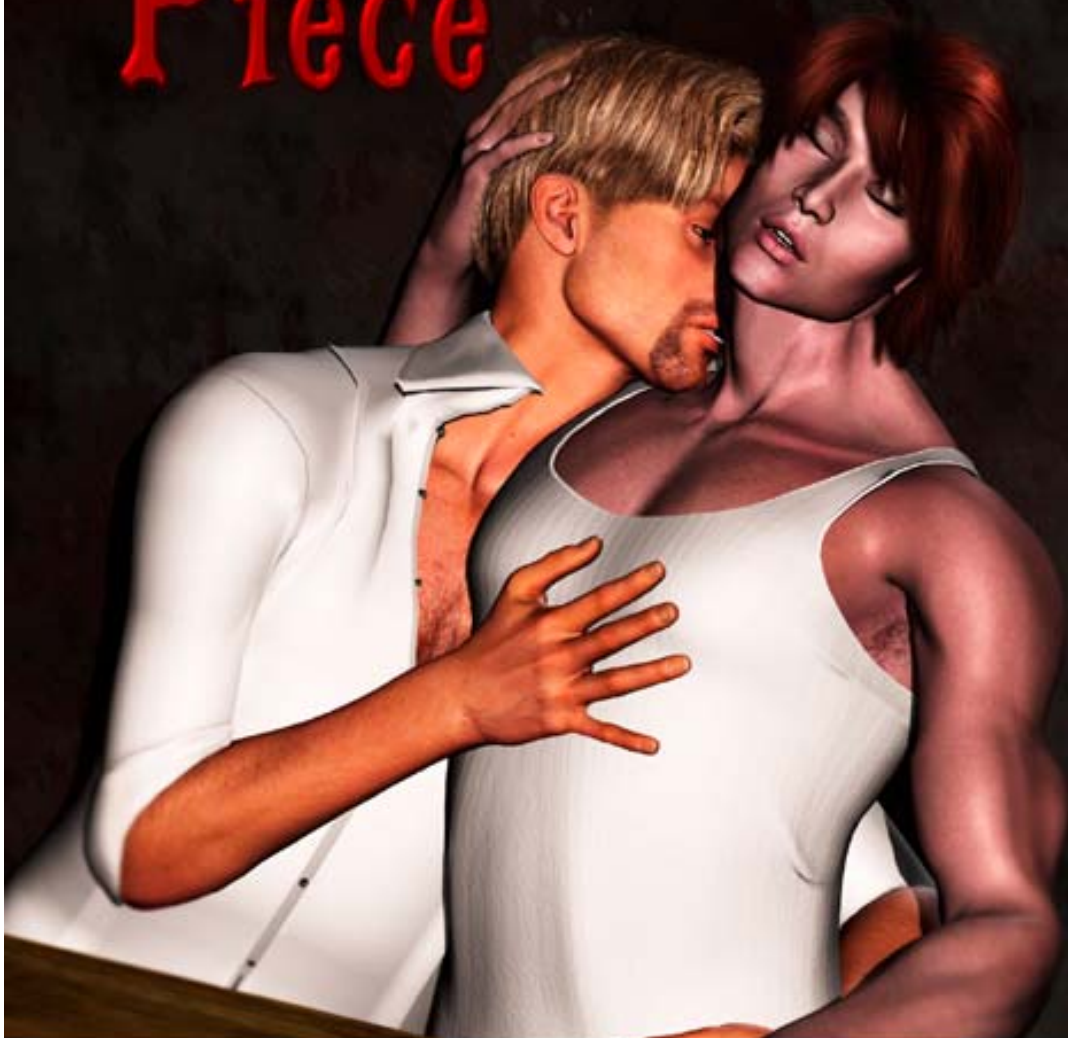


The Brotherhood 4:

Loose Id

Good Luck Piece



Willa Okati

Praise for the writing of Willa Okati

The Brotherhood: Amour Magique

What an intriguing story to start a series with! Ms. Okati has come up with a novel idea of an incubus who needs friends and wants to help them. But I'm not surprised, her stories are always creative and unique. I can't wait for the next book.

-- *Joyfully Reviewed*

With a unique plot and a host of sexy characters, *The Brotherhood: Amour Magique* is a winner... From humor to intrigue, to sexual sophistication, this is a first-class read.

-- Nancy Jackson, *Coffee Time Romance*

The Brotherhood 2: Bite Me

Tie me up, tie me down, do whatever you want as long as I enjoy it as much I enjoyed *The Brotherhood 2: Bite Me*. The writing is fabulous, with thought processes that are just funny as hell, and when the characters start talking to themselves it's damn hilarious.

