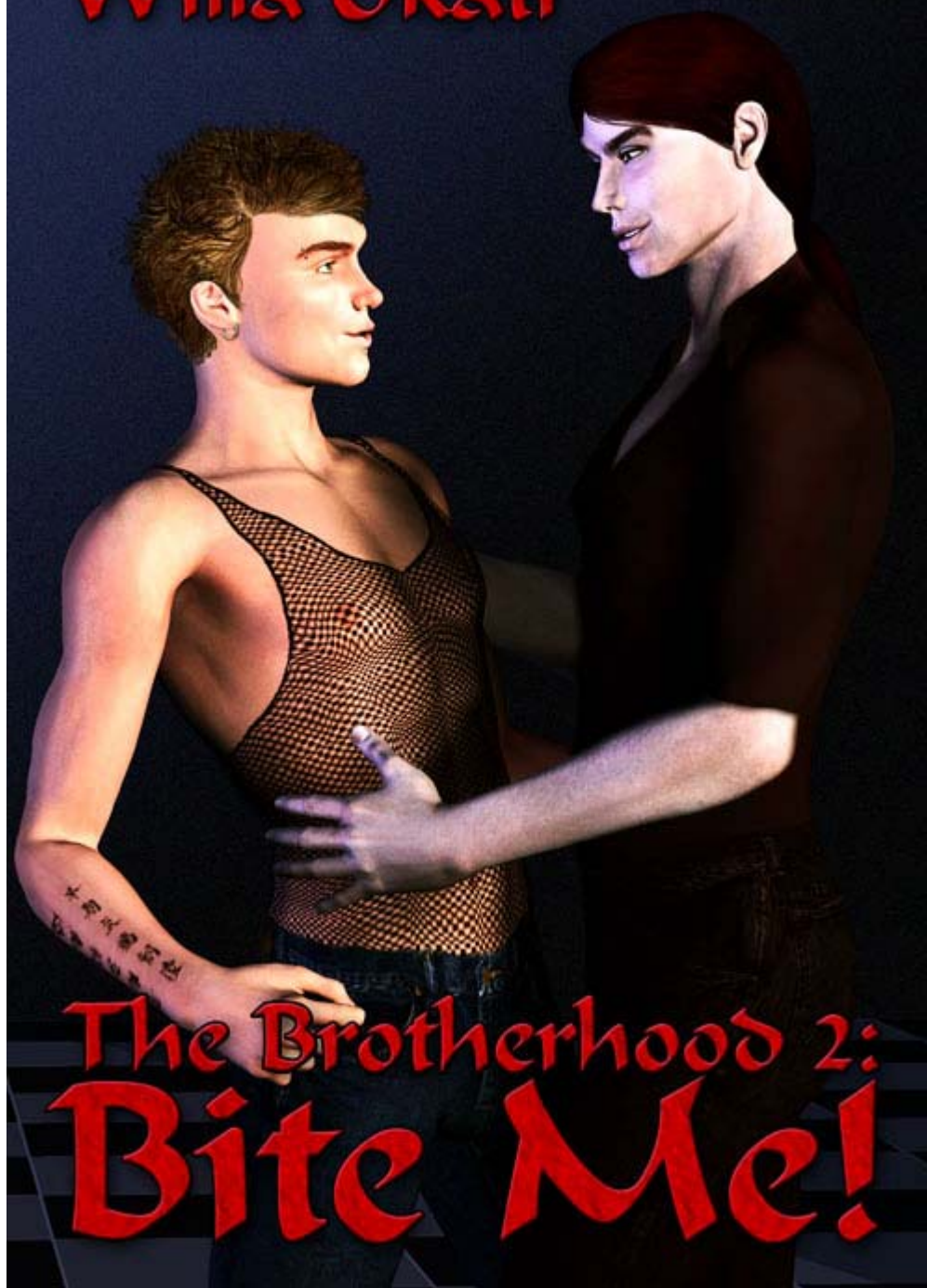


Willa Okati

Loose Id



Praise for the writing of Willa Okati

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting

Cleverly written, with plenty of witty charm, readers will enjoy the first installment of *The Finest Line* series, *The Sighting*.

-- Patricia Green, *Romance Reviews Today*

Steamy and soul-stirring, *The Sighting* chronicles the ebb and flow of the relationships of at least two couples and takes readers along on their struggles. Betrayal and malice also make an appearance, making *The Sighting* a suspenseful read.

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms. Okati has created suspense and drama for us to read. Like pieces on a chessboard, moves are made that could bring victory or defeat. I often wondered what new twist this author had to offer us.

-- Candy Cay, *Coffee Time Romance*

Tirsah and Benec are two explosive personalities that clash often. It was a delight for me to read. The secondary characters are just as fun... This is a wonderful first installment in this series, and I'm looking forward to reading more about Benec and Tirsah in the next one.

-- Luisa, *Cupid's Library Reviews*

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting is now available from Loose Id.

THE BROTHERHOOD 2: BITE ME

Willa Okati

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex, some violence).

The Brotherhood 2: Bite Me

Willa Okati

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Dedication

For "The Mouse," who fell in love with Bree and encouraged me to make and keep him the wild, wicked bad boy he is. You keep me rockin'!

Prologue

“You’re early.”

“So I am.” Julian slid into his accustomed seat at the bar’s end. Amour Magique boasted several watering holes of varying class and convenience, each with its own bartender specifically chosen to suit the typical clientele. Some were easier to find than others -- some had to be looked for with deliberate intent to make them appear, some hid in the shadows, and some catered to any who happened by. Julian had long since chosen this one, hidden by magic and shadows in a corner of Amour Magique, frequented only by those in the know and the occasional bumbler who stumbled across it by curious accident.

His kind of people. His kin.

Not that they acknowledged him, or he them. They might throw him a glare, as one would toss a bone to a dog, but he had long since perfected a slight smile that drove them absolutely mad. None dared approach him for a challenge. They knew his power to be greater than their own, that he had risen as far above them as a god before an ant. He had worked to perfect his skills, something few of his lazy brethren could understand. Every so often, to his great amusement, sycophants would raise the banner for him to become king of their breed -- and were shocked at his refusal.

No, not for him the responsibilities of a monarchy. He took pains to make that clear. Despite all temptations throughout centuries of existence, he emphasized that all he wanted was to be left alone to savor his preferred drinks, amuse himself with beautiful men, and observe the richness of life as it passed by the bar.

He was patient, for one of his sort -- another of the skills he had worked to perfect. Patient enough to put up with Silas's odd choice for bartender in this particular corner. While the owner of *Amour Magique* did have a peculiar sense of humor, he never failed to show good business sense, so Julian never complained, accepting that the specific choice of bartender was deliberate.

But, really. A garrulous, tactless, utterly unbeautiful, balding shrimp of a man in charge of a bar designed for his kind?

A meat puppet sent to control the vampires?

It delighted Julian to no end that Silas's odd design worked. The bartender, plain old Tom, brooked no nonsense from the blood-drinkers who liked to pose and threaten. He laughed off their threats to bite him and laid odds on their fangs even being able pierce his tough old hide. Julian often had to stifle his chuckles at the young undeads' absolute bewilderment at Tom's total unconcern over being their natural prey.

He didn't often decide he liked someone, but he believed, after weighing it thoroughly, that he liked Tom. Tom seemed to favor Julian, as well, so it all worked out.

The mortal had been humming to himself as he set up a row of gleaming shot glasses. Now, he cut a frankly curious look at Julian. "So?"

Julian affected a blank face. "So, what?"

"What's with the early? You don't stumble outta your digs until sundown. Least, not since I've known ya. Somethin' up, or goin' down?" Tom winked. He knew that such nosiness was akin to putting his foot in a bear trap, but he did it with all the vampires, most of whom were so taken aback that they blurted out all their plans.

Julian, however, was beyond such foolishness and had learned to guard his tongue. “Possibly,” he responded, trailing his finger over Tom’s polished bar. “Are you set up for the night?”

“Nah. Not yet. Gotta wait for the Red Double-Cross to make their delivery.” Tom grinned. “So, no good stuff yet. Guy tipped me off we might get some AB-negative, only a couple days past date.”

“It all tastes the same.”

“Yeah? I figured. Not like vodka versus gin versus rum, after all. Blood’s blood. Too bad you can’t taste it right. Got a fabulous Scotch in this morning. Fifty years old. Dust on those bottles near about made me sneeze up a lung.”

Julian quirked an eyebrow. “How can I resist a sales pitch like that?” he asked dryly. “I can taste well enough. I’ll take a sample of it.”

“Your funeral. Or not.” Tom cackled to himself as he set up the glass and uncorked a still-dusty bottle. The heavy smell of peat and smoke filled Julian’s nose. Hardly neat or polished in his approach, Tom splashed the expensive liquid in with abandon and shoved it across, grinning. “Get yourself a snootful of that. Had a sip myself earlier.”

Julian took the glass and inhaled, wistful despite himself for the days when he could have enjoyed every nuance of the drink. It would be costly. “Add it to my tab, of course, but out of curiosity, how much does this run?”

Tom rolled his eyes, whistling. “Fuckin’ fortune, man.”

“You might have said before you poured it out.”

“Like you can’t afford the stuff. Drink hearty. I’ll take ten percent off if you tell me, honest and true, how it tastes to a vamp. I gotta know how it works on your kind of tastebuds. If it’s still good, which I bet it is, Silas owes me fifty for betting no vamp would be interested.”

A wager? Well, anything to pass the time. Julian lifted the glass, breathing in the bouquet once more before trying a small sip. He closed his eyes involuntarily as the strong wash of flavors raced over his tongue. Few things besides blood tasted of more than water or sand to a vampire, yet this had flavor aplenty

For a moment, heady with the rush, he felt mortal again.

Tom didn't have to ask. He broke into a hoot of laughter and slammed the flat of his hand on the bar. "Knew it!"

Julian allowed him a smile. "You have a gift, Tom."

"Nah. Just been hangin' around you creeps so long, I can figure what'll do the trick and what won't." Tom rolled his eyes.

"Yet you still stock wine coolers."

"Eh, the wannabe babies gotta have something that won't set them pukin' right off." Tom grinned, whipped out a white cloth, and began polishing the spotless bar. Julian watched with interest. Was it merely something all bartenders did out of habit, or was it to keep their hands busy, much like habitual smokers needed the feel of a cigarette between their fingers to keep their minds on an even keel?

It pleased him that he could be curious. As long as his mind remained active, even with regard to trivia, it meant he was still sharp. Still at the top of his game. Still in control of himself. Every aspect of himself.

Julian was a vampire and had long since accepted what that meant in every aspect of his undead life. He knew himself as few ever did, mortal or otherwise. That, above all else, was what made him dangerous. Very few were smart or lucky enough to understand that.

It kept him on top.

Allowed him to do as he pleased.

Let him enjoy the ages stretching on and on. True, maintaining his power and status took discipline, but it left plenty of time for other pursuits. One of which was indulging his

taste in Amour Magique's clientele. And like a skilled hunter, he always laid careful plans to trap his prey.

He took another slow sip of Scotch, riding out the wave of bliss that came with its strong taste, then put it down. It would last him for hours. Tom didn't mind Julian taking up a stool at his bar, and he would, of course, be purchasing blood once the delivery came. In the meantime, this corner was a peaceful place to examine his latest acquisition.

Not bothering to conceal his actions, Julian slid an envelope from his pocket and opened it. A variety of pictures, from Polaroids to printed Web pages to mugshots, spilled across the bar top. Julian studied them with great interest, plucking up the sole line drawing amongst the others -- a drawing of a young, slender man with a fall of impish curls and sparkling eyes. He wore a blue crystal around his neck, the only spot of color in the picture.

"Liam," he murmured. "Son of Lilith." They had met before on occasion, but it had been centuries since their paths last crossed.

Completely unashamed of being nosy, Tom paused in his polish work to poke his nose in. He made a noise of approval. "Buncha cuties there," he said. "Who's the dish in the sketch?" Only Tom would refer to an incubus as a "dish."

"Liam," Julian said, tapping the image of the blue crystal with a fingernail. "Do you know what this is?"

Tom peered at it, then shrugged. "Got me. Looks like that new doodad Silas hung up over the door."

"Ah. I hadn't noticed." Careless of him. Still, it explained much. Vampires rarely crossed paths with the children of Lilith, but Julian made it his business to keep tabs on new developments in Amour Magique.

So. Silas had somehow gotten his greedy hands on one of Lilith's Tears. A sure-fire magnet for the amorous. He could not have gotten it from any save an incubus, and since he himself had spotted Liam speaking with the club owner a week ago ...

A trade, then? That seemed the most likely explanation and filled in the answers to questions Julian had spent the week pondering. A seer whom he had paid handsomely had informed him that a particular group of mortals, graced with temporary power beyond mortal capability, would be visiting *Amour Magique* on the next “Freak” night. Humans often made it past the ropes, of course, but the seer had insisted that this group was “special.”

Blessed by an incubus? Yes, that would certainly make them special.

It had sparked Julian’s curiosity, and he had decided to indulge it. One quick phone call to a suitably disreputable photog-cum-PI, with a few details about Liam and a promise of handsome payment for a full investigation, had netted him the envelope full of pictures and a scribbled sheet of notebook paper detailing each of the men.

He had to stifle a laugh as he read through it. Incubi were noted for being flighty, and Liam’s decision to ally himself with a group of no-hoper gay men called the Brotherhood tickled Julian’s fancy to no end. He assumed that Liam had traded the Tear for an all-inclusive pass in the hopes that his chosen companions would get lucky. His choice to bring them on a Freak night? Well, that was a bit more interesting. He did not think Liam malicious enough to serve his friends up like food. Perhaps he thought they might have better luck among the supernatural who walked the earth.

He might be right.

Casting the letter aside, Julian picked through the pictures a second time. From plain to rugged to academic to jailbait, the Brotherhood had a pleasing diversity to it. He paused over several of the pictures, holding them up to the light for consideration.

“Like pickin’ hors d’oeuvres off a tray, ain’t it?” Tom cracked, watching him without embarrassment.

Julian couldn’t deny as much. He narrowed the stack down to six, then to three, and finally selected one. He laid it on the bar in front of him, gazing at the image in deep thought. A mugshot, not flattering in the least, of a young man bristling with piercings,

decorated with tattoos, his hair spiky, and his eyeliner smudged. His eyes were large and dark, beautiful despite being unusually guarded, even for a mugshot.

“This one,” Julian said, sliding it across for Tom’s opinion.

The bartender wrinkled his nose. “You picked the punk? Jeezus, vampire, that one looks like trouble on a hot plate. Probably kick you in the nuts if you come too close.”

“Exactly.” Julian cocked his head, gazing at the photographed eyes. “I like a challenge.”

Tom shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Gonna bite off more’n you can chew one of these days.”

“I think I know my limits. This man, this ...” He flipped the picture over to read the name scribbled on the back. “... Bree. I wonder what that’s short for? There’s more to him than meets the eye. He, among all the others, is the one I would get to know better.”

“Your funeral.”

“He’s hiding something,” Julian mused. “I wonder what. Such an adventure to find out.”

“Yeah? How can you tell?”

Julian smiled, the smile that never failed to drive human or vampire barking mad. He flashed his fangs at Tom. “I know a little about living undercover, you might say ...”

Chapter One

There isn't enough aspirin in the fucking world.

Bree pinched the bridge of his nose. Felt weird to not bump against a stud or a hoop when his fingers touched his face. Never could get used to the sensation. Kind of like losing a tooth on a caramel and only realizing it when you ran your tongue through your mouth to clean it. First shock, then a sinking realization of *oh, shit, this isn't right.*

Being without the jewelry made him feel naked. Exposed. Like the people who looked at him could see straight past his face and get a look at his thoughts. Thoughts he'd much rather keep to himself. He wasn't stupid enough to think he could get away with all the decorations during the day, though. Not when they made him live by too many other rules, like wearing long sleeves and high necks in the middle of summer to cover up his tattoos. He had the biggest damn collection of lightweight preppy turtlenecks he'd seen since the time he'd picked up a trick with a bad case of worse taste and a serious yuppie infection.

God, he hated every one of the soft, clingy things. The gentle brush of cotton rasped on his nerves like a kid trying to play violin for the first time. Wearing these, losing his jewelry, brushing his hair back neat and straight, donning hard, polished dress shoes that pinched his toes without mercy ... it was like being inside a shell or wearing a mask. Fake Bree.

Still, gotta pay the rent somehow.

“Sir?” A pair of bony knuckles rapped the plastic veneer of his till window. “Young man? Excuse me!”

Ah, shit. Customer. Head still pounding, Bree looked up, arranged his face into a bland smile, and recited: “Welcome to Money Now! My name is Brian, and I’ll be your assistant today. How may I help you?”

The owner of the knuckles, a woman in her seventies with pale lavender-white hair and her polyester pants pulled up to just beneath her alarmingly sagging boobs, scowled at him from among her wrinkles. “It’s about time. I’ve been waiting for almost ten minutes!”

Bull. I only had my head down for a second. Saturday’s our busiest day.

“Were you asleep?” She peered at him in deep suspicion. “You were napping, weren’t you?”

Bree smiled on, mask perfectly in place. “No, ma’am, I promise I wasn’t asleep. Just a little headache.”

“Liar! I’m seventy-three years old, and I know asleep when I see it. I should tell your manager.”

“There’s no need for --”

She fixed him with a lemony glare.

Hiding his sigh, Bree pushed over a business card. “Her name is Ms. McVeigh. All the pertinent details are printed right there.”

“Good!” His customer snatched the card up like a prize, peered at it, then tucked it into the depths of a yawning knit purse even he could see was filled with junk -- a few dozen receipts, parking tickets, movie stubs, and unopened mail. She looked up in triumph, as if she’d just taught him a darn good lesson. “Now, are you going to help me, or not?”

