



CHRISTINE MCKAY

a taste of
Summer Magic

Carnal Passions Presents

A Taste Of Summer Magic

By

Christine McKay



This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Carnal Passions
A Division of Champagne Books
www.carnalpassions.com
Copyright © 2007 by Christine McKay
ISBN 9781897445877
October 2008
Cover Art ©
Produced in Canada

Carnal Passions
#35069-4604 37 ST SW
Calgary, AB T3E 7C7
Canada

Dedication

To Melanie. To quote Stephen King: "Writing is a lonely job.
Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of
difference." You were the first to believe.

One

Jason stared at the nine-inch stainless steel dildo and shivered. Another one of Perry's play sessions gone bad. He didn't want to be on the receiving end of that.

He handed Perry the package, contents carefully camouflaged in tissue paper. "Present for you from Carrie. When's she stopping in?"

Perry brought a glass of Merlot to his lips, then nearly choked when the dildo's gleaming head surfaced from its delicate nest. He bobbed both box and wine glass. The box lost. Dildo, box, and paper hit the floor, the steel chiming like a bell as it struck the marble tile.

Jason hadn't bothered to remove the entire thing from its wrapping. Fully exposed and displayed in all its glory, it looked like a weapon, something to be hung from a police officer's belt and used to subdue the unruly. It was also attached to the most perfect and painful-looking set of steel balls.

The two men exchanged a look.

Perry glanced at his watch and cleared his throat. "I may be able to head her off."

"I think I left the burners on at the restaurant. I better check." He dashed for the door.

Perry snagged his arm. "Coward."

He held up his hands. "Guilty as charged. *That* is not my idea of a low key, get-to-know-you night."

Perry swallowed hard and carefully avoided looking at the dildo. "I admit, at first glance, it appears daunting."

Jason snorted.

"A little lube, some more wine, the right moment—"

Jason nudged it with his toe. Dear God, it was as long as his shoe. "How about I put my foot up your ass and you can tell me how it feels?"

"Don't get crass."

The sound of a car pulling into their driveway sent slivers of panic through him. "Can't we have a nice girl? Someone who doesn't own custom machined dildos and have more leather in her closet than we do?"

"Fine," Perry said, crossing his arms. "Next time, you pick."

"Seriously?"

"Good luck." Saluting him, Perry polished off the contents of his wine glass, then poured himself another. "Nice girls don't sleep with two men."

~ * ~

Fifteen minutes until midnight and Morgan T'Naile thought she had everything ready for her personal celebration of Midsummer Night. As a solitary witch, she was used to celebrating the holidays alone, though in the past, she'd done so in the confines of a spare bedroom or, when her now ex-husband was away, outside beneath the sheltering canopy of moonflowers and honeysuckle. Now she had nothing. No garden. No spare bedroom. No husband. If she didn't think about it too hard, it still seemed a fair exchange.

Taking a deep breath, she banished all depressing thoughts. Though she was celebrating the longest day of the year, a wintry wind and its mate, a clinging fog, rolled off the Great Lake, prickling her bare skin and tightening her nipples. She curled her fingers into her palms and prayed she wouldn't get caught. How many campers wandered the beach at midnight on a weekday?

She tipped her head back, but the moon failed to cut through the lake fog. Better to hide her, though she wouldn't escape without a summer cold as a souvenir. Again, she tried to focus, clearing the clutter from her brain, tucking away human worries for another time. This moment belonged to the Lady and her consort. Her shoulders relaxed. The wind toyed with her loose hair, mimicking the tide's snarling of stray seaweed strands. Her arms opened, embracing the moment, the moon's hidden energy, and

everything the world had to offer.

Fanned by the wind, but dampened by the fog, the cauldron fire fought to keep itself lit. Oak and birch twigs fueled the discreet beach fire, its tiny flames licking up the sides of a cauldron no bigger than a Dutch oven. That it *was* her discarded Dutch oven was moot. Tonight it was her cauldron. The beach, Earth's representative. The lapping tide, Water's envoy. Bridging the barrier between water and air, the fog enveloped her like an ethereal stole.

Picking up a container of salt, she circled her cauldron, her bare feet creating perfect imprints in the wet sand. "Boundary between the Otherworld and mine, I conjure this circle, home to the Divine. Ancient Ones I now implore. Watch, guide, and guard this door." She walked the circle three times, leaving a trail of salt in her wake.

Discarding the salt, she knelt beside the cauldron. A fistful of alfalfa, plucked from a roadside field, went into the pot first. Its smell reminded her of fresh cut hay, mown lawn laden with dewdrops, and wet, newly turned earth. "Bless I who walk the hidden road. Bring prosperity to my humble abode." *Or tent*, she thought grimly. For a moment, she lost the blissfulness her worship usually provided. She struggled to keep herself together and prayed the Lady, knowing her mental state, forgave her lapse.

A bit of honeysuckle, orange blossoms clinging to olive branches, joined the alfalfa. "Serve as guide, for to this earth, I am tied."

Her hand shook, more from cold than fear, as she added a pinch of vervain to hurry her plea. A dash of Echinacea followed to strengthen her flagging confidence and booster her spell. "Lady and Lord, bless this night and all who dwell beneath the Moon's light." Even Thomas. Especially Thomas, since her less than charitable thoughts toward him inspired her to consider using if not black, then definitely gray, magic against his machinations.

"Morgan?" a feminine voice called.

Oh for the Goddess's sake, could nothing ever go her way? Struggling to her feet, she said a silent prayer, then hastily re-traced her circle, opening the door to her world and evicting the Otherworld from her own once again. Her worries were so entrenched in the spiritual realm. The

automatic response to complete her ceremony before dressing made her smile. Once it would have been much different. She had Thomas to thank for that.

See? She could think positive thoughts about him.

She hurriedly slipped into her broomstick skirt, chosen more for its elastic waistband than its dubious association to brooms, and pulled on her windbreaker.

"It is you!" Beth Mertes, park ranger, jogged up the shoreline, her flashlight's beam dancing atop the rolling waves like a fairy waltzing with a shiny bit of tinsel.

Did Beth see the beauty in the moment? She glanced at her friend's face and decided against pointing it out. Shrugging, Morgan held out her hands. "Put the cuffs on me, Officer. I'll go quietly."

Beth ignored her humorous attempt. "Kids reported seeing a fire on the beach. Damn it, Morgan. You know how far I had to walk?"

As far as she had and though she wasn't packing handcuffs, a portable radio, or a flashlight capable of bludgeoning a man, she had carted a Dutch oven and all her magic-working supplies. "I'm sorry. I thought I was far enough away not to be noticed." Leave it to an overly observant child to spot her.

Beth huffed, her tight curls further wound by the damp air. She eyed Morgan's shivering form, her bare feet, and the sand clinging to her clothes. "Please tell me you were wearing clothes."

"If you'd like."

"Morgan!"

"Beth," she mocked gently. "Let me put the fire out and I'll follow you back." Without waiting for an answer, she knelt beside the cauldron. Removing the pot, she carefully cupped the sand, sprinkling it over the flames.

Beth cleared her throat. "I went off shift a half hour ago. I had to stay late to track you down."

Taking the hint, Morgan rushed to bury the fire.

"What should I write in my report?" Beth asked with a dramatic sigh. "Found coven dancing nude around sacrificial offering?"

On another night, the ribbing might have bothered her. Still surrounded by the Lady's peaceful bubble, she was

more tolerant. "Only if you want a horde of curiosity seekers and copycats. Trust me, they're much worse than the real thing."

"What smells like moldy hay?"

Digging another hole, she surrendered the cauldron's contents to the earth. "Nothing."

"Morgan, don't you think if this hocus-pocus really worked, you wouldn't have been evicted from your home and left squatting at a campground?"

"Bad things happen to good people. The Lady has a lot of subjects to look out for." She could picture Beth rolling her eyes. She waited a moment, composed herself, and stood, towel-wrapped pot clenched to her chest. She wanted nothing more than to shower, enfold herself in her sleeping bag, and treat herself to a cup of warm spiced wine. "I'm sorry I wasted your time. I didn't think anyone would see me here."

"Why don't you come home with me? There's the couch—"

"You and Lia are just getting off on the right foot again. Why ruin it by coming home late with another woman?"

Beth gnawed her lower lip.

"I'll be fine. Really."

"You've lost some weight."

"I needed to."

"And the circles under your eyes?"

She wiggled her brows. "Fog does groovy things to mascara." Balancing her cauldron in the crook of her arm, she gently turned her friend around. "Lead the way. I forgot to bring a flashlight."

Beth laughed. "Typical," she muttered.

Two

Jason woke to the sound of soft snoring. Scowling at Perry, he resisted the urge to jab him in the ribs. Not only was he a blanket thief and a bed hog, but now he added snoring to his repertoire. It was too much.

Slipping quietly out of bed, Jason left him to catch up on his rest. The man spent way too much time at work. Jason begged him to find some sort of addictive hobby, even if it turned out to be golf. But the only thing that drove Perry Holloway was his restaurant...and its success. Thank God the Helios Guild's camp outing had crept up on them. Denied access to his restaurant, the man was now forced to relax.

At the foot of the bed, Jason found a pair of freshly ironed jeans. They weren't his, but he and Perry shared the same pants size, and his were in a tangled pile of socks, underwear, and denim. These were neatly folded. No nail-biting decision there.

He automatically headed for the stream, wishing he would have remembered to pack his fishing rod. Star-shaped purple flowers bloomed beneath the shelter of ferns. Oaks jockeyed for light beside spindly pines. The ground was littered with last year's castoffs: dead leaves, acorn hulls—their insides long since stolen by squirrels—and broken branches in various sizes and shapes. His spine, twisted from sleeping in an unfamiliar bed and jockeying for covers all night, relaxed. Stride lengthening, he thought about going for a light jog.

His tranquil stroll through the woods was interrupted by a very feminine oath.

He froze.

What was a woman doing down here? Privacy was the

main reason the Helios Guild booked the group site at Embarrass Delta Park each year. The secret skinny dipping hole, the campfires on the delta, and, in his never-humble opinion, his to-die-for cuisine were several others. Its relative close proximity to their restaurant, *No Patio*, made it convenient for them to sneak away.

The stream bordered the edge of the group camp, squirming through the undomesticated woodland. He could hear it chattering already, just beyond the tangle of the usual spring flood's debris. Carefully picking his way through the downed tree limbs, he crouched at the stream's edge.

A fisherman, er, woman, cast her line toward his hiding spot. The lure hit the water with a splunk. Iridescent color danced across the dark water before the lure vanished. Her floppy olive hat hid much of her face, but her dark ponytail bobbed as she expertly worked her rod and reel. She wore waders and a fishing vest; a coral bikini top peeked through the vest's opening.

The scent of bug repellent drifted around her in an invisible cloud. If her intentions were to try to seduce a man away from the camp, she'd selected an odd perfume to do it with. He shook his head. Crazy woman. Crazier to think she cared who stayed at the cabins. She was obviously fishing and totally oblivious to what went on at the group cabins. Sometimes he worried he spent too much time in Perry's company. Not everyone had an ulterior motive.

She cursed to herself again as she reeled in the line. She cast in his direction again.

A flash of silver exploded out of the water, no less than five feet from his shoe. Yelping, he backpedaled and slipped in the mud. He reached for a tree limb. The branch snapped under his grip. He slid on his ass into the water.

Her head jerked toward him. "Who's there?" When she saw him, her look of consternation turned to amusement. "Hello there. Spying on me?"

He marshaled the remnants of his dignity and stood. The water hit him at mid-thigh. "Of course not. The group camp's up that way. You're the spy."

She raised an eyebrow. Her attention was diverted by her slack line. "Fish off. Damn it." Chewing her lip, she reeled her line in, and cursed again when she found it

missing its lure.

The gesture seemed too familiar. He stared at her. The heart-shaped face, the dark eyes. Add a little weight. Erase the shadows under her eyes. "Morgan T'Naile?"

Her ease slipped away as swiftly as her fish had escaped. "Who wants to know?"

The defensiveness surprised him. Where was the laid-back girl of his childhood? Even then, he'd had a secret crush on her. As his older sister's best friend, catching a glimpse Morgan's breasts had been an adolescent obsession of his. Just one more goal he'd failed to check off the list.

He pondered the source of the shadows, the defensiveness; somebody or something had clearly hurt her. The urge to protect her from her unseen assailant was only a natural male reaction...he hoped. "You don't recognize me, do you? Jason. Jason Scholl, Natalie's little brother."

"Not so little anymore." Beneath her vest, her heart did a tap dance against her breastbone. His smile could melt glaciers. Normally, she had eyes only for clean-shaven men, but Jason's carefully groomed goatee looked good on him. Bright blue eyes regarded her with amusement. His body showed off his natural athletic prowess. Long muscled limbs, a charming smile—erase her image of his ass-first crash into the stream—and he'd easily catch the eye of any warm-blooded female.

In high school, she and Natalie were inseparable. College, marriage, and physical distance weakened the bond. She bore the greater brunt of blame. Her marriage dragged her into an elite social circle she nearly drowned in. Everything else—friends, hobbies, career—was tossed overboard in her attempt to stay afloat. "How is she?"

"Married. Two kids. Third on the way. I heard you got married to some big-wig's son."

"Heir to the Henny Penny empire." They were the largest distributor of organic eggs and chickens in the Midwest. She held up her bare left hand. She tried to keep the resentment out of her voice, but failed. "Recently divorced. He found a woman who threw better parties." And didn't mind acting the part of bubble-headed hostess.

"Tough break. Kids?"

She shook her head.

He blew out a breath. "Almost heiress to an egg empire, huh?" His eyes gleamed, suddenly mischievous. "Speaking of eggs, remember that meringue you taught me to make?"

"How could I forget? You sprayed it all over your mom's cabinets and walls." Who knew that egg and sugar ate away at some kinds of paint? Or maybe they just waited too long to wipe it off. By then, it'd undergone a metamorphosis, its stickiness rivaling super glue.

He laughed. "Made my mom cry," he remembered. "But I have you to thank for my career choice." He gave her a mock bow. "Head chef at *No Patio*."

Her grin resurfaced. "Really? I'm impressed."

"Are you camping here or just fishing?"

"Camping. Site one oh eight." She lifted her stringer of fish. "Stop by tonight and I'll cook for you, unless your educated palate no longer lets you stoop to camp grub."