-- Sin St. Luke, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

The Brotherhood 3: The Dragon's Tongue

I'd have read this in one sitting if real life hadn't intruded. Ms. Okati knows how to draw in a reader and keep them engrossed. Collin is very lovable. You will find yourself rooting for him to find love, and have a few giggles along the way.

-- Astraea, *Enchanted Ramblings*

Amour Magique, *Bite Me*, and *The Dragon's Tongue* are now available from Loose Id.

THE BROTHERHOOD 4: GOOD LUCK PIECE

Willa Okati

LooseId
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Warning

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

The Brotherhood 4: Good Luck Piece

Willa Okati

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Dedication

To my editor, O.W., because she's always there when I need her and has been an unending source of help and encouragement. Mwah!

Chapter One

“There’s a place, a sad and lonely place, they call Last Chance Saloon --”

“Oh, God, he’s singing again.”

“Trey, shut him up!”

Finn ignored the hecklers. Opinions were like ... well. Everybody had one, and everyone was a critic, besides. He took another sip of his apple martini, which he hadn’t ordered and didn’t want, and made a face. You never got what you wanted to drink in the Last Chance. Part of the rules, he supposed. If you were loser enough to be in the “time-out” corner of Amour Magique, you certainly didn’t rate a frosty microbrew for your buck.

Tilting back his head, he warbled on. “If it happens that you end there, you’ve lost your silver spoon --”

“Your silver what, now?”

“What is he talking about?”

“Singing, you mean.”

“You call that singing? Hey, barkeep, come on!”

Trey, the bartender, gave Finn’s hecklers one of the long, blank looks he’d perfected during his years in the Last Chance. It said, *If I have to listen to it, so do you. Shut up.*

Finn chuckled to himself. “What rhymes?” he asked. “One hundred blazing bayonets, one hundred queer dragoons --”

“You don’t even know what a dragoon is!”

“What is a dragoon?”

“Is he mispronouncing ‘dragon’?”

“You bunch of heathens,” Finn tsked, abandoning song for wine, but thankfully not for women as well. “I’m giving a perfectly good floor show, and the lot of you are all but throwing rotten tomatoes at my head.”

“We’ve got a floor show,” one of his compatriots pointed out darkly, jabbing a finger at the security feed monitor that hung as heavy as the threat of a thunderstorm over Trey’s ill-polished bar. Currently showing -- as if it ever had any other feeds -- was a view of the main dance floor at *Amour Magique*.

At this time of the evening, early still, with a bit of sunlight yet remaining outside, the eye candy was scarce. Thin enough that the men who were dancing kept looking around themselves, obviously feeling more or less like fools. That was unless they were one half of a definite couple, wrapped so tightly around each other that you couldn’t squeeze a credit card between them.

Finn focused on the lone pair of men all but fucking on the dance floor, sighed, and lifted his glass. “Best of luck to you, lads,” he said mildly -- and waited.

“God, Finn! You moron!”

“Why’d he have to go and open his mouth?”

“Man, it’s like someone walking out of the original showing of *Empire* and shouting to the people in line, ‘I can’t believe Vader is Luke’s father!’”

“Or walking out of *Titanic* and saying, ‘the boat sank and that kid died!’”

Finn winced. Bad enough that the Last Chance was filled with geeks, dorks, dweebs, putzes, spazzes, no-hopers, and sad sacks -- did they have to be painfully plebian and almost

Trekker in their tastes? Not that he'd anything against Trek, mind you. Riker, now ... *there* was a man who'd send you off to happy, sticky dreams.

Of course, he knew why they were protesting. A good-luck wish from Finn himself meant absolutely the worst was sure to happen as a result. He gave the ooey-gooey, lovey-dovey, happily humping dance partners six hours -- or possibly six days if they were particularly entwined. Most of that time, though, would be spent bitterly fighting, coming up with suspicions of cheating, embezzling, or finding pet peeves swollen fit to bursting with unbridled irritation.

Finn knew all of that, of course, just as he knew his fellow losers in the Last Chance absolutely hated to see a good love story go belly up. He'd nothing against the gropes-and-groins types, but what the hell? If he didn't have a prayer himself of ever finding happiness with a man, why should they get to have fun?

Childish, yes, and most days he might be inclined to let them walk on by. Just not this day. His fellow romantics had been criticizing his singing, so he thought he'd teach them a lesson.

"Boys," he said, twirling the stem of his martini glass, "Don't be greedy. I've got plenty of wishes to go around. Who's first? Step on up."

