't want to try it?"

*Oh what the hell.* "I didn't say that." Determined, Owen shifted so he was straddling Archer's thighs. He continued to move when Archer wrapped the fingers of his free hand around Owen's arm and urged him forward. He wasn't settled until Owen straddled his belly.

Holding his cock, Archer eased Owen back until the wet tip of his prick prodded Owen's backside. "Take it slow," he murmured, hand steady on Owen's hip.

Owen did, letting his weight bring him down over the tip of Archer's dick. Wow, that felt different. Okay, the same but still different. He held on to Archer's arm for balance as he eased farther back.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." He let his head fall, amazed by the feel of Archer inside of him. As much as he loved sex with women, this was definitely something he could only get with a guy. That feeling of being filled was just... "Ungh."

"That's it." Archer's wet hand closed around the base of Owen's cock, working its way to the tip as Owen sank even lower.

Owen's renewing erection had flagged with his worry, but the pleasure from being filled together with the touch of Archer's hand had it coming back to life. Moaning, he stopped sinking to pull back up slowly, loving the friction within. Archer steadied him as he got to just the tip. Then he sank back down.

"Oh, baby."

Owen found his balance, sitting up to test until he managed just the right angle. A bit of experimental rocking had him gasping in surprise at the exciting new angle. He pushed into Archer's hand, then back down on his cock, falling into a rhythm that made his thighs burn and his belly heat.

Then Archer bent his legs behind Owen, changing things. Owen had to sit up a little more, and a small scream oozed from his throat when Archer showed the power in his body by thrusting up into Owen. "Fuck! Do that again."

Blearily, he looked down to see Archer was far gone, his gorgeous face set in sweaty concentration as his fingers gripped Owen's hips to hold him steady. Owen wrapped his own hand around his cock in an effort to catch up to Archer. He didn't make it. Archer's eyes closed, his mouth fell open and the rhythm of his thrusts failed. Owen knew when Archer came from the shudder that racked the muscles beneath him, and the sight was beautiful enough to distract him from his own orgasm. He was still watching when Archer dissolved into a boneless, sated heap in the ivory sheets.

Dark eyes cracked open a minute or so later, matching the smile that curved the man's gorgeous lips. He glanced down. "Want me to help you with that?"

Owen glanced down to see his own hand, stilled with fingers wrapped around his cock. He felt Archer's erection flagging, slipping out of him. "No." He planted his other hand on the man's sternum and jerked at his cock. It didn't take long. He was already drowning in sensual overload. His balls drew up, the burble of excitement burst, and then he was coming in long streams all over Archer's taut abs. "Fuck."

Chuckling, Archer reached up to draw him down. Heedless of the spunk between them, he draped Owen over his chest and held him there, chin gently resting on the top of Owen's head. "You're okay?"

"I'm great."

"Mmmm. Yes you are."

## Chapter Thirteen

Gretchen was on her treadmill when Archer's car turned into the driveway. She'd situated her exercise equipment in front of the big bay window in the upstairs room she used as a combination workout room and sometimes office. It was a nice, bright space that she'd considered using as the master bedroom when she'd first moved in. But the fact that the other room was attached to the dressing room, two walk-in closets, and the bathroom with the shower stall and bathtub with jets had opted in favor of that room.

Smiling at the sight of the car, Gretchen pushed the appropriate buttons to begin the wind down of her workout. She'd need to take a shower, but that was okay, Archer would probably want to wait for Owen to arrive anyway. Had he brought food? Maybe she should call Owen and ask him to pick up lunch.

Glancing up, she nearly hurt herself on the treadmill by faltering her jogging rhythm. She wouldn't have to wait for Owen, because Owen was with Archer. There he was, getting out of Archer's Jaguar. She watched, still surprised, as he and Archer retrieved shopping bags from the trunk. Had Archer picked Owen up? But that didn't make sense. The two of them lived in completely different directions. Which left her to jump to the conclusion that they'd spent the night together. Without her.



"Okay, nothing really surprising," she chided herself, slowing down to a walk. "They're lovers now too."

She blinked at the red dials before her. That thought gave her a strange burble low in her belly. Was she turned on? Jealous? Whatever it was, she did her best to quell it. No use in the men seeing it when she wasn't sure what it was.

They started up the front walk together. Owen glanced up and saw her. She waved. He lifted a hand burdened with bags in an attempt at a greeting, smiling underneath his sunglasses. Archer shouldered a backpack she recognized as Owen's, then looked up and waved. Her heart did a flip at the sight of them together like that. A completely mismatched set that looked so very right together. *Gorgeous.*

They entered the house using Owen's key, and she heard them in the kitchen as she stepped off the treadmill. Glancing down at herself, she grimaced at the feel of sweat clinging to her skin and grabbed the towel that was draped over her weights rack. Despite the air-conditioning, some of the summer had crept into the air. She did need that shower. Or maybe a swim.

She was still considering when she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Archer's distinctive tread was followed by Owen's lighter touch. In just about everything, there was that light and dark contrast between them.

Archer came through the open door and headed straight for her. "Mmmm, sweaty woman."

She stopped him from a hug by spreading a hand over his chest. "Ugh, I'm all grimy."

He laughed and batted her hand aside. "Yeah, a *real* woman."

She chuckled as he folded her into his arms, succumbing to his kiss. It had been days since she'd felt him, so it did feel good. She opened her mouth to him and tasted the coffee he must have had just recently, a mocha cappuccino if she didn't miss her guess. He strayed from her mouth to kiss her neck. She shrieked when he turned a

seductive nuzzle into a bite just shy of really hurting. She swatted at his back, and he drew away, grinning.

"Beast."

"You know it."

She turned, and there was Owen, watching them with that dreamy expression of his.

"What are you grinning at?" she asked, crossing the room toward him.

He reached up to cup her face as she drew close. "You." He opened his mouth on hers, a little more aggressive than usual but still far less demanding than Archer.

She drew away, unable to stop smiling. "You're both too sweet, but I look awful." She stepped back, turning halfway so she could see Archer by her desk. "I need to take a shower."

"Want some help?" Archer suggested with a leer.

"No."

"We brought food," Owen said with a grin. "We'll have it ready when you get out."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

Archer sighed. "She's already hot and sweaty. Why shower when you're just going to get that way again?"

Rolling her eyes, she stepped back out of arm range as he headed for the door. "Owen, dear, would you please explain it to him?"

Owen laughed, following Archer out the door. "I'll try."

She grinned. There was a different feel between the two of them. Lighter. Companionable. Maybe it was a good thing they'd spent the night together.

*Maybe they're better off together.*

She mulled that over in the shower, knowing she was thinking too much and chiding herself for it. Still. How gay was Owen? Or Archer? Both of them seemed to

enjoy being with her but sex was fun, wasn't it? She'd never taken the opportunity but she imagined that sex with another woman could be quite enjoyable in the right context. But she'd spent weeks with Archer and had never felt anything to tell her the sexual heat between them was forced. And both Owen and Archer were firm in the fact that Owen had wanted her before anything had happened with Archer. Her experience in the music business and with Heaven Sent especially had her secure in the knowledge that bisexuality was real and not just a homo- or heterosexual person who couldn't make up his or her mind. Since she had nothing else to go on, she simply had to trust her men to be true to what they were feeling. She had to believe that they enjoyed each other and her.

Her men. For however long it lasted.

Secure in that knowledge, she finished her shower and donned a short, light summer dress decorated with pale yellow flowers. She didn't bother with underwear. Knowing Archer, it'd be gone shortly anyway. She could only hope to get something to eat first.

Rock music filled the air from the stereo in the living room. Sounded like one of her company's new groups. Owen must have put it on. It wasn't very loud, but it was just enough to cover the sound of her footsteps so that she caught them unaware. Stopping in the doorway to the kitchen, she got a chance to admire the sight of Owen trapped between the rock of the tiled island and the hard place that was Archer. The younger man's back was bent back over the counter, his forearms draped over Archer's shoulders. One hand full of a bag of bread and the other with a plastic bag of what looked like turkey or chicken. Gretchen let herself watch for a moment, admiring the play of lips on lips and the occasional glimpse of tongue within. Then she put on a smile and advanced into the room.

"Jeez, guys." She plucked the bags from Owen's grip as the boys startled apart. "The food's going to get all cold if you just keep making out."

"It's already cold," Owen assured her, amusement deepening his voice.

Archer turned to brace his butt up against the side of the counter. "There are many ways to heat things up."

She favored him with a leer over her shoulder. "After I eat."

He threw up his hands. "What *is* it with the two of you and eating before sex?"

She shared a grin with Owen as Archer passed between them on his way to the refrigerator.

"We need our strength to keep up with you, big man," she teased, stepping up to the counter.

He grunted. As she helped Owen put the rest of the food on the counter, Archer took a beer to the kitchen table and sat down with a sigh. The sigh gave her pause, made her look at him. On first glance, he looked relaxed. On closer look, he seemed tired.

She glanced at Owen to see him watching too. He felt her regard, exchanged another brief look with her, then dropped his attention to the spread before him. "So this is Ellen's band. How do you like the new song?"

She considered pressing the point but realized it was probably worthless. Judging from Owen's look, Archer wasn't talking anyway. "Sounds good." She made a mental note to corner him later. "Oh, artichokes! We *must* have these."

It was a pleasant afternoon. Lunch made its way into the living room, where it somehow became a good idea to shove aside her tables and spread out in the middle of her new carpet. The strawberries that had been provided for dessert proved to be a prelude to slow, exploring sex.

Lying draped over Owen's back as he lay in a similar position over Archer's chest, Gretchen had to wonder if sex with just one man would ever compare to this.

Archer sat up, gently dislodging Owen. "Time for a swim."

Owen groaned, curling into a ball.

Gretchen laughed, sitting up. "You're kidding."

"Nope. C'mon, you pansies."

"Fuck off," Owen muttered.

Gretchen shook her head. "No way."

Archer scoffed, turning toward the patio door. "You'll join me. You'll see."

"Hey, don't forget a towel!" She groaned when she heard the patio door slide, knowing he was ignoring her.

Smiling, she lay back down to curl around Owen's back. "You okay?"

"Fine." His fingers twined with hers just under his chin. "Just worn-out."

She closed her eyes and enjoyed a flashback of the two of them on their sides, Archer's cock pistoning wetly in Owen's ass. She hadn't been able to resist sucking Owen's cock, helping to drive him over the edge. Owen did love being in the middle. Made her wonder if she should give more consideration to double penetration. They'd talked about it briefly before, but she'd bowed out in fear. Anal had never done much for her in the past. But maybe now...

She put the thought aside for later, a different topic surfacing to chase away some of her hazy warmth. She sat up, leaning on her arm so she could peer at Owen's profile. "Owen?"

"Mmph?"

"What's wrong with Archer?"

He startled, eyes snapping open. "Huh?"

"He looks tired. What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing." He stared straight ahead, not at her. "Why?"

"I know he's been working long hours, and he sounds stressed. I just want to make sure everything's okay."

He blinked a few times, then finally rolled over onto his back to give her the full attention of those gorgeous blue-green eyes. "I think he's tired. I didn't realize until

yesterday how much he's in charge of. He's doing jobs that typically two or three people do."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Plus he's the owner of the company. He's got lots of connections he needs to keep."

She nodded, knowing that one firsthand. "Is there anything we can do to help, do you think?"

He swallowed, then shook his head. "Not right now. I don't think, no."

She placed her hand in the center of his chest. "You'll keep me updated?"

His nostrils flared a little. "Okay."

Smiling, she leaned down to kiss him. Strange, but she just knew that Owen would find out before she did if something was really wrong. She was the girl; wasn't that supposed to be her job? Not that she wanted it.

Pulling back, she giggled. "Know what?"

"What?"

She pinched his side gently. "I'm going swimming."

He sat up as she scrambled to her feet. "You're kidding me."

"Nope. Be a doll and bring out some towels, would you?"