He hesitated and she cursed to herself. Of course, he was staying at the group camp. Beth had specifically asked her to fish upstream this week. The request fell through the cracks, unremembered, until now. The Helios Guild, a club for gay men, booked the entire group camp for the week. All the rangers worked hard to ensure the group's privacy.

"Your partner's welcome, too, of course," she added.

He flashed her a look, an uneasy smile playing at his lips. "Really?"

"Jason Scholl, do I look that narrow-minded?"

His grin changed into a real smile, wide and white. "No. You look like an ad for a men's magazine."

She splashed water at him.

"Hey! That was meant to be a compliment!"

"Yeah, right. You're none too handsome yourself, mud puppy."

His grin faded. "Perry's going to kill me. They're his pants."

"Blame it on me," she suggested.

Eyes narrowing, his face assumed a mock serious expression. He stroked his goatee. "Yeah, I can manage something."

"You do that. Seven o'clock okay for you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He started to scramble up the river bank. His jeans hugged his perfectly sculpted ass as he moved, making her mouth water. *Forbidden fruit.*

"Hey, Scholl," she called after him.

He paused, midway up the bank. "Yeah?"

"You didn't turn out half bad, even if it does look like you shit your pants."

His face split into a grin. "I meant what I said, about the men's magazine." Then he vanished into the underbrush.

Damn it. Why was it that every sexy, articulate man she ever met turned out to be gay?

Beth, with an awareness bordering on the uncanny, met Morgan in the parking lot. "How far downstream did you make it?"

Morgan shifted her stringer of fish to the other shoulder. She swore they'd doubled in weight since she'd decided to return. "To the group camp."

She secretly wondered how the petite redhead managed to discipline anyone, let alone drunken campers. Her tan hat perched atop her tight curls, making her look like a grown-up version of Orphan Annie. Maybe her regulation pistol and well-worn ticket pad were enough motivation to behave around her.

Beth's breath hissed out. "I told you to stay away from them."

"I didn't do it on purpose. I forgot." Her lips slipped into a smile. "'Sides, I ran into an old friend. We're having supper at my site."

Tipping her head, Beth studied her. "That's the difference."

Wary, she asked, "What?"

"The color's back in your cheeks and don't blame it on sunburn." She shook her finger at her. "Of all the men to fall for—"

"Please. There was no love at first sight." She bit her lip. "Lust maybe. But that's just because it's been so long. I swear, all a guy has to do is lay a hand on me and I'll explode."

Beth arched a brow. "Spontaneous orgasm with a gay man? You let me know how that works out for you."

"You're just jealous."

"Of the anticipated orgasm or your male friend?"

"Both."

Beth snorted. "Right. So who's the guy?"

"In high school, I used to hang out with Natalie Scholl. I swear we were attached at the hip. Jason, her kid brother, tagged along sometimes."

Beth held up a hand. "So let me get this straight. Not only are you playing for a man who's interested in outies not innies, but you're robbing the cradle as well?"

She shrugged, glad for the sunburn. It camouflaged her flaming cheeks. "When you put it like that, it sounds bad. Look, I just want to cook a meal and share it with some nice company. Not that you're not," she stumbled as Beth's gaze narrowed, "But it'll be fun to reminisce. The good 'ole days."

Beth's gaze softened. "Before Thomas Vinton, oh-so-cocksure the third. I get it. Want me to swing through later on and check on you? Move him along if things get rowdy?"

Morgan laughed, startled by the gaiety in her own voice. It'd been a long time since she'd laughed like that. "You do that," she said. "Bring a case of beer."

"I just might, honey." She hesitated, choosing her words. "Don't expect too much."

"I'll be good," she promised, crossing her fingers.

~ * ~

It was one thing to agree to supper, quite another to convince Perry to join him. The man could be so pigheadedly reclusive sometimes.

"She was my sister's best friend, not my lover," Jason soothed, for the umpteenth time. "You can come in sackcloth as long as you don't scowl at her all evening."

"I don't scowl," Perry retorted, doing just that. He crossed his arms. "I have nothing to wear."

Ah, well, that was his fault. When he set off for an early morning stroll, he had no intention of ruining Perry's pants. He'd just picked up the nearest article of clothing and put it on. Now the aforementioned pants were soaking in a bucket of lemon-scented water.

"I don't want to go without you," Jason persisted.

"Afraid she'll hit on you?"

That was dangerously close to the truth, but he was

more worried he might be the one with the urge to seduce. The sight of Morgan T'Naile resurrected all sorts of fantasies he thought he had long since outgrown. *Treading in dangerous waters, pal*, he reminded himself. The carefree Morgan of his youth was not the suspicious woman he met this morning. He raised his chin. "You said next pick was mine."

Perry's eyebrows rose.

He didn't want to sound sullen or defensive. "Please come with me. Borrow someone's pants if you have to."

"It's that important?"

"Yes."

Perry sighed. "We can't go without a proper bottle of wine. Grilled fish, you say?"

Jason grinned. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"You owe me a lot more than that."

Three

Morgan resisted the urge to check the filets. Opening the foil packet would ruin the delicate ecosystem she had created with wine, lemon juice, and smoldering charcoal. Her fingers itched to do something. Arrange flowers. Fiddle with the fine china. Pity she had neither the china nor the flowers. The cup of wine she poured for herself remained untouched on her picnic table. She managed a laugh. God, with the way she was acting, one would think she was preparing for her first date.

Glancing at her watch, she frowned. Quarter to seven. She had a little time. She liked to think she never begged the Goddess for frivolous things, but she was about to break her own rule. She shrugged. Friday happened to be an auspicious day for friendships and social activity anyway. She was just going to give it a little boost. Ducking into her tent, she retrieved a white candle.

Propping the candle on the picnic table, she whispered, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone, the Triad enthroned. In my nervous hour, I invoke your power. Guide me and my guests to ensure our best. Bless all who partake of this meal. And bring happiness, health and peace to feel." A little bubble of calm surrounded her. Breathing deep, she lit the candle. Some of her associates never invoked the Crone, fearing her temper and lack of tact. But for Morgan, things never went according to plan if she just picked the naive Maiden or the nurturing Mother.

"Are you trying to set your hair on fire? Or is that just peripheral entertainment?"

She flinched and screamed, more a girly surprised noise than an alarmed run-for-the-rangers alert. She never heard the men sneak up her path. She had expected them to drive, not hike the mile from the group site to the main campground. Her elbow knocked her plastic cup, sloshing wine over its rim.

Jason and his friend stood less than ten feet away.

So much for getting off on the right side of the broomstick. "Creating ambiance," she said with a weak smile. No need to immerse them in her religious life. She didn't want her views to become the focus of the conversation as they inevitably did when someone found out. At best, she would get asked to read their palms or divine tarot cards. At worst, she would be greeted with suspicion and what was meant to be a peaceful time to catch up with an old friend would be cut unnaturally short.

"Aren't you the jumpy one?" Jason teased.

While the smell of singed hair bullied the cooking fish's aroma, she juggled a napkin and her half-empty plastic cup in a Ron-White-meets-Martha-Stewart pose.

"I would have knocked or rang, but I didn't see a bell," Jason continued, oblivious to her distress. He didn't see any mode of transportation other than a bicycle, either. A stack of plastic totes peeked from beneath a blue tarp behind her tent. She seemed to have a lot of gear for a simple camping trip. An impressive pile of wood marked the boundary on one side of the campsite. They could keep a fire going for four days straight with that much wood.

She found her grin and with it, her sense of humor. "Hello again. I see you've changed your pants."

"They were Perry's pants. Tell him how nice my ass looked in them. Maybe he will forgive me for wearing them." He glanced at his partner's face. "Or not."

"To be honest, I never noticed," she murmured.

"Liar."

He wondered if Perry thought they were grinning idiots. "Morgan, this is Perry Holloway. Perry, Morgan T'Naile, to whom I owe my undying gratitude for steering me toward culinary school rather than taking over the family automotive repair business."

"Shh, your dad would hunt me down if he knew that."

His grin never wavered. "He's gotten over the disappointment. 'Sides, I'm not too bad of a pastry chef, either. I bring him treats."

"You bribe him," Perry corrected.

Morgan and Perry didn't bother to hide their inspection of one another. Jason's stomach churned. Color blossomed at the back of Perry's neck, his eyes the deepest shade of mahogany. He only had that intense look when he was aroused. Morgan, too, seemed to be having difficulty keeping her sentiments hidden. A smile played on her lips, eyelids at half-mast. God, if a man could manage that look and not appear sissy doing it, any person, regardless of sex, would fall at his feet.

Perry held out his hand.

She took it, meeting his scrutinizing look with an innocent batting of her brown lashes. "If he gets too obnoxious, I'll tell you about some of his youthful exploits."

Jason colored. "That's blackmail."

"Play nice," she retorted.

"I'd be delighted to hear how he misbehaved as a child." Perry held her hand a moment beyond good manners.

Jason cleared his throat. What the hell was going on? If he didn't know better, he'd think they were flirting with one another. "We brought a bottle of wine. I hope you like sauvignon blanc. Perry thought it'd go well with the fish."

"I'm sure it will." *The man has a warlock's eyes*, Morgan thought. Enchanting, haunted, and dangerous. Jason wasn't the one to watch. Perry was. *Down, libido, down*. Shadows etched secrets into the line of his jaw, like runes highlighted by a sacrificial fire. Those secrets surfaced and sank in the mahogany depths of his eyes. She shivered.

Beth was right. She had more than an itch. She had a full-out case of poison-fucking-ivy.

Perry wore his chestnut hair very short, bangs a hint longer. Well groomed sideburns flanked his ears. His white button-down shirt looked freshly pressed as did his jeans. She wanted to peel him out of both and devour him right on the picnic table. Thank the Maiden for that thought. Or was that the Crone rearing her head?

The two men settled at the table while she checked the filets. She felt their eyes on her back. She hoped they couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"So, how long have you been camping?" Jason asked.

Determined not to lie, she had rehearsed answering the question a half dozen times before the men arrived. Each time she sounded like an ignorant fool. She flipped the foil packet onto a cookie sheet. "For a while. Could you open the wine?" She held up a corkscrew but Perry had already pulled one out of his pocket.

"Looks like you're here to stay," Jason pressed.

Setting the sheet on the picnic table, she met Jason's gaze. Friendly curiosity encouraged her to hold to her promise to herself. "I've been here since May. I'm not sure how long I intend to stay."

Jason choked on his wine. "Jeez, Morgan, warn me when you do that."

Offering him a napkin, she worked on transferring the filets to plates. The scent of lemon drifted through the campsite. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply. In order to best be appreciated, food needed to inspire all the senses. She succeeded, at least, at that.

"I don't think she's kidding," Perry said quietly.

She didn't look up. "I'm not. My divorce was just finalized. I had nowhere else to go and a ten year old unused marketing degree. I'm not exactly prime hiring material."

That clearly peaked Perry's interest, but he was polite enough to accept the proffered plate without peppering her with questions. Picking up a fork, he snagged a flake of perfectly whitened fish and popped it in his mouth.

Jason continued to gape. "Let me get this straight. You gave the bastard nearly ten years of your life and you walked away with nothing? No house, no car, no maintenance, nothing?"

"That was part of the pre-nuptial agreement, yes. Though I managed to squirrel away some money. And I kept the ring." She didn't mention she'd already hocked it. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell your sister. She'll think I'm an idiot."

"She needs to know what a jerk he is. Create a blog or a chain mail. We could put a poster up in the restaurant

window: 'Boycott Henny Penny. Buy chemical-laden eggs.' "

Rolling his eyes, Perry laid a hand on Jason's forearm. "The fish is excellent. Trout?"

She flashed him an appreciative smile. "Bass. Smothered in white wine, garlic, and lemon."

Jason ignored Perry's quiet warning. "What was your lawyer doing while you were signing away your future?"

She bit her lip. "I used his."

Without a word, Perry filled her glass. "May he contract a vicious venereal disease," he said, raising his cup.

She smiled. "The lawyer or Thomas?"

"Both," Jason replied.

"I'll drink to that." She clinked cups with Perry, then Jason.

With the confession of her stupidity out of the way, conversation flowed unhindered, though Jason contributed to the bulk of it. Perry seemed mesmerized by the food. For a man who ate like that, she expected him to weigh over three hundred pounds. If the glimpse of his arms were any indication, however, he spent as much time working out as he did contemplating his words. With an audience so appreciative of well-crafted food, it was no wonder Jason and Perry hit it off.

Dappled sunlight faded to dusk, then to full dark. A string of white lights blinked on, prompted by an automatic timer. Shadows danced beneath the twinkling lights. Jason laughed. "My folks always strung lights when they camped, too. Though less tasteful than these."

"I remember." She made a face. "Multicolored faux Japanese lanterns."

His eyes twinkled. "You don't, by chance, have s'mores fixings?"

Perry poked at the fire with a stick. Spearing the remains of his paper plate, he lifted it above the coals. The plate's wax coating ignited as it oozed off the paper surface, creating a flaming waterfall. "You can't still be hungry."

"S'mores aren't food. They're a little bit of heaven. No calories," Jason added.

"I do." She stood, wobbling toward her tent. She hadn't realized just how much she'd drank until she found

herself focusing on walking a straight line. Thankfully, the darkness hid her stumbles. Her alcohol tolerance was ridiculously low.

"You okay?" Perry asked.

She giggled. "I haven't been this messed up since January." He started to stand. She waved him off. "It's good. I'm glad Jason ran into me. Fell over me. Fell in the water. Whatever." She procured two steel marshmallow roasting sticks, each armed with three feet of steel skewer and a wooden handle.

Perry stood. Taking the sticks in one hand and her elbow in the other, he tried to steer her toward her chair. "I need the marshmallows." Twisting loose, she dropped beside a plastic tote and rummaged inside. Clutching her supplies to her chest, she took Perry's proffered arm.

Before she lost the nerve, she placed a quick kiss on his cheek. "Thank you." Her lips grazed his stubble. *Look out cheek, the lips are next.*

His lips curved, as if he could read her thoughts. Then he steered her to her chair.

"Balance always was the first to go," Jason commented.

When she glared at him, he winked impishly. "I can't remember how many times Nat bribed me into playing lookout while you guys raided Dad's liquor cabinet." He took the bag of marshmallows from her. Loading the spears, he returned a stick to her. "Why'd you let him stomp all over you?"