Bree smiled again. Patient. Placid. Calm. “Of course, ma’am. In case you’re not familiar with our operation, let me give you a quick rundown. Money Now! is a payday advance

company, designed to give you a little help if you find yourself short before your next check comes in. We'll just need some ID, a recent pay stub from your place of employment, and --"

The customer reared back. "Employment? You mean, like a job?"

Bree's inner alarms whooped. He kept the smile on. "Yes, ma'am, a job."

"I don't have any job! I just told you, I'm seventy-three years old. Where would I get a job? I just want some money. Your sign says money now, nothing about all this information you're asking for. I came in to talk about getting some money. Is that clear?"

"And you ... have no way of paying it back?" Bree faltered.

"Oh, of course. I'm not *stupid*. My son-in-law's going to win the lottery, and then I'll repay you."

"I see." Bree's head gave an extra-nice throb.

Nope. Not enough aspirin in the fucking world at all.

So how did I get myself into this, again? Bree resisted the urge to rub his temples. Instead, he pulled out a small legal pad hidden beneath his cash drawer and made a vicious check-mark with enough force to rip the paper. The heading at the top read "Idiot Counter."

One of his coworkers, Cindy Lou, who wasn't bad despite being named after a Dr. Seuss character, gave him a sympathetic grin. "It coulda been worse."

Bree gave her a look filled with pain. Yeah. Could have been worse. They'd both been there before.

She shook her head and went on counting her cash. Ready to close out her shift, lucky bitch. "I mean, what is it about places like these that attracts morons?"

Hell if I know. Even though I should. I figure I'm the biggest dumbass ever for walking through the doors with a job application. Shoulda stuck with Fast Food Hell. Even Taco-Rama, may it rest in roach-infested peace, was better than this.

He'd been stupid. Dealt with the last customer he could take demanding "More hot sauce. No, I said *hot* sauce, not mild! More than that! Hey, you short-changed me! Can I get a couple of taco meals for free since you screwed up? No? Let me speak to your manager!"

So, he'd gone out looking. Found this place through a friend of a friend, with their big "Now Hiring" sign, the kind that shines like a heavenly beacon to the perpetually broke. Gone in, filled out his forms, and been called back a couple days later to ask when he could start. All gone off without a hitch. He'd walked in the first day, looking like his normal self, and been called straight into the store manager's office.

He'd walked out with a pocketful of stripped-off jewelry and a wadded-up dress code in his hand, ordered to go home and change into something called "business casual."

Things had pretty much gone downhill from there.

Cindy Lou gave a discreet cough. Bree glanced up to see a middle-aged man with an immense beer belly, ragged shorts, mud-caked sneakers, and a filthy ball cap stomping toward him with murder in his eye. He was already waving a "request for repayment" statement like an angry matador.

Bree tried to glance away, pretend he was busy -- too late. The man zeroed in on him like a mosquito to a nice juicy vein. Slamming his statement down on the counter hard enough to make the whole shebang rattle, the man barked, "You! Did you send this to me?"

"No, sir, corporate sends out all our correspondence, but I --"

"Fuck that!" The creep leaned in. Bree caught a whiff of rotten-cheese BO strong enough to make his stomach flip. "I don't give a shit about corporate. I'm here, now, and you're gonna get this straightened out for me. Got that?"

Smile, Bree, smile. Remember, it's payday soon. "I'll see what I can --"

The man narrowed little, piggy eyes at him. "You sound like a girl," he said. "You one of them faggots?"

Smile! "I'm sorry, sir, we are not allowed to discuss those things --"

“Knew it. Whole world’s gettin’ overrun by fucking queers. So? You gonna sit there on your pansy ass, or do something?”

Smile! “I’ll be glad to. If I could just see your letter so I can get some information about your account?”

“Why? Ain’t it all in your computer? You should know who I am.”

Smile! “Yes, but I just need to double-check --”

The man spat a gob of tobacco juice on the floor. “Double-check my balls, cocksucker.” He groped himself. “Do I gotta call your manager?”

Smile! Smile! Smile!

Cindy Lou patted Bree on his shoulder as Mr. Needs-a-Bath-in-Lysol stomped off, the manager’s business card clenched in his fist. “Sorry, hon. I don’t think I have seen worse, actually.”

Bree said nothing. He brushed the shreds of torn-up collection statement off his desk and made another heavy check on the idiot counter. Somehow, it didn’t feel very satisfying.

“I hate to say it, but you’d better clean up the spit before you-know-who sees.” Cindy Lou primed her mouth up like she’d been eating persimmons and mimicked their boss. “Mr. Brian Todds! Money Now! prides itself on providing a safe, pleasant experience for its patrons. How dare you leave a puddle that someone could slip in?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She meant well, but again, not helping. Bree fished a bottle of cleaning spray and a roll of paper towels out of his file drawer, plus a cheery yellow *Be Right Back!* sign to prop on the countertop. He trudged around front to wipe up the tobacco juice.

Oh, God. His gorge rose. The puddle was still warm. Made the skin on his fingers want to peel back in disgust. He kept his face expressionless, squirting and wiping until the floor was clean and dry, then heading back behind the counter to toss the whole mess and pour on

a hefty payload of hand sanitizer. The sharp smell burned his nose, but it was better than still being able to feel warm, slimy spit on his fingertips.

He glanced up. No customers in sight. Thank God. Maybe the rush had finally slowed.

Bree hid his idiot counter, then bent to pick up the paper shreds. The guy had done a serious number on them, tearing the pieces up so small that he couldn't make out a thing. *Shit*. He'd be getting into trouble for that, not only when the customer called his manager, but when she found out he hadn't even gotten the guy's name before he went off like a homophobic firecracker.

"Excuse me?"

Damn it!

Bree glanced up -- and up. There was a lot of *up* to this customer. And a whole lot of ... *holy shit*.

The man -- or the fallen angel masquerading as a man -- gave Bree a kind smile with a small, wry quirk to it. "Let me guess. You've had a rough day?"

Bree stammered briefly before his own plastic grin popped back into place. "Oh, it's all part of the territory," he said with corporate-approved cheer. "Now, how can I have you? I mean -- help you?" *Shit!*

The man's eyes twinkled. Bree gazed at them. God, he'd never seen such eyes. The exact color of good coffee, a warm, dark brown he could fall into and happily drown in. Eyes that had definitely seen it all, but instead of turning sour had come to some kind of peace with the fucked-up world they lived in. Couple of smile creases. And oh, God, yes, his smile. That was the kind of smile every customer service rep -- not to mention the horny and lonely -- lived in hope of. The quirk of those lips said, *I understand. It'll be okay. Trust me*. And while he was staring, why not scope out the thick, deep-red hair tied back in a silky ponytail, or the bod that Michelangelo would have wept over, or ...

"Why are you staring?"

The question came out gentle and soft, maybe even a little teasing, but Bree gave a jerk and shook himself. If the manager saw that ... crap. "I'm so sorry, sir," his lips said in numb rote. "You, er ... you look like my cousin." He winced. "Again, I apologize. My name is Brian. How may I help you today?"

To his surprise, the man tilted his head back and laughed. Still soft, not drawing any attention, but something had definitely gotten him tickled. Bree blinked. "Sir, are you all right?"

"Ah, Bree, Bree!" The man looked back at him, gaze gentle and warm as the sunrise. He reached out and cupped Bree's cheek in one hand. The ball of his thumb brushed over Bree's slightly parted lips and stroked down the dimple in his chin. "You are a rare treat."

The touch of this stranger's hand made him want to curl up and purr like a kitten. Bree blinked, a little dazed. "I -- what -- huh?"

"This place strips you of your wit," the man said, the first flash of sadness crossing his face. "Better things are soon to come. That, I promise."

He smiled again, slowly withdrawing his hand. "You'll see me soon, Bree."

Bree stared. Couldn't help himself. "When?" he managed to whisper.

"When you least expect it, of course -- but after you've been looking for me." The man winked. "I'm called Julian. Remember the name."

As if Bree could forget.

Tucking his hands into the pockets of mouth-wateringly well-fitted jeans, Julian turned away and sauntered back out the doors into the mall. Bree found his own hand coming up to rest where Julian had touched him. He tingled. Julian's skin had felt deliciously cool, but at the same time ... oh, man.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't spy his next customer stepping up until he heard them speak in a sneer. "So this is how low you go, Bree? Thought you had better taste than shilling suckers for a buck. No, wait ... you don't, after all. I taught you well."

Bree blinked as he automatically recognized the man in front of him. How could he not? For six weeks, he'd woken up next to that face. Kissed it. Trusted it. Believed the words it spoke were truth. Believed those lips when they said, "I love you."

His ex.

The ex that had wiped out his bank account, maxed his one credit card, and then brought a frighteningly young-looking guy home to Bree's own bed, where he'd found them just about breaking the springs.

The guy who had sent him to lawyer Simon and into the Brotherhood.

Bree's canned speech died before it had a chance to get out. "Management has the right to refuse service," he said, backing off a step.

James sneered. "Not to paying customers. Good customers who they like." He slapped down a personal, embossed check and a bill. "I'm here to pay in full, on time."

"With what? The money you stole from me?" Bree couldn't stop himself. "Or did you sponge it off your little boy toy?"

James shook his head. "Now, Bree. That's hardly good customer service, is it?"

Bree gritted his teeth. No way had James come in by chance and just happened to walk up to his till. The guy had proved himself to be a grade-Z prick. He was loving it, flashing the cash when he knew Bree was still struggling to pay back his Visa bill.

Simon's calm voice sounded in Bree's mind: "Don't let him get to you. You know you have anger-management issues. If you see James again, above all else remain calm."

Fine. Calm. He could do calm. Damned if he'd smile, though. Stone-faced, Bree took the check and letter. He punched the information in, all the while feeling James's delight in seeing him at his menial worst. The transaction went off flawlessly. He stamped a receipt and pushed it back across. "Thank you for your business. Have a nice day."

Now get the fuck out of this store.

James took his sweet time examining the receipt before folding it up neatly and tucking it into the inner pocket of his tailored blazer. “Good little lackey,” he said with a sweet smile. “But then again, you always did get off on doing like daddy said, didn’t you?”

“Stop it.”

James lowered his voice. “Oh, James, James, James!” he mocked in sing-song. “Fuck me harder, James. I love you, James. I’ll never leave you. It’s okay, James, I know this credit card bill has to be a mistake. I trust you, James. You’d never cheat on me, James. You’re the one I’ve waited for all my life ... James.” His eyes sparkled with malice. “God, are you a schmuck.”

Simon’s voice frantically chanted advice in Bree’s mental ears. Too bad it was getting drowned out by a tidal wave of rage, the same blind fury that came up whenever he thought of James. Memories were bad enough. Seeing the bastard in the flesh? Bree felt his hands curling into fists. Images of Simon were replaced by visions of smashing in that perfect nose and watching the blood splatter over counter and floor.

“Get out,” he growled.

James pretended dismay. “Oh, my, that won’t do. Where are your manners, Bree?”

“The way I figure it? Same place as my savings. Shot all to hell. Now get out before I call the cops.”

“On what grounds? You never did take out a restraining order to keep me out of your life, and I can go wherever I want. You should have taken steps to ‘protect’ yourself, hmm? Sloppy, Bree, very sloppy. But as I recall, you liked getting messy. Nothing like my little Robbie. He’s neat as a pin. Always makes sure to clean up after himself. And me.”

Bree glared. “Great for you. Glad you’re happy. Now leave.”

James ignored him. “But I’ve been thinking, Bree. Remembering the good times. What do you say to taking off work early and going somewhere a little more ... private? Just for fun, of course.” With that, he reached out to touch Bree’s face.

Right where Julian’s fingers had rested.

Bree reacted without thinking. He jerked away from James's hand, then lunged forward to grab him by the lapels of his damned tailor-made jacket. He might not have been the bigger of them, but fury gave him the strength to start shaking James like a puppy dog. "You fucking, fucking bastard! Get the hell out of my face!"

"*Brian Todds!*" The harpy-like screech came from the back of the store. Clawed hands manicured in pale pink wrenched him away from James, pulling him back. His manager, who hid in her office all day watching the security cameras and keeping careful logs of complaints, had finally put in an appearance. A mightily pissed-off cameo. She glared at him with pure venom before pushing him aside for James. "Sir, are you all right?"

James began to cough and splutter, even though Bree hadn't gone anywhere near his neck. "This man is a maniac! He's nearly killed me!"

"Sir, I cannot apologize sincerely enough."

"I want his job!" James spat out, straightening his jacket. "Does a company like yours allow maniacs to work with the public?"

The manager spared Bree a withering glance. "No," she said. "We most certainly do not. I'll be certain this is dealt with. In the meantime, is there anything I can do to make amends for his behavior?"

"No. Just make sure I don't see him in here again."

"But I --" Bree protested automatically.

They ignored him. "I won't sue," James said genially. "Just give me your word that you'll deal with this man according to policy."

"Thank you, sir. Rest assured that I will. Have a good day!"

James spared Bree a knowing leer, then turned and walked out, almost jauntily.

As soon as the doors closed behind him, the manager turned to Bree with quiet, terrifying ferocity. "Put up your away sign," she hissed. "Back to my office. Now. We're going to have a talk."

Bree paused a moment before following her mincing, high-heeled steps. He took in half a dozen deep breaths. Forced the rage deep back down inside. Hid it in a pocket within his soul. Sent it the same way as his piercings and tattoos.

Okay. Probably going to lose his job. No savings. Rent due soon. Hardly any groceries left. He never had been good at planning for the future, and the same shit happened to him near the end of every month. He knew James knew that and had been counting on it as an extra little jab for his twisted pleasure.

Bree took another deep breath. Still calm, he took off his name badge and laid it on the counter. He took out his idiot counter and squared it up next to his uncounted till. Then, without a word, he walked away from the manager instead of toward her office, heading for the exit.

He didn't make a sound until he let the door slam with a vicious bang, then kicked it for good measure.

The hell with you and your payday business, he snarled inside his head. I'm not gonna be your whipping boy anymore. Find someone else to pick on. I'm outta here.

Bree does what he wants on his own fucking terms from now on. Again.

Damn straight.

Chapter Two

“*There* you are, young man! We’ve been waiting all day for you. I knew the moment I saw him that he would be the one for you. Just look at his face!”

Damn. Some days, it was better to go anywhere but home.

Bree switched off his motorcycle and levered the kickstand down into place. Yeah, they’d bitched at him about his ride at Money Now! too. He’d stood his ground about keeping the bike, because face it, even with a trade-in he couldn’t afford a car. Besides, the thought of a beige compact made his stomach do sick little flips. He could handle faking the clean-cut look, but no way would he sacrifice his beat-up Harley. Trouble was, it kind of advertised his arrival to the nutcases -- er, neighbors -- he lived with.

He could see Mrs. Jamison, who lived downstairs from him, waddling toward him fast as she could go, vast thighs rubbing together and a grin brighter than Times Square on New Year’s Eve splitting the middle of her bulgy face. She always made him think of bread dough that had been left out too long: puffy, white, and kind of sticky-looking. Bread dough that had serious personal space issues. And a fixation with small, furry animals. For some reason he had yet to figure out, she’d taken a shine to Bree.

He had learned by then to either back up slowly or run away whenever Old Lady Jamison came after him with that kind of manic glee and her hands full of ... something.

Okay, I can handle this. Not taking off his helmet, he made to hop off his bike and breeze past her. *Maybe she'll think I'm just a visitor.*

Unfortunately, Jamison had gotten wise to the trick he'd pulled a couple of times before. She wagged a segmented-sausage finger in his face with a giggle. She jiggled with delight, every roll of her. "Now, now, now, Bree! I know it's you in there. Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Yep. Bread dough. Crazy bread dough. Even though he felt positive he'd regret it, Bree lifted one hand and raised the visor on his helmet. He took a careful two steps backward, only to have her take two steps closer, wiggling with obvious glee. "Here!" she declared, lifting her other hand. "He's perfect for you!"

Something furry, with way too many teeth, peered at him from a distance of one inch and started up a hellacious chittering noise punctuated by screeching. Bree let out a yelp to match it, volume for volume, and stumbled back against his bike. "What the -- what the hell is that thing?"

Jamison followed him, making playful jabs at his face with the Mini-Monster. "Silly boy! This isn't an 'it.' He's a ferret kit. Best of his litter. Look at that face! How could you resist such a cute little woobie doobie doo ..." She broke off to nuzzle the thing, which now that Bree had space to get a good look in, made him think of a stretched-out rat. Right down to the beady black eyes and the nasty teeth. It was just way, way *longer* than any rat he'd seen before.

"Ferret?" he said stupidly.

"Oh, yes! Ferrets make the peachiest pets, Bree! You know I've been after you for ages to get an animal for company. Animals are much better friends than people," she said seriously, chins wobbling. "I saved this one just for you. Here!"

Bree managed to choke back his yelp, but didn't even try not to jump out of the way, safely onto the steps leading into the cut-up house full of apartments. "That's okay, really. You, um, you keep the ferret. Really."

"But he wants to go home with you!" She pouted.

"Yeah. See, problem with that is our landlord's no-pets clause, right? You know how he fines you every month because of all your animals?"

"Pish-tosh and pocket change. It's worth it for my babies. You'll see. Here, take him!"

"No! I mean, thanks, but no, and hey, you take it easy now; have fun with the ferrets and all, but I'm gonna go upstairs now, all right?" Bree dodged the furry bullet one more time and -- to hell with dignity or 'tude -- made a run for it through the old, squeaky front door. He didn't stop until he hit the first landing, where a quick peek back through the window showed him Jamison having a serious conversation with the ferret and smothering it with messy lipstick kisses.

Jesus.

Bree shook his head and plowed back up the stairs without looking -- straight into something that yelped and went down like a pile of broken sticks. Startled, Bree yanked off his helmet and looked down at the ragged carpet to see ...

"Hey, Bree!"

Jesus, help me, Bree prayed, even though he hadn't spoken to the Person in question for about ten years. "Hi," he said shortly, deliberately not offering a hand to the guy he'd knocked down, who was as skinny as Jamison was fat, with skeleton ribs and a concave belly that showed even through his faded bowling shirt. A shock of sickly, mouse-colored hair cut into a pageboy still managed to fall into his eyes, definitely unwashed for a few days. A face not even a mother or a ferret-fanatic could love, with the same creepy little black eyes.