All she heard was a long-suffering groan.

## Chapter Fourteen

Both Archer and Gretchen were lost in their own thoughts as he drove her home after yet another industry party. It was a comfortable silence; a rest after hours of chitchat and networking. Their seventh party in the last month. Business had exploded for her after she'd started putting out feelers for Heaven Sent, and Archer welcomed the chance to escort her since it scored more business contacts for him. It worked out nicely for both of them. It was also the only real time they spent together recently. Busy was good for both of their businesses but it didn't leave much time for their private lives.

She handed over the key to her gate as he drove up to it. "Are you coming in?"

He turned the key in the box and handed it back to her as the gate swung open. "I shouldn't." He drove the Jaguar forward. "I've got four sequences to debug before Ali gets in tomorrow morning."

She watched him drag a hand through his hair. Now that the party was over, his exhaustion showed through. He didn't even try to hide it anymore when they weren't in public. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made you come tonight."

He laughed. "You didn't make me come. I'm always glad to be your arm candy." He reached over and caught her hand. "But I missed a few hours of work that I need to make up for, that's all."

She smiled as he pulled to a stop. "And finally I meet the geek that you truly are."

He turned toward her, grinning. "I warned you."

"You did." She tipped her chin toward the windshield. Owen's car was parked in front of them, and the light was on in the bedroom. Given the hour, he was probably watching Wade Jenkins's *Night Owl* in her bed. He'd been staying over more and more as she got busy. It was convenient for both of them, and it meant that she got to be with him. Didn't do much to help their missing Archer. "You sure you don't want to come in? I know he wants to see you."

He glanced at the car too, sighed, but shook his head. "If I get inside with both of you, I won't leave."

"And that's bad," she teased, unfastening her seat belt.

"In this case, yeah."

Free of the belt, she could inch closer to him over the center console. Reaching up, she smoothed the backs of her fingers over his cheek. "You look exhausted."

He caught her hand and brought her knuckles to his lips. "It's part of the cycle. We need to get these sequences solid before we get your boys in the studio for digitizing."

"Whatever that means."

He chuckled. "I can explain."

She squeezed his hand. "Please don't. Owen may be able to make sense of your high-tech babble, but all I hear is the drone of the adults in a Peanuts cartoon."

That earned her a louder laugh and an easing of much of the tension around his eyes and mouth. He kissed the inside of her wrist tenderly, letting his tongue briefly press her pulse point. She leaned in, and his lips easily transferred from her wrist to her mouth. She opened to him, tracing his lips with her tongue. He barely responded and, finally, pulled away. It was soft and beautiful, but it was clear that nothing more was going to happen.

She pulled back with a sigh. "Okay. You need to work."



He released her hand. "Kiss Owen good night for me."

"I will." She opened her door and paused after placing one designer sandal on the concrete. "We should all try and get together this weekend since I'm going out of town."

He snapped his fingers. "That's right. You leave for London on Monday?"

"Sunday. Won't be back for nine days."

"Right. How about Saturday?"

She smiled and leaned back to put her mouth back in range. "That sounds lovely."

He took the hint and kissed her again, and they both smiled as she righted herself. She got out of the car and stood waving as he started the car back up and reversed down the driveway.

Suppressing a yawn, she headed up the walk to her front door. No signs of life downstairs, which meant Owen hadn't heard them drive up. That wasn't odd. He'd been up early, after all.

She made it upstairs to find that her guess was correct. Owen lay on his belly across her bed, his head toward the footboard with a pillow bunched up under most of his upper half, sleeping soundly. She stood in the doorway, admiring the sleek line of his bare back and the swell of his ass in cutoff gray sweatpants. His hair obscured his face, reminding her that she should suggest he get it cut. It was looking a little ragged, and while she happened to find the look endearing, if he was serious about taking on clients of his own, he really needed to look a little older.

She picked up the remote from where it lay on the mattress beside him and switched off the cable. In tune with the sound, Owen jerked awake as soon as it was gone. "What? Huh? Oh!" He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Hey."

Rather than lean down, she waited for him to get up and kneel on the bed. "Hi." She draped her arms over his shoulders and kissed him. "That's from Archer."

He glanced at the door behind her. "He didn't come in?"

She kissed his cheek, then drew away to turn around. "No. He still had work to do. Unzip me?"

"He had work tonight?" He slid his palms over her bare skin when it was exposed to "help" her slip the dress over her shoulders.

She stepped away before he could take the caress further. "He told me what he was doing, but you know me. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about."

His voice followed her into the walk-in closet. Then so did he. "He couldn't even come in and say hello?"

She stepped out of the dress and reached for a hanger. "As he put it, if he came in, he wasn't going to leave."

"And that's bad?"

She laughed. "That's what I said."

He lifted the dress and hanger from her hands, freeing her to see to the rest of her clothing. "The three of us haven't been together for a while," he commented carefully as he hung it up near the doorway.

She sat at the dressing table that sat along one wall of the closet. "I know. But he thinks he can be free Saturday."

"You told him you were going out of town?"

"I did. That's why he's going to try for Saturday."

"Good." He gathered up each piece of jewelry as she set it on the vanity surface. "Let's just hope he doesn't sleep. Although, he probably needs it."

"Yes, he does."

His eyes caught hers in the mirror. "So do you."

She arched a brow as he turned his back toward the tall, thin cabinet where her jewelry was stored. "Are you saying I look tired?"

"Look? No. But you are. You're both working too hard."

"I have you to make sure I don't do that."

He snorted, opening the appropriate little drawers to put each item away. "As if you listen to me."

She watched his reflection as she brushed out her hair. "I listen to you."

That got her a disbelieving look.

"I do."

He shrugged but didn't argue. She frowned as he disappeared, putting down her brush to turn so she could unhook the stockings from her garters. He returned with two sets of her typical sleepwear in hand and held them up. "You want the blue or the orange?"

She carefully slid her stockings down her legs. "Owen, you don't have to help me get undressed."

"Oh come on; that's one of the best duties I have."

"That is not part of your job."

"It should be."

She snatched the blue nightie from his hand. "Brat."

Grinning, he left her and didn't return. She heard him leave the bedroom.

He returned after she'd visited the bathroom to remove her makeup and brush her teeth. He set the hot cup of tea he was cradling on the nightstand.

"You really are too good to me."

He crawled over her legs to the other side of the bed. "I've got to make sure you keep me around."

She risked spilling tea over herself, swatting his ass as it passed. "You don't have to wait on me to get me to keep you around."

"Oh?" He settled on his side next to her, his head propped up on his arm. "I have other good qualities?"

She froze, caught by the warmth of his gaze. There he was, young and lean, nicely toned muscles, and smooth, creamy skin. His worn cutoffs rode low, exposing the jut of

his hip bone and that sexy-ass crease of muscle and bone where belly, groin, and thigh met. She licked her lips and put aside the mug. "Some."

He stayed where he was as she crawled down to draw her tongue down that groin groove until she was nuzzling the waistband of the sweats. Sighing, he rolled onto his back as she added her fingers to the nuzzling, easing his waistband down. She pressed her nose into his freshly fragrant skin as she pushed his cutoffs farther down. His cock nestled quiet and soft between his thighs but began to perk up as she ran her tongue over the dry, velvety skin.

She was tired and sleep was encroaching, but Owen was simply too delicious to resist. His cock swelled until it was too big to fit in her mouth, and the sweet little moans that bled from his lips spurred her on. When he was full and hard, she wet her fingers and rooted down, behind his balls.

"Wait..."

"No." She squeezed his cock with her free hand as her fingertip found his entrance. "Come for me, baby."

He groaned, working one of his knees free of his sweats to bend it, giving her better access. She swallowed as much of him as she could while working her finger into the warmth of his body. She let her imagination go, picturing her fingers as a cock, working her way into him. Ever since she'd started watching Archer take him, she was obsessed. And he certainly did seem to love being filled. She rode him through it, rubbing that spot that drove him nuts while his cock grew in her mouth. He clutched the sheets underneath them, crying out as he drove himself down onto her fingers. So tight. He came in a rush of salty cream that filled her mouth and slid thickly down her throat.

Satisfied, she released him and crawled back up his body. Heavy-lidded eyes looked more green than blue in the lamplight as he smiled at her, his hands up to caress her sides.

"Give me a minute," he murmured in between kisses.

"No need. I'm not worth anything tonight."

"But..."

She settled down beside him, pillowing her head on his shoulder. "Not tonight, sweetie." She yawned, snuggling close to his warmth. He was better than any body pillow. "Maybe in the morning."

## Chapter Fifteen

"Not another delay?" Some of his panic came through in the near whine.

Archer's fingers didn't stop flying over his keyboard, his eyes glued to the monitor. "Don't test me, Owen."

Owen stood before Archer's desk, staring at the man's profile. His thick black hair was getting long around his ears and neck; that and the ragged state of his Vandyke—complete with stubble on the rest of his jaw—told Owen more than anything that the man was not having a good day.

Or a good week. Or heck, a good month. When the true work of game development had started, Archer had retreated into his own world. Only through talking occasionally to the men working for Archer had Owen learned that the craziness was usual. The situation this time was worse. Archer's team was woefully understaffed and ill equipped for such an endeavor. They could do it, Brad had assured him, but it'd be a crunch. Brad had said it with an excited gleam in his eyes, clearly looking forward to the challenge. But he didn't have the responsibilities that Archer did. The boss man was not only serving as producer—the face man who kept up communications with the outside world—he was working triple duty as designer and one of the lead

programmers. As Brad put it, this game was pretty much Archer's from the ground up. It was not an ideal situation.

"I'm going to have to tell Gretchen."

Archer's palm slammed on the desktop, making pen cups rattle. "No!" Finally, he spun to face Owen. The strain showed at the corners of his mouth and eyes as he visibly smothered his glare. He took a deep breath. "You tell her, and she'll panic. She might pull them out."

"You don't know that." Owen tipped a coffee cup toward him to see the dregs of its cold contents. *How many cups has he had today?* "She'd probably want to help."

"No." Archer snatched the cup from him and set it out of reach. "It's not her problem. It's *not* a problem. I don't want to get her involved." He ran a hand through his mussed hair and pushed himself up to sit straight. "It's fine. Everything's fine."

Owen narrowed his eyes. "Just saying that isn't going to make it happen."

The left side of Archer's mouth lifted in a partial sneer for a brief second before he suppressed it. His eyes locked on Owen's with glittering intent. "She's got enough to worry about. What's she going to do about it when she's in London?"

Owen dropped his gaze, toying with the strap of the backpack he had slung over his shoulder. The only reason he hadn't told Gretchen about it yet was that Archer had convinced him not to. *"She's busy. There's no use telling her. We'll be in the studio soon."* But "soon" had become terribly flexible, and things were now two weeks overdue for Heaven Sent to do their part in the creation of the game sequences. Owen had heard snatches of conversation from Brad and the others too, hinting that there was some sort of undue pressure that threatened the company. They wouldn't go into detail when he tried to pry.

Archer heaved a sigh and got up from his chair. "I'm sorry, baby. I know you want to tell her, but it's really for the best. Telling her will just cause problems."

Owen wasn't sure. The guys in the band had been very understanding, but he didn't know how long that would last. They had busy schedules, after all.

The urge to flinch from Archer's touch was just as strong as the urge to melt into him. The dichotomy kept Owen still, his fingertips brushing the near surface of Archer's desk, while the man himself circled around it and came up behind him. Owen's backpack slipped from his shoulder; then Archer's warmth pressed up against him. The urge to melt took over, and Owen let the backpack drop to the carpet and reached up to grip the forearms that came around to band his chest.

"Everything's fine," Archer murmured in his ear, holding him close. "I know it looks bad, but this is the way my business is. It's the price I pay to not work for one of the publishing companies."

Owen sighed. Archer had explained it to him one night. Brad had explained it to him on a separate occasion. He'd done his own research. As an independent third-party developer, there was a lot more on the line for them, but the monetary benefits and creative independence were also much greater. "Okay. But what am I supposed to tell them about the delay?"