She knew immediately who he was talking about. *Thomas*. "Seduced by an easy grin and soft hands." Sighing, she raked her fingers through her hair, tucking the loose strands behind her ears. "Love is blind. And ignorant. Sometimes pig-headed. But always terminal."

"Wow. You don't leave much room for happily ever afters," Jason commented.

"They don't exist." Satisfied with the shade of brown, she twisted her stick, toasting the opposite side of the marshmallow. "Someone is always sacrificed in the mix." She raised her head, staring at him across the fire. "Take your meringues. Lovely, but bye-bye yolks."

When he remained silent, she added, "I'm not bitter.

Honest. I was, but I think I'm over it. The last couple years were hell. His finally serving papers was a relief." She eyed the empty wine bottle and contemplated opening another. No, she was saving the vintage she filched from Thomas's treasured stash for a special occasion.

Jason picked up a graham cracker. Breaking it in half, he laid a piece of chocolate on one half. Then he sandwiched the hot marshmallow between the two and slid it off his stick. Taking a bite, he closed his eyes, savoring the taste. "The chocolate's melted, but still here. The marshmallow toasted, but again, essentially unchanged. The graham cracker plays harmony to their sweetness. Nothing's lost, but without the amalgamation, it wouldn't be a s'more." He opened his eyes. "There aren't winners and losers in a sincere and loving relationship."

Her breath hitched. Nat's baby brother wasn't only gorgeous, but clever, too. Why hadn't she seen that? Duh, 'cause he'd been eight when she was sixteen. Fate could be so cruel. She stood. "Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom."

The bathhouse was only eight campsites down. The pressure in her bladder was probably enough motivation to override the alcohol in her system, but she recited the campsite numbers as she walked anyway. Dissolving into hiccupping tears and cursing her lot in life wasn't an option.

God, she wanted them. And it wasn't because it'd been eons since she enjoyed a man's hands on her. Perry or Jason, she didn't care which. There was a comfortable familiarity about Jason. He'd be a playful and inventive lover. But Perry—there's where the true mystery lay. His dark eyes missed nothing. His stiff manners complimented Jason's ease. His subtle wit made her anxious to hear him speak again. She was certain breaking down into tears wouldn't endear him to her.

Everyone had obstacles to finding love and acceptance. But changing one's sexual preference seemed pretty insurmountable. Finished, she splashed cold water on her face. She needed to get a firm rein on her libido. When the divorce was announced, her "friends"—acquaintances mostly, Thomas's friends' wives, mainly—shed her like a chicken molting feathers. Friends were hard to come by. She

was determined not to ruin the beginnings of something so precious just because she had an itch to scratch. Dildos couldn't hold you while you quivered, but they didn't lug around emotional baggage or sexual preferences, either.

Satisfied she had squashed all improper thoughts or at least convinced herself she was marginally sane, she headed back to her campsite.

When she left, Jason leaned forward. "Isn't she great? What do you think about your first s'more? I'm trying to create a dessert based from it. Maybe put the finishing touches on at the customer's table with a blow torch. Can't you picture the chocolate melting over the marshmallow as it browned? Releasing that intoxicating cocoa scent?" It was all in the presentation.

"I think you should sleep with her and see if that gets her out of your system." Perry's mild voice was deceiving.

Jason sobered. Perry always attacked the heart of the matter. He loved that about his friend, but sometimes his assessment seemed downright clinical. Emotions be damned. Unfortunately, most people, including himself, didn't work that way. It made him a hard man to love. "Do you really think it's as simple as that?"

Perry shrugged. "Sleeping with her was one of your teenaged fantasies. The woman's changed. You said so yourself. So take a ride and replace fantasy with reality. It's a harsh pill, but it should cure you."

He disagreed, but kept his doubts to himself. "And if it doesn't?"

Perry gave him a tight-lipped smile. "We'll negotiate if it comes to that. I did say you could pick the next one."

"You like her, don't you?"

"She's lost."

Jason's brow furrowed. Hesitating, he said, "Okay. That wasn't what I was exactly thinking, but I'll go with that."

"You be careful with her."

He straightened. "I think I know my way around a woman."

"I didn't mean that." Perry held up his hand. "Let me finish. If you sense you're going to cause more damage, let

her go. Pride's a fragile thing to reconstruct."

"Would you like first dibs?" Jason asked softly. "I'll back off." He almost missed the quick flash in Perry's eyes. Desire? Anger? His moods were never gentle creatures to deal with.

"Too much, too quick," he replied, voice terse. "You first."

That was it, wasn't it? Perry wanted her, too. Excitement bloomed. Could they have finally stumbled over a woman both could agree on? He fervently hoped so.

Four

When Morgan returned from the bathroom, Perry and Jason were talking in hushed voices. Goddess help her, they looked good together. The campfire light plucked hidden red highlights from Perry's hair, shadowing the dips in his arms to further emphasize his musculature and showcase his granite profile. Jason's dark hair blended into the background until all she could see was the gleam of his bright blue eyes reflecting the firelight.

Before she entered her campsite, she cleared her throat, quietly announcing her presence. Goodbye renegade libido. Hello, polite hostess.

Perry stood. "I'm going to leave you two to reminisce. Morgan, the meal was delightful. Stop by the restaurant any time." It was the longest string of words he had said all night.

She blinked. "You're leaving?" She tried again, hoping she didn't sound so desperate this time. "Have a good night. It was great meeting you." She offered him her hand.

He took it, gaze locked on her. There was that flash of wizard eyes again. She shivered. Damn it, she needed to make her neurotic wanton clitoris toe the line.

"The pleasure's all mine. You gave Jason a run for his money and he's professionally trained."

"Hey," Jason protested. "They don't teach campfire cooking in culinary school."

With an inscrutable glance toward Jason, Perry headed down the path toward the group cabins.

Morgan settled into the chair beside Jason. "Thanks for dropping by," she said quietly. "This was fun."

"Sure. I don't see my sister as much as I should. You

bring back good memories." He laid his hand on her arm.

Her heart froze in her throat.

He kneaded the taut muscles in her forearm. "Relax."

"Um, I know it's wrong, but I haven't been exactly thinking virginal thoughts all evening."

He raised a brow. "Really? Tell me more." His fingers trailed over the back of her hand, brushing her knuckles. Her hand automatically flexed and he threaded his fingers through hers.

"Seriously, Scholl. Your boyfriend walks away and less than two minutes later you're hitting on me? Not good, not good at all." She tried to draw her hand away, but he held it tighter.

"He gave me permission."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. Tell me another."

He thrust a napkin in her lap. "Here's his consent note." As she picked it up, he said, "Oh and you cost me fifty bucks. Perry said you'd never let me make a play without his approval. I told him he was an arrogant ass."

She read the note:

He's all yours for tonight. Make him beg. – Perry

She waved it at him. "You wrote this."

He held up both hands. "I've had a crush on you since I was a kid. Perry knew that."

She chewed her lip. "You haven't sworn off women?"

"Neither of us has. We just haven't found the right one to share." When she remained silent, he added, "It's called bisexual where I come from."

"You ass. I know that." She slugged him in the shoulder. He squirmed under her scrutiny. "You think you can charm me, ply me with wine, and just slide right into my pants?"

"You're wearing shorts," he pointed out. "And I'm not going to slide into them. I'm going to take them off along with everything else you're wearing."

"You always were overconfident."

He gave her his most charming smile. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a maybe." She toyed with a strand of hair. "I'll probably disappoint you. My portfolio of sex partners is ridiculously thin."

He chuckled. "Nothing you'd do would disappoint me."

How could Perry willingly give his blessing and just walk away? Was he really that confident? Or had he sized her up and found her lacking? Her back stiffened at that thought. "How long have you and Perry been together?"

"Five years."

"Have you strayed before?"

He frowned at her wording. "We've both dabbled. *No Patio* is not only our business, it's an extension our life together. Neither of us would do anything to wound the other."

She fiddled with her empty cup. "You're both amazing. Smart, sexy, articulate, funny. I don't want to be the cause of any rift."

His grin widened. "You talk and worry entirely too much, T'Naile." Leaning over the chairs' armrests, he cupped her face in his hands. "Let's start with this." His lips covered hers.

Oh, so sweet. They still tasted of chocolate and marshmallow. His tongue teased the seam of her lips. When they parted, he delved inside her mouth. Tracing the outline of her jaw with his thumbs, he deepened the kiss until he was leaning forward in his chair and she backward. Her libido did a back-flip, her vulva enthusiastically clapping. She squirmed in her chair. Damn, she might not have exaggerated to Beth. Warmth pooled low in her stomach, making her twitchy.

He rested his brow against hers. "See? Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

His chair, tilting on two legs, collapsed. He fell into her lap, crumpling her chair as well. Propping himself up on his elbows, he said, "I see stars."

She giggled. "You're going to set us on fire."

He tugged a strand of her hair. "My intent all along, Miss Morgan." His finger trailed over the curve of her ear, slipped down her neck and teased the creamy mounds peeking over her tank top.

"Not to ruin the mood, but my chair leg's carving a hole in my back."

With a laugh, he pulled them both upright. She clung to his shoulders. His arm slid around her waist, his other hand lacing through hers. "Do you tango?" He whirled them

around the campsite before she could answer, then dipped her over his arm.

"No." Visions of the two men danced in her head. *Easy, girl. Let's see if you can handle one.* Jason's boundless energy left her breathless.

"Will you show me your humble abode?"

"Sure." The odd word combination, the exact phrase she'd used in her Midsummer Night spell, should have set off warning bells in her brain. Instead, lulled by wine, she was secretly pleased. The Goddess approved.

He kept his fingers laced through hers as she led him to her tent. One side served as her bedroom, complete with air mattress, sleeping bag, and blankets. The other side sheltered a folding table and chair. She clicked on the LED lantern, bathing the tent's green walls in an eerie white light.

"Not exactly romantic," she commented, but before she could finish, his mouth latched on hers again.

Sweetness slid into possession. His tongue teased the edges of her lips, lingering in its heart-shaped dip. Hands skated down her arms, tugging off the blouse she'd thrown on to cut the evening's chill. The heat of his palms scorched her skin. Gripping her elbows, he drew her closer, until her breasts rubbed against his tee shirt. Damn the cotton and silk barriers.

She tugged his shirt out of his cargo pants, her hands slipping beneath the fabric. His chest was as searing hot as his hands. Stomach muscles danced beneath her touch as she explored, his chest hair tickling her palms.

When he gave her a moment to breathe, she whispered, "Should I turn on the fan?"

He shook his head, grasped the edges of his shirt, and yanked it over his head. Her eyes widened. Dark hair frosted his pecs, softening their hard lines. When he tossed his shirt aside, a double row of abdominal muscles rippled like runway lights, directing her hand downward.

He tugged at the hem of her tank top. "Your turn."

She eased the tank up, fabric lingering just below her breasts. His hungry gaze followed the cloth's movement, frowning when her progress halted. "Whew. You're right. That's much better."

"Tease."

Her nipples jutted through both her bra's silk and the thin cotton of her tank top. She wiggled the shirt over her breasts, then let it join Jason's discarded tee. Violet lace covered her tanned skin.

He nudged aside her bra strap, then whistled appreciatively. "No tan lines."

She ducked her head, grinning. If one could outwit the mosquitoes, there were plenty of private places on the delta to sunbathe nude.

"My, my. A closet exhibitionist. I would have never guessed."

Straining against its olive prison, his cock apparently approved. Her hands skimmed the length of his arms, caressing his muscled biceps and forearms. Goosebumps sprouted along his skin. Bending her head, she kissed away the bumps, her nipples brushing against his chest. He shivered.

He licked his lips, voice hoarse. "That's not playing fair."

"All's fair in love and war." Dropping to her knees, she revealed the curve of her spine as her fingers undid her bra band. She arched her shoulders. The bra's straps slid down her arms. Discarding her bra, she pressed her breasts to his skin before he could catch a glimpse of their tight dark aureoles.

Her nipples skimmed over his abdomen as she straightened. He stood but half a head taller than her. Glancing down, he ran a fingertip between the valley of her breasts. It was her turn to shiver. His hands cupped the sides of her breasts, sliding beneath their swells to cradle their full weight in his palms.

Lifting his head, he stared into her face. Something inside her broke; an aching whisper of need ripped through the crack. His eyes were filled with awe, tenderness, and lust. His fingers and thumbs found her erect nubs. Rubbing them between his pads, he teased them into tighter and tighter peaks. Her lips parted. A soft gasp escaped. Heat bloomed low in her stomach.

His head tilted to the side, eyes gleaming. He pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, then to the points of her collar bones. Kissing the tops of her tanned swells, he buried

his nose between her breasts. His tongue explored their inner curves, caressing the sensitive skin. Her hips ground against him.

They were still wearing too many clothes. Her clitoris throbbed, begging to be rubbed while her nipples all but screamed for release. Licking a path to her bellybutton, his teeth and tongue found her sides. She shivered, giggling.

"Ticklish," he murmured, face pressed against her stomach. His hands fumbled with the button on the waistband of her shorts.

She tried to fist her hands in his hair, but there wasn't enough to grip. "Please."

He paused, head tipped back to capture her gaze. His lips glistened. "Please, what?"

She wouldn't beg. "I'm burning up."

He chuckled. Undoing her zipper, he tugged both panties and shorts down. His hands slid to her bared buttocks. Cupping her cheeks, he pulled them apart, making room for his pinkies to explore the rim of her anus. She clenched her ass. His fingers found her anus's edge again, teasing the nerve endings. Before she could protest, he moved on to her perineum, leaving her body humming with strange new sensations.

Kissing her mons, he rubbed his nose in her dark curls, inhaling her feminine scent. Her thighs quivered. "I need to sit."

His arm snagged the back of her knees, sweeping her quite literally off her feet.

She screamed as she fell, but he caught her, arms around her shoulders, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Don't. Ever. Do. That. Again." Her heart lurched, trying to recover its rhythm. What if one of the campers called the ranger? She prayed it'd be Beth and not one of the rookies that showed up.

Snickering, he set her on her mattress. She crossed her legs primly. He shook his head. "That won't do. Spread 'em, baby."

The way he phrased it made her laugh. He cupped her mons. Laughter morphed into a gasp. She stilled. "Take your pants off, first."

The words were barely out of her mouth before his

pants joined the pile of clothing on the tent floor. Placing his hands on her thighs, he spread her legs.

"Underwear, too."

"That wasn't part of the deal." He kissed her mons, thumbs slipping into the crease where thigh met torso. The sensitive skin trembled beneath his touch.