Eustace.

Completely unfazed at being knocked off his feet, Eustace lay on the ratty stairwell tread as if it were an easy chair, beaming a huge, gap-toothed smile at Bree. “I’m so glad to see you! You know, I heard the bike pull up, and I was sure it would be you ’cause no one else here rides a chopper, and I knew that Jamison was down there, but I figured you’d give her the slip real easy, and so I thought I’d come down and grab you before you got up to your apartment because you never answer the phone or the door, you know, not even when I bring up a casserole or some parfait or want to watch TV, do you?”

No kidding. Especially when I know it’s you. “I don’t hear so good,” Bree lied. He darted a glance around the stairwell, but damn it, Eustace’s scarecrow arms and legs had sprawled everywhere, blocking his path.

Eustace was still going. Did he ever breathe? “-- but, anyway, it’s Saturday night -- you do know that it’s Saturday, right? -- and I don’t have any plans, and I know you never have any plans anymore after you dumped that GQ guy, and hey, way to go, slugger, I always knew he was no good for you, but anyway, I spent all day cooking stuff I’ve seen you eat, like fish sticks, only I used real fish and ramen noodles with some extra spices, and I even tossed a couple of hamburgers in a pan; plus I made these chocolate things that look just like snack cakes, and, oh, yeah, popcorn, and then I went and bought a few cartons of wine coolers because I don’t like vodka, but that was the only thing I wasn’t sure you liked, ’cause, you know, I keep an eye out on you, I mean for you, and there’s a *Queer Eye* marathon on tonight, and I thought I could bring all the food up to your place, and we could watch it together, okay?” *Beam.*

Bree blinked. Half of his mind was still trying to translate the stream of nonstop babble, while the rest was telling him, *Run, you fucker, run! Step on him if you have to!*

“Eustace, man,” he began “Had a bad day, all right? I’m not --”

Eustace blinked. “See, that’s why I told you not to take that job. I mean, I go by the mall almost every day you work, and I see you in there, and you just look so miserable, and

you're starting to get all washed-out, too -- oh, which reminds me, are you taking those vitamins I left for you?"

"Yup," Bree lied again. Actually, he'd flushed the horse pills. "Do you wanna move? I need to get to my apartment."

"Move? Sure, I can move." Eustace scrambled up. Looked like a scarecrow come to life for Halloween. But instead of moving out of Bree's way, he latched on with one dirty-fingernailed hand and hung tight. "You know, you really are a big gloomy Gus, Bree, even if you don't feel like it. I know if we just hung out you'd loosen up, and maybe you'd start to smile even. I'd be good for you, Bree. I'd be anything you wanted. If you want me to change, just say so; I did that for my last boyfriend. I still have all the ties and that weird beanie yarmulke hat, too. Oh, hey, I could get something pierced, or we could get matching tattoos!" Eustace's eyes gleamed. "That would be fun! We can ditch the food, and you can show me where you get your ink done, and afterward, let's come back and sit on the couch and have a good, long talk."

In. Your. Dreams. Your wet dreams, probably. Bree shook off Eustace's hand. "Sorry," he grunted. "Gotta go." Rude or not, he shoved past the skinny creep and vaulted up the stairs, two at a time.

Behind him, he could hear Eustace, still going. "So, okay, not tonight, but what about tomorrow? I could make a cake; I know you like cake; I've seen you eat cake through your window a few times, and --"

Oh, God. Bree paused to rub his shoulder, where Eustace had touched him, against the grimy wallpaper. *I'd rather stick my dick in a blender than that freak.*

Yeah. Definitely time to get home. Just one more flight to go. Fuck, he was so gonna lobby for an elevator next time the petition went around. Who cared if there wasn't a place to put one? Damn landlord could fucking build an elevator shaft. He'd give up his parking space to make room.

One more flight. And, hey, he hadn't dropped his keys or absently shoved them into a pocket, either. They jingled in his hand as he practically ran for his door. Never could tell when Eustace or Jamison might pop up out of nowhere again like the freakin' ghosts of Christmas Present. How they did it, he had no clue. If he believed in any of that paranormal shit, he'd be inclined to think they could teleport or some such bull.

But nah. Those two were just creeps. Ordinary, extra-creepy creeps, yeah, but nothing special. He could cope. He was *Bree*, after all.

He leaned against his door, battered and scarred from a thousand kicks and punches, some of them his own from when he was drunk and the lock didn't want to work. This time, the key slid in smooth as silk, the tumblers clicked over easy as pie, and he had his hand on the knob, starting to turn it when --

"Monsters!" a voice bellowed in his left ear.

Bree nearly jumped out of his skin. "What the fuck!" he yelled, corkscrewing around, hands already clenching into fists. Enough was e-damn-nough! Then he saw who had yelled and wilted. Aw, hell. He could live with a lot, but not pummeling on a guy old enough to be his grandpa -- and a veteran, to boot.

Crazy Pete peered at Bree through his one good eye, the other long ruined by some kind of shelling damage. Vietnam, Bree remembered Pete bragging once. The old man leaned on his huge cane, one pants leg dangling empty below the knee. He wore one of his old uniforms, hanging off his bones, chockfull of medals, including a Purple Heart. His face reflected the serenity of wisdom, gathered through the years, and the knowledge that he spoke the truth.

It was all a little negated by the triangle hat made out of tinfoil, complete with antennae.

"Monsters," he rasped, nodding emphatically. "Whole city's full of them today. I heard it on the CIA broadband. The newspapers have been calling, but I don't give a rat's

hindquarter about those bastards. Let them get eaten, for all I care. You, on the other hand, I'm warning to be careful."

Pete liked Bree, even if he did have a habit of pulling on his labret to see if Bree's lip would come off with it. "Monsters," Bree repeated, hand twitching on his doorknob. "You not been taking your meds again, Pete?"

"Meds, schmeds. They mess with my brain and block out all the signals. I can't be having that. You gotta keep a sharp eye and ear out for what's going on in this world."

"And, apparently, now it's monsters." Last week it had been your standard aliens. Pete was moving up -- or down -- in the world.

"Monsters! Whole shitload of 'em. Visiting tonight, one-night-only special. You'd better stay in and go to bed early. That's all I've got to say." Pete waved Bree aside before he could speak. "Oh, I know, a young guy like you wants to go out and get some tail on a weekend night, but you'd be better to jack off in the shower. I got some naked photos of Bette Davis, if you want. I beamed them from my brain to the copy machine. Good stuff, too. Nice shot of her snatch." Pete leered. Bree gagged.

"Thanks, but no, thanks, Pete," he said, turning his knob. "I have plans with a bottle of vodka. You, um, keep an eye out for the monsters, okay?"

"Damn right." Pete twiddled with an antenna. It snapped off in his fingers. "Shit!"

"Better go fix that," Bree suggested. "Night, Pete!" And with that, he made his escape. Slamming the door behind him, he took in a few deep breaths and decided that 1) as soon as he had enough cash, he was moving as far away from there as he could; 2) if he ever got old or went crazy, he'd get someone to shoot him; and 3) he gave up on humanity. Screw the whole wacko race.

Christ, what a day.

Okay. Home, and thus relatively safe. Might not be home for much longer if he couldn't come up with rent money, but for a few more days, still his own private shit hole.

His kingdom. The place where he could do what he damn well pleased. Far, far away from Money Now!

Speaking of which ... Bree glanced down, plucking at his turtleneck. He narrowed his eyes. Okay, first things first. He yanked the disgusting shirt out of his slacks and pulled it over his head. He kicked off the polished shoes and got a thrill out of the sound they made hitting the far wall. His cargo pants joined the turtleneck, then the stupid black socks. Last of all, his no-creases tighty-whities.

Bare of any stitch, Bree kicked his discarded yuppie gear out of the way and stomped toward his cubbyhole kitchen, made straight for the special cabinet, and jerked it open. Two bottles stared back at him, both vodka. One plastic, labeled *Cousin Boris's Special Recipe!* and one glass, Grey Goose. He reached for Cuz out of habit, then paused, hand in midair.

Fuck that.

He snatched the bottle of Goose, not bothering with a glass, wrenched off the cap, and tilted it back. The vodka hit him like an eighteen-wheeler, wham! A stream of fire down his throat and an instant explosion in his stomach. Shaking his head, he took another chug, swallowing half a dozen gulps before his gorge rebelled. He eyed the bottle sourly. Well, he had time. Plans with a bottle? You betcha.

Carrying Goose by its neck, he headed back for the den. To do that, though, he had to pass through his bedroom. His closet doors hung open where he'd forgotten to close them that morning. A dozen cotton turtlenecks winked out at him. If clothing could laugh, he'd swear the damn things were cackling at him.

Bree glared at the corporate-casual crap. Took another few swigs of vodka, enough to turn his vague thoughts into a solid, good idea.

Plunking the bottle down, he made for the closet and threw the doors open wide. He grabbed first one, then two, then all of the shirts and pressed beige pants he could hold, dumping them into a pile on the floor until he couldn't see another one through his early-

stage vodka haze. For good measure, he went burrowing through his dresser drawers next, hunting down every damn BVD and pricey sock to add to the mess.

His breath came in hard jerks as he stood over the pile, glowering at it. There it lay, a messy icon for all he'd done the past couple of years. They smelled like detergent, but he was no dummy. Underneath the April Fresh, they stank of every idiot customer, every run-in with his manager, every time he'd been felt up or cussed at or spit on. A costume he'd been forced to wear to hide who he really was.

No more.

Bree reached for his cock, half-wishing he could piss on the pile of clothes. Then he rolled his eyes and sighed. He'd cleaned up enough puddles for one day, thanks. Vengeance was one thing, being stupid was another.

But better yet ...

Bree's hand lingered on his genitals. Maybe ... maybe.

He stroked his cock, mostly out of curiosity

Soft. He tried again, this time picturing the latest movie star. That got a slight stir of interest, but no big hurrah. Fine. Not like he didn't have plenty other wank material.

One of the guys from the Brotherhood? Nah. Pansy asses, all of them. Except Liam, maybe, and he just wasn't Bree's type. Creeped him out, for one.

His dick went a little limper.

Uh-uh. You're gonna work with me, here. Bree pumped himself harder, ignoring the slight pain of insistent work on soft flesh. *Hey, brain! Come up with something for me. Something good.*

A visual flashed across his mind's eye. He paused, surprised. Dark red hair. Kind smile. Eyes like he'd never seen before.

His cock began to swell.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, there we go. Bree tilted his head back. *What was that guy's name again? Julian. That was it. Julian. Fuck, he was gorgeous.*

In his imagination, Julian smiled at Bree. Reached out to touch his face again, so cool and soft.

Bingo. Instant erection. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about," Bree muttered. "Up, up, and fuckin' away, man! No one does this better than me, right? I'm the best there ever was. Oh, hell, yes. Yeah!" His cock throbbed in his hand, almost tingling as he imagined Julian's fingers running over the silky skin, his cool thumb circling the head. Catching a drip of precome and bringing it to his mouth for a taste.

Oh, man. Good, yeah, definitely good. Julian would be the kind of guy to do that. He wouldn't stop with just a little jack-and-tease, either. He'd take Bree all the way. Play him like a violin and not stop until the big finish. Ah, ah, ah -- he could feel the man's hand around him, tugging at his Prince Albert, slipping down to fondle his balls, tugging at the guiche hidden behind them.

Making him beg for mercy.

Bree let out a groan from somewhere deep in his gut. This was amazing. Didn't even feel like his own hand on his cock anymore, never mind fantasy. He *felt* Julian's cool touch and the softness of his fingers. Could all but *see* the man across from him, smiling that mysterious little smile, refusing him a kiss until he'd melted Bree into a puddle. Pushing him on, hard and fast, just the way he liked his hand jobs.

It'd been a long day. Too long. Whole lot longer since he'd gotten laid. Bree wasn't any stranger to jerking off, but this felt different. Like he was actually with someone, not just pretending.

A cool breath of wind blew across his forehead. Startled, Bree let his half-shut lids fly open. For a split second, he saw -- not imagined, saw -- Julian's eyes gazing at him from midair.

“I’ll be seeing you, Bree,” Julian murmured. Bree heard a soft chuckle. The eyes disappeared.

Bree stood frozen, on the very edge of climax. His mouth worked silently before it came up with: “What -- the -- *fuck?*”

In the utter silence that followed, the phone rang. For the second time since he’d gotten home, Bree almost jumped out of his skin. The surprise lasted all of three rings, and then, then, then -- he got *pissed*.

He reached for the cord in the wall, ready to jerk it out, socket and all.

Then, he hesitated. Didn’t know why.

Tried again.

Couldn’t do it.

Baffled, skin prickling with a definite sensation of weird, Bree hesitantly reached for the receiver. Moving slowly, he lifted it to his ear. He meant to bark “Bree!” but to his amazement, found his lips forming: “Hello?”

“Oh, good, you are at home,” an accented voice answered pleasantly. “I had feared you might be caught up at work. But what a pleasure to find you there!”

Bree scrambled to place the voice. His mind swam from vodka and prickled with a bizarre sort of fear. “Yeah. Guess so.”

The caller chuckled -- no, giggled. “Bree, you’ve no idea who this is, do you?”

“I -- uh -- I --”

“Need I remind you how tasteless it is to drink hard liquor before, how do you call it, happy hour?”

“How did you know --”

“Irrelevant, Bree. This is Liam, of the Brotherhood. Do you know me now?”

Liam! Fuck. Yeah. How could he have been confused? Liam's freakazoid accent was one of a kind. Bree sagged in relief. He'd dealt with the kind of weird that Liam put off. He could handle this. "Course I do. Yeah, got off early," he lied. "What's going on?" A thought occurred to him. "Who the hell gave you my home number?"

"Simon, of course. He has a very tidy, thorough Rolodex in his home. I took the liberty of copying down everyone's contact information after our decision to visit Amour Magique together."

"Amour Magique?" Bree repeated stupidly.

"But of course. Tonight. Bree, surely you hadn't forgotten?"

Well, yeah, he had. He'd had more important things on his mind than a happy little field trip to Gay-O-Rama. Still, he'd voted for it ... he thought. "Nope, didn't forget," he said. "I'm in. What time do we meet, again?"

"Nine p.m., outside the doors. You do know where Amour Magique is located?"

Not a clue, but he'd get a map or something. "Sure."

Liam laughed again. "Excellent. Do take care to look your best, Bree. This will be a fine night for love. Or sex. In quantity as well as quality."

Love? Yeah, right. Sex, on the other hand ... Bree's deflating erection tingled, reminding him that it wanted a little more attention. "I'll be there."

"Do you promise?" Liam's voice fucking twinkled.

"Yeah. Promise." Another wacko chill ran down Bree's spine. He shuddered despite himself. Why did one simple word suddenly give him the creeps? Geez, it wasn't like he was offering up his soul or something. "Promise," he repeated stubbornly.

"Good! Until then, Bree."

"Sure. Later."

Liam disconnected. Bree stood stock-still, receiver frozen in his hand, staring at the phone. Something wasn't right. Definitely not right. He felt ... God, he actually felt frightened.

His thoughts clinked together like ice cubes in a glass -- then tumbled over with a click Bree almost heard. Glaring at the phone, he slammed it down and then managed to jerk the plug out. No more of that shit. He wasn't gonna put up with any more shit, not tonight. Not from Liam, not from anyone.

Oh, he'd go to Amour Magique. Dress up, even. But he'd do it his way, and to hell with the consequences. He'd be *Bree*, and fuck to anyone who said anything about it.

Still naked, stomping again, he made for his dresser and a small box that had once held cigars. The flimsy lid flipped open to reveal his stash of good jewelry. Sterling silver hoops, labrets, studs, beads, and bars. A pricey eyeliner pen, charcoal black, lay tucked in with the tangle of metal.

Bree pulled it out and held it to the light. "Come to your old man," he whispered, curling his tongue behind his teeth and baring them in a grin. "It's show time."

Chapter Three

Waiting for the traffic light to change, tapping his scarred leather boots on the pavement in impatience, Bree found himself scanning the tangled crowds still out and about. Weekend traffic in Charleston, road and foot, was a bitch.

Bored now. To amuse himself, he targeted a prime example of *Touristus Americanus*, easily identified by its Bermuda shorts, sandals, and black socks. The guy didn't realize he was being watched. Just kept standing there with a cigar in one hand and a neon-green snow cone in the other. Chatting to some scrawny, chain-smoking woman with badly dyed blonde hair, a "Charleston ROCKS!" T-shirt, and much shorter shorts. Probably his midlife-crisis redneck princess.

Yeah. Whatever.

The light changed, and Bree roared on ahead of the traffic. Buying this bike, and keeping it in shape, had been the best use of his money besides condoms and lube -- well, back when he still kept a supply of sex stuff on hand. After James, he hadn't had a reason or money to spare to go buy more, damn him.

Sometimes Bree wondered if James had put a curse on him. Wouldn't put it past the guy, especially after Bree took him to court. One of the few cases Simon lost, on account of

James was too slippery for even the Brotherhood's leader to grab by the balls. Had his hands in every dirty pie. Yeah, bet he'd gone to some voodoo woman and had her dangle chicken feet over a picture of Bree's naked ass in bed while chanting, "May you never get laid again."

Scary thing? He really *could* see James doing just that. Money wouldn't have been enough to take from him. Wouldn't make a satisfyingly deep mark. He'd want to hit Bree where it hurt most, for humiliating him.

Great.

For a second, Bree entertained the idea of begging a loan from Simon or Micah or maybe David -- a nice enough guy even if he didn't have a clue about, well, anything -- and hiring a professional to take James down.

Uh-huh. From what he'd heard, the guys who knew what they were doing didn't even open their doors for less than four figures, usually five. If the whole Brotherhood ponied up for the cause and he threw in all his savings, he still wouldn't have close to enough. Shit! Bree pounded one handlebar with a fist. He had to get that bastard somehow. He'd think of a way. He was *Bree*, damn it, and he wasn't going to put up with James screwing his life forever.