Archer's arms gave an involuntary squeeze. His forehead bumped the back of Owen's skull. "Just this one more. We'll have the studio a week from Tuesday."

"You said that before."

"Damn it." Archer's arms fell, and his warmth backed away. "I know. But it *will* happen this time."

Owen bit the inside of his lip rather than harp on it. He turned halfway to watch Archer blindly staring out the darkened window. "One more time, and I have to tell Gretchen."

"Owen..."

"No, Archer. She's going to flip already if she finds out I knew about this." He turned to face the other man, willing himself to be strong. "The guys have been good about it, but Brent and Hell are delaying a trip because of this, and Luc's schedule is starting to get unmanageable. If I don't tell her, they will." He shook his head but felt the need to add: "You're already in breach of contract."



Archer's nostrils flared, his eyes narrowing a little before he brought them back under control. "Fine. If Tuesday's a no-go, you can tell G whatever you want." Owen hated the flat, cold tone in Archer's voice.

"Or you could tell her."

Archer spoke through gritted teeth. "Don't. Push it."

Owen wanted to argue, but even his limited time with Archer had taught him he was no match for Archer's will. "Fine."

"Fine."

Archer stormed back around to the other side of the desk, dropping heavily into his chair. The monitor drew his gaze like a magnet, and his fingers landed on the keys like they belonged there. Before having seen it, Owen wouldn't have believed Archer was a computer nerd, but when he was at his workstation, it became glaringly apparent.

Owen bent to pick up his backpack. "You want company tonight?"

Archer startled away from the monitor, tried to cover it by shaking his head. "I can't."

He'd suspected as much. Shouldering his pack, he turned from the door. "Okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He was at the door when Archer caught up to him. One big hand closed on his forearm and yanked him around. He stumbled eagerly into Archer's kiss, winding his arms around Archer's neck to feed at his mouth. Strong hands slid over his back, one reaching down to cup one side of his ass. Owen had purposely come after hours to make sure they were alone in the office, all Archer's team long gone home.

"You sure?" Owen breathed into Archer's mouth, holding on when the bigger man made a feeble attempt to pull back.

Archer's lips brushed his as he spoke: "I can't go home yet."

He cupped Archer's jaw, nipping at the beard-shrouded chin. "Fuck me here."

Archer shuddered, his grip convulsing on Owen's ass.

"Please," Owen begged before Archer could say no. "It's been so long."

"It'd have to be quick."

He shoved his hips into Archer's, making the other man aware of his hard-on. "Fuck yeah."

"Okay." An answering hard-on pressed back at him. "Wait. Damn. No lube."

Owen dug into his pocket for one of the single packets he'd bought at the convenience store on the way to Archer's office. He'd never been a Boy Scout, but he did believe in "be prepared."

Archer growled when he held it up. "You little..." Not bothering to finish a needless comment, Archer again grabbed Owen's arm and shoved him toward the desk. "Get your pants down."

The door closed and locked behind him as he rushed to the desk. "What about the window?"

Archer already had the cord for the blinds in his hands. "Got it. Pants."

Grinning, Owen hastened to obey. He tossed his backpack onto the couch and fumbled with his jeans. A glance showed him Archer working on his own fly. Eagerly, Owen dropped his jeans and lifted the plastic sachet of lube to his mouth.

He got it open; then Archer plucked it from his fingers. "Bend over."

Gripping the edge of the desk, he watched over his shoulder as Archer poured the clear liquid on his palm, then smeared it on his cock. The packet got tossed aside as Archer's dry hand smacked Owen's bare ass. At least it looked like Archer was eager too. Owen faced forward again when wet and dry fingers parted the cheeks of his ass so two of the wet ones could slide into his eager hole. His needy moan filled the air.

"Yeah," Archer groaned as Owen shoved into his hand. Two fingers twisted, searching out and finding that spot that set every one of Owen's nerve endings on fire. "God, you're hot."

Owen whimpered. Unable to resist any longer, he freed one of his hands so he could reach down to fist his own prick. He wasn't going to rush things—not if this might be his only chance with Archer for days—but he needed some attention.

Then the head of Archer's cock pushed at his anus. He squeezed the head of his own cock and pushed back into Archer, needing to feel that thick cock filling him.

"Baby." The endearment was barely heard through Archer's sigh of relief. Owen wanted to believe Archer had missed him, that Archer needed him too. He let himself believe it as Archer adjusted to the fit of him.

Archer's fingers dug into his hips, and he began to thrust. No preamble, no foreplay, just pure fucking. It turned Owen on far more than he'd imagined. In no time, he had to let go his own prick so he wouldn't come. Archer's fingers dug into the back of his neck, pushing him down until his chest was flush with the desk. Owen held on for dear life, his cheek plastered against the papers scattered across the desktop.

As Archer had warned, it was quick. Both of them were too keyed up to last long. Archer's pounding faltered, his fingers digging into Owen's back as a curse bled from his lips. Owen shuddered with Archer as he came, drinking in the sound and feel of his lover, memorizing it so he could relive it later.

"Fuck." Archer shook, his weight pressing Owen into the desk.

Owen stayed very still, listening to Archer recover. Then Archer growled and pulled out. Before Owen could protest, he was spun around yet again and Archer was on his knees. Owen could only gasp as the heat of Archer's mouth closed around his cock. Like the fucking, there was no teasing, just eye-popping suction. Owen gripped Archer's skull, his fingers combing through thick black silk for just one heart-stopping moment before he came.

Archer stood slowly, brushing kisses over Owen's torso through his shirt. He paused for a more thorough exploration at the base of Owen's throat before working his way up to Owen's mouth.

*I love you.* The words beat at the back of Owen's throat, trying to force their way out. He sucked on Archer's tongue in a desperate attempt not to say them. He was not at all sure how the words would be received, and he was deathly afraid of rejection. He did *not* want to be cast aside as the poor, love-struck kid. So he swallowed his words along with Archer's taste and chided himself for wanting more.

Archer drew back, cupping Owen's jaw and nipping his lip one last time. "I'm sorry."

Owen grabbed his wrists to draw them down. "I know. You've got work to do."

"Yes."

Owen forced an impish grin, poking Archer's belly, bare beneath his rucked-up T-shirt. "At least maybe you're a little bit more relaxed?"

Archer laughed, backing away. "Yeah."

They didn't talk as they reassembled their clothing. Owen made a brief trip to the bathroom next door to Archer's office. By the time he got back, Archer was seated behind his desk again.

Suppressing a sigh, Owen put on a smile and went behind the desk for a brief kiss good-bye. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Archer nodded, typing furiously. "You bet."

Shouldering his pack, Owen left. He shouldn't take it personally. Archer was busy. Archer had a huge, crushing weight of responsibility on him. Owen should leave him alone. But...

He made it to his car and drove away. Late-night traffic was light, so it did nothing to distract him from his thoughts. The idea of loving Archer wasn't a new one in his head. He'd come to that conclusion a week or so ago. He couldn't pinpoint when or what had made him acknowledge it, but it was there. Maybe it was watching Archer struggling and feeling the pressure in his own heart, or the wanting to help the man even though he knew he couldn't.

Owen drove up the drive of Gretchen's house. He felt more at home there than anywhere these days, even with her out of town. He parked his car and walked up the path to the front door. He would have come the next morning anyway. He was in charge of picking up the mail and watering the plants and such while she was gone. What did it matter if he came the night before?

He wandered upstairs, toed out of his sneakers, then fell into her bed. He clawed back the spread that covered her pillows and buried his face in one, desperate for her scent. Because here was the other problem. Much as he loved Archer, he was still in love with Gretchen. He missed her terribly, and not just because she was out of the country. He looked forward to her calls every day, even when they were strictly business. He felt better after hearing her calm voice, even in the midst of a flurry of activity. It tore his heart out to keep a secret from her, but Archer was probably right. She'd think of Heaven Sent first. They were her primary focus. Always. Owen wasn't sure she'd even put her personal life above their needs. And he still didn't know if she needed him, really.

Groaning, he kept his face buried in her pillow and fretted himself to sleep.

## Chapter Sixteen

Gretchen settled in the backseat of the Town Car with a sigh. The seat shook slightly as the driver shut the trunk on her luggage. Soon she'd be home. She was okay with traveling, but this trip had been exhausting. More so than it should have been. Six months effectively out of the scene had thrown her off more than she'd realized. She didn't even have the boys with her and yet she'd been going nonstop talking to people who wanted to put them on their schedule. She allowed herself a satisfied smile. Her boys were still hot, even after nearly a year of no engagements.

As the driver climbed into the front seat and started the car, she pulled out her phone and turned it on. She should take a break, at least until she got home, but if Carson Tyne called, she wanted to know about it. The event scheduler was the epitome of stuck-up Brit, but he did know everyone in Europe who needed knowing, and he'd mentioned a number of sweet-sounding plans.

Two voice mails. Checking the missed-calls list, she saw that one was, indeed, Mr. Tyne but the other was Brent. Without bothering to check the message, she dialed him.

"Hey, Gretch," he answered after a few rings.

"Hey, just got off the plane and saw you called. What's up?"

"Nothing that urgent. It can wait until tomorrow if you just got in."

"Don't be silly. I've got a half-hour drive home. What's up?"

He sighed. "Basically, I need to know if these delays with the game are going to keep happening."

She frowned. "What?"

"The imp's got us lined up with a short deal in Brussels that we'd love to take, but if this keeps getting pushed back... I need to know if we've got to cancel."

"Hold up. What delays?"

Pause. "Delays with the studio."

"What delays?"

"You didn't know?"

"Know what? Shouldn't you guys be done by now?"

"Uh, yeah. Except we haven't even gone in yet."

"Excuse me?"

"Wow. You didn't know."

"I most certainly did not. What happened? What's the holdup?"

"Beats me. Haven't you talked to your boyfriend?"

*Which one?* "Why don't you tell me what you know?"

"Not much. We've gotten three calls over the last two weeks postponing the time we're supposed to be in the studio."

"All of you or just you and Hell?"

"All of us."

"And no one told me?"

"Hey, Owen called. I figured if it was him, you had to know."

Ice filled her veins. "Owen?"

Brent whistled softly. "Oh, man, why do I get the feeling this is not good?"

"Because it's not." She took a deep breath to gain a modicum of control. "All right, you tell me what you know and what you need, and I'll take it from there."

\* \* \* \* \*

*How convenient.* Owen's car was in her driveway. Not surprising. He'd known when she was coming in, known her preference to take a Town Car from the airport rather than having someone pick her up. He probably had an early dinner waiting for her too. Perfect little homemaker, that one. *Even though he keeps secrets from me.*

Anger made her movements choppy as she climbed out of the Town Car and rummaged in her purse for her wallet. Anger about the deception was foremost, but she was also quite angry that such a dark cloud had to fall over her homecoming. She'd looked forward to a nice dinner with Owen. She'd wanted to call Archer from the car to see if he'd join them. She missed them. Both of them. The last two months had been mad with work, but she'd done some soul-searching during this last trip. She'd wanted to reconnect, to find out just how deep this rabbit hole went between the three of them. Because, for the life of her, it hurt her to think of being without either of them. Owen was a piece of her heart now, and Archer, damn him, had gotten under her skin. She'd decided that maybe Archer had the right of it, that maybe there was something to this threesome biz.

That was, of course, before she found out they'd been lying to her.

As she handed over a tip to the driver, the front door opened. Dressed in jeans and a white, long-sleeved T-shirt, Owen looked good enough to eat. His bright smile spoke of his happiness to see her and his eager step brought him quickly to her side. Despite her pique, she lifted her arms to wind them around his slim shoulders and accepted his kiss. Heedless of the driver who waited to help get her bags inside, she clutched Owen's hair and ate at his mouth like it was the last time she would taste him.