His back bowed, spine curving as his head dipped lower. The view of his smooth curves and the rounded swell of his ass were almost enough to put her over the edge. Her fingers itched to touch. Nosing aside her labia, he kissed her throbbing nub. Tremors seized her lower legs. His mouth parted, lips latching around her bud. The heat in the pit of her stomach spread like a languorous wave of warm honey. His tongue found the bundle of nerves, teasing them until they shrilled. His nails scraped up her legs, then seized her hands. Twining his fingers through hers, his mouth and tongue resumed their plundering.

Her vagina clenched. "Dear Lord and Lady," she whimpered. It'd been too long since she let herself feel this way. Too long since she sensed need in the hands touching her. Too long since she actually felt sexy, feminine, desirable.

Jason's satisfied male laughter finished her off.

Molten heat surged through her body. Her fingers stiffened, but he kept his grip. Every muscle she possessed—and some she didn't know existed—tensed. She teetered at the cusp of orgasm. His tongue dipped inside her, lapping at her juices. The precipice crumbled beneath her.

Dropping her hands, he shed his underwear. Tears blurred her vision. Seizing her hips, he balanced on his knees, shaft bobbing between his spread legs. She caught a glimpse of its rounded head before he slid inside her, filling her up and bringing her immediately to the brink. Her breath caught in her throat. *Not possible*. She shattered again.

Her body still twitched with aftershocks as he rode her. Hips automatically met hips. Feminine gasps mingled with satisfied male grunts. Her hands seized his ass cheeks, clinging to his muscled curves while her heart buffeted her breastbone. He gripped her breasts, clenching tighter while they both spiraled higher. His eyes darkened, sky blue fading to midnight. He groaned. Tendons popped out along his neck

as he threw his head back, ejaculating. Her vagina clenched around him, clinging to him while her body gave up any semblance of humanity, dissolving into a boneless mass of nerves and tendons.

God, she was more than his adolescent mind could have ever conjured up. She stirred in her sleep, turning toward him. Arms tucked to her chest, she burrowed beneath his chin. Snagging the edge of the sheet, he pulled it over her shoulders, then folded the blanket, tucking it around her waist. Her feminine scent teased him, lavender mingled with the musky odor of sex.

Even without knowing the guy, he wanted to punch Mr. Thomas Vinton III in the face. How could anyone leave their wife of ten years bereft of the basic necessities like a house and transportation? It wasn't as if money were the issue. At the very least, he could have bought her a condo, maybe a nice used Mercedes. Jason bet the man had denied her other more important things, like affection, warmth, and compassion. Tonight she all but devoured their words, absorbing not only what they said, but the companionship that came with them.

The man deserved to be strung and quartered. Familiarity was no excuse. Even though he had been with Perry five years, they found plenty of ways to spice up their love life. So it took a little effort. So what? One appreciated the precious when it was sweated and fought for.

Perry would call him a foolish sap, but Jason began to think she might be worth fighting for.

Five

It rained the next four days straight, ruining the remainder of the Helios Guild's camping trip. One could only play strip poker or cribbage so many times before the confinement went directly to the screaming portion of one's brain.

Or as Perry succinctly put it, "Too many queens vying for one throne."

Jason worried entirely too much about Morgan. He pictured her trapped in her tent, staring at her smoldering campfire. He saw her walking in the rain, head bent as the raindrops lashed her back. Melodramatic portrayal, yes. Accurate, probably not. Morgan didn't strike him as a woman who would let something like rain stop her from doing whatever she wanted.

He hoped he kept his obsessive thoughts to himself.

"She's been here since May. I'm sure she's found a way to pass time when it rains," Perry said when Jason lost yet another game of cribbage.

Apparently not.

"I didn't get her out of my system. It's worse now." He wouldn't meet Perry's gaze.

"Hmm." Perry shuffled the deck of cards.

"We have a spare bedroom."

"She's not a stray puppy. You can't just adopt her."

"I thought you liked her."

"I do. The answer's still no."

"Jealous," Jason groused.

"You know that's not true." With a sigh, Perry set the deck of cards on the table. "You're begging to have your heart broken."

"She's not that type of woman."

"None of them are," Perry muttered. "All right, let's take a drive."

Jason immediately brightened. "I'll get the car."

~ * ~

An SUV pulled alongside Morgan. Ignoring it, she continued walking. Most of the campground was deserted, but there was a stubborn group of college kids that'd taken over six sites. She'd yet to see any of them sober.

She wished she had the nerve to visit Jason at the group camp, but she didn't want to spoil he and Perry's vacation. They'd exchanged phone numbers. Though it might kill her, she could wait. She wondered if she'd look desperate if she called him next week.

The SUV continued to shadow her. She thought about cutting through the ditch and ducking into the brush.

"Hey, pretty lady. Want a ride?"

She recognized that voice. A jumble of emotions followed. Relief. Excitement. Curiosity. Hot, wet need. She couldn't fault her clit for trying. "What are you up to?"

Jason leaned out the passenger side window. "Summer camp's over. We came to rescue you."

As she laughed, she noticed Perry's glare. It didn't appear to be directed at her, though, but at the back of Jason's head. She sobered.

"I thought the rain would be keeping you trapped in your tent."

"It's a warm rain." She lifted the bucket she held. "And a perfect time to collect worms. They crawl onto the road to escape suffocation."

Jason wrinkled his nose. "Climb in. We'll give you a ride to your site."

"Worms, too?"

"That's pushing it, but okay."

Opening the back door, she slipped inside. She shook back her hood. Wet tendrils of hair clung to her neck. "Had enough of roughing it?"

"You bet. Move in with us and make our lives more bearable."

What did he just say? She held up a hand. "Whoa."

She met Perry's worried eyes in the rearview mirror.

"That came out badly," Perry corrected. "He's trying to offer you a place to stay."

Humbled by their generosity, she didn't know what to say. "Thank you, but I don't take handouts."

"If it makes you feel better, you can pay us the camping rate and help around the house," Perry continued. "The restaurant demands most of our time, so you wouldn't be intruding."

"You don't even know me."

"Jason does."

"I could be a thief."

"If you were," Perry said dryly, "you'd have amassed more cash before getting the boot."

She colored.

"Say yes to the nice man," Jason prompted. "This is his most humanitarian moment ever."

"I don't want to create a wedge between you."

"Guest suite is on the opposite side of the house," Jason said. "You'll have your own bathroom and shower."

The chance to have her own bathroom again—without worrying about catching athlete's foot, warts, or some other nasty fungus? Her resolve crumbled. "I've been looking for a job." There wasn't anyone willing to try a dried-up socialite with an antiquated and untested degree. Even the nonprofit organizations took her resume, glanced at it, and politely promised to call her when something opened up.

Jason shrugged. "So keep looking. We won't hold you up. When you get on your feet, you can find yourself an apartment."

She gnawed on her lower lip. It was a wonderfully generous offer. Her hobo lifestyle couldn't go on indefinitely, two, maybe two and half months, tops. September weather was notoriously fickle.

"Are you sure I can be of use? That I won't be in your way?"

Perry gave her an almost imperceptible nod, but Jason was the one who answered. "It's settled. Let's load up some of your stuff."

~ * ~

Less than a week later, she was settled into Jason and Perry's home. She delighted in her very own shower every

morning, standing under the spray until her skin turned bright pink. At thirty-five hundred square feet, there was significant living space between the master and guest suite. Perry was right. She wouldn't infringe upon their privacy.

Nor would she interrupt their schedule. As far as she could tell, they were too tired for alone time and the word "schedule" was an alien concept. Jason often left earlier in the day than Perry, but Perry sometimes didn't arrive home until after midnight. They'd just hired a secondary chef and Jason was still possessive enough of his kitchen that he wanted to be there while the man learned to replicate his recipes.

Meanwhile, she tried to be of some use. She weeded the neglected flowerbeds and sprang for more plants when the ones already there were beyond her care. Since they were rarely home, cleaning consisted only of dusting and light vacuuming. Neither man trusted her with their precious laundry. From her perspective, they hand-washed entirely too many articles of clothing.

If she yearned for one more night of marathon sex, she tucked the longing away. She was a guest in their house. Jason would have to make the first move. Until then, she'd treat him like Nat, with a sisterly affection.

With a prayer to the Lady in general and the Triad in particular, she headed for Denton Plaza. Newly opened, the Plaza's owners were looking for a marketing savvy person to add to their staff. Walk-in appointments were welcomed, no pre-screening necessary. Halleluia! Prior scrutiny of her resume by Jason and Perry failed to reveal what made the document trashcan fodder. She suspected Thomas's meddling, then repented the dark thoughts, and figured it must be her lack of recent work experience. Meeting someone in person and watching them review her resume might give her the key she needed to fix the cursed document.

She called and made a one o'clock appointment.

Checking her appearance in the glass front's reflection, she smoothed a stray hair and walked into the office building. She hoped the cream business suit appeared sophisticated while the emerald silk blouse demonstrated her eye for color. It also reminded her of her prosperity spell on

the night of summer solstice. She felt powerful and confident. They had to notice her.

With a polite greeting, the receptionist asked for her name and ushered her to the waiting room.

Another clerk glanced up, recognition, curiosity, and surprise warring on her face. "You're the witch," she blurted out.

Morgan pasted a pleasant non-confrontational expression on her face. "I'm sorry. I don't believe we've met. I'm Morgan T'Naile." She extended her hand. Blushing, the woman ducked her head and answered the phone instead.

She hadn't chosen to share that fact, nor was it common knowledge. Who had poked their nose into her business? Perry and Jason didn't know, though she toyed with telling them on a daily basis. That left Thomas.

At promptly one o'clock, the receptionist led her into a plain conference room. Either it was so new they hadn't taken the time to decorate, or it was purposely left that way to give no sign of the company's tastes. She'd done her research, though. If they gave her a chance, she already had some ideas to boost the Plaza's appeal.

Propping her portfolio beside the table, she pulled out two copies of her resume, a pad of legal paper and a pen. *Think success.*

When her interviewer entered, Morgan rose and offered her hand. The woman took it, her grip light and dismissive. "Josephine Coblewska."

"Morgan T'Naile." *Happy thoughts*, she reminded herself. *Be confident. You're worthy of this job.*

Once seated, Morgan eagerly shared her resume. Josephine looked it over, her manicured fingernail tapping the table as she read.

She looked up. "I'm sorry, Ms. T'Naile. We're looking for someone with more experience."

"I've been an active member of the community. I have many business connections—"

Ice blue eyes met her gaze. "I'm well aware of your former socialite status and your questionable lifestyle choices."

Morgan blinked as if slapped. She had deliberately used her maiden name. Swallowing hard, she said, "Are you

referring to my religious beliefs?"

Her lips pursed. "Witches and warlocks, magic and mischief, are children's games, Ms. T'Naile. We run a professional business."

She pressed her palms to the table, praying she wouldn't regret later what she was about to say. "You can't dismiss me because of my religious beliefs."

"I'm not. I'm dismissing you because you have no experience." Josephine shuffled Morgan's papers, then handed the sheets back to her.

She took them with a steady hand, though her voice hitched. "How can I get experience if no one will hire me?"

"Charity work. Perhaps donating your time at your local church."

She looked down at her resume, the crisp black words marching across the thick cotton paper. Fingering the paper, she raised her head. "May I ask you a question, Ms. Coblewska?"

"Yes, though our interview is officially over."

"I understand." She nodded once, the finality of defeat. "How did you deduce my religious beliefs from my resume?"

The woman colored slightly. "Your practices are common knowledge."

"No." She shook her head. "They aren't. Thomas Vinton spoke with you, didn't he?"

Glancing at her watch, Josephine stood. "I wish you well on your job search, Ms. T'Naile. Let me show you out."

"What did Thomas tell you?" she pressed. "That I dance naked under the moon? Sacrifice frogs or cats? Cast hexes? Participate in orgies?"

"Ms. T'Naile, please lower your voice. You'll disturb our other guests."

She hadn't realized she'd raised it. "That's it, isn't it?" Her eyes narrowed. "You look like an educated woman, Ms. Coblewska. How can you swallow a pack of vindictive lies? If I were a prospective candidate, you would have checked my references and found out the truth. Instead, you chose to believe the fantastical and far-fetched. Perhaps you should be running a Halloween House of Horrors instead of a business plaza."

Apparently Josephine had more practice acting like a proper businesswoman than she did. Though doubt and perhaps a pinch of guilt flicked through her gaze, the woman did not let her detached mask slip. Spinning, Morgan exited the room, her portfolio clutched to her side like a bandage covering a wound.

The march through the waiting room dotted with other applicants or clients, the clerk's eager face, even the receptionist's aloof look, all made her blush. Raising her chin, she prayed she wouldn't cry.

The Bright Lady, damn it all, answered that request. Once outside, she simply stood there. What now? Take out an ad in the local paper countering Thomas's lies? She snorted. Oh, the biddies would love that. Try her hand at waitressing, house-cleaning, or driving a bus? She couldn't afford an apartment and food on a waitress's salary.

One thing she wouldn't do was stand here and let everyone watch her have a nervous breakdown. Blinking back tears—would there never be an appropriate time and place to cry—she started to walk. Aimlessly at first. Then with more purpose. Her first thought was to confront the lion in his proverbial den. Several blocks of walking in heels shelved that thought. She could picture Thomas's smug expression.

"See?" he'd say. "She is crazy. Good thing I rid myself of her before her unorthodox ideas made a fool of the Vinton name in public."

Her blouse stuck to her skin and rivulets of sweat tracked down her back. Pulling off her jacket, she folded it over her arm and continued to walk. Her stupid shoes pinched and she'd kill for a drink of water.

Maybe Josephine Coblewska was right. Maybe there was nothing professional about her. Maybe she was a fool to try to enter her chosen industry after a ten year hiatus. She should march back there and thank the woman for opening her eyes.

She hesitated and now the tears did start. With them came a strangled sobbing. She stepped into an alleyway. Leaning against a building, she doubled over, trying to choke back her frustration and humiliation.

"Morgan?" a voice asked.

Oh, bloody great. Couldn't she find a place to hide where no one knew her? She didn't bother looking up.

A hand briefly touched her hair, then a face stooped to her level.

Even better, it was Perry.

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "Go away."

An arm slid around her shoulders, his body pressed against hers. Without a word, he steered her farther down the alley. When they reached the back and he started to usher her into the building, she panicked. "I said, go away!" She pushed against him, dropping her portfolio in the process.