He could feel his pulse pounding at his temples. That little vein he got on his forehead when he was really pissed was probably throbbing. What had Alex, the EMT, told him? Learn how to chill out, or watch his heart go ka-boom with high blood pressure. Fuck. He'd thought he wouldn't have to worry about such crap for at least twenty years. But, nope, Alex said Bree would be heading for a heart attack if he didn't learn "anger management skills" and "healthy expression of strong emotions."

Bull. Shit.

What was he supposed to do? Push it down, or let it all hit the fan? Advice like Alex's didn't make any sense. Besides, he hadn't had a choice, most of the time. At his job, it had been cork it up or get fired. Which, what with his jumping on James, proved the point. He

vented some around the Brotherhood by being a general wiseass, just enough to blow off the steam. If it got bad enough, he either rode the hell out of his bike, full throttle, or kicked fresh dents into the apartment building's garbage cans. Didn't help for long. For months now, he'd been feeling this primal scream building up, just waiting to tear loose. Add that to frequent blue balls and, yeah, Bree figured he had a right to get pissed off easily.

But he needed to calm down now. He'd almost hit the gay district, and *Amour Magique* wasn't far in. He seriously doubted the place was all that Liam claimed, and he hated the deafening techno music dance clubs usually played, but there might be one or two hotties in the mix. One thing he knew: men on the prowl didn't go for someone who had a kill-or-be-killed death glare on their face. So, bottle it up one more time, play the club game, and, if there were any merciful gods listening to horny gay men's prayers, at least get one good dance in, if not someone to take home or go home with. That'd be too much to hope for. But a dance ... that wasn't too much to hope for, right? Right?

On the surface, Charleston's gay mecca looked like any other street, full of foot traffic and shops with classy, Old South window displays. Well, classy until you looked closely at what they displayed. *Amour Magique* stood out like a rhinestone on a silver ring. A big honkin' rock of lights, muffled music, and ... Bree's jaw dropped. Holy fuck! The line to get inside, herding its way through velvet ropes, stretched around the block!

He pulled his motorcycle up, double-parking beside some sad schmuck's moped, and turned off the ignition. Whipped off his helmet and stared. Da-a-a-a-a-mn. He hadn't known Charleston had that many gay men. That many hot ... muscled ... young ... gorgeous ... gay men.

At some point, his mouth had fallen open. Oddly enough, he didn't care.

"Bree!" a familiar voice called. "Bree, we've gathered over here, just by the ropes! Come and join us!"

Bree shook his head and turned, trying to peer through the crowds. Liam's face appeared through a gaggle of milling bodies. He was waving eagerly, beckoning Bree toward him. That wasn't what caught his attention, though. Bree zeroed in on the handful of brightly colored tickets in Liam's waving hand.

Oh, hot damn. Tonight, we play. I hope.

Without a second thought for the moped's owner, Bree yanked his keys out of the bike's engine and leaned it on its kickstand. He swung one leg over the saddle and landed already not quite running, but moving faster than normal, for sure.

He forced himself to slow down as he drew closer to Liam. He had a rep with the Brotherhood. Bree, the bad boy. Rough guys did not run like schnauzers in heat at the sight of mouth-watering asses packed into painted-on jeans, standing in line like snacks on a tray. Cooling down to a saunter, he ambled up and gave Liam, standing in front of the gathered Brotherhood, a brusque nod. "Made it," he said, pleased to hear that he sounded a little bored. "You come through with the tickets?"

Liam's eyes sparkled with glee. "But, of course!" He flashed the neon chits at Bree a second time. "I am a creature of my word, Bree. May I say that you look spectacular tonight?"

"Feel free." Bree gave the men his best wicked grin. Their reactions ranged from a startled blink or two to Simon's stifled gasp of horror.

Yeah. He'd gone all out for this. Why not? Let them see what *no guts, no glory* was all about. Every single piercing he owned had been slotted into place, from eyebrows to nose to cheeks to chin to lip to ears, hoops and bars and studs, all shining titanium polished up to a brilliant gleam. Niobium chains thin as a whisper linked several of the loops together, trailing across his face spider-web fashion. He'd gone heavy on the makeup, not only ringing his eyes with black liner, but adding some charcoal shadow and a coat of crimson lip gloss. His nails were painted black.

More, Bree hadn't bothered with a motorcycle jacket, so they all got a good, instant look at his see-through mesh shirt topping his tightest pair of black leather pants. High school vintage. What the hell, he'd call it retro. Besides, they were two sizes too small -- and therefore, just right. Good, beat-up, steel-toed shit-kicker boots finished off the look. Bree grinned at them, knowing he'd gotten it right. Scared the bejeezus out of them and, if he read them right, caused a few boners to pop up.

He trained his gaze on the most prominent bulge. "Collin," he drawled. "Didn't know you liked your meat tough."

The businessman spluttered and coughed. "You dare to --"

"Please. You know you want a piece of this." Bree swaggered in close enough for his chest to brush Collin's in its immaculate yuppie-wear. He leered up a few inches. "You man enough to take me on?"

"Bree, enough!" Simon butted in, looking shaken. No sign of life stirred in his shorts, unless the tailored pants were good for hiding more than a little desk-jockey spread.

Bree looked the lawyer over, deliberately acting bored. "Yeah? What?"

"Please contain yourself. We are in public."

"Not for long. Looks like I'm the last one here. Let's get moving."

"Yes." Simon straightened his tie. Holy hell, he'd worn a fucking *tie*. "We thought you weren't coming."

"Miss this? Nah. I had a few offers, but I figured I'd check out the action here first." No need to tell them his offers had involved ferrets and skinny, babbling nerds. It was impressions that counted, yeah?

Liam thumped his shoulder in approval. "Excellent! I knew you would not let us down, Bree." He pressed one ticket into Bree's hand. "Here. No matter what, do not lose this, not even once you are inside. The enforcers do random checks for authorized guests, particularly on weekends."

Huh. Bree studied it. Looked like a plain movie ticket to him, even if the color threatened to blind him. No name on it, just “Admit One.” Well, whatever. First things first. He jerked his head at the growing line of studs and stallions. “So, do we wait in line for a couple hours, or what?”

“Oh, no, no!” Liam shook his head. “Come, all of you, follow me.” He passed out the rest of the tickets in a neon blur, beamed at the Brotherhood, and took off like a hoppy, happy little bunny blissed out on speed. He bounded up a short flight of stairs and beamed at the surly bouncers, twice his weight and a good foot taller, beckoning them down to his level. He whispered in one set of ears, then another, and for some reason, pointed up above the doors. The bouncers looked startled, then respectful, and ... awed? They unhooked a barring rope and motioned Liam forward.

“Come on!” Liam called, making hurry-up gestures. “Follow me!”

Down the fucking rabbit hole, man, Bree thought in admiration. *Now this is more like it!* Still, he kept his pace lazy as he followed, bringing up the rear of the pack ... and bumping into them as they cleared the doors and stopped, en masse, in their tracks.

David whispered one word, audible above the thumpa-thumpa of the music. “Wow.”

Bree stared. “Yeah.” *Wow* summed it up pretty damn good.

Liam almost glowed. “You see? *Amour Magique* is all that I promised, isn’t it?”

“And then some.” Collin’s voice sounded strangled. Simon spluttered a little, but, thank God, kept quiet.

Bree decided that he’d died and gone to Homo Heaven. Yeah, *Amour Magique* sure as hell did live up to Liam’s hype. A good old raw-boned warehouse on the inside, tangles of spotlights blasting circles on the floor, and crowds, literally crowds, of hot bodies and lithe, thrashing dancers. Men pumped their hips, fucking with their clothes on, all to the sounds of music that infected his blood with the beat but didn’t bug like regular techno.

His mouth watered. Hot damn. Even if James had cursed him, a place like this carried enough rainbow mojo to beat it down for one night, at least. He *knew* it.

"I see your wow and raise you a whoa," Christian whispered, eyes huge.

Bree couldn't help himself. He tilted back his head and laughed out loud. "You fuckin' amateurs! What, you've never been in a gay dance club before? Shee-yit, you wusses. Stand aside and let me show you how it's done."

He sauntered forward, feeling all eyes on him -- in shock, amazement, or in Liam's case, absolute approval -- and flung himself into the dancers as if they were a mosh pit, letting himself be swallowed whole.

Oh, dear God. Yes. Cock-rockin' Elysium. The crowd parted like water to let Bree in, then closed around him. Hot, hard bodies slick with sweat pressed in, rubbing their chests against his. He felt himself grabbed by the waist and tugged backward against a solid, seriously well-sized cock just barely trapped in a pair of jeans, thrusting forward to the rhythm of the drums. Bree laughed again, then lifted his voice and *howled* out that primal scream he'd been waiting on for months now.

He twisted around to face Mr. Well-Hung and planted a deep, wet, messy kiss on lips that opened sweet and obedient for him. The man's hands, good strong hands, flew down to grope Bree's ass as if he were desperate for it. For Bree.

Oh, hell yes. It was going to be a good night. He spared half a thought for the Brotherhood, who he was technically supposed to be hanging with, then mentally tossed them aside. They were big boys. Let them figure out how to have a good time for once. They could watch him if they wanted pointers. Tearing away from the kiss, Bree turned in a half-circle and found yet another desperately eager body to kiss. This time, he was the one to grab a handful of booty, his first in way too long, and hang on tight. A solid cock bashed against his own, rising good and proper to the occasion.

He was going to buy Liam a dozen roses for this, and fuck the cheese. He owed the weird little guy. But that'd be later. Right now, he planned on having the time of his life!

Ditching his cock of the moment, he turned again, almost dizzy with excitement, and blurred into the waiting arms of still another man. Mmm, good solid arms, bare to the shoulder. Leanly muscled. Smooth and white as marble. Strangely ... cold.

A bell went off somewhere in Bree's mind. Cold? Where had he felt ...

His dance partner pulled him closer than any had before, letting Bree feel just how very interested he was in finding a pierced, tattooed punk to play with. The strength in those arms said he wasn't going to let go anytime soon, not like the others. The way he thrust his hips and stiff cock against Bree's pelvis let him know that this guy meant business. Rock-'em, sock-'em, hard-core fucking business.

A wisp of his long red hair fell across Bree's hands as he lifted them up to the man's shoulders. They were as cold as the rest of him.

Bree looked up in baffled wonder to meet a pair of familiar eyes, wise, all-knowing, blazing with bedroom heat. The kind of eyes that you knew belonged to a man who would best any orgasm you'd ever had. Eyes that managed to send a shot of adrenaline to Bree's own cock and a yearning ache to his ass, even though he'd never bottomed enough to get a taste for it.

Eyes that somehow seemed to *know* Bree. Recognize him.

Claim Bree as his prize for the night.

Eyes that he recognized, not just from Money Now! but from that tripped-out vision flash in his apartment.

"Julian!" Bree blurted out.

Julian smiled down at him. He reached to brush his hand across Bree's cheek. "So, we meet again. But then," he said, leaning down to whisper in one ear, "I did promise you we would."

Chapter Four

Oh, no. No, no, no. I am not letting my night on the town turn into an episode of the Twilight Zone.

Bree jerked back -- or tried to, anyway. Julian had a good grip on him and appeared to be a good deal stronger than he looked. Bree settled for his best homicidal glare. "You want to take your hands off me before you lose them?" he demanded.

Julian laughed. Bree knew he'd heard every word, even above the pounding music, but instead of being unnerved, he looked amused. He reached forward and brushed his fingers against Bree's cheek. "So full of life," he said. "You overflow with vitality, Bree. Did no one ever tell you so?"

Bree felt a chill crawl over his skin. Shit. Julian's touch creeped him out, sure, but damn if it didn't also set his cock to stirring, swelling into the start of a hard-on.

"You grow so angry, so quickly," the red-haired man whispered. His cool fingers pressed into Bree's arms with almost, but not quite, enough force to leave a mark. One-fucking-hundred-percent at odds with his soft, chuckling tone. "What darkness lies within, that your first reaction is violence?"

"So, you are threatening me." Bree kept his voice level with an effort.

“Oh, no! Fear not, Bree. I mean you no harm. I only want to enjoy the dance.”

“Sure. That’s why you’re pulling the schizoid act.”

“Me? Crazy? Bree, Bree, Bree.” Julian touched his lips to the curve of Bree’s ear, nipping lightly at a stud. “I do like these. I have never been one to favor piercings in excess, but they suit you. And, ah! I wander. Bree, I am as sane as you, though most men would, by now, doubt the balance of your own mind.”

Bree’s stomach turned. “Let me go,” he said. His voice cracked for the first time, and he hated it, but damn if he weren’t getting desperate. “You’re nuts.”

“Perhaps by the definition of some. However,” Julian said thoughtfully, “definitions can be awfully narrow, can’t they? Words. Words are limiting things. They try to box up all that a man is and can be in a neat collection of syllables that are, in the end, meaningless sounds floating in the air.” He kissed Bree’s ear again, this time suckling in a hoop.

Bree moaned softly, unable to help himself. Julian laughed, a gentle buzz against his neck. “Men are so much more than words are able to express,” he murmured. The tip of his tongue slipped out to trace a pattern on Bree’s throat. “More than can be conceived of.” He bit ever so carefully, not breaking the skin, but sending a delicious, aching thrill of pain through Bree that went straight to his cock, which throbbed as it swelled harder still. “Yes,” Julian whispered. “You enjoy this. I knew that you would. I knew from the moment I saw you.”

He bit harder.

Bree felt a trickle of wet warmth run down his throat. Part of his mind began to scream. The other part buzzed with the power of a coke blast, making him dizzy with bliss. “I -- I --” he managed to stutter. “What are you --?”

“Ssh.” Julian pressed a cool finger to Bree’s lips. “I’m not done yet.”

More? Oh, my God, there’s more? Run. I should so run. This fucker just bit me!

Why aren’t I running?

Julian lapped at the trickle of Bree's blood as it trailed down his throat. "You taste of dark, forbidden secrets," he breathed. "There is so much inside you. So much that you hide not only from others, but from yourself, as well." He lifted his mouth to kiss the small wound his teeth had caused. "I could show you," he said. "Would you like that? Are you man enough to face the beast inside? You have the power to come out triumphant and stronger for it. I see this." He took another taste of Bree's blood with a small hum of pleasure. "I see you, Bree."

Bree struggled to shake his head. "No," he managed to mutter. "No, you don't. Can't. Just met me. You don't know me."

"But I do. I know so many, many things. I know who you really are beneath the masks you wear. I taste it in your blood. I know things you've never dared to dream of." Bree felt Julian's lips curve into a smile. "Yet."

He bit down again, hard. Bree couldn't stop himself from letting out a small, startled scream of pain -- but as Julian's lips and tongue followed the sting of his teeth, shock waves of orgasmic bliss blasted through him.

What ... the ... hell? This is wrong. So wrong. This guy's got a god-damned blood fetish! Run, you fucking moron! Kick him in the balls and run!

"I would not." Julian tightened his grip. "I have not yet finished here. Let me speak my piece, then -- Look! I will be generous for now. I will let you go, if you still want it." His tongue traced a delicate, wet pattern on Bree's throat. "If you truly want to leave me. Somehow, I feel sure you will stay or will want to."

Bree shook his head. The movement made his fresh wound sting. He bit back a cry of pain. Julian made a soft, sympathetic sound and drew Bree closer into his arms, burrowing his face against Bree's neck. Licking, sucking, probing with the tip of his tongue. It should be sick. Instead, it made Bree hot. Hotter than the fires of hell.

“What are you doing to me?” Bree said, his voice clogged with confusion and choked up with the swelling waves of arousal that just kept on coming despite the things Julian was doing to his body. “Stop it.”

Julian shook his head, hair brushing soft and whisper-light against Bree’s cheek. “In a moment. The blood is still warm, and it flows yet.”

Bree, have you lost it? Get. The. Hell. Away. From. Him!

“Stay,” Julian murmured.

Bree found himself surrendering. “What are you?” he demanded weakly. “Some kind of hypnotist with a blood jones?”

Julian laughed, a delighted sound. “Oh, Bree. So lacking in imagination. We will teach you better.”

“Says you.”

“So brash, even now. Do you not understand what I could do to you?” Julian traced a runnel of blood with his lips. “I choose not to. Yet. But know that I could, I would, and not a soul in here would stop me.”

Not a soul in here ... hey, wait. Bree froze in confusion. Damn good point. Even the horniest man, pumped up on techno and running with the rhythm of cock against cock, should have noticed that, oh, whoa, that guy is drinking the punk’s blood. Should we, like, do something about it?

Damned if a soul had noticed, though. Or if they had, not a one of them was coming to his rescue.

“Yes,” Julian said. “This is not the place to seek help, and no one will save you from me. Bree, Bree, you must realize what they already know. You don’t *want* to be rescued. You want me. Want this. Let me show you.”

He bit down a third time.

Fuck! Bree let out a stifled moan and felt himself sag against Julian's lean, solid body. This shouldn't be turning him on. How sick was he? He liked piercings, yeah. And he liked a little pain, fine. He'd admit that. But not being a snack. He didn't even like S & M, much less blood-play. Any other guy would have long been crumpled up in a ball on the floor, clutching his bashed-up nuts, but Julian ... no. Too strong. Deceptively strong. Bree knew if he even lifted a knee to try, Julian would just snap his neck and say something calm like, "What a pity," brush his hands, and walk away. The dancers would swarm in and writhe over his corpse until they'd destroyed it and never even notice.

"Yes," Julian murmured. "Now you understand, at least in part, some of my power."

Bree fought not to tilt his head back and open the bite wound wider for Julian to enjoy. The urge, though, just about killed him. He didn't know where it came from. He didn't have a death wish. Didn't want to die. Did want to run screaming, but ... couldn't.

"Neither do you want to. Be honest with yourself, Bree. You have longed for one such as I for ages."