*It might be.*



"Wow," he murmured when she finally allowed him to breathe. Aqua eyes darkened to ocean blue in the shadows, sparkling. "I missed you too."

She swallowed and nodded, stepping back from him. She didn't quite trust herself to speak. Not yet. Not with an audience.

The men picked up her three bags, and she shouldered her carry-on. The driver left them with thanks in the foyer. The scent of curry filled the air. As she'd suspected, Owen had provided dinner.

*Why'd he lie?* She didn't know he had. She didn't know anything except what Brent had told her, and he'd admitted that he hadn't known much. Just that there had been delays. How much did this have to do with the workload Archer had been shouldering lately? She needed to know all the facts before she said anything hasty.

"I got you some shrimp curry from that Thai place you like so much."

"Smells divine. I'm going upstairs to change."

She stopped a few steps up, seeing him watching her.

He tilted his head to the side. "Everything okay?"

She nodded, but she doubted her expression was reassuring. "I'll be right down."

She considered taking a shower but decided against it. It wasn't in her to let something like this drag on. So, changed into a T-shirt and sweats, she went back downstairs. He had the food set up on the kitchen counter as they often ate. God, she'd gotten so used to having him around. He sat on the far side of the counter and had drawn up one of the high stools to the near side for her. A flavored water sat with the cap already cracked open beside her plate.

"How was your flight?" His voice was careful. He knew something was wrong.

"Good. Long. Thank God for first class."

"No kidding."

She took a few bites, but the savory curry that she usually loved was like school paste in her mouth. "Have you talked to Archer?"

"I saw him last night."

"I didn't get to talk to him much while I was away. Are things going okay?"

"Uh, yeah."

"And the boys? Are they done with their part for the game yet?"

Pause. He sat, fork in hand, staring at his food.

She kept her voice calm. "Owen?"

"Um. No."

She set her fork down, lest she stab him with it. "No? Weren't they supposed to be long done by now?"

"Yeah. But..."

"But?"

He played the tines of his fork over the noodles on his plate, fidgeting in his seat. "There have been some delays."

"Delays."

"Uh, yeah."

"What kind of delays?"

"Archer was having trouble with the space he was renting."

"What kind of trouble?"

Another pause.

"Owen."

He set the fork down, his gaze creeping toward her plate but not managing to reach her. "It's all worked out now. They're going into the studio one week from today, for sure."

She placed her hands flat on the surface of the counter. "They were supposed to be done and gone already."

"Right."

"Owen. Look at me."

With difficulty, he finally raised guilty eyes to hers. That said it all.

She scowled, anger flaring. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He fidgeted. "Archer said he had it worked out."

"Obviously, he didn't."

"I didn't think it'd take as long as it did."

"That is beside the point. It was your *job* to tell me."

"If I had, you'd have pulled them."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

Words spilled from Owen's anxious lips. "If I'd told you that things were delayed, you'd have pulled Heaven Sent out of the contract, and Archer really *needs* this..." He slapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing."

"Owen."

"Nothing!"

She scowled, heat rising up to press at her eardrums. "Owen, I trusted you to keep me in the know about this."

His gaze dropped with his hand. "I know. But it's fine, I..."

"No." She stabbed at the counter with her finger, making her point. "The minute something threw off their schedule, you should have called me."

"You were so busy, and Archer said..."

"No. You know good and damn well that those boys are my life and I need to know when something, *anything*, adversely affects them."

"I know that." The slight grimace that passed over his features ratcheted up her anger.

"Goddamn it! What made you think I'd do something drastic just because of one problem?"

He scowled at her fork.

"Answer me."

"Archer told me not to tell you."

His words punched at her heart. "What Archer told you shouldn't have anything to do with it. I don't believe you'd hide this from me."

"It's not a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal. I need to know that I can trust you."

"You *can* trust me." He was getting a little of his backbone back. "I'd never do anything to..." He stopped, and she let him chew on what he couldn't say truthfully. He shook his head. "He said it would be fine."

"So you chose to side with him?"

"It wasn't about taking sides."

"It was absolutely about taking sides!" She shoved off her barstool, uncomfortably aware that what she'd just said sounded terribly childish. "You chose to keep secrets from me. Secrets that could hurt my business. *Our* business. How am I supposed to recommend that you move up when you can't handle something like this?"

"I *was* handling it. That's what I was *doing*." He fumbled off his own stool to follow her into the living room. "You were busy; you barely had time to eat or sleep, so I chose not to tell you about this and handle it."

At the fireplace, she rounded on him. "You did a piss-poor job of it."

His eyes widened, and you could almost hear the pop of the bubble bursting. She'd gone too far, but damn it, he deserved a dressing down.

"Are you firing me?"

"Should I?"

There was too much visible white around the blue-green in his eyes, too much tension in his lithe body. His fingers closed into fists, then slowly unclenched.

"I don't want to," she said before he could respond, "but you have to know that this changes things."

"Just at work?"

"No." She had to be honest, didn't she? "I'm beyond hurt that you and Archer would believe I would act without consideration of his issues. I know he's been under pressure. I would have worked..."

"No, you wouldn't. We both know Heaven Sent is your top priority. Everything else—everything—takes second stage."

She couldn't deny it. That fact had dissolved most of the personal relationships she'd developed in her life, and they both knew it. "I guess we know where we stand."

He turned. "I guess so."

She listened to him head upstairs and knew he was getting his stuff. She stood there, wanting to go after him, wanting to tell him...what? That she forgave him? She didn't. That it was okay? It wasn't. Even if the issues behind it were minor, he'd kept it from her and that hurt.

Minutes later, he appeared in the foyer, bag slung over his shoulder. He paused under the arch that led into the living room. "Should I come to work in the morning?"

She swallowed. "Take the rest of the week off. We both need some time to cool down."

"Am I fired?"

"No. But we'll need to have a serious talk."

He nodded. Spine rigidly straight, he turned toward the front door. He pulled his keys out of the pack pocket as he opened the door. Pausing, he fiddled with the keys, then set something down with a *click* on the side table.

She closed her eyes as he left, knowing that he'd left his key.

## Chapter Seventeen

Owen stared at the main room of his apartment, hardly recognizing it. He'd spent so little time there in the past two months that it hardly felt like home. The magazines on the table in front of the couch were old; there was still an empty glass on the counter in the kitchenette that had been there for weeks. He'd only been here to pick up clothes and, once or twice, to sleep. All his other time had been spent at work, at Gretchen's, or at Archer's.

He supposed he needed to get used to the apartment again.

Not bothering to turn on the light since the dull yellow streaming in from the streetlamp outside was ample, he crossed the main room into the bedroom. That area looked a little more lived in since he had come through to swap clothing, but he'd even done most of his laundry at Gretchen's. He'd eventually have to go get the rest of his stuff. He flopped on the bed, facedown in the pillow. *That's if I'm ever going back there.*

She was pissed. He'd never seen her that pissed, not even when she'd dressed down the occasional caller at work or the workmen who had ruined the first couch that had been brought to her. She was always levelheaded.

*Except when you betray her.*

He groaned, curling into himself. He'd *known* keeping the delays from her was a mistake. Why had he listened to Archer?

*Because you wanted to help Archer all you could.*

Another groan tore from him. Loving two people just sucked! Especially when they were both as strong-willed as Archer and Gretchen. It was amazing they hadn't argued much before this.

*They haven't argued yet.* He sat up, his hand going to the phone tucked in his pocket. Archer didn't know.

He dialed. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Archer, but he needed to warn the man that Gretchen might be on the warpath. She might be on the phone with Johnnie right now, suggesting that Heaven Sent pull out of the game. What would that do to Archer?

"Archer Thanos. Leave a message."

Owen scowled. Archer probably had his phone off. He did that when he was coding sometimes. "Archer, it's Owen. Call me back. G knows about the delays in the studio time. I-I'm sorry. I don't know how she found out. I didn't tell her." *Pathetic.* "Anyway, she's pissed, so...I don't know. Call me."

He shut off the phone and tossed it to the side of his full-size mattress. Would Archer call back? Probably not for a while. He did know that Gretchen was due back today, but they'd already talked. He was working late, yet again. This past week had been particularly bad. Owen had barely heard from him since that time in his office Thursday night. Owen had a feeling there was more going on than just the substantial workload but Archer wasn't telling.

Owen stared at his ceiling. He and Gretchen should have just finished dinner. They should be curled up watching television while she drifted off into a nap. Or better yet, making slow, sweet love to reacquaint themselves with each other's bodies.

Just the thought made him curl back into a ball. *Stupid!*

He lay there for a long time. Fell asleep. He woke, and the bedside clock told him that it was almost midnight. He checked his phone. No messages. Archer either didn't know or was too pissed at Owen to call back. Dejected, Owen got out of bed only long enough to get out of his clothes and brush his teeth. Then he was crawling back between the sheets, willing sleep again so he didn't have to think about how badly he had screwed things up.



## Chapter Eighteen

"What did you do?"

Gretchen glanced up from where she sat in Owen's desk chair, but seeing Ellen in the doorway, resumed her search. "What?"

The door shut, and Ellen's heels thumped softly across the carpet. "Why is Jane telling me that Owen may not be coming back?"

Giving up the search of the desk drawers, Gretchen turned back to the keyboard and monitor. The login page stared at her. "Damn. What's his password?"

"Gretchen?"

No help for it. She logged in as herself. Most of her online business was conducted on her laptop or on her iPhone, but since it was *her* office after all, it stood to reason that she had access to her assistant's computer, right?

Ellen sighed. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get to my calendar."

"What's wrong with your iPhone?"

"Nothing. I wanted to see the full thing."

"What's wrong with your laptop?"

She clicked to open a browser. "I want to see Owen's e-mail."

"You do realize that you don't have to be on his machine to see his e-mail, right?"

She paused, staring as the browser opened up. "I don't?"

"No. But you *do* need his password. Or you need to get Jim to change it for you." Jim being the office's part-time tech guy. "Why do you need his password? Why isn't he here?"

Gretchen stared at the browser's e-mail login page. All right, she hadn't fully considered this. She'd never tried to get into anyone's e-mail before, and hers had been set up to just run with only the occasional need to put in her password. "Shit."

"What's going on?"

She shoved away from the desk, standing. "We had a disagreement."

"A large one, I gather."

Ellen was on her heels as she returned to her own desk. "Where do I find Jim's phone number?" When no answer was forthcoming, she glared up at the other woman. "Well?"

Ellen stood her ground, folding her arms over her chest. "Tell me what's going on, and I may help you."

"You work for me."

"Your point?"

Gretchen growled, glaring at the list of her own e-mails. So many new ones. Did she get this many in a day? How much exactly had Owen been filtering for her? And Ellen before him? Suddenly, she felt very ineffectual. "I don't have time for this. I've got dozens of things to do today, and no assistant to help me."

"Tell me what I want to know, and I may consider resuming my old job for a day or so."

Caught. Emitting a small scream, Gretchen leaned forward to cover her eyes with her palms. "We had a fight."

"It's a 'fight' now?"

"He lied to me."

"What about?"

Irritated, Gretchen opened one of her many e-mails and scanned it. "This goddamn game of Archer's." *Do I even know this person?* "There were repeated scheduling delays, and neither Owen or Archer chose to tell me about them."

"Were they handling them?"

"I don't know, do I? I just found out about it. *I've* been out of the country. But I got a call from Brent yesterday, and he was concerned."

"'Concerned.' Not mad?"

"Oh please. Brent doesn't get mad unless it's something directly to do with the music."

"Are any of the other boys mad?"

"I haven't talked to them."

"What?"

"I was a little distracted last night."

"By what?"

She gripped the edge of her desk rather than throw her laptop across the room. "He *lied* to me! He didn't tell me just because Archer asked him to. They jeopardized the boys, and I will not have that."

"Oh please. It doesn't sound like he jeopardized anything. Archer, maybe, but not Owen. And what's the big deal anyway? Sounds like a simple breach of contract to me. The boys can go on their merry way."