Papers flew everywhere. Her resume fluttered to the ground and found a patch of grease. She watched the fine cotton paper absorb the stain. Another choked noise escaped her lips. She started to stoop down to retrieve it. Instead, someone else took over, a rage-filled, over-wrought version of herself. She watched dispassionately as she stomped the paper over and over again, crushing it into the ground. Her shoe heel broke and that only fueled her efforts.

Abruptly swept off her feet, Perry carried her into the building's cool interior. She didn't bother fighting. Instead, she buried her head against his shoulder and sobbed. Everything tumbled out, months' worth of frustration, disappointment, and loss. She played by the Universe's rules. Why was it punishing her?

He set her on a couch and closed the door.

She couldn't bear to look at him.

Silence reigned. A grandfather clock chimed and she raised her head, startled that Perry would choose something so old-fashioned. Two wooden bear cubs tumbled out of a hidden entrance beneath the clock's face, executed three barrel rolls, and vanished into another opening on its far side.

She sniffled, amused despite her misery.

"Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte."

It is only the first step that costs. She should have known Perry would speak a foreign language. The man, unlike her, had a Midas touch. He probably owned a pretty little villa somewhere on the European coast and stored his hoards of money in a Swiss account. Irrational, uncharitable

thoughts for a man who'd taken a virtual stranger into his home. "I'm a failure."

Perry leaned against his desk, arms crossed. "Really? Last time I looked you were simply a very pretty woman struggling to make a new life."

"Hah, hah. That's something I'd expect Jason to say, not you."

Shrugging, Perry handed her a tissue. "He's rubbed off on me."

She took it and blew her nose. She didn't even bother trying to salvage her make-up. By the looks of Perry's rumpled shirt, she'd deposited most of it on his shoulder. "Everything I touch breaks."

"I assure you, Jason's dick is still functioning."

Coloring, she closed her mouth and looked down at her hands. She heard Perry stir. Raising her head again, she watched him casually remove his soiled shirt and exchange it for its crisp, fresh mate hanging in his closet.

She had the absurd urge to hurt him, to give birth to the words lodged in her stomach. That wouldn't be fair. He'd been nothing but kind.

"I take it your interview did not go as anticipated," he said over his shoulder as he buttoned his shirt.

She studied his rippling back muscles and wondered what he'd think of her if he really knew her. She wasn't Suzy homemaker, but a witch. And gauging by the way her life was moving, not a very good one. "A smashing success. They want me to move to Paris and oversee operations there."

"I don't believe I've ever seen a backward, little plaza leached of style over there, but perhaps I missed touring the more glamorous sections of the city."

"There's more," she said sadly.

"Is this where you confess to practicing Wicca?"

She straightened. "You know?"

He raised a brow. "Get out our hanging rope, men," he drawled. "We have a witch to swing."

She hiccupped, half laugh, half sob. "It's swim." She could never picture Perry in the Old West. He might actually have to walk around with dust on his clothes. "How can you possibly know?"

"Mr. Vinton used to supply our eggs."

"Now we have to make do with the charmingly eccentric old woman from the Farmer's Market who names each of her chickens and appropriately labels the eggs belonging to them." Jason peeked around the door. "Is it safe to come in or do I risk being hexed?"

"This isn't funny," she said weakly.

"You're right. It's not. It's a violation of your rights." Jason plopped down beside her. He wiggled his flour-encrusted fingers at her. "I'd kiss you hello, but I'm making bread."

"Mr. Vinton's associates have loose lips," Perry said, as if she couldn't guess where the revelation came from.

"You can't fault the uninformed," Jason said.

"I do." Perry offered Jason a hand towel. Jason declined. Morgan wondered how often the man entered covered with ingredients. Frowning, Perry set it beside him.

"We were going to ask that you not sacrifice the neighbor's cat, but then it dug in the flower beds again—" Jason trailed off when Perry shot him a black look. "I admit to being curious, but it doesn't change my opinion about you."

"I don't sacrifice cats, nor anything living if you don't count plants. I don't worship the devil and I've never participated in an orgy."

"Bummer, I wanted to hear all about that." Seeing the look on her face, Jason risked getting her filthy and kissed her on the cheek. "I swear, it's all in fun." His eyes twinkled, laugh lines etching his face. "I know I shouldn't tease, but—"

"You can't help yourself." He smelled like bread, a soothing yeasty scent. "My day's opened up. Can I help you in the kitchen with anything?"

"Do you still make that melt-in-your-mouth piecrust?"

"Of course."

Jason popped to his feet. "You're hired. Make Perry lend you a shirt and I'll give you an apron."

The thought of spending the remainder of the day with Jason lightened her mood considerably.

"No rest for the wicked. I'm off to sacrifice Petronella's offspring for quiche," Jason said.

Perry beat him to the door. "Let me get that."

"Thanks." Jason smiled broadly. "I'd like to think you're being chivalrous, but I think you just don't want me to dirty your door knob."

"There's that."

Jason winked at her. "Don't keep me waiting."

Perry shut the door behind him, then surveyed the mess. A trail of dough marked Jason's path from door to couch. Flour dust sketched an outline of him on the black leather.

She could see the wheels already turning in Perry's frustrated brain and decided, for Jason's sake, to divert his attention. "You didn't have to get rid of my ex as your supplier, but I'm glad you did." She smiled.

He blinked at her brilliant smile, then his features softened. "I would have done it just to catch a glimpse of that." Freeing a shirt from its hanger, he handed it to her. "If he wasn't such a brilliant chef, I'd fire his messy ass."

Six

"Hex him," Jason declared.

"What?" Morgan lost her rhythm, bobbled the knife, and prayed no one saw her miss the carrot entirely. She was supposed to be cutting vegetables for the buffet's stew, not making blood soup.

"You heard me. Curse the bastard."

"I'm not that kind of a witch." She could easily get used to this line of work. The soothing scents, the repetitive motions...tastes, textures, and smells reminded her of happier times. Grandma's hands covering hers as she kneaded bread. Mom letting her lick the beaters when no one was looking. Her first perfect meringue. The melt-in-your-mouth taste of bread fresh from the oven. Homemade tomato sauce simmered all day on the stove.

Jason wiggled his nose, trying to mimic what he thought might be a magical gesture, as if facial contortions pleased the Bright Lady. "Turn him into a toad."

Rolling her eyes, she glanced around for Perry, then risked throwing the carrot top at him.

"Coward," he taunted and ducked.

The carrot struck the stove's overhead vent, skittered across the freshly wiped countertop, and landed in the kitchen doorway, right at Perry's feet. Self-preservation immediately set in. Morgan and Jason pointed fingers at one another.

"He did it."

"She did it."

Perry studied the still twirling carrot top. "Must I separate you?" he asked, but humor crinkled the corners of his eyes. "I hope your pie is as fantastic as Jason insists."

She froze, knife held mid-cut. "Why?"

"John Mozart Van Kellen just walked in the door."

Jason frowned. "Food critic. I changed my mind, Morgan. Hex him, instead."

Perry held up an order slip. "Congratulations, Ms. T'Naile. Your blackberry pie will either be trashed or lauded in Sunday's newspaper."

"Perhaps I should take stock of my hexing supplies, just in case."

Jason gave her a dusty clap on the back. "That's the spirit." Snatching the slip from Perry's hand, he glanced at it and immediately turned to the refrigerator, both of them abruptly ignored. He could be sweet, bubble-headed even, but when it came to cooking, he was a perfectionist.

Morgan and Perry shared a look, then Perry retreated. Morgan stared at her still steaming pies and sent a silent prayer to the Bright Lady.

~ * ~

"The individual blackberry pie appealed to my selfish nature, while flaunting nature's generous bounty. The crust reminded me of my Grandmother's *pâte brisée*. If this is Chef Scholl's work, I commend him for learning to master one of the old arts. If you cannot make a flaky crust, you do not deserve to run a kitchen." Jason set the newspaper down. "Beginner's luck," he sniffed.

Without looking up, Perry raised his glass of orange juice in salute and continued reading the business section.

"I think this calls for a celebration," Jason announced.

Perry set the paper down. "A quiet evening in with take-out Chinese?"

Jason wrinkled his nose. "How about a night of spell-casting?" He hurried on before Perry could stop him. "Seriously. You haven't come up with a better idea of salvaging Morgan's reputation, have you? And I want to watch. Please."

Perry sighed. "No."

"Umm guys, right here. I appreciate the support, but it is *my* reputation he's stomping all over."

Both looked expectantly at her. She ran her fingers through her loose hair, barely resisting the urge to fist it and tug. "I took an oath. Do as you will, but let it harm none."

"That's not saying you should be a willing doormat." Jason leaned his elbows on the table. Perry automatically rescued the glass of juice he bumped.

He was echoing similar sentiment she'd played through her head since the Danton Plaza interview. "I don't think I can banish him like a rabbit."

"You did that?" Jason crowed. "I wondered why the rabbits hadn't attacked the flowers you set."

"I didn't banish them," she corrected herself. "I merely suggested that Mrs. Shaut's might be more tasty. Do you know she actually asked if I was Perry's sister? And when I told her I wasn't, she frowned and mumbled something about living in sin." She waved her hand. "Never mind. Thomas has already discovered other women. I can't advise him to irritate someone else." She gnawed her lower lip. "But I can protect myself."

"Excellent. When do we get to sit naked in a circle and chant at the moon?"

Collecting her plate, she patted Jason's cheek as she stood. Perry hid a smirk behind the newspaper. "Let me think on it."

She found the positive review and her new direction of thought gave a boost to her flagging self-esteem. She chose Tuesday night to work, an auspicious day for aggressive magic. And it gave her a couple days to cleanse a space and select her supplies. The living room, with its vaulted ceiling and skylights seemed a more promising space than the backyard. With permission from Perry, Tuesday morning she moved the furniture out of way. He'd kill her if she spattered black wax on his white furniture.

No Patio was also closed on Tuesdays. She expected Jason to join her. Perry's appearance, though, surprised her. Jason appeared in nothing more than a bathrobe. Perry yielded enough to shed shoes and socks. His shirt sleeves were rolled up past the elbow, revealing well muscled forearms dusted with fine dark hairs. She wondered what it would feel like to be wrapped up in those strong arms.

Finding her attention wandering, she looked away. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Should I have a fire extinguisher handy?" Perry asked.

"I've never needed one," she replied.

Perry sank onto the couch. Jason sat cross-legged at his feet, an eager expression on his face. Oh dear, she hoped he didn't think she'd be providing any sort of show. Oftentimes she knew her spells worked based on subtle cues: a sense of peace, a slight change in the wind's direction, a stir in the Otherworldly energy she contained within her circle. No fireworks. No levitation. Nothing spectacular.

Salting a carpeted circle wasn't practical, so she'd opted to form the circle with black candles. Wide plates she picked up at the local thrift store served as bases and would catch any stray wax.

"Black isn't evil. It's for protection and banishing negativity," she explained. Jason looked disappointed. Perry merely nodded.

"O-k-a-y, then." Taking a deep breath, she deliberately turned her back to them. With the candles lit and her clothes shed, she outlined her circle of protection with her footsteps. Thank goodness the flickering candlelight softened her silhouette. She had enough to concentrate on without feeling self-conscious.

"Boundary between the Otherworld and mine, I conjure this circle, home to the Divine. Ancient Ones, I now implore. Watch, guide, and guard this door."

Pulling on a pair of black elbow length gloves, she picked up a silver bell and rang it three times. She sank into a cross-legged pose at the center of the circle. "Hecate, I humbly call. Dark mother of the shadowed hall. Herne, I ask you to lead. With your pack at your heels, make Thomas Vinton take heed."

She placed an empty glass bottle between her legs. To it, she added a small amount of white vinegar. A snipping of nightshade joined the liquid. A piece of dragon's blood bolstered the spell with a pinch of vervain to hurry it along. Agrimony and dried elder flowers merged with the concoction. She wasn't taking any chances on Thomas slipping past the spell. She only had the guts to perform this ritual once. Last, she added a tiny birch twig, a protective talisman that always worked for her.

"A pin to remind you lying's a sin. A nail to make your

conscience wail. A screw, deadly as yew and you, to make you rue." Corking the bottle, she shook its contents. "Those I invoked, witness now. Protect me from him and his lies. This I bind with my most solemn vow. Thomas Vinton, I bid you good-bye."

Leaning forward, she snagged one of the candles and brought it to the center of the circle. She dripped wax over the corked bottle until its entire top was thick with congealing wax. *Bright Lady, I mean no overt harm. I just want him to leave me alone.* The hair stood at the nape of her neck and along her arms, a sign she'd been heard.

Standing, she retraced her circle, mentally thanking Hecate and Herne for taking the time to lend her their aid.

There. It was done. If that didn't work, she didn't know what would.

The house remained eerily silent, no appliance daring to intrude upon the moment. That was left to Jason.

He applauded. "Remind me to never piss you off."

She had forgotten all about the two men. Perry wore an interested look. "Who are Hecate and Herne?"

"Hecate is the goddess of the crossroads. I felt like she was important seeing as I seem to be standing at a crossroad in my life. Herne's the stag god of the Wild Hunt, kind of like a nasty bouncer."

She snuffed the candles before Jason could cause permanent damage to the house, then gathered her clothes.

"Do you think it will work?" Perry asked.

"Of course. That was some powerful mojo," Jason said before she could answer.

"Time will tell," she replied.

"I still think you should have turned him into a toad or maybe a slug." Jason stood to help her collect the candles.

"Mentally, he's already at that level. What more could I do?"

"Sue him for libel," Perry suggested.

She shot him an amused look. "Where's the magic in that?" Her gaze slid from his face to his crossed arms, then flicked lower. Her smile wavered. An erection strained to break free from his trousers. She glanced at Jason's retreating backside, then to Perry's face again. Jason had nothing to do with what was going on. Perry waited for her

reaction.

"It's late," she whispered hoarsely. *Coward.*

His lips curved.

"I'll move the furniture tomorrow if you don't mind."

Unfolding his arms, he spread them along the couch's back and relaxed, perfectly at ease. "Coward," he said, echoing her thoughts.

"Tempting, but off limits until I'm told otherwise."

He shifted. "Want me to call Jason back in?"

"No!"

The panic in her voice must have shown. He smirked.