"No," Bree gasped with one last show of nerve.

Julian chuckled. "Lies taste of tears," he said. "Bitter and sweet. Come, let me show you what you really want."

"Show me what I --"

"Oh, yes, Bree. Yes. Like so."

Julian moved with the grace of a snake, hands sliding up and down Bree's arms. Not letting up on his grip, not giving him a chance to break away, but Bree suddenly no longer wanted to. The feel of Julian's palms set him on fire wherever they touched, blazing bursts of sensation that traveled bullet-fast, sniper-accurate, straight to his cock.

Julian moved closer still, shifting his hips so that his own erection not only bumped, but ground into Bree's own. It would have hurt, normally. Too hard, too much, too rough. Julian just made it feel good. Better than anything or anyone ever before. The feel of his cock

against Bree's promised more than just the climax of his life. It promised the kind of orgasm he'd never forget, the Big One that everybody dreamed of and never quite found. Not in real life.

Bree had known Julian wanted to fuck him. Now, he knew, somehow, that Julian wanted to possess him, too. Turn him inside out with sex and blood. Make him something new. Something that lived in the dark, where he'd always thought he belonged. Something powerful and mighty, without mercy. With blood and come, he'd wash Bree's mind and body clear of everything and raise him up, a new man altogether.

Images burst into his mind, powerful as bursting grenades. Visions of him and Julian, fucking. No, not just fucking -- consuming each other.

Bree, on his knees, cheeks swollen as he swallowed Julian's cock. Julian's long white hands buried in the spikes of Bree's hair, pulling hard. Julian pulling out each of Bree's piercings, playing with them, sucking the holes they went through. Nipping sharp, silver kisses that would leave scars where each stud or hoop had been, replacing them with something even more intimidating.

Bree, on his back in a bed softer than feathers, legs raised high, draped over Julian's white shoulders. Julian leaning above him, dipping down for a red, wet kiss full of teeth. Julian drinking deep as he slid his cock into Bree's hole with a wonderfully rough thrust and a strangely gentle caress of his hands on Bree's arms.

Julian, teeth crimson, rocking Bree in his embrace. Lifting his head to laugh, soft and low, pleased as a hellcat, brimstone burning in his eyes as he licked his lips clean of blood and come ...

No. Fuck! No!

Bree twisted himself with all his might. Whether Julian let him go or he'd startled the man, he didn't know, but he was free. Inches separated them, but good enough. He'd gotten

back far enough to stare up at Julian's eyes. Those damned eyes that had haunted him from his first sight of them.

No devil fires were to be seen. Julian's gaze was amused, as if he'd proven a point. Gloating just a little, but not meanly. He looked pleased. Happy. Satisfied. Approving, as if Bree had just passed some kind of test.

He kept his eyes focused on Bree. Fixed. Eternally patient.

Bree stared back. His mouth worked, words bubbling up and not one of them making it out.

Julian's lips curved into a smile. Very deliberately, he snaked out his tongue and licked away a smear of red. Startled, Bree lifted his hand to his neck and felt a wet spot. Too wet for a messy kiss. *Fuck!* Still bleeding. How deep had Julian bitten him? And Christ -- why?

"You're sick," he blurted at last. "What kind of freak are you?"

Julian tilted back his head and laughed. Not insulted in the least. Bree couldn't take his gaze away. His skin tingled with chills, but his damn cock reacted like the sound was pure Spanish fly, throbbing for the touch of Julian's cool fingers. Unable to help himself, Bree imagined Julian's teeth nibbling at the length of his erection. It horrified him that the notion *didn't* horrify him.

He shook his head, feeling suddenly cold. "Crazy," he said. "You're a crazy man. Stay the fuck away from me, Julian. I have friends here with me."

"You call them friends?" Julian tipped his head. "Do you? Are you close to them, then? I would say, no, you are not. By your own choice, of course."

"Liam!" Bree blurted. He blinked. Why had he chosen that name, of all the others? "I'm with Liam. Hurt me, and he'll have your balls for breakfast."

As if! But damned if that didn't do the trick! Julian raised his eyebrows and stepped back two paces. "I would not want to displease that one," he said, thoughtful for the first time. "Very well. I will wait, then, for you to come to me of your own will."

“Like hell that’ll happen.” Bree wiped at a fresh trickle of blood running down his neck. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Oh, I do hope so, Bree.” Julian reached out to him. Bree jumped back, but not before Julian had seized his hand and lifted it to his dangerous mouth for a kiss. “We’ll meet again, very soon, I think.”

With that, he turned and walked away, free and easy, as if nothing had happened. Bree stared after him. He felt frozen as a corpse, scared one-hundred-percent shitless, baffled over why Liam of all people could give a man like Julian a moment’s pause, and him, damn his loins, hard as a rock and aching to be fucked.

He shook himself hard. *Got to get out of here. Not safe.*

“You can’t leave,” a voice whispered from nowhere. “You chose to walk in these doors, Bree. There is no running. Not any more. Not from yourself ... and not from me, now that I have found you.”

Bree jerked around, eyes wild. “Julian!”

He heard Julian’s soft laugh, but couldn’t see him anywhere. “You bastard!” he swore. “Leave me alone!”

One more chuckle, then silence. Bree felt himself begin to shake as if he were about to snap from fear or come like he’d never come before. He couldn’t tell which, either.

Damn the no-smoking laws, damn Julian, and damn Liam for getting him into this. Bree reached into his jeans pocket, where he’d stuffed a half-pack of cigarettes for luck. It’d been years since he quit, but he carried them around for the look of it. Thank fuck.

Hands shaking, he managed to fish out his smokes and a lighter. He put one to his lips, lit it, and sucked in a deep, burning lungful of smoke. Stared at where Julian had been. He’d come back for Bree. He knew it.

What would happen then? Would he go, no matter if it was to his death?

Shit. He had the sick feeling that when Julian showed his face again, he wouldn't be able to help himself. He'd gotten lucky once -- no. No, he hadn't. Julian had *let* him go.

He wouldn't do that a second time.

Bree exhaled the diluted smoke. Looked into the face of his death and what lay beyond, while it looked back, amused by his fear.

Okay. Bring it on, then. Maybe I'll go down tonight. But by God, I will go down fighting.

Bree lowered his cigarette, staring into the crowd, not seeing anything but Julian's face.

Knowing it was just a matter of time

Chapter Five

All I wanted was one good night. A chance to get out and party. Get my hands on some ass, soak my shirt with sweat, dance until I couldn't lift my feet anymore, and maybe, just maybe, find someone to share a moment with. One moment. I've spent way too fucking long wearing the Clark Kent persona -- at work, at the apartment. I wanted to go wild and find someone to take with me on the ride.

I wanted to find some peace. There isn't any peace for me, though, is there? The life I fell into, the ways I chose, who I am, it doesn't let anything be simple. Complications. Always so many god-damned complications.

I just want to be free. Instead, I get bitten by a blood freak, and I'm pretty damn sure he's gonna try to kill me. What scares me most is ... touching him, I just about wanted it. No ... I craved it.

Fuck. I gotta get out of here.

"Hey!" A raucous shout jostled Bree out of his frozen reverie. He blinked to clear his eyes and saw a gym bunny with far too dark a tan and way too many muscles standing in front of him, hands on hips.

"What do you want?" Bree snapped back.

“Would you put that death stick out already? Some of us came here to have a good time, not to breathe in your secondhand poison.”

Bree narrowed his eyes. Deliberately, he lifted the cigarette to his mouth and took in a long, sweet drag. He blew the smoke out at Gym Boy’s face. “You mean, this poison?”

Gym Boy spluttered and coughed, not very convincingly. He twisted up his features in as much disgust as if Bree had spit on him. “Prick!”

“Damn right. You want to try me out? Want a piece of me?” The guy might have muscles, but Bree would bet anything he didn’t know a damn bit about street fighting. Playing it dirty. No, he stayed in his nice, safe gym, getting other pumped-up hunks of rock to spot him so he could stare at their cocks from below. He wouldn’t ever suspect anything like a fist to the throat or a kneecapping.

The image of his aggressor collapsing to the floor, screaming in pain, filled Bree with a sudden blood-lust that ought to have been frightening, but ... wasn’t. He could just see the man curled around his wounds, screaming -- if Bree left him with enough breath to scream - - and just like when Julian had bitten him, no one taking a damn bit of notice.

Bree’s breath began to come in quick, sharp pants. His hands itched, curling into fists. “Come on,” he whispered. “Try it. Just try. You know you want to. I’m just a little guy. Think you can take me? Attack. Give me your best fucking shot, asshole. Do it. Do it. Do it!”

The gym bunny’s eyes had begun to fill with confusion, then with fear. “You’re crazy, man,” he said, voice shaking. “How’d you get in here, anyway?”

Bree took another drag on his smoke. His grin felt too wide, too sharp. “I got friends.”

“Are they all like you?”

Bree thought briefly of Julian. A shudder of pure, raw lust ran through the length of his body. A hunger for blood and sex. “Some,” he said.

The guy jerked back. “I’m calling the management,” he said, voice shaking. “You’re so out of here.”

“Am I? Just as well. I was figuring to leave soon anyway.” Bree shrugged. “Got things to do. People to find.”

James.

The thirst for blood rose up strong and hot at the thought of his ex-lover. He knew where James lived, or had lived. He could track the bastard. Find his home. Probably find him in the middle of humping his latest fuck-toy.

Bree’s mouth watered. He licked his lips, tasting smoke, blood, and the last traces of Julian. “Maybe I’ll start with you, though,” he whispered. His voice was low and rough, but it carried.

The gym bunny shook his head. Scared as a -- a rabbit! Bree laughed out loud at the notion. At the sound, his would-be aggressor backed off a few more, panicky steps. “Don’t,” he said, voice shaking. “I’ll leave you alone. Don’t hurt me.”

Bree grinned, showing all his teeth. “Sure. No problem.”

The man eyed him nervously, clearly not believing a word, but after a moment turned to run.

“For now!” Bree called, just to watch him stop and turn around, face etched with terror, before he took off at a dead run, smashing his way through the dancers.

Bree watched him go, still laughing to himself. Absently, he took out another cigarette and lit up. Poison, his ass. Bastard like that would pump himself full of steroids and never question it, so long as he looked better each day. He inhaled, savoring the harsh burn of the smoke. God, why had he quit? Tasted so good. Made him tingle all over. Tasted of pure, sweet death ... and blood. Salty, coppery blood. Blood filling his mouth.

His fingers began to shake.

Oh. Oh, shit. What did I just do? I was gonna kill that man. And I was gonna enjoy it. I could’ve bathed in his blood, danced on his guts, then turned around and fucked the first willing body in the ruins left behind. And I wouldn’t -- have -- cared.

What's happening to me?

The cigarette fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. *Fuck. Oh, fuck. I'm a monster.*

"No." A hand lightly grasped Bree's forearm. He jerked sharply around to see Liam, of all people, at his side. The small man looked up into Bree's face as if searching for something. Bree stared back, scared shitless, letting Liam look his fill.

Finally, Liam seemed satisfied. "I can answer all your questions," he said, as calm as if they were talking about the weather. "But come. Let us find a more private spot."

Bree couldn't help holding back a little, no matter how much he longed for answers, or for the strange sense of comfort Liam was pumping out like a geyser. "How do you know anything about what's on my mind?" he demanded. "You haven't --"

"Julian," Liam said, gazing calmly at Bree. "You've met Julian." He reached up to touch the forgotten bite mark on Bree's neck. His fingertips came away stained with red. It stung like hell, and Bree flinched. Liam glanced at his stained hand with mild curiosity and a certain blasé attitude. "Yes, Julian," he said. "I know him of old. Come with me, and I'll tell you all I know."

"You don't know anything," Bree whispered, throat dry.

"Don't I? I know his name. I know it was he who bit you. I know you feel a thirst for blood that frightens you senseless."

Bree stared at Liam.

The small man held out his clean hand. "Will you come?"

Wordless, swallowing around the knot in his throat, Bree grasped Liam's hand tightly and bore down. "I'm scared," he whispered.

Liam's eyes filled with an old, weary sympathy. "I know. Now come. Come, Bree. Follow me."

Liam seemed to know every inch of Amour Magique from the inside out, as intimate with its twists and turns as he might be with a lover. He'd led Bree, never pausing once to consider his choice of direction, straight out a side door Bree would have sworn hadn't been there, and onto a smoking balcony. No one else out there but the two of them and an ashtray full of butts.

Liam had let Bree smoke his way through three cigarettes, waiting until the smoke he took in began to make his stomach turn. Still silent, he'd offered Bree a glass of something cold and fizzy, one Bree hadn't seen him carrying -- hadn't both his hands been empty? Confused, but desperate to wash the coppery, bittersweet taste of blood from his mouth, Bree had grabbed the drink and guzzled down half a dozen swallows. Ginger ale. Of all the fucking things. Ginger ale! What he always drank when he felt sick to his stomach.

He'd put the glass down, wiped his mouth, and stared at Liam. Liam had stared back, eternally patient. He'd put out a small, dry palm to pat Bree's shaking hand. Then, he'd begun to talk. Quiet, quick, and utterly calm. Spinning a tale that had set Bree's head spinning. Halfway through Liam's speech, he'd started shaking his head and hadn't stopped yet.

Liam finished. "Do you mind? I am a bit dry now." He picked up the ginger ale and took a sip. "Delicious, in its way."

"Yeah." Bree managed to still his jerky movements, then reached up to rub at the wound on his neck. Still damp. Bloody. "I thought Julian was nuts," he said abruptly. "But you? You're a fucking psycho, Liam."

Liam shrugged. "I've been called worse. Accusations do not alter the fact that what I've told you is only the truth."

"Uh-huh. And I'm supposed to believe every word of it, no questions."

"Do you need further proof? Still?"

Bree shivered. Unable to stand in one spot any longer, he started to pace. “You’re giving me a load of fairy-tale shit, and you expect me to open up and swallow? God. How dumb do you think I am?”

“I begin to wonder,” Liam said dryly.

Bree ignored him. He waved his hands, pale as dying moths in the moonlight. “You’re telling me you’re not human. You’re an incubus, whatever the hell that is. Got the sex magic working for you. That’s just you being deluded about yourself. But you tell me that you’ve known Julian for years, hundreds of years? Known him back when he killed for fun and fucked his way through half the men who stood in his way? While he butchered the other half just to watch them die?”

“He has changed,” Liam said mildly. “Changed a very great deal. I had heard rumors, but had no confirmation until I laid eyes upon him tonight. He has passed through the need for wholesale slaughter. It is natural, if one of his kind lives long enough.”

Bree let out a bark of laughter. “One of his kind. Yeah. You’re telling me Julian is a god-damned *vampire*, and you expect me to just believe that?”

Liam raised his shoulders. “My words are all but irrelevant,” he said. “Julian has tasted your blood. He used his power to show you the pleasures of drinking from a wellspring of pure life.”

“Cut the poetry shit,” Bree snapped. “Vampires aren’t real. Neither are incubuses, or whatever the hell you think you are.”

“‘Incubi’ is the proper plural.”

“What the fuck ever. Like it matters. What the hell did you drag us into, Liam? We thought we were coming to party. Is this where all the crazy people come? Jesus, man, no one even *blinked* when Julian bit me. No one cared!”

“They wouldn’t. Anyone who saw Julian knew what he is, was, and has been for centuries. You danced your way into a cluster of his kindred without even knowing. Of

course, they wouldn't help you. I don't doubt they were jealous, but no one would dare to cross Julian." Liam paused thoughtfully. "I expect they admire you for your courage now."

Bree laughed again, the sound harsh. "Yeah. That just shines my ego up nice and pretty. Thanks a ton. Vampires. You're crazy, Liam."

"Not crazy," Liam said patiently. "You *know* that. Why do you blind yourself to the truth? By Lilith, I dearly love humanity, but your stupidity appalls me at times." He touched Bree's neck. "Julian's marked you for his own. He picked you out very deliberately. Perhaps he even knew you would be here tonight. It would be like him."

Bree shook his head. "Bullshit."

"No. Truth."

"Why should I believe you?"

"That much is your choice. Only know this, the last bit of knowledge I can share: Julian no longer exists for the kill. He has grown old and seeks both peace and a partner to spend the rest of eternity with him. He seeks a mate, Bree, and I believe he has chosen you."

Bree stared. He opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "Me? Why the hell would he choose me, even if he is what you say?"

Liam chuckled. "I wouldn't dare try to analyze what goes on in Julian's head. I do not fear him, but I respect him and prefer to leave him alone. But I think ... yes, I think ... he sees a darkness in you that matches his own. Like calls to like, Bree. With his bite, Julian unlocked or shut doors in your mind you never knew were there, despite this tough-man mask you wear. He's laid his mark on you, and this is why you feel the thirst for blood and violence."

"Shit." A chilly wind swept over the smoking balcony. Bree rubbed his arms. "Say I believe you, even though I don't. What do I do about it? How do I stop this?"

“Stop it?” Liam blinked. “There is no stopping it, Bree. Julian has chosen you. Laid his mark on you, as I said. No one can turn back once their changeover has begun, and no one can make it stop, not even Julian himself.”

“Changeover?”

“Becoming like Julian,” Liam said simply. “There has always been an emptiness inside you, Bree. A yearning for something more. An anger that burns to be set free. I think you were made for the fate Julian has laid upon you. I think he knew that the moment he saw you.” He patted Bree’s arm again. “It’s none so bad. Julian can teach you many things. How to control the hunger, how to hunt and feed without making a kill. He has had centuries to learn, and he will teach you.”

“Teach me?” Bree whispered.

“Oh, yes. Back inside with you. Go to him. Seek him out. I feel, somehow, that he will come when he knows you want to see him again. Do as he says. Obey, and be free. Die to live forever.”

“Die?”

“Only for a few minutes. Perhaps less. From what I am told, there is no pain, only pleasure and orgasm beyond your wildest dreams. I --” Liam stopped midsentence and put a hand up to silence Bree’s shocked sputtering. “Quiet! Someone is coming.”