Gretchen's wrath turned on Ellen. "He should have told me."

"What would you have done about it? You've been busy the last few weeks. Maybe he thought he could have handled it."

"Obviously he didn't."

"That's beside the point. Maybe he was trying to spare you what he thought was a minor thing."

"Not his call."

Ellen held up a finger, her brows arching so that she looked like a schoolteacher. "I beg to differ, m'dear. *It is* his call. It used to be mine when I had his job."

"You knew what you were doing."

"And he doesn't?"

Gretchen chewed on her tongue, now glaring at the smooth wooden pen holder on the edge of her desk.

"So that's it. You don't think he can do it, do you?"

"He's not ready."

"How the hell do you know if you don't let him try?"

"I did. He kept this from me."

"No. You didn't. You didn't think about it. You left it to him. You're just pissed off when things go wrong that you can't handle."

Gretchen both hated and loved that Ellen knew her so well.

"What about the game? Is it in trouble?"

"I don't know." The other half of her night had been filled with worry about Archer. She'd picked up the phone to call him a dozen times and stopped herself each time, convinced she was too upset. But in her calmer moments, she'd had to worry about him. What were the delays all about? What had been behind Owen's outburst of Archer's needing the Heaven Sent game. Was it something to do with his business? "I was going to talk to him and the boys this morning, but when I got in I had seventy e-mails. Seventy!"

"That's pretty normal."

"Is it?"

Ellen laughed. "After the crap's weeded out and the lesser ones are answered, you might see twenty. You see, he's already been filtering stuff for you. Do you accuse him of lying there?"

Gretchen glared. "That's different."

"Is it? Sounds to me like he was doing his job. Would you be this pissed if you weren't dating?"

"This has nothing to do with that."

"Doesn't it? Aren't you really pissed because he and Archer kept a secret from you? Jealous much?"

Gretchen leaned back in her chair. "Fuck you."

"Ah, we've stooped to profanity. That means I must have struck a nerve."

She stared at the manicured fingernails of one hand. "The two of them are better off together anyway."

"Whoa. Where'd that come from?"

She sighed. "This threesome thing is too confusing. Archer and I are far too busy and self-centered to keep up with it, and it's not fair to Owen. Besides, I've seen them together. They're very right for each other."

"What about you?"

She shrugged. "What about me? I got to enjoy the two of them for a while."

"You sure that's how they feel? You've talked to them?"

She snorted. "Talking to them is a full-time job."

"That's what you do in relationships."

"Exactly. I don't have time for a relationship."

"Coward."

"Maybe."

"Well, you're going to need to talk to Owen eventually."

"I gave him the week off."

"Damn, you really are a cold bitch."

Heaving another sigh, she sat forward at her computer. "Probably. Now leave me alone so I can figure out what I need to do today."

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't talk to Archer or Owen for the rest of the week. She called Archer on Thursday but only got his voice mail. Trying to call his office directly didn't work either, because the young man who answered the phone said he wasn't in-house and his cell phone was a better option for catching him. So, Archer was avoiding her. She left a scathing message on his voice mail Friday warning him that he'd better call to confirm studio time by noon on Monday or she would exercise her options through breach of contract and tell the boys the game was a no-go. It hurt her to leave the message. She'd left many in her time as manager of Heaven Sent, but never had she taken any personally.

It was a lonely weekend without her lovers. It hit home how much she'd come to depend on Owen's presence and look forward to Archer's free time. She missed male laughter that wasn't anyone from Heaven Sent, and that bugged her enormously. It bugged her even more when she became convinced that they were together. Why shouldn't they be? They were coconspirators, weren't they? Owen felt close enough to Archer to keep his secrets from her, secrets that affected her life directly. They were probably together planning just what to say to her on Monday. She wondered how businesslike it would be. Would she ever get to hear Archer's side of the story? It wasn't completely out of the question for Archer to write her out of his life completely. Just like that. Obviously, he hadn't fallen in love like she had.

And she had. There was no other explanation. She had avoided it as long as she could, but being without them convinced her that she'd fallen in love with them. Both of them. It couldn't hurt this much if she didn't.

The weekend was filled with manic workouts followed by ice-cream binges and hours crashed in front of the television trying to turn her brain to mush, so she didn't have to think. She'd deal with it all on Monday.

Monday came and made it all so very much worse.

Johnnie picked up on the third ring. "Hey, babe. What's up?"

Gretchen stared at the legal papers stacked neatly on the desk before her. "Hi, hon. How are you?"

"Doing okay. Tyler says hi."

"Tell him hi."

"I will. What's up?"

"It's about the game."

"Oh hey, glad you brought it up. We still on schedule tomorrow or is there another delay?"

She fingered the edge of the contract. "There's another delay. A big one." The empty tone in her voice reflected the hole in her heart. Too much had happened. Her emotions had shut down. "The whole project has to be put on hold. If not scrapped."

"What? Why?"

"I just got a visit from a Mr. Smythe at Interactive Arts. His company just bought out Thanos Gaming." She kept talking, sticking to the business at hand. "They want to honor the contract in the long run, but the buyout means things will need to be on hold indefinitely. We'll need to have our own meeting with the other boys to decide what we want to do, and this new deal will have to be signed. I'll have to send it to you. We actually do have an option to buy the storyline ourselves if we want, but IA would like to go ahead with the project once everything's in order." She barely took a breath. "Of course, that'll have to wait, because Brent and Hell will be going out of the country, and

it'll be late November or December before anything could possibly be done, so Luc's schedule is out because of the wedding. So we wouldn't be able to even make a decision until early next year. I told him that, and he understood. They want to work with us." The silence was loud when she ran out of words. "So..."

"So. You okay?"

"Me? I'm fine. Why?"

"You just told me that one of your boyfriends lost his company. I assume he lost it, and it wasn't a sale he'd been planning?"

She swallowed, determined that the burn in her eyes was *not* tears. "I don't know."

"What's he say about it?"

"I couldn't tell you. I haven't spoken to him since I was in London."

"What? What happened?"

"Nothing happened, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Bullshit, nothing happened. Are you okay?"

She closed her eyes. *I should have called Brent or Darien first.* Luc, she knew, would have reacted exactly like Johnnie. Who was she kidding? Any one of them would have heard the catch in her voice. "I'll be fine. Can we...not...?"

"You need to talk? I can be there in a half hour."

"No. I need to *not* talk about it."

"Gretch."

"Johnnie."

His pause said it all. He wanted to push. She thought he might, and determined that she was going to hang up on him if he did, but his next words proved that he did know her well. "You want me to call the others?"

"Yes." Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. "Yes, please. I'll fax over this new deal and my initial notes so you know what's going on."



"Okay. I'm here if you need me."

A tiny sob escaped before she could swallow it. "I know. I'll be fine."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

She switched off the phone and dropped it onto her desk. The tears she'd fought during the phone call with Johnnie burst through her control and streamed down her cheeks. How come she could have personal lives with Heaven Sent and couldn't manage it with her romantic relations? The only answer she would entertain was the sex, which made her glad, yet again, that she'd never slept with Johnnie.

Face in her hands, she let the tears come but tried to keep the sobbing to a minimum. She had to pull it together. She was still at the office.

Mr. Perry Smythe had arrived at a quarter to eleven on the dot and was brought in to see her immediately. He had told her what happened with Thanos Gaming in brief but very clear terms. They had bought out Archer's company. She'd not even had an inkling that something that drastic was in the offing. Trouble, perhaps, but not *that* much trouble. Mr. Smythe apologized for the suddenness of contacting her, but he had known of the scheduled studio time the next day. That time was, of course, canceled. He hadn't gone into the details of the settlement with Archer, of course, but Gretchen got the awful feeling that Archer got screwed. Smythe made too many references to the shoddy, incomplete work of his predecessor. Of deadlines not met and preparations that hadn't occurred. Clearly he had no idea she'd been involved with said predecessor.

There was too much she didn't know. Too much she'd let slide in the last few weeks if Archer had managed to keep something this big from her. It had to have been going on even before she'd gone to London, hadn't it? Things like this didn't just happen. Had Owen known? All of it? How much had Archer kept him in the dark too?

Drawing a deep breath to steady herself, she picked her phone back up and punched the speed dial for Archer's number. He was the one with all the answers so he was the one she needed to talk to. She'd let things fester too long and that wasn't

usually her way. He didn't pick up. She left a message. "It's G." She stuttered over using his single-letter version of her name. It was simply natural for her to say it when communicating with Archer. "I just got a visit from Perry Smythe, so I know what's happened. Call me. I...I want to know if you're okay and if you need anything." She hung up before she could say more. It seemed inadequate.

Without releasing the phone, she dialed Owen's cell number. "We're sorry. The number you are trying to reach has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this message in error, please hang up and dial again." The message played twice before she overcame her shock to switch off the phone. Disconnected? How could his cell number be disconnected. Her company paid that bill.

She scrolled through the phone book on her phone for his home number, but it wasn't there. Of course it wasn't there. She always called his cell. She had to consult the HR records via her laptop before she found the number. She dialed it and got a similar message with no forwarding number. Cold dread seeped into her veins. Where was he? It had only been a week since she'd talked to him.

Still frowning, she picked up her desk phone and started to dial. Then she stopped, hung up, and got to her feet to go find the person she needed.

Jane's desk was one of a group in a large room down the hall from Gretchen's. She stopped at the end of the hall and paused when she saw that Jane wasn't alone. Two other employees were busy at their monitors.

No help for it. Jane was close to Owen, closer than Ellen. "Jane?"

The younger woman looked up, eyes widening at seeing Gretchen. "Yes?"

"Could you come into my office for a moment?" Gretchen turned as the younger woman began to stand. Back in her office, Gretchen refrained from sitting in her chair but she did wave Jane into one of the guest chairs. "Please sit."

Jane did.

"Have you heard from Owen?"

Jane fidgeted, eyes on Gretchen's desk rather than on her. "Um, yes."

"Could you tell me how to get in touch with him? Both his cell and home phone have been disconnected."

"Uh, yeah."

"Jane..." She sighed. Clearly, Jane knew something and didn't want to tell her. Had Owen told her not to? "I'm sure you know what's been going on between us, and no doubt he's told you we had an argument last week. I would very much like to talk with him about it, but that's nearly impossible if I can't get in touch with him."

She saw the fleeting frown that passed over Jane's face before she managed to smooth it away. She curled her fingers over the knees left bare beyond the hem of her skirt and braced her arms straight. "He left."

"Left."

"Yes."

"Where did he go?"

"Back to Atlanta."

Home. Dear lord, he was hurt worse than she thought. Gretchen clasped the back of the second guest chair, in need of some support. "When will he be back?"

Jane shook her head, nearly dislodging her straight black hair from the two barrettes that held it back from her face. "He's not coming back. He moved out."

"What?"

"He gave me his keys and asked me and my boyfriend to get rid of his furniture for him."

Gretchen left the chair for the stronger support of the edge of her desk. "But he never... We... Why?" The last was out of her mouth before she thought about it.

Panic filled Jane's face.

Gretchen shook her head. "No. Don't answer that." She raised one hand to shield her eyes, not wanting the younger woman to see the tears that burned. She blinked them away, then straightened. "Do you have any way of getting in touch with him?"

This time Jane wasn't as successful in smoothing away her frown. "Yes."

"Did he tell you not to tell me?"

"Well, no."

"But?"

Jane chewed at her bottom lip. "May I speak openly?"

"I'd appreciate it."

"Is this just about his job or is it personal?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

Gretchen chose to rely on what she saw as clearheaded good reason in Jane's face. It was one of the reasons she'd been hired. "It's personal."

"He was devastated. I tried to convince him to stay, to wait it out, but he was convinced his life here was over."

Gretchen stared at the spider plant hanging from the ceiling in the corner of her office. "For what it's worth, I didn't fire him. I just wanted some time..." She stopped. She shouldn't be explaining herself. Suddenly, she couldn't quite explain herself. She should have talked to him. Cowardly of her not to have done so.