"That is—not tonight—" Damn it, she must sound like a complete fool. Her gaze kept flicking to his impressive bulge. Her nipples tightened. She clutched her bundle of clothes to her chest. Why not tonight? Because working magic left her drained and she had the feeling an encounter with Perry would require her to have all her mental capacities sharpened.

"Oooh. Damn you," she spouted. Spinning, she fled the room, Perry's quiet laughter echoing in her ears.

In the morning, she found a note slipped under her door, scrawled in Jason's trademarked hurried script. *We share everything, Morgan. Bon appétit.* –JS Shivering, she glanced across the living room. Their bedroom door stood ajar. Everything?

What would it be like to share two men's attentions? Thomas had been a detached lover—enough of Thomas. Last night she'd hopefully set up the magical equivalent of a restraining order. She didn't need to tempt the strength of her spell by continually thinking of him. Dwelling on him only picked the scab on her healing process.

Leaning against the doorframe, she stared into space. Silence surrounded her and she instinctively knew both were already gone. They liked to work out together, though Perry was the more dedicated of the pair. Jason tended to steal an extra few moments of sleep whenever he could, though apparently not today.

She was content here, wasn't she? She liked and admired Perry, didn't she? Hadn't she caught herself looking longingly at their closed bedroom door? Perry had to have a generous nature hidden behind his brusque exterior. Hadn't

he held her when she cried? She envied both men.

She wanted to know both of them more intimately. No more hiding behind past failings. Speaking of which, she wondered if she hadn't bobbed her spell on Midsummer Night. She still didn't have a job or a home, but now she found herself with two men. Prosperity came in many different forms, didn't it?

~ * ~

Allowing Morgan to work in the kitchen was the best thing the men could have suggested. Deprived of its activity, even for a day, left her depressed, but if she worked continually they'd have a glut of desserts. Today Perry had office work to attend to and Jason was off visiting local farms, scouting for sources of fresh produce. That left her day open. Off to the library for the latest perusal of her automated rejection emails.

She wandered into the house, a sheaf of potential job descriptions in hand. The job search at the library today seemed different. Hope returned and with it, a fresh energy to tackle her unemployment. Even the librarians appeared cheerful, going so far as to offer their own suggestions and coaching her on what sites to search.

Still absorbed in thought, she threw her purse on the counter...and froze.

Perry stood in the kitchen. She glanced at her watch. At only five P.M? What was going on? If it was their anniversary or a special date, she'd have been happy to make herself scarce.

He finished emptying a second can of soup into the pot on the stove and scowled at her. "Is something wrong?"

"I was about to ask you that."

"Jason came down with a cold. He'll be coming home early." He hesitated. They both knew how capricious Jason could be. "I'll kill him if he doesn't."

That, at least, explained the cans of chicken noodle soup. Was he trying to finish the man off? Feeding a chef canned soup? "I could run to the deli," she offered.

His scowl deepened. "I'm cooking."

Setting her armload of books on the kitchen's granite island, she inched toward him and glanced into the pot. "Can I give you some advice?"

He waited.

"There's some carrots in the crisper. We could add them for color. Maybe whip up some dumplings, too." She was in a chef's personal kitchen. There had to be flour around here somewhere.

"I don't cook."

She relaxed enough to study him. His scowl was merely his way of hiding how worried he was. He'd already removed his suit coat and rolled up his sleeves. His tanned forearms contrasted nicely with his crisp white shirt.

"Dumplings aren't really cooking." Taking no response as acceptable to continue, she rummaged through the cupboards until she found a suitable bowl. "Flour, baking powder, milk. A dash of parsley." She pulled ingredients out of the pantry as she spoke. Poking her head around the pantry door, she asked, "Does he like cheese?"

Perry was staring at her ass.

Caught in the act, color crept up his neck. He looked at his pot, poking its contents with his spoon. "You haven't had sex with Jason since the campground. He doesn't want you to think it was just a one night fling."

She set the ingredients down, startled by his words. "I was being careful. I didn't think an invite to live with you automatically meant free access to your boyfriend." She hesitated. "Free access to either of you. And me being a witch—"

He lifted a brow. "Don't. It's a poor excuse."

"I'm not a permanent fixture. You are."

"He just wants to be loved. Gender doesn't matter."

"That's because his mom was queen of the ice bitches. I'm surprised he didn't become an axe-murderer." She put her hand over her mouth, eyes wide. "That was uncalled for. I'm sorry."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Why ever for? She's the reason he rarely sees his family."

"Surely Natalie isn't that narrow-minded."

"Anyone caught associating with him is a traitor." The flash of pain darkened his eyes.

She laid her hand on his arm. "Their loss."

He shook it off. "I don't do pity."

"That's a shame. I was about to offer you a great

shoulder rub, then talk you into those dumplings when you were suitably lulled."

His stiff expression relaxed. "The soup is really a terrible idea."

"No. It just needs dressing up."

He eyed her warily. "You're really offering a massage?"

She placed the carrots in front of him, her stomach flip-flopping. Her mouth watered at the sight of his forearms and the quick glimpse of his tight ass in dress pants. How long did these men think they could continue their chaotic lifestyle? Someone was bound to burn out.

She could at least help ease one man's tension. A simple shoulder massage was not an invitation to sex. They were in Jason's kitchen. What was the worse that could happen? It wasn't like Perry was going to toss aside civility, tear off her clothes, and take her on the kitchen island.

Bad mind. Bad imagination. Evil self-animated fingers.

She rubbed the cords at the nape of his neck. He groaned. *Red alert*, screamed her nipples. Thank goodness he had his back to her. Moving her fingers in tight circles, she worked her way into his hairline, searching for the source of his tension. She shifted to his shoulders, massaging the rigid band of muscles. He groaned again. Sundry bits and parts of her clenched. She resisted the urge to fan herself.

Standing on her tiptoes, she glanced over his shoulder. "You need to grate that into the soup."

Picking up the carrot scraper, he started peeling toward him.

"Not like that." Her hands automatically covered his, guiding it away from him. "You don't want to accidentally peel the skin off your knuckles."

"I see."

By gripping his hands, she basically embraced him, pressing her traitorous nipples directly into his back. She dropped her hands. "You get the idea." Her cheeks flamed. She tried to back away, but his hand twisted, catching her wrist.

"I do." His thumb covered the fluttering pulse at her wrist.

She licked her lips. His eyes followed the gesture. "You should set the soup on simmer," she whispered, throat abruptly dry.

He jerked her to him, arm locking around her waist. "Jason's willing to share. So am I. What do you want, Ms. Morgan T'Naile?"

"Sorry, my brain's incommunicado at the moment."

He chuckled, a purely male noise, then crushed his lips to hers. No gentle seduction. No whispered endearments. His tongue plundered, teasing hers until it was forced to retaliate. He tasted of spearmint. When he released her mouth, his tongue and lips traveled over her chin, licking the length of her throat.

He marked her. She knew that by the strength of his touch. She didn't care. Unbuttoning her blouse, he kissed the tops of her breasts. Her hands skipped his shirt and jumped directly to his pants' waistband. Catching her wrists, he imprisoned them in one hand and held them above her head.

"I may not be a trained chef, but I do know my way around a kitchen." His free hand opened a nearby drawer. He pulled out a roll of cotton cording, used to suture stuffed birds.

Her eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"Trussing you up." He wound the cord around her wrists. Kissing her again, he pressed her back to the counter. He tied her bound hands to one of the cabinet handles above her head. Walking away, he opened the refrigerator and removed a half empty bottle of wine.

She tugged on the rope. "Perry, I've never dabbled—that is—I need my hands free."

Leaning over her, her nipples scraped against his chest as he selected a wine glass. Her clit throbbed, vulva snapping open and shut in frustration.

"I would have given you the fifty bucks if you'd have left Jason desperate and horny. As it was, you simply left me in that state. I need to remedy the situation." He poured himself a glass of deep red wine. Taking a sip, he set it aside.

What had she been thinking? She relaxed a smidgeon.

His fingers teased her nipples through the white silk fabric of her bra.

"Please don't leave me like this."

He raised an eyebrow. "Unsatisfied? Aching? Empty?"

"Yes. Oh gods, yes."

Unhooking her bra, he slid the cups over her breasts. "He mentioned the lack of tan lines. Feel free to tan nude anytime in the backyard."

He lowered his mouth to her breast, tracing the outline of her dark aureole with his tongue. His teeth closed around the nipple. He drew back, nub clenched between his teeth, stretching the breast's soft tissue until she moaned and fought her restraints. It walked the fine line between pain and pleasure. He eased off, lips and tongue replacing teeth. When he started to suckle at her breast, she thought—clit be damned—she might actually orgasm.

Raising his head, he peered over the mound of creamy flesh. "I want to hear you say my name. I want you to beg for release."

He undid the button and zipper on her pants, wiggling them over her hips. Her legs parted. He rubbed his erection against her thin triangle of silk. The wet fabric teased her clit.

"Please. Now."

Ignoring her plea, he opened another drawer and selected his instrument. He held up a turkey baster, waiting until her eyes widened in shock before filling it from his glass of wine. Releasing a drop of wine, he let it trail between her breasts and down the dip in her stomach. Muscles and nerves twitched in its wake. His tongue followed its track, further exciting her body. A few more droplets followed the same path.

She wasn't sure how much more slow torture she could endure.

One hand delved beneath her panties. Setting aside the baster, he picked up the wine glass. While his finger twirled atop her pulsing button, he took a sip of wine. He studied her over the rim of the glass. "Beg me take you."

Her wetness slicked her inner thighs. "Please, Perry. Please. I want you inside me. I need you inside me."

His finger dipped into her vagina. She clenched around it, but he immediately slipped out. He leaned close. The sweet scent of wine lingered on his breath. "You know what

I want?"

She shook her head, mesmerized by his dark stare.

"I want to see you tied to our bed, Jason suckling at your breast while I bury myself in you. I want you to ride him while he polishes my cock with his tongue and I caress your bouncing breasts."

She nearly came right there.

"Would you do that for me?"

"Yes," she whispered hoarsely.

He jerked her panties down, then simply stared at her twitching cleft. Taking a step back to give her a better view, he carefully undid his trousers. He neatly folded the pants and laid them on counter beside her stack of books. The sight of his white brief's tented fabric made her drip even more.

Running his finger around the elastic waistband of his briefs, he started inching the fabric down. He turned his back to her. His ass was creamy white, dusted with fine dark hairs. Obviously he didn't sunbathe nude. When he bent to remove his underwear, she was subjected to an award-winning show of his curves. Broad shoulders sloped to narrow hips which blossomed into a milky double moon of taut ass muscle. Those muscles merged into thighs sculpted by endless repetitions of squats and lunges. If her hands were free, she'd give him two thumbs up. Who was she kidding? If her hands were free, they'd climb over his curves like a mountaineer scaling Everest.

Straightening, he glanced over his shoulder. She hoped she wasn't salivating.

He turned. She tried to keep her eyes focused on his face, to maintain some semblance of self-control, but her gaze wandered. His lips twitched. When his hands dropped out of her line of sight to stroke himself, she couldn't resist any longer.

His cock and balls were as meticulously maintained as the rest of him. Hair trimmed, his crinkly sac bounced beneath his shaft as he slowly ran one hand up its length, teased its head, and slid back down.

She didn't think her nipples could get any tighter. She was wrong.

Stepping forward, he pressed his shaft against her.

Sucking on her earlobe, he whispered, "How are you holding up?"

She whimpered. Not sophisticated. Not modest. But the best she could manage given her brain had jumped ship and all her blood pooled in her nether regions. Her vulva literally ached.

He jerked her panties down so fast she barely had time to catch her breath before he plunged into her. Her vulva gorged itself. The first climax blended seamlessly into a twitching second tremor, bowing her back and wringing a scream from her throat. His hands settled at her hips, but she needed no encouragement to match his thrusts.

His pace deliberately slowed. He ran his fingers up her arm, gripping her bound wrists with his hand. His lips hovered over hers. His other hand seized her breast, teasing the nipple into a frantic peak. "Naughty. Naughty. You're supposed to ask before you come," he whispered.

She caught his lower lip between her teeth. His eyes went wide and dark with pleasure. For the first time, his pacing faltered. His thigh muscles shivered. She twined her legs through his, keeping him trapped to her. She turned the bite into an open-mouthed kiss, wriggling against him while he attempted to recover his rhythm. No luck. She might be bound, but she was in control now.

She brought him to the edge, eliciting a deep-throated groan. Her hips froze. He twitched against her, unable to break free of her legs.

"Don't play games, woman," he growled.

She kissed his throat, sliding her lips to his shoulder. Then she latched onto his collarbone with her teeth.

He exploded. His arms locked around her while his body shivered and bucked. When the tremors ceased, he rested his head on her shoulder. His heart hammered, pulse writhing like a creature trapped beneath the tender skin of his neck.

"Release me and I'll show you things you've never seen before," she whispered.

He lifted his head, curious. "Like what?"

"How to make dumplings in the nude."

He groaned, but found a pair of scissors and cut her wrists free.

Perching on the kitchen island, she set the mixing bowl between her thighs. "Let's start with one cup of flour."

His eyes gleamed. "This might take a while. I can be a slow learner."

"That's okay." She smiled. "I intend to be a thorough teacher."

Seven

Jason found the pair pants-less and spattered with flour. All cold symptoms were instantly forgotten. He couldn't have been more shocked if he'd stumbled upon Jimmy Hoffa's body in his restaurant's walk-in freezer. He'd hoped she'd make the first move, prayed she'd embrace them both, and now here they both were. It was almost too much.

The soothing scent of chicken soup filled the room. He automatically inhaled. It did nothing to ease the knot in his gut or his instant and painful erection, but the still functioning portion of his brain admired the full-bodied aroma.

"What have you been up to?"

"Cooking. For you." Morgan extended a ladle brimming with broth.

He took a sip. Closing his eyes, he played the flavors across his tongue. Not bad. Certainly not the best he'd tasted, but far from offensive.

"Morgan made the dumplings," Perry said.

He opened his eyes, took in the glasses of wine, Perry's relaxed air, and the dark mark at Morgan's throat. "What else have you been cooking up?"

She gave him an impish grin. "Get your clothes off. Soup is best appreciated nude."

"They never taught me that in culinary school," Jason protested.

"Savages." Perry's serious express never wavered.

Jason made it as far as the living room before they ganged up on him. Perry looped his arm through Jason's elbows, holding him hostage.

"Hey now!" he protested.

Morgan and Perry shared a glance.

