

The delayed teaser

By Holly Lisle

Hero? Heroine? Villain? I've been trying to figure out which of these I ought to toss into the pot, and I keep coming back to the villain. I'm happy with the way this scene turned out – it may undergo some revision as I get a little deeper into the bad guy's connection with my heroes. But for now, I think it'll stand.

He moved through the crowd down on Las Olas, nearly oblivious to the people who brushed past him, murmuring their apologies. He was focused inward, watching the movement of one particular star in his private sky. This one was a bright, pretty star.

He moved off the main thoroughfare, onto the side street with its entrance to the little Wicca shop. Watching her light moving across his half-closed eyelids and listening to the soft murmur of her thoughts, he knew she was alone, but his timing needed to be right. He pretended to read the menu of the cafe next door, and he waited until at last he felt her move to the back of the shop.

He gave her just another moment, to be sure she was busy, and entered the shop then, and as the cowbells clanged against the door, he shouted, "Hey, Lainie, it's just me." As he yelled, he was turning around the "Open" sign so that it showed the little clock. He moved it to fifteen minutes – he knew he didn't have long, and he didn't want the body to go undiscovered for any length of time. He dropped the blinds over the big front display window, then went to the place where she hid her keys – the little hook beneath the cash wrap, way to the back.

"You still had half an hour on lunch," she called from the

stockroom. "You didn't need to hurry."

"Lunch was boring," he shouted to cover the sound as he locked the door. He'd unlock it when he was done with her.

He heard her rattling boxes. "Did the new cards come in?" He started taking off his clothes, folding them, putting them into one of the plastic shopping bags he had with him.

"Some of them. The oversized Thoth is on backorder still, and so is the miniature Motherpeace. But we got all the standards, and a couple of new Angel decks that look interesting."

He pulled out one of the pairs of latex gloves he'd brought with him. He got the gag – he didn't like to use gags, but then he usually didn't work in public. This was a change for him, but he was going for volume today. He'd already visited two of his stars, and he had one more that he wanted after he was done with this one.

"You're quiet out there," she called to him, and he smiled.

"Just thinking," he said, and picked up his little case of toys from inside the other shopping bag. It had fresh blood smears on it, he noticed, but working at speed, that was really unavoidable. He was pleased he'd thought of the two shopping bags; they kept his clothes clean in case anything splattered, and kept his toys and their mess separate.

And then he walked back to visit his next star.

She looked up from pulling tarot cards out of boxes, and saw him, and the look of bewilderment and horror that crossed her face got him so hard he thought he'd explode right there.

"Who the hell are you?" she whispered, scrambling for something she could use as a weapon. She came up with her box-cutter, and he grinned at her.

"I'm just the guy who turns out the lights," he said.

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