Great. Hopefully someone sane. Maybe if I promise them anything they want, from a blowjob to letting them fuck me blind, they’ll help me get out of here. Maybe they’ll protect me.

Chattering and laughing to his companion, the new arrival stepped out onto the smoking porch. He paused, letting his eyes adjust to the light. Bree had already gained his night vision, and recognized the newcomer long before he himself was spotted.

“James,” he said, voice low and ugly. “James.”

“Your ex?” Liam questioned quietly.

“One and the same.” Red heat flooded Bree’s vision. His heart began to pound in a fast, frantic tattoo. “I’ll kill him. I’ll fucking kill him.”

“Bree, no. Don’t! Bree!”

Too late. The need for revenge rose up and drowned out any thought of consequences. Letting out a howl, he lunged at James, taking the bastard to ground with one hard thud. James let out a startled yell, but Bree hardly heard him. He was too busy lashing out with the rage he’d bottled up for months, punching with all his strength, and barely registering the urge to *bite* --

He was vaguely aware of James’s boy-toy screaming over and over in a damn-fool high-pitched squeal, and Liam tugging at him, trying to pull him off. “No, Bree! No! Stop this at once! Stop!”

A bigger, colder hand landed on his shoulder and easily pulled him off James, now slumped unconscious on the floor. Bree yelped in surprise and anger as he flew through the air and landed hard against a solid body.

Julian stared down at him with those damnable eyes, each filled with lust, wonder, and appreciation. “You called?” he rasped. “I have come, Bree. Kiss me, and let me drink deep.”

He stared into Julian’s eyes, and for just a second, felt himself falling, as if down a dark, bottomless well. Suddenly, everything seemed simple and clear. Bree’s rage vanished in a swell of euphoria that left him swaying on his feet.

“Kiss me,” Julian whispered again.

Bree opened his mouth, no hesitation. Julian plunged into their kiss, devouring his mouth with his sharp teeth, drawing still more blood, lapping it away, and plying an expert tongue against Bree’s own. Tasting every nuance of life that he could offer.

Bree’s cock rose up with a jerk, filling so hard and fast that it hurt. Best hurt ever. A searing ache scorched his belly. Oh, God. Fuck. He needed to fuck. He needed it *now*.

Julian tore his mouth away from Bree's. "Yes," he said. "You begin to understand. You know what I want."

"Me," Bree breathed, rubbing himself against Julian, utterly without shame. He ignored the small, panicked voice still shouting in the back of his mind in favor of the fire in his cock. "Fuck me. Right here, right now. Do it."

Julian smiled. A smile that would have sent any man still in his right mind running, screaming. He took Bree's hand and laced their fingers together. "Not here." One finger brushed Bree's lips. "Will you come with me? Follow where I lead?"

"Depends." Bree's eyes blazed. "You going to fuck me?"

"Within an inch of your life, and then that last inch."

Bree smiled back, feeling dark and cruel. "Promise?"

Chapter Six

Things like this don't happen in real life. Men like Julian don't exist, much less stumble into my path, or, God help me, "pick me out" and hunt me down for a taste of what I've got to offer. I'm not that special.

So maybe I drank more of that vodka than I thought I did and passed out. Probably fast asleep on my tumbledown bed right now, snoring like a buzz saw. Gonna wake up tomorrow with a hell of a headache.

See, I just can't wrap my head around really believing this is happening. I must be dreaming. But God, if I am dreaming, I don't ever want to wake up ...

Bree leaned against Julian's cool chest, strong as an iron lamp post, and laid his head in the crook of the red-haired man's neck. He let out a contented sigh as Julian's arms enfolded him and held him close. Protective.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude, son of Lilith," he heard Julian say gravely. "Without your assistance, I would have had a much harder time tracking down my quarry."

"I didn't bring Bree here for you," Liam replied, sounding equally serious. Bree burrowed deeper against Julian's skin and hummed, playing idly with a strand of crimson hair. *Ah, shut up, Liam*, he thought.

Julian rumbled a soft laugh. “Of course not. As mine often does, your reputation precedes you. When you find a man or group of mortals who lack for love, you seek out places for them to find good matches. That was your purpose in bringing this Brotherhood to Amour Magique, was it not? Yes, I can see it in your face. Do not fret yourself, Liam. Regardless of what sort of creature I am, I very much doubt Bree minds the end result.”

“So you say ... but unless I mistake my guess, he’s enthralled at the moment, yes?”

“Partially. He has quite a temper, I believe?”

“And then some.”

Julian’s shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I assume you have seen changeovers and know of the new lusts that awaken within a man. Combined with his fiery nature, it was becoming too much, too fast for our Bree to cope with and retain his sanity. I did this for his own good. I mean him no harm, none at all. My word to you on that, by the Lilith you worship and adore.”

Bree could hear Liam’s breathing for a long moment. *Huh*, he thought drowsily. *Julian’s chest doesn’t move at all, even when he talks. No air flow. Guess he must not need it. Cool.*

At last, Liam sighed. “I will choose to trust you with him,” he said. “Bree and I are not especial friends, but he is dear to me in his way. We are tied as part of a group, and I made a vow, when asking them to come here tonight, to protect them in every way. You understand the seriousness of my swearing to their safety?”

“I do.”

“Then, once more for the sake of Lilith, do this for me. See to his body’s needs, all of them that you can sense. Be gentle, even if he demands blood and pain before his changeover. Bree does not always know what’s best for him. Remove the thrall enough to allow him full understanding, and explain what you’ve chosen to do with his body and soul.”

“There is no turning back from it, you realize.”

“I do. But still, he should know.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Very well. My own word on it.”

Liam chuckled. “Are there any deities you swear to?”

Julian laughed back. “Not as such, no. What if I swear to keep my word by the pain of holy water, the burning of a cross against my flesh, and the threat of a stake through my heart?”

“Lightly spoken, but yes, if you swear by all a vampire’s worst fears, then I believe you.” Bree felt Liam lay a small, warm hand on his back, between his shoulder blades. “Go on with Julian, now,” he ordered gently. “Let him care for you tonight.”

Bree made a small, sleepy noise and snuggled against Julian’s chest. “Mmm.”

“Drunk as a lord.” Bree could almost see Liam shaking his head, wryly amused. “You must teach me how to enthrall one day.”

“I shall. Consider it a gift of thanks.”

“I need no thanks except to know that Bree goes into this via free will. Yes, yes, I know, there is no stopping it. However, if he is not prepared well, Bree is the sort who might be determined enough to pierce his own heart with the first sharp stick he can lay hands on and end this new life.”

Julian stiffened. “You didn’t tell me this before I made my oath.”

“Didn’t I? My mistake.”

Bree giggled. He swayed drunkenly against Julian, drew back a little, and gazed up into those ultimate bedroom, fuck-me-now eyes. God, he could drown in those. “Less talk, more action,” he whispered. “Come on, Julian. Let’s go.”

Julian smiled down at Bree, reaching to play with one of his earrings. “Where do you want me to take you?”

“Your place. A hotel. Broom closet. Doesn’t matter.”

“So eager. You, Bree, are delicious.” Julian glanced up, over Bree’s shoulder. “Are we finished here, incubus?”

“Our words have come to an end. Keep your oath, and I’ll keep mine.”

“Done and done.” Julian pulled Bree into another close, cozy embrace. Bree heard the light patter of footsteps going past them, and a brief burst of noise as Liam opened a door and slipped back into the club.

Then silence.

Bree let out a deep, contented breath. Julian hummed at the sound of Bree’s sigh. “May I?” he asked. Reaching down, he lifted Bree’s bare wrist first to his lips, for a long kiss over the vein, the tip of his tongue tracing its pattern, then moved to his ear. “So beautiful,” he said. “I never grow weary of this sound. The rush of blood through its myriad vessels. The thundering of a heart wild with lust or fear. I will miss yours, when it is gone.”

Gone? Where’s it going? Huh. I’ll ask later. When I feel like it. Bree shivered happily. He reeled, drunk on the feel of Julian’s lips and fingers. “Kiss me?” he asked, hoping the cool man would play along.

“Gladly.” Julian bent to brush his mouth over Bree’s -- but only a brush, not even parting his lips. Bree whimpered, unashamed of sounding so needy. “Come on,” he demanded as Julian drew away. “More. Don’t hold out on me now.”

“I would rather we find some privacy, before we lose all of our control. Will you come with me?”

Underneath the drunken fugue of happiness, Bree felt his first tremor of unease. The way Julian put it ... it sounded like he was asking for more than Bree to go with him to a room. For half a second, he was tempted to say no. Something Liam had said made him afraid of Julian. What the hell *had* Liam been talking about? He struggled to remember.

“This will not do.” Julian laid two fingertips to Bree’s temple. “*Pax.*”

Quick as a Popsicle in July, Bree's fears melted away. His heart swelled with adoration, just as his cock filled with blood and began to throb, wanting its own share of Julian's touches. "I'll come," he whispered.

Julian smiled. "Good," he said. "Very, very good. Take my hand, now, Bree."

No hesitation. Bree let Julian twine their fingers together, cool against warm, and lead him back to Amour Magique's entrance. *Nope*, he thought, happier than he'd been in years. *Don't ever want to wake up.*

As they went inside, the music washed over them in a thick, heady wave. Bree's lips parted in amazement. "Julian," he whispered, tugging at the man's sleeve. "Julian! The club. I can hear its heart beating."

"Yes. You will be able to, now."

"How?" Bree shook his head. "It was all just music, and -- and noise, before."

"It has not changed. You have. You'll understand soon. Now, walk where I walk. Follow in my footsteps."

Bree felt the vaguest prickle of fear at the base of his spine. As if he sensed it, Julian turned around and looked at him with genuine fondness.

The bad feelings floated away. Bree grinned back, wide and loose. "It's good," he said.

"Oh, yes. Very good, and it will only get better." Julian took a tighter grip on Bree's hand. "Now, come. But one more thing -- do not speak unless I give you permission. Not everyone here would understand what's happening to you. Most, but not all. This is for your safety. Do you promise?"

Bree nodded. *Whatever you say, lover. I'll walk in your wake, and I'll keep my mouth shut. I can do that. Got a lot of practice at work, right? Difference is, I want to make Julian happy. That's what matters.*

It's all that matters anymore. Huh. When did that happen?

He shrugged. Floating on his own private cloud of bliss, he clung to Julian's hand and followed him through the crowds. They didn't bump against or into a single man, packed though it was. Bree glanced around in curiosity and saw that wherever Julian moved, the dancers shifted out of his way. Made a path for him. More than a few snuck curious, but definitely awed and seriously respectful, glances at him.

Bitchin'. I landed the king of the ball. Bree giggled to himself. *Or is that, king of all the balls?*

Julian led Bree back into a darkened corner of Amour Magique, up to a ... bar? Yep, a plain old bar, dimly lit, with a scrawny shrimp of a mostly bald man polishing glasses and chatting up his handful of customers. He looked to be having a great time, but the instant he saw Julian, he waved the other guys off and ambled straight over. His look wasn't one of respect, but of amusement and a touch of admiration. "Look at what the black cat dragged in," he said with a crooked grin. "So you caught him after all, huh?"

"Tom," Julian said with a slight nod. "Yes, I have done what I set out to accomplish. I always do."

"Yep. You manage to get what you set your mind to having, that's the truth. Kinda bloody, though, isn't he?"

"A bit. He's a fighter."

The bartender -- Tom? -- let out a low whistle. "No shit? He hit you?"

"Of course not. I believe, from what he was screaming while he pounded the man's head into a jelly, that it was his ex-lover. A man who had done him great wrongs."

"Most exes do. You gonna go after him, if he lives?"

Julian smiled. For the first time, his eyes looked to be tinged with ice. "What do you think, Tom?"

"Think I'd better get a crew out there to mop up the mess."

“Wise decision.” Julian laid his hand on Bree’s shoulder, drawing him protectively close. “I have struck a bargain with the incubus to take special care of my prize, and I have laid charms upon him, but it strikes me that he seems somewhat more unfocused than even a little blood loss and magic should make him. It has been a long time since I cared if a mortal was ill in any way. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Blood loss, yeah. How much you take?”

“More than my usual amount. Two, perhaps three pints, instead of half of one.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Jeeeeeeszus, Julian. Humans don’t give up that much blood and walk off whistlin’. You gotta give them something to get their sugar back up and some liquid into them, or they go all woozy.”

“They do?” Julian sounded worried. “He seemed fine before. Many decades ago, I set the half-pint limit when I determined it was all I needed. Before that, when I drank, I drained my victims dry. I am not accustomed to this halfway mark. Why did it not affect him until now?”

“Runnin’ on that changeover high, is my guess. Now that he’s calmed down, his body’s yellin’ for some seein’ to. Yeah, yeah, I can see he’s horny, and that’s not what I’m talkin’ about. Here.” Tom pulled down a short glass, bent underneath the bar, and came up with a pitcher of orange juice. He poured the glass brim-full and shoved it over to Bree. “Get him to drink that up if you want he should make it to your rooms without passing out.”

“He might faint?”

“Like my kids say, *duh*. Hey, you.” Tom poked Bree in the shoulder. “Chug-a-lug.”

Bree stared at the juice. It looked off to him, like it had turned. He glanced up at Julian to find his face furrowed in thought. “Yes,” the man said. “Drink, Bree. Perhaps not all of it, but as much as you can swallow. I know it looks dreadful, but you must, for your own good.”

Bree slumped. *Well, shit. I thought we were heading for sex when we left that smoking porch. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, you know? Now I'm being told I have to drink all this juice? Fuck that. Don't want it.*

He frowned. *I do want something, though. Something besides sex. Weird. What is it, though? Can't put my finger on ...*

"Bree," Julian said, gentle but firm. "Drink."

Bree shut his eyes. He lifted the glass to his mouth, took a swig, and swallowed, trying not to taste it. Didn't quite work. He still got a blast of citrus across the tongue. But the stuff had definitely gone off. It tasted like decay. He made a face despite himself, but to please Julian, which kind of seemed to be all that mattered now, he kept on drinking.

"Good," Julian murmured. "Very well done."

"Not bad. I figure it must taste like piss to him right about now. You picked a good one after all, Jule, gotta hand it to you. Enough of a hellcat to ride the blood lust and beat the shit out of an enemy, but then he follows your orders like a lambie pie. Not bad. Thrall?"

"A small one."

"Figured. You gonna take it off before you, eh ..." Tom paused meaningfully.

"I think so."

"He'll be scared. Might try to fight."

"I gave my word that he would understand what was happening to him. I can bear a bruise or two if he chooses to struggle."

"Guess you're a tough old bird after all this time, yeah. Oh! One more thing, just to be sure." Curious, Bree opened his eyes and took a peek, just to see Tom rummage under his bar again and come out with a box of chocolate-chip cookies. "Make him eat at least one. Two, if he can choke them down. It'll help."

Bree groaned.

“Hush, now,” Julian chided. “Eat.” He picked up a cookie and held it to Bree’s lips. “Open for me, now. Open wide.”

Bree found his lips parting. Julian slipped the cookie between his teeth. Automatically, he snapped off a bite and chewed. Then gagged.

“Tastes like cardboard, huh?” Tom asked sympathetically. “Or sand, maybe.”

Julian hung over Bree like a hawk until he’d choked one cookie down. “Enough,” he decided. “I can feel what he has consumed making a difference in his blood. It will do. I thank you for your help, Tom.”

“Eh. It’s my job. You want anything else? Kinda figure you got take-away tonight, but I could let you have a free sip of any type you want. Get the motors revved up.”

Julian chuckled. “Always looking to make a sale, Tom? No, I don’t require anything else from your bar, and though you meant Bree’s nourishment as a gift, I will see that you’re paid for it. I must ask you for one more favor. I grow impatient, and it is difficult for one even as powerful as I to maintain a thrall for so long. May we use the dimensional doorway behind your bar tonight?”

Tom frowned. “Silas, he don’t like me doin’ that. Got into a shitload of trouble last time I let someone borrow my ride.”

“Very well. I’ll barter a future pledge against this favor. Whatever you please, so long as it harms neither Bree nor myself. You may use it yourself, or give it to Silas.”

Tom eyed them up and down. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s worth the risk. Come on back.”

“Bree.” Julian tugged at Bree’s arm. Curious, but keeping his mouth shut, Bree followed Julian as Tom lifted up a section of the bar top and let them inside. The little man led them around to an even darker corner. Not just regular dark. This little patch swallowed up the light. He stared, fascinated.

Tom jerked his head. “Just step on in,” he said. “It’ll take you wherever you wanna go. Like Dorothy in Oz. Just think about home, my friend. You’ll be right there.”

“My thanks, Tom.” Julian bent and brushed a kiss across Bree’s cheek. “Close your eyes. Walk forward until I tell you to stop.”

This is weird. But ... I’m not scared. Not at all. I can trust Julian.

Obedient as a child, Bree screwed his eyes shut and stepped forward. He felt a brief lurch, as if his stomach were dropping out, then a light thump. He fell a little, losing his balance for some reason. No biggie. Julian was right there to catch him.

He tilted Bree’s head to the dim light. “You did that well,” he said, voice hoarse. “I must be strong enough to wait a little longer, but for now ...” Letting out a small hiss, Julian dipped his head and hungrily kissed Bree’s mouth. Rougher than before, much more eagerly, Julian’s tongue thrust in and out in imitation of the fucking to come. Bree felt sharp pains as Julian bit down on his lips and lapped off the welling blood, but hell if he cared.

He just wanted the kiss to last forever. And even if they were in public, he wanted Julian’s hand on his cock. Now. Five seconds ago would have been better. Moaning into the kiss, Bree thrust his hips into Julian’s and ground against him.

“Bree,” Julian whispered between sips of his mouth. “Are you so eager? Speak.”

“Hell, yeah.” Bree reached between them and rubbed the heel of his palm against Julian’s cock, as hard as his own. “I want you. You want me. Come on, Julian. Fuck me. Make me see stars.”