"You look feverish," Morgan pointed out. She reached for his belt.

"Really?" Jason sounded doubtful. "I should look pale. I think all the blood in my body is pooled in my aching balls."

"Aw, poor baby." Pulling the belt out of its loops, she snapped it at him.

Jason licked his lips. "Did, um, Perry tell you that bondage play is not my thing?"

"Mine either," she whispered. She undid the button on his pants and slowly slid his zipper down.

His shaft strained against the white cotton of his briefs. Her fingers wrapped around him, kneading his cock and balls. Then she made a noose in the belt and looped it around his tender package. Perry ground himself into Jason's ass, clearly aroused.

He decided she was lying.

What could these two have in mind for him? "I'm sick," he pleaded. A token struggle against Perry proved fruitless. He lost his pants in the tussle.

Morgan tugged lightly on her "leash." He whimpered, so turned on he was afraid he might actually cream his briefs.

She led him toward their formal dining room, her hips swaying. He caught a glimpse of the lower curves of her ass bobbing beneath the tails of her shirt. That was a magic cure-all pill in itself.

Perry's breath tickled his ear. "Quite a spectacular view."

Jason agreed, for once at a loss for words.

A single place setting was laid on the walnut table. The room smelled of cinnamon-scented candles, set on every flat surface but the table. That didn't bode well. Perry wouldn't risk his precious antique table, would he? The high-backed eighteenth century chair beckoned, its seat turned perpendicular to the table. Morgan dropped her leash so Perry could march him to the chair and turn him around. Then he held Jason in the seat by the shoulders.

Crouching in front of him, she held onto the armrests and presented him with a clear view down her shirt, all lush curves and pink nipples.

He exhaled noisily. "I don't know what you're planning to do, but I don't get any harder than this."

Perry chuckled. "Come early and she's all mine."

"Damn you."

"I think you've already damned the both of us, thank you."

Slipping to her knees, Morgan glanced up through her hair. The expression on her face was a mix of lust and earnestness topped with a dollop of uncertainty. God, his hands itched to cup her face and kiss all her doubts away. He squirmed in the chair.

She wrapped her hands around his inner thighs, holding his legs apart. Lowering her head, she rubbed her cheek against the taut fabric. He reached out to caress her hair, but Perry's hands abruptly slid down his shoulders, holding his upper body flat to the chair's back. *So close.* A tendril of hair brushed his fingers before he found himself more securely imprisoned.

Her fingers crept to the waistband of his briefs, her nails scraping his skin. She tugged the fabric down, then planted a kiss at the top of his dark curls. Perry's fingers dug into Jason's biceps.

Jason's cock throbbed, dancing in place. She kissed its head, her tongue tip dipping into his slit. She swallowed his shaft before he could finish shuddering. Gently squeezing his balls, she worked her way around his length with tongue and lipsticked lips, leaving a spiraled trail in her wake. When she teased the tender skin tucked beneath his cock's engorged head, he tried to bolt out of his chair. Perry held him tight.

Morgan lifted her head, eyes alighting on Perry's straining muscles. Her lips glistened with a mixture of gloss, pre-come, and saliva. She sat back and slowly unbuttoned her shirt. Her gaze returned to Jason. Parting the fabric, she caressed the undersides of her breasts. Then she supported that blushing flesh while tweaking her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

Jason whimpered.

The shirt slid off her shoulders. Gliding toward him, she rubbed herself against him as she stood, his cock nestling momentarily between her breasts. Her pebbly nipples ground into his bare chest, sliding higher to skate

along his cheeks. He inhaled her sweet scent, his tongue trailing between her breasts, then she passed him by to steal a kiss from Perry. Her labia left a wet kiss on his thigh. One breast caressed his cheek. He turned his head and latched onto that breast, working the flesh into his mouth until he could seize her nipple between his teeth.

Gasping, she ground herself into his thigh.

Perry's grip loosened, then altogether vanished. Instead, he grasped Morgan's shoulders and jerked her toward him, pressing her breast more tightly into Jason's mouth. Jason seized the opportunity, clutching her hips and drawing her onto his aching cock.

She twitched, her cry swallowed by Perry, his lips still latched onto hers. Jason bucked beneath her, driving himself into her. God help him, she was wet. He raised her hips, teasing her entrance until she moaned a protest. Perry's lips slid down her throat then settled at her breast. She jammed herself onto Jason's cock, grinding into him so suddenly, it rocked the chair back on two legs. Without raising his head, Perry pushed it forward. He continued to suckle at her breast while his other hand tweaked her nipple, molding the sensitive flesh between his fingers and slowly stretching it out.

Morgan's mewling cries spurred Jason on. He dropped one hand from her hip and searched for her pulsing clit. Instead, his finger slid into her.

She cried out. "More."

He slid a second finger alongside his cock. She ground herself harder against him.

"More." A third finger joined the fray and his eyes met Perry's, wordlessly sharing the future possibilities. He cupped her ass, driving her harder against him.

She abruptly clenched around his fingers and cock, her vagina pulsing while she shivered. Her head rolled back and she nearly fell off the chair. Jason orgasmed a second later. God, it felt good. She was so tight, so slick. What would it feel like to have both his and Perry's cocks in there at the same time? To experience the three of them coming at the same time?

"That wasn't exactly planned." Plucking a still twitching and somewhat dazed Morgan from the chair, Perry

carried her to the table and plunked her butt on its edge.

Perry didn't wait for an invitation, just plunged directly into her slicked core. Her eyes fluttered, hands opening and closing. Based on Perry's jerky thrusts and the rapt expression on his face, Jason gave him less than a minute to orgasm.

Jason knew his partner well. What he didn't expect was Morgan to grab Perry's ass and hold him hostage until she fingered herself to a second orgasm.

He grinned. The grown-up version of Morgan was way better than his adolescent fantasies.

~ * ~

The crisp scent of freshly cut grass drifted through the bedroom patio's screened door. Tucked beneath a sheet and thin quilt, Jason stifled a yawn. Unselfconsciously nude, Perry was propped next to him, arm draped across Jason's shoulders.

Morgan drained the last of her wine from her glass. "I'll let you two lovebirds have some time to yourselves. Have a good night." She stood.

Jason straightened. "Where are you going?"

"To bed."

The men exchanged a silent look.

"Stay," Perry said.

"Don't go," Jason added.

She wagged her finger at Jason. "You're sick. You're supposed to be getting some extra rest." Her gaze roved over Perry's body. "And you're just too much of a temptation."

Perry smirked.

"I promise to take it easy. In fact, I call bottom." Jason was already removing his tee shirt.

She put her hands on her hips to hide their tremors. What had she done in one of her past lives to deserve such exquisite karma? Or had squandering ten years with Thomas been enough to tip the scales?

"What about your needs?" Perry pressed.

She swallowed hard. "A hot shower and a mattress are all you promised when you invited me to stay here."

"I imagine with our showerhead you get along just fine." His cock bobbed as he quietly laughed.

She kept her eyes on his face, though her cheeks burned. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"Get in bed, woman, and rock Jason to sleep."

She didn't wait for a second invitation.

Crawling onto the foot of their bed, she knelt there, giving both a clear view down her shirt. After Perry had removed her bra earlier, she hadn't bothered to replace it. Perry's hand slipped beneath the covers, to stroke his or Jason's cock, she didn't know.

"Before we continue, I have a confession," she murmured.

They stilled.

"Remember your first meringue? The dog didn't get it. Natalie and I ended up using it to pass our Home Economics project."

Jason's hands tangled in the covers. "Ooh, wait until I talk to my sister. I ignored Tigger for days."

"I'm sure he forgave you." She laughed at the sour expression on Perry's face. "What were you expecting?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "Me to share secret fantasies?"

"A hard-on only lasts so long. When you're through with Jason, you'll have me to contend with."

"Idle threats," she retorted.

Perry's eyes flashed.

She involuntarily shivered. Undoing the buttons on her blouse, she slid it down her shoulders and tossed it aside. Remembering their kitchen escapades and how creative Perry could be, she turned her attention to Jason. She wanted to remain in charge, or at least unbound. Inching up the bed, she straddled his body. Her breasts trailed over his form, the blankets a barrier to skin-to-skin intimacy.

Jason took a ragged breath. "Let me get these out of the way." He started to push the covers back.

She caught his wrist. "They stay." She ground her hips into him, pinning him to the bed. Beneath the sheets, his cock jumped. Releasing his wrist, her outstretched hand caressed Perry's thigh. She settled between them, the heat of Perry's skin scorching her back. Nibbling on Jason's earlobe, she whispered, "So how do you intend to convince me to stay?"

Turning his head, Jason's lips brushed her cheek. "No

idea. I'm afraid if I move, I'll come."

She grinned, equally nervous. "Did you say come or cough?" Her hand slipped beneath the sheets. Locating his shaft, she wrapped her fingers around it and slowly stroked its length. Cupping his balls, she said, "Turn your head and cough please."

He groaned, hips lifting off the mattress.

"Two can tease." Perry's breath tickled her ear, shaft bumping her buttocks.

She clenched her ass cheeks. "That's hallowed ground, pal."

"I wholeheartedly agree." His hands roved over her buttocks, separating them just enough to slide his shaft between her cheeks.

Her hand tightened on Jason's cock.

"Whoa, baby." Prying her hand off his shaft, Jason kissed her knuckles. "Not that I don't love being touched, but that's enough to break me."

Wrapping an arm around her waist, Perry rolled both of them off the bed. He stopped their fall with a one armed push-up and lowered them to the floor. Keeping her tucked tight to his body, he stood, her feet and legs dangling above the ground.

"Virgins," Perry tsked. Shifting her in his arms, he set her atop Jason's prone body so her ass faced Jason.

"I like this already," Jason said. He traced the bumps in her spine. Raising up on one elbow, he placed a kiss in the dip of her back where her spine vanished and her buttocks began.

"I don't." She crossed her arms under her breasts. No view to speak of...until Perry stood in front of her, his cock at her head's height. She stalked, on hands and knees, toward the bobbing shaft.

Grabbing the covers, Perry yanked them off the bed.

Jason yelped. "Sheet burn!" Before he could begin another protest, Perry seized him around the ankles and dragged him to the edge of the bed. His legs draped over the footboard.

Using the bed's footboard as a support, she slowly lowered herself onto Jason's shaft. He groaned. She wiggled her hips, grinding her nub against his him. The sensation

ignited little sparks of heat inside her. Closing her eyes, she drove the last of him into her. She gasped. Pure pleasure. His hands settled at her waist, lifted her up, and drew her down his length. Her vagina shivered, clenching around him.

Something tapped her lips. Her eyelids fluttered open. Perry's dark pink penis head greeted her. Her tongue flicked out, licking the pearl of fluid off its tip.

"Since you suggested playing doctor, I better take your temperature."

Rolling her eyes, she obediently opened her mouth. Perry slid his cock into her wet sheath, his balls slapping her in the chin. Her tongue laved its head, teasing the sensitive nerve endings. Teeth nipped the tender skin. Perry moaned. His hands cupped her breasts, kneading them in rhythm to her sucking. When he found her erect nipples, her muscles clenched around Jason's shaft. Jason shifted slightly, striking her G spot and setting off a firecracker string of mini-orgasms.

She kept herself erect only by gripping Perry's thighs. Muscles danced under her fingertips. She dug her nails into his skin, leaving crescent-shaped welts. Her nerves twitched, legs vibrating as the orgasms' waves washed through her. Beneath her, Jason climaxed.

Placing a hand between her breasts, Perry shoved her backward. His cock popped free, a string of her saliva momentarily chaining her lips to his rod. She swung her legs in front of her, draping her body over Jason's, his chest pressed against her back. Jason wrapped one arm around her, holding a breast hostage. His other hand covered her mound. Climbing onto the bed, Perry straddled the double set of legs. His cock slid into her semen-lubed cleft.

Jason's fingers crept to her throbbing clitoris. His first light touch had her whimpering and arching her back. Perry took his time, drawing his cock slowly out of her wet tunnel, then shoving it back into her. Meanwhile, Jason's deft fingers rubbed her clit, teasing her nerves and urging her muscles to cavort. Beneath her, his hips moved in unison to Perry's thrusts, until she lost sense of what was her motion and what was his.

The orgasm built, stoked by Perry's long slow strokes, incited by Jason's feathery touches. Its heat spread through

her stomach like a lava flow. By the time it erupted, her senses had been reduced to sound only, the pulse of her own heart in her ears. She screamed, her body bucking.

Perry exploded inside her.

When her sight and touch returned, she was cradled in Jason's arms, Perry's head resting on her breasts. She trailed her fingers through Perry's bangs. Stirring, he murmured in his sleep and kissed the top of her breast. She fell asleep to both men's arms wrapped around her.

Eight

Jason lifted his head and glanced blearily at the alarm clock. Rubbing his jaw, he abruptly sat up. "Crap." An apologetic grin followed. "Ah, Perry. I gave Maureen my cold. She's not coming in tonight. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell you when I walked in. I swear it."

Perry opened one eye. "Bet you'll look mighty fine in a skirt and hosiery."

Morgan sniggered. "I'd like to see that."

"Hey, no comments from the peanut gallery," Jason shot back. "You're the reason I forgot."

She extracted one hand from the covers and waved it airily. "Don't worry. I can fill in."

Both men stared at her, Jason surprised, Perry thoughtful.

"Seriously, guys. Waitressing helped pay my way through college. I'm sure your clients won't be slapping my ass and offering to shove dollar bills down my blouse."

"Mr. Kohl is really our only consistent drunk." Perry shrugged. "He won't slap your ass, but he'll ogle."

"What does Mrs. Kohl think?"

Perry twirled a strand of her hair. "Since she's been dead for six or seven years, I'm not sure. Harmless old man. We stop mixing alcohol in his drinks as soon as he looks tipsy. He's never figured it out."

"You've done so much for me. Let me do this."

"You don't consider it degrading?" Jason asked.

"Why?" She sat up, careful to keep the sheet tucked above her breasts. The boys might be unselfconscious about their bodies, but she was uncomfortable with a few of her body parts. Despite her diligent exercising, she detected the

infamous boob-droop when she hit thirty. Though neither Perry nor Jason seemed to notice.

Jason rested his head against her breast, toying with one of her nipples through the thin cotton sheet. "Going from wealthy socialite to waitress. It's gotta be a tough adjustment."