"He said that, but he was sure you meant to fire him. Then when Archer wouldn't talk to him..."

"What?"

Jane paused, brows flying up. "You didn't know?"

"I would have thought he'd go directly to Archer."

"He tried. He could never get hold of him. After a few days of not hearing from either of you, he panicked."

Archer hadn't talked to Owen either? Owen had been alone? Chastising herself for a fool, she took a deep breath and faced Jane. "I am going to find Archer and figure out this mess that we seem to have gotten ourselves into. Once I do that, could I ask you to get a message to Owen? I would very much like to speak with him and, at the very least, apologize."

Jane studied her face for a long moment before standing. "He's staying with his parents, so Ellen could probably get you the number. But if you want, I can e-mail it to you. It's in my phone."

Gretchen nodded. "Thank you. You can..." She gestured at the door when her voice broke. "Thank you."

Thankfully, Jane left without trying to console her. Gretchen may be a woman, but she didn't like being coddled. She'd done her share of coddling in her life—mostly for her boys—but she did not relish being on the receiving end.

She stood alone for a moment, staring into space. What did she want? It hurt her to the core that Owen had suffered due to her cowardice. If she was going to end things, she should have done it immediately. If she wasn't, she should have opened the lines of communication so they could get past this. But she hadn't. She'd hidden, and she hated that she'd been part of the cause of Owen's panic. She knew how emotional he was, much more so than she or Archer. As Ellen had said, she'd overreacted to what she'd suspected between Archer and Owen. But why? She was part of what was between Archer and Owen, wasn't she? Or was that it? She'd never felt it to be completely the case because they'd never declared it. She'd cast it from her own mind a number of times with the excuse that it was too soon. Well, obviously it wasn't too soon. Hearts were involved, at least hers and Owen's. Archer's feelings on the matter remained a mystery.

So there was where she needed to start.

Decided, she closed her laptop and shoved it into her case. Work would wait. It was time to straighten out her love life.

## Chapter Nineteen

With no other obvious options, Gretchen started with Archer's apartment. Jane hadn't said if Owen had tried going there when he couldn't contact Archer, and Gretchen couldn't decide if he would have forced the issue. Perhaps not. Owen was not as straightforward as she was. Anyway, she needed a place to start her search and the apartment was the best she could think of.

She sighed, pulling at her hair as she drove. At times like this, she wished she thought and acted a little more like a girl. She'd always been this way, never fond of what she saw as unfair head games that women played on men. Her mother had been an expert at manipulation, tying four men in knots during Gretchen's early life before she'd died, alone and bitter. Gretchen's sister followed the same path, although she'd managed to stay with the same man for nearly ten years. Gretchen had decided early on in her life that she liked men but didn't need them and didn't need to control them. Not like that. She'd lived up to that until recently. But she could see now that she'd played a regular mind game on Owen at least.

What had changed? Why these two? It couldn't just be the sex. Was it the fact that Archer attacked life with an outlook so similar to hers? Was it the way Owen looked after her and was always there when she needed him? One was the worthy adversary

who challenged her, and the other filled in all those girly qualities she'd never had, without being terribly girlish himself. Maybe she really did need two men. Either one of them alone would eventually drive her crazy, but with the triad balance, could they make it work? What about them? She'd noticed Archer coddling Owen in a way he'd probably never think to coddle her. Could Owen stand to have two such domineering people in his life?

She finally reached Archer's building and parked. She'd only been here once, and briefly, but once was enough. Glad she'd worn slacks and flats to work that day, she approached the building's front door and was about to punch Archer's number when a family of four barreled out of the double doors. She smiled nicely at the grade-school boy who held the door open for her and considered it a good sign as she mounted the stairs. It was another fit of luck that she gained the landing to find Archer's front door ajar, held open by a box stuck in the door frame. But the lucky feeling drained when she got close enough to see more boxes beyond the door. He was packing? Was she about to lose him too, without any more notice than Owen had given?

Without knocking, she pushed open the door and stepped in. The place was a mess, boxes lined against the walls and covering most of the available surfaces. At least three visible rolls of packing tape sat on varied surfaces. Not even the warm summer breeze coming from the open balcony door could warm what looked, to her, like an empty room.

Male voices from down the hall got louder as they approached. She saw Archer and the other man before they noticed her. Both were dressed in dusty T-shirts and jeans, both sweaty from exertion.

"...take this round of boxes and I'll catch up..." Archer froze on seeing her, his arms occupied with two straight-backed chairs she recognized from his bedroom.

The other man bumped into Archer's back with the nightstand he was carrying. "Hey, what...? Oh."

She only had eyes for Archer, watching those dark brown eyes widen, then narrow.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk." She gestured at his armload. "Are you busy?"

"Yes."

She nodded, starting for the end of the couch that wasn't taken up by an open box of books. "I'll wait."

His grumble reached her as she sat. "Do we have to do this now?"

"Yes. We do."

He took a deep breath. "Fine. Brad, we're done for the day. Take the boxes, and I'll call you tonight."

"Okay. I gotta work tomorrow, but I'm free Sunday."

"All right. Thanks."

She waited while he got rid of his friend. Finally, he sat on the chair kitty-corner to the couch. "All right. What?"

She shook her head, narrowing her gaze. "You're such an asshole."

Snort. "That's a good start."

"Suddenly decide to move?"

He laced his fingers loosely in between his knees, elbows on his thighs. "Have to. Won't be able to afford it soon."

"Are things that bad?"

"Not yet. The selling price of the company helped, but..." He shrugged.

She studied him, noting that he wouldn't look at her, that his shoulders were held tight and in, that the tension around him fairly crackled. She would not have thought that she'd learned to read him yet, but she found that she was wrong. He was scared. He was embarrassed. It deflated her anger some. "Why didn't you tell me?"



"Not your problem."

"I could have helped."

He scowled, shaking his head. "I didn't want your help."

"Archer..."

"Look, what do you want? An apology?" He looked at her. "Fine. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got you in a contract that I couldn't deliver on. I'm sorry I didn't tell you that my company was about to be bought out and that game was my only shot at getting out of it. I didn't know they'd up the stakes when they found out Heaven Sent actually signed on to do it. Bad judgment on my part." And that's probably what pissed him off the most. "I'm sorry I kept all that from you, and I'm sorry I asked Owen to do the same. There. You happy?"

"No."

He groaned between his teeth, throwing up his hands. "Then I don't know what else to give you."

"I'd like you to give me some credit. I'd like you to remember that we are—or at least we *were*—in a relationship and that I might give a damn about what you were going through."

His attention returned to the carpet as he rocked forward, feet bouncing on his toes.

"I care about you, Archer."

"You shouldn't."

"Excuse me?"

He shook his head. "All we had was sex, right?"

"Was that all it was?"

"Wasn't it? We said it from the start. Neither of us was looking for anything long-term."

"That changed when we brought Owen into the mix."

If she hadn't been watching for it, she'd have missed the wince. But it was there, along with a guilty blink of his eyes. "That was a mistake."

"Was it?"

"I didn't mean to hurt the kid. I thought it would be fun."

"It was."

"Yeah."

"It grew."

He shut his eyes, shaking his head. "That's stupid. Things like that don't happen that fast."

"Is this the brutally honest man I've come to know and love?" They both froze. She hadn't meant to say it. Hadn't really *thought* it. But with the words said, she wouldn't take them back. So she leaned forward. "You haven't once let me hide from my feelings. I won't let you hide from this."

He turned his face away.

"We fell in love somewhere along the way. All three of us."

"That's impossible."

"Is it?"

"I hardly believe you can fall in love with one person, much less two."

"But it happened. Didn't it? Archer, look at me."

Of course he wouldn't, obstinate man, so she had to scoot toward him, close enough to reach over and grab his forearm. "Archer. I've never really believed in love either, but I do believe that I fell in love with you."

He sighed, shook his head.

"I fell in love with Owen too, and you already know I hardly wanted that." She laughed to take the sting from her words. "I think he fell in love with both of us as well. What about you?"

"You're both better off together, without me."

"I beg to differ. I don't think our relationship would work without you."

He stood up, taking himself out of reach as he walked toward the window. "Look, I left you both alone on purpose so you could go ahead and be mad at me. Just go and be happy together."

"What?"

"You two are good together. You don't deserve..." He growled, shook his head. "You're better off together."

"Owen doesn't agree, it seems." She watched his back. "He left."

That turned him halfway back to her. "What?"

"Owen. He left."

Now he faced her fully, dropping the maudlin act for a concerned frown. "Left? Where?"

"I haven't seen him all week either. Not since we argued."

His eyebrows flew up. "What? I thought..."

She nodded. "I thought he was with you. I was leaving the two of you alone as well." A bitter laugh escaped her throat. "How stupid are we? We both left Owen to the other, and here he's dropped away from both of us. We hurt him. Badly."

Archer was back at the chair, keeping it between them. "Where is he?"

"Atlanta."

"His folks?"

"Yes."

"Damn. Why?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I haven't talked to him."

"Why not?"

She scowled at his tone. "I tried. He's disconnected both of his phones."

Some of the Archer she'd come to cherish resurfaced as he stared at her, his confidence showing in the set line of his jaw. "Do you want him back?"

"Do you?"

His jaw worked back and forth a little as he ground his teeth. "Did you mean what you said before?"

"Every word of it."

He rounded the chair and sat again, this time facing her. When he leaned on his knees this time, it put him right in front of her. "I've never been in love before."

"Me either."

A small grin curled one side of his mouth. "But you're a woman, you're better at it."

She laughed, reaching out to curl her fingers with his. "I'm pretty sure they'd throw me out of the girl's academy on that one."

He squeezed her fingers; then the grin died to all seriousness. "I *am* sorry I couldn't find a way to tell you. I wanted to, but every time..." He shook his head. "I didn't want to know what you'd do if you found out I was a failure."

His admission filled her heart with warmth. That she understood. She would have reacted the same way. If only she'd seen clearly. "Oh, honey, you're not a failure. There are hundreds of reasons you could have lost that company. Believe me, I know. If it wasn't for Heaven Sent, I don't know what I would have done." She frowned. "I was pissed – no, I *am* pissed – that you chose to jeopardize my business with your delays."

He nodded. "I know."

"And I'm livid that you asked Owen to keep it from me as well. It was his *job* to tell me."

"I know."

She wouldn't let him draw his hand away. "But what hurt most was finding out that you and Owen felt the need to keep a secret from me. It broke my heart to think that you didn't trust me enough."

"It wasn't that. It happened so fast, and I was so caught up in everything that I..." He sighed, folding his other hand over hers. "I have explanations but no excuses. I can only say that I wasn't prepared for the fear when I thought you'd leave me because you thought I was a failure."

She slapped his knee. "Dolt."

He smiled ruefully. "That's me."

"All right." She closed her free palm over his knuckles. "We need to figure out what to do about Owen, but first I need to hear the words."

"Words?"

"Don't play dumb with me, mister. I've laid my heart out for you here. I deserve to hear the words back."

Deep chocolate eyes drank in the sight of her. "Isn't it too soon to say 'I love you'?"

She rolled her eyes. "God, you're such a romantic."

She yelped when he used his hold on her hand to pull her into his lap. He sat back in the chair, cradling her to his chest. "I don't want to lie to you. I've never been in love. But I will tell you this past week has been hell. I've wanted to call you and Owen all the time, but I didn't want to dump my problems on you. I've always been able to take care of everything, and this time..." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "The best time of my life was this summer with you. I want to be with you all the time, and I've never felt more of an instant connection with anyone else. Except Owen." He tilted his head for a brief kiss. "If that's love, then, yes, I love you."

She wound her arms around his neck, entranced by his confession. It was far more than she'd let herself hope for. "I'll happily take that, whether it's love or not."

His smile was a little sad. "Even if I'm unemployed?"