Julian dropped his head onto Bree’s shoulder and let out a groan. “Bree, you tempt me too far ... my control ...”

“Yeah,” Bree breathed, stroking Julian with all the skills he possessed. “You like it, huh? Want me?”

“More than you could know. I have waited centuries for you.”

“Yeah? I’ve waited a couple hours. Long enough, don’t you think?” Bree let his fingers wander to the fastening on Julian’s pants, starting to pull them open. “No more wasting time.”

Julian clutched at him. "Bree ... Bree ..."

Bree blinked. The weirdest sensation crawled over his skin. Kind of like it was being peeled off. "What the fuck ...?" he blurted. "Julian, did you feel that?"

"I did." Julian's voice was bleak. "My thrall has broken, and you are powerful enough now to see past Amour Magique's shields."

"And what's that mean in English?"

"It means your eyes are open now." Julian stroked Bree's arm. "I wonder if Liam knew this would happen. More than likely, he did. Cunning bastard of an incubus! He knew I would be forced to this."

"Forced to what? Julian, you're not making much sense here. Look at me. C'mon, look at me. What's up?"

"You'll know as soon as I do look at you," Julian whispered. "Promise that you will not run away before I can explain."

"What? Why would I --"

"Promise!"

"Okay, okay," Bree said, bewildered. "But why would you think I'd want to --"

Julian raised his head and looked directly at Bree. His eyes were the same. His skin just as smooth, just as luminous -- but damn him if, at a second look, it didn't seem to be skin so much as thousands of fine scales. And his mouth ... it had been distorted by far too many teeth, all of them pointed, and two fangs, long as a cobra's.

Memory came rushing in, along with a bone-crushing, mind-numbing terror.

"Vampire!" Bree blurted out. "You *are* a god-damned vampire!"

Julian nodded. "Yes," he said, voice slurred around his wicked teeth. "I am. But, Bree ..." His finger came up to brush Bree's lips. "You promised not to run. Amour Magique will hold you to that."

Bree swallowed. Yeah. He'd figured already, when his instant reaction to bolt hadn't even reached his feet. "What are you going to do with me?" he asked. *Might as well know sooner than later.*

Julian smiled, bizarrely tender despite all those flashing teeth. He cupped Bree's chin in his hand. "Why, fuck you, of course," he said. "And then, I'm going to kill you."

Chapter Seven

I really hadn't figured on this day getting any stranger. Shows how much I know.

"Kill me, huh?" Bree eyed Julian up and down, from his long, muscled legs to his mane of red hair, finally coming to rest on his face -- eyes from a wet dream and teeth from a nightmare. "You probably could. It's easier to kill a man than most people think. Kick them in the throat, knife their lungs, hell, even use a good old-fashioned gun.

"I've had death threats before. I *worked retail*. I'm used to being told to fuck off and die. Some people even got real creative on how they were going to do me in. So, fact is, you don't scare me.

"Besides, like I said, I worked retail. You think that set of fangs is scary? Julian, I have seen much worse teeth aside from people claiming to be vampires. I'm no ninety-six-pound weakling, either. If you want to kill me, you can try. But I think I might just give you a decent fight for your trouble."

Bree folded his arms and stared at Julian, stone-faced. Julian blinked back at him, countenance blank with surprise.

Damned if Bree didn't almost hear the whistle-and-rattle of a classic Western gunfight movie scene start to play. But he waited. Turn to run, and it'd all be over. Besides, he'd

already walked away from one fight at Money Now! that day because he'd been too disgusted and weary to put up his dukes. It'd felt much better to smash James's face in. If it came to it, he'd grapple with Julian.

Might not win, but he'd go down swinging.

Julian's horrible mouth twisted. A sound burbled out of it. It wasn't until the vampire threw back his head and staggered a few steps back that Bree realized he was *laughing*. Absolutely tickled to -- well, Bree guessed, not to death as such, but close enough. Tears trickled from the corners of his bedroom eyes, shut tight with the giggles.

Bree folded his arms and glowered. "I'm not joking, you know."

"I know, I do!" Julian wiped at his cheeks. "That is what makes it so very funny. Bree, you would not know this, but it has literally been centuries since anyone was brave or foolish enough to challenge me, whether or not they knew what I was or saw my true face. You look on me without the glamour, without any thrall, and what do you do? Tell me you've seen scarier teeth before and offer to take me down. For that alone, I would keep you and give you the Gift! Balls, brains, and brawn, Bree -- a priceless combination."

"Uh-huh. Glad you think I'm such a blast, Julian."

Julian moved too quickly to see, his hand suddenly cupping Bree's chin as it had in the store. Unable to help himself, Bree shivered at the chill and went weak in the knees. God, even Julian's hand was sexy as hell. Practically orgasmic fingers, despite being cold. The vampire's mouth twisted into a smile. "You are worth far more than a laugh, Bree," he whisper-hissed. "I chose you because I suspected what you would be like. You are not the man I counted on." Julian tilted his head. "No, you are better. It's just now struck me. Perhaps it's that I grew so used to the words that I have learned to ignore them, but you have not asked for mercy or to be let go, have you?"

Bree gave Julian a level stare, pulling away from his touch with an ache of regret that he ignored. "Not in the mood for word games right now. No, I didn't ask for any of that, and

you damn well know it. I don't know shit about *vampires*, but I do know when a man says he's going to kill you and means every word. I'm not the begging type, and I've had my fill of running away. So, I figure my last choice is to fight."

Bree lowered himself into a street-fighting stance, fists loose and ready, leg muscles poised to lunge. He glared up through a wisp of hair that had fallen across his eyes. "Well? Come on, then. Let's do this."

Julian smiled again, "I think not," he said. His hand blurred forward again, far too fast to see, and --

Bree came to, lying flat on his back, laid to rest on something soft and silky. Soft, like a bed. His head ached as if he'd been bashed across the skull with a lead pipe. *Damn, but Julian moves fast. Hits hard, too. Gotta remember that.*

He licked his lips and found them so dry that bits of skin were flaking off. Not a good sign. "How long was I out?" he muttered.

"Only a few minutes," Julian's voice responded without pause. "You are a tough one, aren't you?"

"Kind of known for it."

"As I suspected. No, don't move. You may vomit. I seem to recall that humans who take such a blow tend to have uneasy stomachs, and frankly, recycled orange juice is not the sort of fluid I care to have on this bed."

Bree laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing. Just thinking. You say you're a vampire. It's just funny to me that you probably wouldn't mind spilling a few pints of blood, but you get all prissy at the thought of a little sick-up."

He heard Julian chuckle. “Yes, well, we all have our weaknesses, don’t we?” A cool hand brushed his forehead. Despite himself, Bree moved into the touch. “You, for example, are still mortal and fragile as the rest of your kind. Yes, I said ‘fragile.’ I used the least part of my strength and down you went, easy as falling off a log. You can’t best me in a fight, Bree. Yet somehow I don’t doubt you’d keep trying if I let you.

“So, I won’t let you. I chose you. Even if I could stop the changes taking place in your body, which I have no desire to do, I would not. Live with them. Die from them. Then rise again, and walk by my side.”

Bree cracked up.

“This is funny?” Julian sounded fascinated.

“Well, yeah. I know I’m going to die tonight, sure. But give me a break. Come back to life? Walk by your side? Kind of hard to do when you’re dead, Julian.”

“Not really. After all, I am dead. I have been dead for centuries. I walk, talk, dance, and ...” The cool hand brushed across Bree’s cheek, down his neck, and teased at the collar of his mesh shirt. “... I fuck, too.”

“I was hoping to end up in bed with you,” Bree said thoughtfully. “Different circumstances, of course. There was a lot less talking and a lot more being naked, rolling around, and groping in my fantasy.”

“That could still happen, you know.”

“Right.” Bree struggled to open his eyes. They felt gummy, the lids heavy, but he managed it. “Julian, you might be pure sex on a stick, but I’m not too inclined to roll over for you right now. Even if I could.” His stomach twisted. “Ow!” he yelped before he could stop it. Embarrassed, he snapped, “So what did you do? Poison that juice?”

“Bree, don’t act the fool. Of course I didn’t poison your drink. Your body is dying, that’s all.”

“Oh. Well, if that’s all ...” Bree shook his head in spite of the instant pain when he moved it. He weighed his options. Didn’t know what dying felt like, but this might well be the real thing. He’d been bled, his skull was cracked open, and he was sitting in a bed with a man who had a mouth like a raptor and who claimed to be a walking corpse with the power of resurrection.

Death might not be such a bad option. Looked like the only way out. Bree had always known someone carried a bullet with his name on it; he’d just been waiting for what seemed like a long time now for the day it was finally fired at him

The bed shifted again as Julian leaned closer. “Bree ...” he said, voice still sending a thrill down Bree’s spine, “don’t be afraid. You have never been happy with life, have you? I saw it in your eyes when I visited you at that awful business. Tonight, you danced with the fervor of a man who had nothing left to lose. You nearly killed your ex without a moment’s regret.”

“Yeah, well, *he* had it coming.”

“You see? I think you were made to be found by one of my kind. Meant to be one of us. I count myself very, very lucky that our paths crossed.”

Bree snorted. “So, you’re that damn sure I’m gonna turn into a vampire?”

“I know you will,” Julian said simply. “These are hard times for us, with modern surveillance and intelligent policemen, but those of us who are capable have adjusted our ways. We hunt, but do not kill, and we thrall to make our feeding nothing but pleasure for the prey. They wake up injured and woozy, but not afraid, and never suspecting a vampire bit them.” Julian chuckled. “As you say, that is fairy-tale rubbish.”

He stroked Bree’s chest, idly toying with his nipples under the mesh. Bree sucked in a breath. It rattled in his lungs. *Damn. Guess I am dying.*

Huh.

Well, if I do come back to life, first thing I'm gonna do is beat the shit out of Julian, sex god or not. If I don't ... well, I think I know how I want to make my grand exit.

-- so much I can teach you," Julian was going on, his fingers roving ever further downward on Bree. "Hidden pleasures of the Charleston night, where to find the sweetest blood, how to use your mind, as well as the power in your fists, to control others, and --"

"Hey, Julian," Bree interrupted. "Shut up."

Julian jerked to a stop. His hands ceased their roving. "Pardon me?" He sounded genuinely shocked, something that made Bree grin despite his growing weakness.

Bree licked his lips. "Does the dying man get a last request?"

Julian looked puzzled. "I -- I have not done so much before, but I suppose, given the situation ..." He trailed off. "Yes. Yes, although bear in mind that I will not let you go. Aside from that, what do you want?"

"Dumb ass." Bree shook his head. He managed to lift one hand and press down on Julian's arm. "I want you. Fuck me to death, and take that as literally as you like. That's what I want. If I'm going down, I want it to be with a bang, not a whimper."

Silence. Bree glanced up to see Julian staring at him. "You amaze me," he said after a moment.

"Yeah, I'm just all that and a bag of corn chips. You gonna give me what I want?" Bree arched his hips up with an effort. "Come on. I've wanted you since I first saw you. Do me to death."

Julian's eyes glowed with a sudden heat. "Only you, Bree," he whispered. "Our living death together will be a glorious thing. Yes. I will do as you ask. But I have no taste for rape, and your body would not enjoy penetration right now, no matter how much you want it."

"Spoilsport."

"Not so!" Julian grinned ferally at him. "Do you trust me not to bite?"

"Huh?"

Julian's hands moved to Bree's zipper. "I asked, do you trust me not to bite?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled Bree's fly open and slid the jeans down his thighs. Bree's cock stood at half-mast yet, determined that no matter what, it was by God going to have its fun before the end.

Bending his head, Julian gave Bree's partial erection a long, lingering lick with the flat of his tongue. Bree gasped with the shock to his system as his cock swelled, and the blood he had left in him rushed to points south. Made him dizzy as all hell, but oh, God, the rush that came with his arousal was better than any street drug. He lifted shaking hands and threaded them into Julian's thick mane of hair. "Go on," he ordered. "I don't think it matters so much if you bite me now, so long as you don't take it off."

Julian gave a small laugh, the vibrations tingling against Bree's cock, tingling, making him harder still. "Trust me when I tell you not to worry about castration," he said, cupping Bree's balls with his free hand. "I plan on enjoying this magnificent prick for a very long time to come."

"Best go ahead and get started, then."

"Yes," Julian murmured, "I think you are right ..."

He pounced. Bree let out a short scream and arched his back up despite the sharp pain shooting through all his muscles. *Oh, God! Oh, fuck, oh, God, oh, hell, Julian!* He'd had his share of blowjobs, but never anything like what Julian could do with his mouth. That cool tongue was everywhere -- licking down the length of his cock, tapping up the big vein, probing his slit, and then, oh, yes, taking him all in until he bumped the back of Julian's throat, surrounded by cool, wet tightness.

Then Julian swallowed.

Bree howled. Not once, but twice, then again. The noise ripped out of him, primal and wild as a jungle cat's roar. He couldn't stop, and he didn't want to. Julian's throat worked his

cock, squeezing tighter than any hole he'd ever plunged into, ripping around him like ocean waves, each one washing him further up toward one hell of an orgasm.

Then he felt it -- the prickle of teeth. Just little pinpricks, but still enough to draw blood from an organ engorged with the stuff. Didn't hurt. Or, no, it *did* hurt -- but the pain was better than any pleasure Bree had ever felt before. "More," he managed to gasp. "Harder, you god-damned liar. Bite me!"

Julian's laughter rippled around his cock, throat spasming. Bree let out a long, drawn-out wail of bliss. "Come on," he panted. "What are you waiting for? Do it!"

Cool fingers rolled his balls together, slipped down to press against his perineum and twist his guiche piercing, and then teased up toward his ass. Bree felt Julian's lips smile around his cock as he drew back to nuzzle into the crook of Bree's thigh, and --

The vampire bit.

Bree's back bowed up hard enough to practically crack his spine. Blood flowed out, thick and hot. Then, with a mighty spasm and an explosion of light, he came, blasting into Julian's mouth in heavy gouts, mixing his seed with the flood from his veins. The orgasm went on and on, Bree's hips jerking fast and frantic. He thought it might never stop, and God, he didn't want it to!

But it did come to an end at last. Bree sagged back onto the bed, gasping for air but half-choking on it, as if it were too rich. As if his lungs couldn't take it. "Yeah," he choked out. "This is how -- I wanted to go -- when I had to -- yeah. Good."

Julian sat up, face smeared with blood and come. He smiled at Bree with that twisted mouth. Put his hand over Bree's heart, which was stuttering to a halt. Hurt like fucking hell, but somehow that didn't matter.

Bree found himself grinning. "Damn ... you," he managed. "And ... thanks."

Julian leaned to kiss Bree's forehead. "Let go," he whispered. "It's almost finished. Relax your hold on life. Die to live again. Do you see the black, coming on quick as night? Walk

toward it, Bree. Dive into the darkness, with my hands upon you, and wake to the glory of the night.”

Bree shook his head. “Can’t,” he rasped. He was *done* already. He’d accepted his death. But damn that body of his, it kept on fighting. “Can’t!”

“Then let me help you once again.” Julian pressed a finger to Bree’s lips. “No pain, I promise you. No pain.”

He nuzzled his way into the side of Bree’s neck, the side he hadn’t wounded before. Bree felt the wet flicker of Julian’s tongue, felt a soft, painless crunch, and then felt a sudden rush, as if the world were falling away and he was tumbling into space.

He saw the darkness. The absence of light and life that Julian had mentioned. And he moved toward it, head held high. “Fuck you, death,” he whispered. Felt his lips curve into a brazen grin. “Try me on for size. I’m ready.”

And, with a last rattle of breath, Bree died.

Chapter Eight

So this is Hell. Mama always did say I'd end up here when I passed on. Guess she was right.

Guess I did go out with a bang, huh? Gotta hand it to Julian -- he sent me on this particular trip the way I always wanted to go. Talk about the fuck of a lifetime, man. Thing is, I don't think that memory's gonna comfort me for long down here.

Hell. It's an interesting place to visit, but I don't much think I want to stay long. Yet, anyway.

Wonder why I'm not afraid? Might just be me being all kinds of contrary even now, or maybe, just maybe, it's part of what Julian did to me. Maybe this is like coming home for a visit. Nothing scares you in your own home, if it's where you know you belong.

The trip had been ... well, different. Bree had ridden all kinds of cars, planes, motorbikes. He'd even gone bungee-jumping. God, he loved the rush of wind through his hair in a total free-fall. The blast of adrenaline he got when he thought -- as he figured no one could help but think -- *Is the safety net gonna kick in, or is this the end?*

He'd gloried in screaming as he fell from the heavens, his own imitation of Lucifer, bright as the Morning Star, plunging forever down and down and down ...

Thing was, this time, he'd come to a most definite, not to mention damned painful, stop on terra-sort-of-firma. From what Bree could see, he appeared to be standing on a hardened but still red-hot plate of lava flow.

Huh. He had eyes. And yeah, feet, too. Feet that he could pick up and move, despite the fact that he should have been glued in place with his soles melted to the lava. He patted himself down and discovered the rest of his body had come along for the ride, vampire bites and all, still oozing trickles of fresh blood.

He also happened to be stark naked, with a hard-on that made him damned proud to look at. Bree couldn't help but whoop out a shout of laughter that rang to Hell's rafters and back. He might be damned to eternal torment, but he was still number one with his cock!

And, oh, yes, he had ended up in Hell itself, no mistake. A glance around was all he needed to see more than he'd ever wanted to. Naked, fishy-white bodies stuck on pitchforks, with *things* that had horns and beaks, eating out their guts. Pillars of fire with people just visible, screaming out their agony as it burned but never consumed their flesh. Barry Manilow playing at high volume, Muzak version.

Yep. Definitely Hell.

No fire for Bree, though, and the first devil to approach him with a pointy thing backed off in a *real* hurry when Bree snarled and flipped it off. Huh. The power of a good old-fashioned "fuck off" seemed to come in handy still.