She shrugged. "Going from my own bathroom to shared facilities—that was a rough transition. Going from mopey woe-is-me to part-time pastry chef—that reminded me what I shouldn't have given up when I got married. Who cares what I do as long as I do it well?"

"Mmm, not me." Jason started suckling her breast through the thin cotton sheet, putting an abrupt end to the conversation. Perry's fingers crept to her ass, worshipping its curves. Her breath caught in her throat.

Dear Lord and Lady, what had she done to deserve them?

~ * ~

Morgan stared at the Mickey Mouse shaped pancakes on her breakfast plate. "Creative, but probably not enough to impress Mr. Van Kellen."

"What?" Jason asked. "I was going to make heart-shaped ones, but that seemed a little gay."

Chopping the ears off his, Perry stabbed the amputee pancake pieces and mopped maple syrup off his plate. "You need a lighter hand with the cinnamon and nutmeg. Ever think about adding a pinch of allspice?"

"With raisins?" Jason posed. "You may be onto something."

She raised her head, pancakes as yet untouched. "You both are so gay."

"If you must categorize, I prefer the term bisexual," Jason said haughtily, waving his spatula. "I have never swung my hips as I walked."

"He'd know. He watches his ass in the mirror." Perry casually ducked the swinging spatula and picked up his orange juice.

"I do not!" Jason plopped into his chair, the last of his misshapen pancakes stacked on his plate. "If we're sharing secrets, perhaps I should tell her about your penchant for silk."

Perry set his glass down. "He lies." He pushed the newspaper toward her. "Read this."

It was folded to the opinion section of the paper. From the way the two divided the morning paper—comics, life, entertainment, and the classifieds for Jason, business, real estate, and news to Perry—she assumed Perry would never risk inking his fingers on the opinion section.

"Why young children should be leashed in public," she dutifully read out loud.

"Not that one." Perry stabbed his finger at the "Dear Natasha" heading, Ms. Etiquette herself.

"Darlings," she began, then snickered. "I can see already why you like it." Perry rolled his eyes. Jason merely grinned, unrepentant. "While many of you are too young to have read this column when my mother fueled its popularity with her wise words, you certainly have been privy to her generous acts. The library's upper rooms—tastefully decorated by yours truly—were a result of her estate's donation. The fenced-in dog play yard at Penelope Park, also compliments my mother. She financed numerous little projects, even before her column was syndicated, from the renovations on Myrtle's Dining Car to the new location for the fall Farmer's Market. In short, my mother was a woman many respected and adored. The community would have been less of a place without her."

"My mother held very eclectic religious beliefs for the time period she grew up in. My grandparents, devoted Protestants, raised her in their faith. Mother respected their beliefs, but she also held her own. That she practiced Wicca was something no one but her children knew, and that upon her death only. In other words, darlings, she was a witch."

Morgan paused. "Please don't make me regret reading this."

Jason nudged her shoulder. "C'mon, give her a chance. Natasha Walling was one of the first people to patronize our restaurant."

"Okay." She took a sip of orange juice and wished it were a mimosa instead. "Given her achievements and the lives she touched, it would have been a shame if Mother had, instead of being respected, been ostracized for being someone our narrow minded community failed to recognize

as an asset rather than a detriment."

"Witches do not sacrifice live animals to their deities. Nor do they consort with the devil or other unsavory characters. Most rarely even hex. They are merely people on a different life path than you and I, in search of communing with the divine outside the confines of traditional religions. What we need to ask ourselves, darlings, is why is being Wiccan is any different than being Protestant, Evangelical, Baptist, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim? If the answer is 'I don't know, it just is,' you need to admit to yourself that you may be a teensy-bit intolerant. As fall's leaves settle around us, let us also consider shedding some of our prejudices in preparation of embracing the New Year with less fetters (and for the sake of true leather aficionados, Mrs. Mayor, please cast aside that nasty brown purse). My mother, had she the courage, would have expressed this with more eloquence. That she did not, should speak volumes on how our community treats some of its more unique members."

Morgan set the paper down. Her fingertips brushed across the blurring print. She wasn't alone. She never had been. She just let herself think so. Silly, moon-blinded witch. A chair squeaked, then Jason's arm slipped around her shoulders. He was smart enough to not ask why she was crying. Taking a deep breath, she simultaneously banished the tears and managed to come up with a weak smile.

Perry appeared, setting a glass beside her. "Drink up."

More orange juice? "Thanks, but the waterworks weren't enough to dehydrate me."

"It's a Screwdriver."

She grabbed the glass, drank, then waved at the newspaper. "How did she know? And why would she risk her mother's reputation?"

"What was it that you said earlier? First do no harm?" Perry asked.

She nodded.

"One of Natasha's brothers blabbed while he was drunk. You weren't the only one in the witch hunt. Natasha wanted to put a stop to it before it got further out of hand." Jason squeezed her shoulder, then stood. "Speaking of witch hunts, if I don't get my ass to work, my boss is going to hunt me down and swat it. Broth doesn't make itself."

Perry slapped Jason's retreating behind. "If I'd known that was an effective motivator, I'd have tried it years ago."

~ * ~

Built in a squat T shape, *No Patio's* long line of dining room was surrounded by glass walls. Shades could be drawn to mute the sunlight, but at night, the open effect was startling. White lights were twined through garlands of grapevines and flowers, their twinkles reflected in the glass. Each table was adorned with a chic umbrella. More white lights wound up the poles and hid beneath their canopies. A stamped concrete floor created the look of brick paving.

The kitchen ran perpendicular to the dining hall, its front camouflaged as a bistro, complete with the overhanging awning and brick façade. The effect made the diners appear they were outside, nestled in front of a quaint café.

Perry introduced her to the other wait staff and the bartender, then left her to familiarize herself with the menu. Guests started trickling in as early as four, requesting sandwiches and soups. By five, they'd started a waiting list. By seven, she wished she'd worn more sensible shoes. She'd forgotten how tiring it could be.

"I just seated a couple at table three," Perry said as she passed his podium.

"I'm on it," she replied.

He startled her with a flash of teeth. "You're doing marvelous."

"I've changed my demands. A foot rub is mandatory."

"I think I can offer more than that."

She headed for table three, a grin on her face.

"Look, dear. They're so hard up for help they're even hiring the socially disadvantaged."

Her smile vanished. Thomas Vinton sat at table three. He looked impeccable as usual in his Armani suit, power tie, and gold cuff links. And here she was, caught waitressing. She wondered if someone tipped him off. She told herself she didn't care, but she did—at least a little bit. Raising her chin, she prayed she could muster up a polite phrase or two. "Thomas, I'm afraid I can't say I'm pleased to see you."

"The pleasure's all mine. You've met Ms. Rashio Valentine, haven't you?"

Of course. They'd mingled in the same circles. Senator Valentine's granddaughter was a spoiled brat. Rumor had it he cut her out of his considerable will to teach her a lesson. If she was clinging to the likes of Thomas, she guessed there was some truth to the report. Rashio dismissed her with an amused glance.

Damn them all, but mostly herself for letting them make her feel like a used couch dumped at the curb. She sent a silent plea to the Bright Lady for strength. She had banished him. He could do no more harm to her life unless she chose to let him. Feeling a weight lift from her chest, she asked with a smile, "May I start you off with an appetizer?"

"Drinks," he corrected. "See that they make my old fashioned the way I like it. I understand it's difficult to hire competent help."

Her jaw worked, but she managed a polite nod. She glanced at Rashio. She was barely more than a child. She played with the pearls at her neck, clearly bored. Her heavily lacquered nails tapped impatiently on the table.

"An old fashioned for you as well?" Morgan asked.

Thomas laid a hand over Rashio's to still it. "She'll have a white Zinfandel."

Morgan started to retreat.

"Do you enjoy your new career, Morgan?" He emphasized the word, "career." Eying her gray skirt and plain white blouse with distaste, his gaze lingered a bit too long on her breasts.

She fought the urge to blush. "Slopping hogs would be preferable to being your wife. At least the hogs show some signs of intelligence."

His companion looked up, the bored expression replaced by avid curiosity. "You're Morgan T'Naile? Were you really reduced to living on the street? Are you a witch?"

"I am a witch," she admitted, more than a little nervous, but determined not to hide. If Natasha Walling was willing to risk her mother's reputation, she could be bold.

"Oh!" Rashio squealed, boredom changing to glee. "Can you do a tarot reading for me? Do you have a familiar?" She leaned forward. "How about a Book of Shadows?"

Morgan smiled despite herself. She bet Rashio couldn't wait to spread that juicy admission among her former

acquaintances. "Yes, every witch has a Book of Shadows. And no, I generally don't lean on tarot magic, so you'd be best to find someone else. It's not my strong point."

Rashio's eyes grew round. "What is?" she whispered.

Morgan could hear Thomas tapping his foot. A lot of choices popped into her head. *Poppets. Talismans. Her cauldron.* She could steal Rashio's attention from Thomas. The thought of taking something he thought was his was satisfying for a fleeting second. But Perry and Jason needed her and she had tables to tend to, drinks to collect, and meals to serve.

"Another time, perhaps," she responded.

Rashio slouched back in her seat, a pout on her face. Thomas frowned. Morgan retreated, whispering a prayer under her breath.

"Moon above and Earth below, guard me from my harmful foe. Lady and Lord, bless my words. Shine brightly upon all who heard." Glancing at the clock, she saw it was nearly eight. "Hecate, lethal lady, remember my spell. Bid him gone at the toll of the bell." The energy flowing off the happy patrons crackled in her ears, aligning with her. Someone heard her plea, Lord, Lady, or Hecate, time would tell.

"Are you all right?" Perry asked, catching her arm as she blindly passed him.

She blinked, oriented herself to the bar again, and smiled. "Don't worry, it's all under control."

A customer approached and Perry, frowning, was forced to release her.

~ * ~

Perry glanced at the crossed off reservation. Vinton. Of course, Thomas Vinton, Morgan's ex. And he was supposed to be the smart one in the trio? He looked in the direction of table three. He never condoned physical violence, but he very much wanted to punch that sardonic smile off Thomas Vinton's face.

Jason stepped out of the kitchen at that moment. "You're going to hate me, but we're running low on milk. We might make it through the night. It was on the last order and they forgot to bring it.." He followed Perry's gaze, words morphing into an inarticulate growl. "He can't stay."

"She's handling it admirably."

"Beside the point. I don't care how much money he has or what it does to our reputation. He can't stay."

"I agree. Follow my lead." Straightening his tie, Perry headed toward Vinton's table. Morgan wouldn't want them to interfere. They needed to act quickly.

"Mr. Vinton, how wonderful you could join us. I hope you find your evening enlightening. This is my business partner and head chef, Jason Scholl."

Vinton preened under Perry's attention. "Your chef's reputation is unmatched. Your wait staff, though, lack manners."

A nerve twitched in Perry's jaw. "Perhaps I can make amends. The aurora borealis are quite breathtaking tonight. Would you care to try our newest addition, an intimate table set under the stars?"

Vinton looked unconvinced until his date cooed. Setting down his napkin, he let Jason pull out his chair before he stood. "Very well. Lead on."

Perry shared a look with Jason. Jason tilted his head imperceptibly. They weren't witches, but they knew how to evict him just as permanently and thoroughly as Morgan had.

~ * ~

When Morgan returned with the drinks, Thomas's table was empty. She glanced around and spied Jason's white coat as it vanished out the emergency exit. Removing the glasses from her tray, she tucked it under her arm and followed him.

She heard Thomas's angry voice first. "This is an outrage. I demand to be let back in."

"You will not treat our staff in a derogatory manner," Perry replied. His voice was calm, but rage colored his tone.

She stepped outside.

Thomas immediately turned on her. "You! What sort of lies having you been filling their heads with?"

Before she could answer, Jason stepped in front of her. "Be very careful, Mr. Vinton. Or *No Patio* won't be the only restaurant you're banned from."

Humiliation and anger painted his cheeks blood red. His hands balled into fists. "Don't you dare threaten me. I'll have you closed down. No one will hire you. You'll be run out

of town."

"Like you tried with Morgan?" A muscle ticked in Perry's jaw.

Thomas's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

"Libelous letters can get one in trouble, especially if they happened to be leaked to the press," Perry continued. "Not every business owner is cowed by you." Taking a step back, he turned and placed a chaste kiss on Morgan's cheek. "We have patrons waiting. Let's go inside."

Rashio's eyes widened, the color draining from her face. She stared at Jason's protective stance, then as realization dawned, at Perry. Morgan wondered what new rumors she'd hatch. Suddenly, being a witch seemed downright tame compared to sharing a life with two men.

"You impertinent blue collar—" Thomas swung at Perry.

"Watch out!" Jason shouted.

Snatching the drink tray from beneath her arm, Morgan swung it at Thomas's head. The metal made a satisfying bong as it struck. Perry ducked even though the punch went wide. Thomas staggered backward, grabbing at Rashio to keep from falling over.

Rashio squealed, tottering under his weight.

"Don't worry. We'll bill you for the tray," Jason said.

Thomas snarled something unintelligible.

Jason held the door for Morgan while Perry escorted her through.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said when the door had closed behind them. "But thank you."

"We can't let you be ridiculed on the first night of your new job," Jason said.

She glanced from face to face, unsure she heard him correctly.

"I don't mean waitressing," Jason hurried on. "Unless you want to. The place keeps growing. I could really use you in the kitchen as a pastry chef. It'd let us pick up some of those catering jobs we've had to turn down."

"We could also make use of that marketing degree you're so fond of." Perry's lips twitched, as if he was fighting to keep from laughing.

"Say something," Jason pleaded.

Her mouth opened and closed, then she found her voice. "Yes."

"Told you so," Perry said, smug.

Jason mussed his hair. "Don't let his act fool you. He was worried you'd say no."

Behind her, the clock chimed. *Eight o'clock*. Released from its spell, the patrons' energy sizzled around the threesome. Magic burst into the night. Linking arms with the men, she stepped into the kitchen's bright light and embraced her new life.

About Christine

Author Christine McKay writes sexy contemporary, paranormal, and fantasy romance stories. Shape-shifters, witches, fallen angels, and mythical creatures populate many of her tales as well as strong heroines and boy-next-door heroes.

Ms. McKay lives on a farm ruled by a persnickety mule and a neurotic Jack Russell Terrier, surrounded by an assortment of goats, cats, dogs, and rabbits.

Visit our website for our growing catalogue of quality books.
www.carnalpassions.com