"Please. I have no doubt you've something up your sleeve." The twinkle in his eye told her she was right. "Besides, if you need a job, I can probably find something for you."

"Mmmm, work for you." He slid his hand around the curve of her ass, squeezing. "Do I get to do the boss?"

"Maybe we could make that your primary duty."

Chuckling, he sealed their lips with another kiss. She succumbed happily, losing herself in the dusty, manly warmth of him.

But then she pulled back. "But we still have a problem."

He paused with his lips over her pulse. "Owen."

"Owen."

Sighing, he sat back, adjusting her more comfortably on his lap. "We hurt him."

She draped herself over his chest, laying her cheek on his shoulder. "Badly."

He twined the fingers of one hand with hers. "You think he still wants us?"

"I certainly hope so. It'd be a shame to ruin the tender moment we just had."

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "Oh, lady, I do love the way your mind works."

"Nah, you just love me." She was pretty sure if she kept at him, he'd eventually break down to just the words without the qualifiers.

His cheek remained pressed against the top of her forehead. "You sure we can make it work? The three of us?"

How odd to hear him asking for reassurance. He'd been the one with all the answers. It was kind of nice to know that he wasn't always so sure of himself. Nicer to realize that he didn't open up this way to many people. "Yes. I think we can make it work. We're a good balance, the three of us."

"Let's hope he thinks so."

## Chapter Twenty

It was hot. Deep South, wet, muggy Atlanta hot. Owen sighed, pulling at his tank top to create a small bit of wind against the moist skin beneath it. A headband held his hair back from his eyes and soaked up most of the sweat that would have fallen behind his sunglasses and into his eyes. A thundercloud loomed in the distance. He could only hope to get home before the downpour. Why had he thought it was a good idea to walk to the store for his mom's cigarettes? His former logic eluded him.

No, not entirely. He'd wanted a chance to get out of the house, even if only for a while. His mother meant well, but she kept pestering about why he'd up and moved back home so quick. She couldn't understand how he could have left a good job when he wasn't fired, nor did she like that he was sketchy on his reasons why. But he couldn't very well tell her he'd left to escape the torture of being around his two lovers, or rather, being ignored by the two people he loved. Not that she'd mind, especially. She not only accepted the fact that he was gay, she was one of those people who lamented that he couldn't "make up his mind" and just settle on men instead of going from men to women and back. If she heard that he'd had one of each type of lover at the same time, she wouldn't be able to contain the inquisition to follow. No, he'd skip that one, thanks.

He'd endure her prying until he got a job and could move out. Maybe his cousin in Tampa would come through with the job at the hotel where he worked.

Finally, he turned down his street and noticed the strange car in the drive. He didn't think much of it. His mother was one of a ravening horde of women who ran their little part of town, and they were always coming by. Which made things even harder, since he'd known most of these women for much of his life and they wanted to know what was wrong too. When she'd called this weekend, Ellen had warned him that going home wasn't the answer. Maybe she was right. He could admit that he had run, but it was better to do it sooner rather than later, right? He opened the gate leading up the short path to the front door, relishing the shade of the huge magnolia tree that dominated the yard. Archer hadn't returned his calls, and Gretchen had made it clear that she didn't want to talk to him. Why should he stick around? Although, he supposed he would have to talk to Gretchen eventually to officially quit his job. If she hadn't fired him in absentia already. That was unprofessional of him. Proved that he was just a stupid kid after all, huh?

Worrying that over, he mounted the steps of the porch, then opened the front screen. Hearing his mother's voice in the kitchen—her primary receiving room—he headed that way. “Ma, I've got your...”

He froze, holding the box of Lucky Strikes in the air. There, at his mother's pristine pine breakfast table, looking very large and dark in the yellow and white decor, sat Archer. Owen's heart leaped into his throat, the sudden pressure surging blood down into his cock. Archer was simply cut from divine cloth. Sleek and powerful in a short-sleeved white button-down and jeans, his sunglasses still perched on top of his head, he looked quite relaxed and at home with the tall glass of iced tea in front of him. He grinned when he saw Owen. Owen gulped, watching a trickle of sweat make its way down Archer's neck, chasing the open neckline into the splash of black hair that was just visible. Archer raised a hand, Rolex flashing as he waved. “Hello, Owen.”



"Baby boy." His mother's voice broke the spell that kept him frozen. He winced at his mother's favored pet name for him. She bustled forward, handing him a glass of iced tea that was probably meant for her. "You have visitors." She grabbed his arm and steered him into a chair at the table, right across the narrow end from Archer. She was a slight woman, but the strength of her conviction made sure that her will was obeyed. "You sit right down here and be sociable."

Owen was seated before the plural of the word "visitor" hit him. He blinked at Archer, then turned toward the kitchen proper. There she was, looking ridiculously refreshed for this heat. Her red-orange hair was clipped back from her face by one barrette on the top of her head, but plenty of curls were free to clasp her moist neck. Without makeup—he could tell—her face was young and vibrant, and her eyes gleamed as they met his. Gretchen's light denim capris fit like a glove all the way down to shapely calves, with modest heeled sandals completing the look. An orange and gray tank midriff top covered her breasts but left her flat belly bare. She held up her own iced tea. "Hello, Owen."

They were here. Why were they here? They were *here*?

His mother thumped him upside the back of his head. "Speak, child. Your friends didn't come all this way to be ignored."

He could hardly ignore them. Either of them. They filled his mother's kitchen like panthers in a child's playroom. But what did he say? He watched as Gretchen came toward him, licking spilled iced tea from her thumb. "It's all right, Edith," she said, smiling brightly as she sat down in the chair between him and Archer. "I'm sure he's a bit surprised to see us here."

Now they were both in his sights. His mother rushed back to the kitchen and was clanking around to get another glass. The looming gray of the thundercloud rose in the panes of window behind Archer.

Archer grinned, raising his glass to his lips. "Surprised?"

"Yeah. What...what are you doing here?"

"We came to get you back," Gretchen answered brightly, toying with a gold bracelet around her left wrist.

He blinked at her. That sentence could have a few different meanings. He wasn't sure which one she meant. But the heat in her gaze gave him a large clue. The kiss she blew him was hidden from his mother, since Gretchen's chair had its back to the kitchen.

"Really?"

She put on a pout and spoke a little louder for their audience. "It was terrible of you to up and leave with no warning like that."

He widened his eyes at her mischievous grin. She was trying to get him into trouble.

And it worked. His mother sniffed as she poured more of her endless supply of tea. "I done told him he made a mistake. I ask you, who just ups and leaves like that?"

Owen glowered at Gretchen, the echo of his mother's words telling him that she'd been talking to his mother while he was gone. How long had he been gone, anyway? Sure, he'd taken his time, but it had been no more than an hour.

"I can't understand it myself, Edith," said Gretchen, never taking her eyes off Owen. Her grin softened a little as she sat forward to fold her forearms on the table. "But I'm sure the misunderstanding was our fault, mine and Archer's. That's why we came all this way to apologize."

*Apologize?* He cocked his head, jaw dropping.

"Well, I'm glad y'all came." His mother sighed heavily as she sat down to his other side. "He's been moping it up since he got here."

"Ma!"

"What? It's true."

He rolled his eyes, hiding his face in his palms. Too much was happening, and having his mother here was throwing him way off.

"Ma, could you leave us alone for a bit?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to talk to my friends alone. Do you mind?"

She did. He knew she did. She knew he knew. But she was also his mother and had his best interests at heart. "All right. Why don't you all go out in the backyard, though. Betty's due here any minute, and you know how much of a busybody *she* is."

Owen snorted, which made his mom smile. He gave her a kiss on the cheek before leading his "friends" into the backyard. He headed for the old wooden swing set his dad had made for him and his sister aeons ago. It showed wear and tear, but it all still worked. They should still have some time to talk before the rain fell.

Archer laughed, leaning against the side of the slide. "Oh, man, I *love* your mom."

Owen sighed, sitting on one of the swings. "She's a lot to handle."

Gretchen settled on the swing beside him, placing him between the two of them. "I think she's a lovely woman."

"You're being nice." He met her gaze before she could say more. "Why are you being nice?"

Her smile softened again. "One should always be nice to one's hostess."

He nodded. "Why are you here?"

"To apologize, just like I said."

"What do you have to apologize for? I'm the one who lied. I'm the one who ran off. I'm..." Oh, that reminded him. He swung his head around to look up at Archer. "Shit, I read about what happened with IA. I'm so sorry."

Archer waved a hand. "Them's the breaks. I'll rebuild somewhere else."

"But that was your company. You worked so hard to keep it independent."

He nodded. "I did. But in the end, it doesn't matter so much." He squatted down in the sand beside Owen, lifting back the sunglasses he had donned, so Owen could see

his eyes. "I asked you to do something I shouldn't have, and I kept a pretty big secret from you. I'm sorry."

Owen shook his head. "No. I understood. You were worried. You had a lot on your mind, and you..."

Laughing softly, Archer reached out to squeeze his knee. "Shut up. I was wrong. I'm apologizing."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry too." He turned toward Gretchen to see her leaning heavily against the swing chain nearest him. "I overreacted, and I shut you out. I can't tell you how much I regret that."

"No. I shouldn't have kept it from you. Like you said, it was my job to keep you informed."

"I learned this week that part of your job is to keep things from me too." She groaned. "I never realized I got so much shit e-mail and mail."

"I asked Jane to see if she could help."

"Well, I don't think Jane wanted to be too close to me. She was rather upset that I hurt you."

"She said that?"

"Not in so many words. I can't say that I blame her. I was callous and unfair. Forgive me?"

"You don't have to..."

Archer squeezed his knee again. "Owen, shut up and let her apologize."

He frowned. "I don't get it. Why are you two here? Neither of you did anything wrong—"

"Stop it." Archer scowled. "We were wrong enough, and we hurt you enough that you flew across the country to get away from us. I'd say that's a lot to apologize for."

"We both put you in the middle of things, and it was very unfair of us." Gretchen reached out to squeeze his shoulder. "I'm sorry you were so hurt that you had to get away from us."

Owen hung his head, staring at his bare knees sticking out from his shorts. Archer's touch sizzled like a sunburn. "I know I overreacted, but I thought you'd both be better off without me in the middle."

When they both started laughing, he got a sick feeling in his belly.

Gretchen's hand closed over his shoulder. "Oh, honey, we thought the same thing."

"Huh?"

"I stopped talking to the two of you so you guys could be together," Archer told him.

"I did the same thing," Gretchen agreed.

"What? But why?"

"Because we're all three too scared or unwilling to admit what's now painfully obvious," Gretchen said. She squeezed his shoulder again, prompting him to look at her. "I love you."

He gaped. Archer moved; then big hands came up to move his head around, his knees firmly planted in the sand. "I love you too."

Owen blinked, jaw falling open. "But..."

Archer grinned. "You love Gretchen."

"And Archer," Gretchen added. "Which is all right, since we've decided we're in love with each other too."

Owen twisted his head to see that Gretchen was smiling but entirely serious. "Really?"

Archer let his hands slide to Owen's shoulders. "Yeah. We do pretty well all together, and we're pretty shitty when we're apart."

Owen swallowed in a dry throat, hands tight on his swing's chains.

Gretchen stood and came closer, her hand closing over one of his fists. "Archer and I have given this a lot of thought. We want you to come back. *We* want you back."

"You...want me?"

Archer sighed, sitting back on his heels. "God, baby, if I wasn't damn sure your mom was watching, I'd kiss you to try and convince you."

Owen grinned. "Mom knows I'm bi."

Archer's face lit up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The man surged up, hands claspings either side of Owen's face to pull him into a kiss. Owen whimpered breathlessly, opening his lips under Archer's assault. He had convinced himself he would never feel this assault again. To have it here stole all reason from his mind.

"Come back home with us," Archer breathed against his lips.

Owen couldn't quite figure out how to open his eyes, still dazed by Archer's kiss. "Home?"