Curious, he padded forward off the lava and onto a path of sharp-edged rocks. He felt each one's razor-keen edge without ever getting a cut. After a moment's pause, Bree shrugged it off and walked on, tall and proud. Not that he was completely certain, but he was beginning to think Julian might have been right: Bree *was* tougher than anything on Hell and Earth.

He passed by many a curiosity, standing to watch for a bit, or not, as he chose. Seemed to be a lot of people who'd ended up drowning for eternity in pools of filthy water, bloated

bodies forever struggling and spluttering, not quite breaking the surface. Every so often, he saw someone lashed to a table, while chattering beasts plunged wicked daggers into their soft bits and cut off their cocks to eat -- cocks that grew right back, over and over. He even saw one woman dancing naked on a bed of broken mirror glass. She might have been beautiful once, but wasn't anymore.

Funny thing, though, none of it held his attention for longer than a few seconds. His feet itched to travel on, and he let them. Why not? Might be there was a reason for needing to keep on the move. He'd trusted his instincts on when to run before. When he'd listened, he'd gotten off clean. When he'd let his cock or his heart blindside him, he'd ended up brokenhearted or, apparently, dead.

That was another thing to consider. Julian had made good on his word and killed Bree. Oughtn't he to be just a little pissed off at the vampire? Bree tilted his head in thought as he walked. Nope, not even a flicker of anger. Just curiosity. *Why now? Why me? What happens next?*

He suspected he'd soon find out.

Wonder how fast I'm movin'? Bree felt like he was going at a normal pace, but the torments around him had started to blur as he passed by, faster and faster, until they were no more than smears against a stretch of infinite and utterly black space that stretched on forever. The rocks grew sharper under his feet, but still did not open him up. The only blood he spilled came from his bite marks, dribbling away. Crimson runnels made patterns down his throat and chest as the flow grew heavier, but he didn't stop to wipe them off.

He kind of thought they looked pretty.

Still chuckling to himself at that notion, Bree didn't see the path come to a stop. He noticed when he jerked to a halt, though, hard and fast as if he'd plowed into a brick wall. Still not scared, only curious, he looked up.

And up.

And up some more.

Well, now, there was a sight to put the fear of God in anyone who wasn't Bree. Fifty feet tall or more, even sitting, the biggest fucking demon he'd seen yet sat on a throne made of skulls. Dry, bleached bones whose mouths still moved, opening up to scream and wail. The demon himself distracted Bree from the thing's choice of throne, though. He stared, curious.

Like Julian, it had two forms, but it shifted back and forth between them, like a TV station caught between channels. The one that was more clearly visible was a monster, skin dark purple and scaly, twisted into hard knots of scarring and raised veins, and thick with muscle, bulging with rage, jagged teeth, tusks, and eyes like twin coals. Blink for a second, and the demon changed into a manlike creature so beautiful that looking at him hurt. He shone with a pure white light that radiated from his curling blond hair, violet eyes, and smooth, luminous skin. Tears ran down his flawless cheeks.

Bree figured he knew who this was. He still wasn't scared. Felt like he was dropping by for a visit to his daddy somehow. "Satan," he said casually. "What's up, you old fucker?"

The monster snarled. "Insolence," it said with a voice like gravel in a crusher. "You dare?"

"Oh, suck my cock. I'm not scared of you. You might be ugly, but to be honest, I've had worse blind dates, so forgive me for not falling down in fear. Nice chair, by the way. You make that yourself?"

Bree grinned, running his tongue over his own set of sharp teeth, as Lucifer sputtered and fumed. "Creature of mud!" it spat. "From dust you came, to dust you will return, and then you belong to me."

"Doubt it." Bree touched his throat wound and held up a hand smeared with crimson. "Looks to me like someone made a prior claim."

Lucifer snickered. Odd, but that was the first time Bree felt anything even close to crept out. “Only for a while,” Old Scratch muttered, settling back in his throne of skulls. “I can wait millennia for you to come back and be my toy.”

“Yeah, well, that’s gonna be then, isn’t it? Right now -- screw you.” Bree paused. “Come back? So I’m not here to stay?”

“Ignorance is among your sins, fool. No.” Satan’s clawed hand clenched into a fist. “You are not come to be my prize yet. Not just yet.”

“Hot damn!”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Not so much. I’m going back, then, huh?” Bree grinned and folded his arms across his chest. “Julian’s making good on his word, then. I’m coming back in style.”

“A vampire. Creature of the night. Blood-drinker. Eater of souls.”

“Yeah, yeah, damned forever, shut out from the light of God, whatever. I read *Dracula*; I’ve got the memo. You want to let me be on my way now, or what?”

Satan eyed him. “Answer one question first.”

Bree eyed the Devil right back, then shrugged. Why not? “Go ahead. Ask me.”

“Are your balls truly bigger than your brains?”

Bree exploded into laughter. Peals of sheer mirth, a sound no doubt altogether foreign in Hell, echoed around him as Lucifer bared his teeth, made a gesture with one horned hand, and Hell went pitch black as he left it behind him for whatever came next. As a vampire, he might be damned now, if he believed everything Julian had said, and he figured that was why he’d taken a trip to Hell in the first place. All the same, it wasn’t time for him to stay there. Yet.

He felt himself falling again, but upward this time. Up and up and up, like a balloon on acid. Best free-fall ever. If it didn’t mean going back down to talk with Old Ugly, he’d want

to do it again. But then, he had a few other things on his mind. Landing with a soft *thump* back in his body, Bree felt his lips crooking up at the corners.

Felt like he'd been laid out on Julian's bed, arms folded like a corpse's. He sensed the weight of a man sitting beside him, then felt a cool hand gently combing through his hair. "Have you returned?" Julian whispered. "Come now, Bree. Wake for me. Open your eyes to this brave new world."

Fuck, yeah.

Bree snapped his eyelids open. The world jumped into sharp focus, blazing with colors never before so intense or alive. He felt cold, but wasn't worried about it. He knew his heart didn't beat and that he wasn't breathing, but he didn't care. As he ran his tongue over his teeth, he grinned at the mouthful of wicked fangs he found, but didn't give those a second thought, either.

He turned his head to the side and saw Julian, still more monster than man, grinning at him like twelve kinds of a fool in what appeared to be total satisfaction. "I knew you would be strong enough."

"Takes more than death to keep a bastard like me down."

Julian's beautiful eyes glowed. "May it ever be so."

"Yeah. Hey, Julian? Something I wanna take care of right quick. You mind?"

Julian looked puzzled, but shook his head. Bree bared his teeth in a grin he knew would have sent anyone else screaming. "You asked for it," he said softly.

Then, he moved. And *fuck*, could he ever *move* now! Faster than good old Superman and those god-damned speeding bullets of his, faster than the speed of light, and, as he'd hoped, too fast for even Julian to track. Not pausing for one moment's consideration, Bree launched himself off the bed and tackled Julian by the stomach, knocking them both to the floor.

Without a word, he punched Julian in the face as hard as all his new strength allowed. Didn't even leave a mark, but *fuck*, was it ever satisfying.

"That's for killing me," Bree said. "Now, let me take this opportunity to thank you for pretty much the same thing."

Julian blinked. Then he began to laugh. "I knew," he managed between whoops of giggles -- giggles! -- "I knew you would be a vampire worthy of the name, no matter how you tried to lie to yourself and to me!"

"Oh, yeah. Love these fangs. Wicked sharp. You mind if I play?"

"It depends. What game did you have in mind?"

"Well, pretty soon, tracking down someone young, hot, and healthy, preferably not pumped up on steroids, and having dinner for three. So to speak. Right now, though, I'm thinking I want to go for a little 'turnabout is fair play.'"

Julian grinned, savage and beautiful. "Oh, do you, now?"

"Damn right. You gonna tell me no?"

"I would not dream of it."

"Good vampire." Bree bent to kiss Julian. He didn't bother being gentle, and neither did his maker. Their fangs nipped at each other's mouths, delicate nibbles that closed within seconds, but not before they got a small taste of blood. Bree savored the rich, salty, coppery fluid on his tongue. Might have made him gag when he was mortal, but now? Better than Russian vodka, besides giving him a buzz just like diving off a bridge.

Yeah, he'd fallen from grace. Then again, Bree figured he'd never been in too good with the Guy Upstairs, and if this was to be his fate, damn him all over again if he didn't plan to enjoy it.

Really enjoy it.

The hard-on he'd sported down in Hell had come back with him. Felt different now, hard as if carved from stone, swollen stiff despite a lack of blood and, oh, so ready to play. He

rubbed against Julian like a tomcat in heat. Julian groaned, lifting his hips to press against Bree's. Bree slipped down to bite at Julian's nipples, leaving circles of teeth marks that bled sluggishly in fucking gorgeous kaleidoscope patterns.

Julian's cock also rose to the occasion. He arched and writhed beneath Bree, releasing devil-cries and cursing in a language Bree didn't know. Maybe no one else alive spoke it. Didn't matter, though. He got the point. No translation was needed for "Want to fuck. Fuck now!"

"Plan on it," Bree growled. He tore at Julian's pants, shredding them off as easily as ripping a Kleenex into pieces. Bared his maker's cock, stiff and proud, cold and steely hard when Bree put his hand around the thing. "But I figure you owe me this one."

Julian howled out in apparent bliss at Bree's touch. Yet his voice retained a touch of laughter when he asked, "You think yourself vampire enough to top me already?"

"Don't *think*," Bree said, baring his fangs. "*Know*."

Without a second's hesitation, Julian brought his bare legs up to lock around the small of Bree's back. "Go on, then," he whispered. "Show me your power, Bree."

"Guess we don't need lube."

Julian flashed fangs at him. "What do you think?"

"I suspect vampires like it rough." Bree slipped a hand between himself and Julian, angled his cock just right, and pushed forward with all his strength. He felt his cock pop past a forever-tight ring of muscle and deep into Julian's ass.

Good. Really, really damned good.

Bree worked Julian's cock with an iron fist, pumping it up and down, hard and fast, even as he lunged in and out of his lover's ass like a fucking sex machine, all the while listening to Julian scream out his pleasure. He raised his own voice in a bellow of holy-fucking-hallelujah bliss.

They could have gone on forever, but Bree figured they did have other things to do, after all. He moved his hand just right, tugging on Julian's balls just as he thrust deep into that tight back channel. Then, he just ... let go, as easily as he'd said goodbye to his mortal life, and poured out his first immortal orgasm deep inside Julian's rectum

Holy. Fucking. Hell. Waves of pure black light rolled over Bree in thick flashes. Every muscle in his body spasmed with ecstasy, contracting into hard knots of agony and bliss. For all that, he still felt it when Julian came, arching high and hard, spilling gouts of semen over Bree's hand. Both of them let out screams fit for creatures born in Hell.

Coming down wasn't like it had been before. No boneless, helpless, sweaty flop over his partner's body. Adrenaline, the taste of blood, and a new surge of extra power kept Bree upright, a grin blazing around his fangs, as he pulled out.

"So," he said. "Still think I'm worth the trouble?"

Julian laughed. Not the tired laugh of a man who'd just come hard enough to turn his world upside down and inside out, who should be brain-dead from his mind being blown all to pieces. No, his sound was vibrant with the wild, wicked energy and glee of his kind. *Their* kind.

"Trouble? Bree, you will never be anything but trouble. Now, and ever after. Why do you think I chose you? Not just because I knew you would make a vampire that could face down Lucifer himself, but because I knew you would put me to the test in everything."

"Yeah? So what's my final score?"

"Full marks." Julian reached up to stroke Bree's cheek, fingernails trailing light scratches down his newly scaly skin. The pain was pure bliss. "We'll make this city our own, Bree."

"Yeah? Maybe later. I'd rather eat, fuck, and maybe fuck again. Then we can see about world domination, Pinky." Bree grinned savagely. "Speaking of eating, you want to get up,

find us some clothes, and take me out hunting already? I got a good few tastes in while we were rutting, but I want more. A lot more.”

“Hookers have a good flavor.” Julian sighed and stretched like a happy cat. A happy, horny, saber-toothed tiger in the moonlight. “Let me up, and we’ll do that very thing. You think like one of our kind already, Bree. You make me proud.”

“Whatever. Food, fuck, lather, rinse, repeat, okay? We can talk about ‘proud’ later.”

Julian lifted them both off the floor so easily, Bree knew he’d been letting Bree dominate earlier. Playing along. No big deal. He’d be strong enough soon for a fair fight. He figured Julian knew as much, too.

Bree watched Julian’s gorgeous vampire ass stride away from him toward a dark wardrobe he just knew would be full of really fucking great gear. He leered at his new lover, running his tongue over his fangs, already making plans for their next roll between the sheets -- or on the floor, up against a wall. He wasn’t picky.

“Do you plan to tell your friends?” Julian asked with a casualness Bree could tell right off was feigned “Show them what you’ve become?”

Bree frowned. Not that he minded his changeover one bit, nor would he go back for all the world and a guaranteed spot in Heaven, but he didn’t really want to freak out the Brotherhood with his new look. They were mortal, lesser creatures than him now, but they’d treated him okay. “You got any more fancy masking tricks up your sleeve -- the kind you used to hide your real face earlier? I could use one of them now, I think.”

Julian turned back, arms full of leather pants and vests. His gorgeous eyes sparkled. He smiled, his features melting back into that of a mortal’s. Smooth and even. He handed the clothes off to Bree, then bent to kiss him, a light brush on Bree’s own monster mouth.

“Fuck!” Bree jerked back. Didn’t hurt, but felt strange as all hell, like cool water washing over him. When he reached up to touch his skin, his face and begrudging grin felt as normal as Julian’s. “You’re teaching me how to do that, you know.”

“Am I?”

“You bet your ass.”

“You’d wager an ass as good as mine? I wouldn’t bet yours for a fortune in gold. Not after I’ve waited so long to find my perfect mate.” Julian grinned, licking his lips. “Next time, Bree, it’s my turn. I’ll fuck stars into your eyes.”

“Fair’s fair, and I know I’ll get my share of you, as well.” Bree smiled back, savage and hungry. Not how he’d planned his day to turn out, or what he’d expected out of life, but hell if he wasn’t taking it all and then some, all he could get his hands on. No more masks. No more lies.

He was *Bree* at last.

“Come on, Julian. Let’s go play.”

 THE END 

Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

Just so she doesn't sound entirely dull, Willa has her fun: she is a practicing member of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) and is involved in her community. She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

A secretary for eight years, she now writes full-time -- and wouldn't trade it for the world.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at willsheornillshe@gmail.com or visit her website to check out her work at <http://www.willsheornillshe.com>.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Spindrift

by Jules Jones

Available Now from Loose Id

Spindrift

I woke the next morning to an unfamiliar weight and warmth next to me in the bed. It was some time since I'd taken anyone to this particular bed, so I didn't have trouble remembering that it wasn't a lover I was sharing it with now.

Niall didn't seem to share that view of himself. As I stirred sleepily, he rolled on top of me, his erection rubbing against me.

"Niall!" I spluttered, trying to fend him off.

He looked as bewildered as I felt. "But I thought you liked men?"

So it was deliberate. I shouldn't have had to think about this when I was still half asleep, and when my body was remembering of its own accord that I'd just spent the night in bed with an attractive man. "I like men. But I don't like taking advantage of people." Though there seemed to be some room for doubt as to who was taking advantage of whom -- Niall was refusing to shift and was bigger than me. "You don't have to do this." The image of those silkie women of legend haunted me. Niall, insisting on doing the washing up last night ... "Niall, I took you in because Jock asked me to. Not because I expect anything in return."

"I know," he said, and bent down to kiss me briefly. "That's why I want you."

"Niall, are you gay?"

"There are people I like and people I don't like. Does it matter if they're man or woman?"

Not a straight answer, but as much of an answer as I was likely to get, I suspected. Did it matter, as long as he was doing this because he wanted to rather than because he felt he should?

"Richard, I want to do this." He was unbuttoning my pyjama top as he said it, making it clear with deed as well as words. "I'll stop if you don't want it, but can you say that you don't?" He slid one hand down to squeeze my erect cock through my pyjama trousers.

All I could think of was how good it felt, and how much better it would feel without cloth in the way. I knew I shouldn't be doing this, but Niall was doing his damndest to convince me that I should, and there's only so much temptation a man can resist. I put my arms around him, pulling him down against me, enjoying the feel of his hard, fit body along the length of mine.

"That's better," he said before kissing me again. He tasted slightly of salt, which must have been my imagination, considering his attempt to drain the hot water tank the night before. He felt good in my arms even before he started thrusting against me, his cock rubbing against mine.

The bloody clothes really were getting in the way now, but I didn't want to let go of him for long enough to get them off. I grabbed at the waistband of his pyjama trousers, trying to pull them down enough to free his cock. Frustration at first, with his weight pinning them in place; then he realised what I was doing and lifted his hips slightly, just enough that I could drag the annoying cloth down past them. Oh, god, but I wanted him, wanted to feel his cock right against mine. I hauled my own clothing out of the way, far enough at least that we had skin-to-skin contact where it mattered. I could feel him properly now, hot skin against mine, his cock dragging against me. There was cream in the bedside cabinet, but I couldn't for the life of me let go of him long enough to look for it. It would have to be rough and ready, none of the little refinements.

He deserved better than that, we both did, but it was far too late to stop now. I was almost there already, morning erection on top of sharing the bed being all I'd needed by way of foreplay. He was in similar straits, frantic against me, gasping my name as he hung on to me.

Then he said more than my name. "Want you, Richard. Want this ... with you ..." And it was enough for me.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Spindrift

Spindrift is a touching love story that will leave you wishing for more. After the first few pages, I left reality and was firmly entrenched in the narrative. There is a sensual quality to the writing style that I found especially appealing.

-- Annabelle, *Joyfully Reviewed*

Ms. Jones explores the myth of the selkie, puts her own unique spin on it and has penned another winner in my book.

-- Michelle Naumann, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

The relationship is believable and I couldn't wait to find out how things would turn out. Jules Jones knows how to write a wonderful story with very erotic scenes!

-- Anita, *Enchanted in Romance*