"I'm moving in with G. Come live with us."

That opened his eyes. His vision was filled with the rich dark of Archer's gaze. "What?"

"My turn."

Grinning, Archer rolled to his feet, stepping back.

Gretchen stepped into his place. She cupped Owen's face just like Archer had, urging him to his feet. Once he was there, she slid her arms around his shoulders to pull him flush against her soft curves. "Come home with us, sweetheart. *Be* with us. I promise, we'll work on the communication part."

His arms slid naturally around her waist. Another touch he'd thought he'd never experience again. "You mean it."

She kissed him softly. "I do. I need you. We need you. We don't work without you."

Archer's hand brushed his back, warm lips nuzzling just above his ear. "That's for damn sure."

He felt Gretchen kick at Archer's shins and couldn't help but laugh. "Is this real?"

The thundercloud rumbled, reminding him of the real world, convincing him that this really was happening.

Gretchen glanced up, worried, then returned her attention to him. "It's real if you let it be. What do you say, honey?"

Either the cloud rumbled again or it was the thump of his galloping heart that he heard. "Oh yes." He unwrapped one arm so he could reach for Archer. He found the man's hand and pulled his warmth close. "God, yes."

## Epilogue

"I'm not sure I'm going to forgive you for this," Reese grumbled, glowering at the people who filled Gretchen's living room.

She laughed gaily, adjusting the blue tabard of her Three Musketeers costume so she wouldn't get champagne on it. *Mmmm, champagne.* It went with the tequila sunrises she'd been drinking for the past few hours. "Of course you will, honey. It was all done in love, you know that."

They stood near the archway between entrance hall and living room, enjoying a good vantage to view the varied costumes of her combination Halloween, housewarming, and wedding shower party. Well, at least *she* was enjoying. Reese obviously had not had enough to drink.

He rolled his heavily outlined eyes and tossed back the dreadlocks of his wig. "I wouldn't have agreed to this if I thought you were going to turn your Halloween party into a wedding shower." Gold rings and a fake gold tooth glittered as he raised his glass and took a sip. She was of the opinion that he made a perfectly lovely Jack Sparrow and his current grimace just added to it.

Still chuckling, she downed the last of her champagne. "Which is precisely why I didn't tell you." She slid an arm around him, just managing not to poke him with the



rapier that dangled from her hip. "Would it upset you to know that I wanted to do the shower first?"

His scowl told her yes.

Delighted, she kissed his cheek. "Oh, it's harmless. I've only arranged one little shower game."

"What?"

Another kiss to his cheek; then she released him. "Just you wait."

"Oh God. Gretchen, what have you...?"

"Hey." Luc arrived from the staircase just in time to catch hold of his lover. She would not have thought that he could pull off a Will Turner costume, but he managed it beautifully. His auburn hair was pulled back, and despite his aversion to facial hair, he'd grown a pencil-thin mustache and goatee. Gretchen toyed with the idea of asking him to keep it, because it looked *damn* good. Together, the pair of them refueled many a fantasy she'd had since she'd first seen the Pirates movies. Arms encircling Reese from behind, Luc nuzzled the other man's cheek. "Are you still being pissy?"

Reese's glare transferred up to his future husband. "I am *not* pissy."

Grinning, Luc stole a kiss. "Of course you're not, my love."

Gretchen deposited her empty glass on a convenient side table, then stepped toward the crowd. "Oh good, you keep that up, and I'll go start the game."

"Gretchen!"

Laughing gaily, she kept walking away, losing herself among her guests. She didn't hold parties often, but this one was different. She was surrounded by close friends rather than just business acquaintances. She was positively delighted that everyone was in town. "Tyler!"

The comely blond jumped at the rather loud sound of her voice. He turned from his conversation with Edie, the wife of Heaven Sent's last producer.

"Tyler," Gretchen said, sliding her arm through his as she tempered her voice. Perhaps she was a bit tipsy? "You've got to help me. No, Edie, you can help too."

Tyler smiled. "What can I do for you?"

Gretchen blinked up at his pretty face. Prettier than usual with the makeup. He *really* should have been a model. She frowned. "How did he convince you to wear this?"

His eyes went wide, and he shook his head a little. "Huh? I thought you said you needed help?"

"I do, but first I want to know" —she stepped back, keeping hold of his hand so she could hold it out as she looked him up and down — "*how* did Johnnie convince you to dress up like this?"

He blushed, but that only made him prettier. She never would have thought to see the day that Tyler would wear a skirt. Not just a skirt, a short little plaid skirt as part of a schoolgirl outfit, complete with knee socks and Mary Janes. Showed off nicely toned thighs with hair so light that you couldn't even see it. He wore a prim white button-down over a modestly padded bra, but he'd ditched the school jacket sometime earlier in the evening. He even had his longish blond hair pulled into two pigtails tied with big red bows just above his ears.

Scowling, he dropped his gaze. "I lost a bet."

She exchanged smirks with Edie. "You, of all people, should know better than to bet with Johnnie."

Miffed, he dropped her hand. "Yeah, whatever."

Edie glanced across the room. "How come you didn't wear an evening gown like he did?"

Johnnie was dressed in a sleek emerald green evening gown. He'd gone all the way with makeup and sparkling jewels dripping from ears, neck, wrists, and fingers. He even had on high heels, with which he navigated better than many women. If it

wasn't for the breadth of his chest and the absence of breasts, he might actually pass for a woman. He, of course, was having a blast with the costume, constantly tossing his loose brown hair in a good imitation of early Cher.

Tyler sighed. "The outfit was part of the bet."

"What was the bet?"

"Never mind." The extra red to his blush assured her that it was quite intimate. She seriously considered crossing the room to ask Johnnie.

"Anyway" – Tyler reached up to comb aside his bangs – "didn't you want my help with something?"

She frowned, her mind a blank. A glance behind her showed Reese and Luc, which reminded her. "Oh! Yes. I need a shower game."

"A what?"

"A shower game. You know. Something to embarrass Reese with."

Tyler laughed. "You're taking this shower thing a bit far, aren't you?"

"Certainly not. What kind of friends would we be if we didn't humiliate him a little before he gets married?"

Tyler shook his head. "I'm *so* glad we got married before you could do this to me."

She glared. "It's not too late, you know. You have an anniversary coming up."

Big blue eyes got even bigger, and his mouth fell open. Edie burst out laughing.

"Yes." Gretchen rubbed her palms together. "I think we can plan out something suitable..."

"Gretchen, don't you dare..."

"Oh come on, Tyler sweetie. Oh! I know! I need some toilet paper!" Resolved, she spun on her heel. Unfortunately, she had been drinking a tad more than usual, and she wasn't quite used to the ridiculously high heels on her knee-high blue suede boots. She miscalculated her balance and flung her arms out, hoping the fall to the carpet wouldn't be *so* bad.

"Whoa!" Strong arms caught her. She hung on and looked up to find another musketeer had nabbed her hat as well as her before either hit the floor.

Happily, she wound her arms around Archer's neck and let him take her weight. "Hello, you."

He chuckled, resettling her hat on top of her head. "Hello. Having fun?"

"Oh, *much* fun, yes. You?"

"Clearly not as much as you."

She made a face, aware she was hamming it up but just drunk enough not to give a damn. "That won't do. You need to be happy."

He kissed her briefly. "Oh, I don't know. I think I talked Johnnie into going into business with me, earlier. That makes me happy."

She froze, mouth open. On the one hand, she was thrilled that Archer had a real prospect. On the other... "Johnnie doesn't know anything about gaming other than playing them." She glanced over her shoulder, but Tyler had taken advantage of her distraction to leave the vicinity. He now stood whispering frantically with Reese.

"Ah, but he's eager to learn."

Abandoning the teasing of her friends, she tried to give her lover a stern look. "Archer, I can't allow you to take advantage..."

Laughing, he sealed her protest with another kiss. She tried to pull away, but it was hopeless. Not only was he stronger but he always made her crave him so. Only once he had her breathless did he release her mouth. "Don't fret it tonight. I promise to give you all the details when you're sober."

She frowned. "'M not that drunk."

He didn't believe her. "Okay. I promise to tell you tomorrow."

"Fine." She pushed away from him and meticulously adjusted her tabard again. The carpet swayed a little. Okay, maybe she was drunker than she thought. "Where's Owen?"

"In the kitchen, I think. I saw him talking to Hell."

Nodding, she wandered that way, just briefly talking with a few of her other guests on the way. It wasn't a particularly large party, maybe sixty people at its high point. But now it was after one in the morning, so there probably weren't more than thirty left.

She heard Darien holding court over by the fireplace, an odd sight in his bright orange prisoner garb. Fake manacles dangled from his wrists and a collar with a chain attached surrounded his neck. He even had a ball and chain attached to his leg. Smiling as she recalled his outfit, she trailed her fingers over the backs of Chris's shoulders as she passed behind him. He turned to see who she was, the bill of his policeman's cap shading his eyes and glasses. Waving at him without stopping, she wondered if he'd pull out the *real* shackles for Darien tonight. She had definite suspicions about those two.

Owen — dressed as the third musketeer — was indeed in the kitchen with Hell. The diminutive keyboardist was dressed as a cat. Black ears on a headband were stuck in his lavender hair, whiskers poked from his made-up face, and his skintight black bodysuit was complete with a tail. The studded, thigh-high black boots may not have been feline, but they went with the belt around his slim waist. Gretchen wondered that Brent in his wolf costume wasn't still beside him, drooling.

"What are you two plotting?" she accused, coming up behind Hell.

Owen's eyes glowed with excitement. "Hell's got a band that needs a manager."

Again, she was left to blink her surprise.

"They're local," Hell hedged, probably reading her expression, "and I'm not sure they'll even stay together, but we've secured the studio space. They'll at least need someone to arrange some local gigs."

"Oh." Obviously, Owen thought he was the man for the job. Was he? True, they'd discussed letting him branch out on his own, but was it wrong of Gretchen to want to put that off longer? Yes. "Well. Let's get their information, and we'll see how it goes."

Owen caught her up in a hug, his musketeer hat knocking hers back off her head. "I know what you're thinking." He laughed in her ear.

She scowled down at her hat on the floor, wondering if she could get him to pick it up for her. "Do you?"

He kissed her cheek. "Yeah." Then he kissed her mouth. "I'll convince you."

Forgetting the hat, she laughed as he kept kissing. "Okay, okay. We'll talk about it later." She gave Hell a mild glare. "Thanks."

Grinning, he nodded. "My pleasure." Well, at least he bent to pick up her hat to put it on the counter.

Before she could think of a comeback or reach for the missing piece of her costume, Owen pushed her backward. "Hey!" She wobbled, teetering for a fall; then those same strong arms from before caught her. Just like that, she was in her favorite place, sandwiched between the two men she loved.

"I think she's drunk," Owen mused, looking up over her head.

"I think you're right," Archer agreed.

"I think that means we get to have our way with her later."

She snorted, groping Owen's pert little ass underneath his tabard. "Wasn't that going to happen anyway?"

Owen laughed—a free, delighted sound. A sound she'd heard often in the last month or so and looked forward to hearing for the rest of her life.

"I love you," he told her right before kissing her. Then he went up on his toes to lean past her. "I love you too."

"I love you too," Archer murmured. The words he'd finally come around to saying made her shiver. "Both of you."

She smiled, grabbing Owen's belt as she snuggled back into Archer. They were hers; she was theirs. How could she have thought this wouldn't work?

She frowned at the few people still remaining in the kitchen. “Now, how do we get all these people out of our house?”

**THE END**

## **Jet Mykles**

Jet's been writing sex stories back as far as junior high. Back then, the stories involved her favorite pop icons of the time but she soon extended beyond that realm into making up characters of her own. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now occasionally uses this art to illustrate her stories, or her stories to expand upon her art.

In real life, Jet is a self-proclaimed hermit, living in southern California with her life partner. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.