The Last Chancers drew back as if he were waving a bloody axe in their faces.

"N-n-n-n-no, Finn, that's okay," one bulgy, spotted type in a Wookie T-shirt hastily piped up. "We're fine with you doing your thing. Go on ahead."

Finn smiled to himself. "Then tell me how much you like my singing."

There was a moment of utter silence. Though he couldn't see them, Finn could almost *feel* the Chancers staring at each other in terror. He took pity on them at last, tilting his head back to laugh. "Oh, relax, would you? I've had my fun for tonight. And, look here, I'll fix it."

“You? Fix it?” a braver geek than most dared to ask. Finn could hear the young man taking off his glasses and polishing them nervously. *Squeak-squeak-squeak*. “I didn’t think you could ...”

Finn shrugged. “Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t.” He glanced up at the view screen. The dancing couple had already pulled apart to talk -- or rather, start an argument. For all the angry words their lips were shaping, they were still plastered over each other like putty on drywall.

“Better give it up now,” Finn said solemnly. “You’ll never find a way to make this relationship work. You’re no good for each other, and you never will be. Walk away, and never see each other again.”

A breathless pause fell over the Last Chance. Finn took a cautious sip of his martini and waited.

On the view screen, the couple’s angry expressions melted into ones of fondness, and they moved together for a tender kiss. A kiss that should have had the backing of an orchestra, music swelling as triumphantly as the cocks in their tightly fitted jeans. The Chancers provided their own Greek chorus of, “Aww!” Even Trey gave a terse nod before flipping a grubby polishing towel over his shoulder and schlepping away to avoid refilling an empty glass.

Finn gave a silent, shuddering sigh and tipped back the last of his drink. Really, he hadn’t been sure his reversal would do the trick. Sometimes it worked, but most often he couldn’t undo what he’d done. Maybe it was a sign -- or a good omen.

He snorted a quiet laugh. Good omens? *Him?* He was there to tell anyone who’d listen that the twain would never meet. He’d been plagued with bad luck and the curse of ill-wishing for hundreds of years, ever since he’d been unceremoniously booted off the ould sod and onto the first ship passing by. His kin had wanted nothing more to do with Finn, claiming he was an embarrassment, a throwback, and possibly a half-blood.

Frankly, he couldn't blame them, although he did heartily enjoy hating them from guts to garters. After all, how else did you explain a six-foot-tall leprechaun who looked younger than forty, had lost his pot of gold, couldn't see the rainbows for being color-blind, and screwed up every single wish he was asked to grant?

No wonder the only room Amour Magique would allow him in was the Last Chance Bar & Grill. Filthy, noisome place it was, full of pimply faces and pudgy bellies, the sad sacks of the gay world, whether paranormal Jakes or ordinary Joes. Not his choice of company, nor even a good watering hole, but, eh, sometimes you wanted to go where everyone knew your name -- and had a taste of healthy respect for you.

He just wished it extended to Trey, who took perverse pleasure in blocking off the beer taps and mixing whatever frou-frou drink took his fancy instead of pulling pints of hearty stout a man or beast could properly savor. He'd have loved to know Trey's story. Mortal, or so it would appear, until you considered he'd been moping sullenly behind the Last Chance bar for at least a couple hundred years.

Not that the drinks mattered so much to Finn. He didn't care if any of the blokes in the Last Chance thought he looked daft holding a glass of day-glow green liqueur, because he could just as easily turn around and hoot at them for their own fruity drinks with the little umbrellas and cherries on sticks.

Besides, he couldn't get drunk. And wasn't that a rotten shame for someone who hailed from Ireland? All part and parcel of the curse, though. Alas.

Finn sent his glass careening down the rough, well-scarred bar top toward Trey. "Another, my good man," he said genially. "Looks like it'll be an interesting show tonight."

He hid his grin when the yowls of indignation started up again, and began singing under his breath. "Oh, they call me cotton-pickin' Finn, and this is where I will begin, deep in the house of rolling sin, and this is the song that never ends ..."

Laughing to himself, he took his astonishingly, actually refilled glass -- something garish and pink this time -- and raised it to the view screen. Challenging Amour Magique to do its best or its worst.

Being stuck in the Last Chance meant he'd never find a man of his own, thanks to his own permanent case of bad luck. There'd never be a man for him unless some other poor sod came along with equally bad karma heavily hanging over his fool head, so he might as well enjoy himself vicariously and watch other folks get ... well, lucky.

"Here we are, now," he said, mockingly. "Entertain us."

He tilted back his glass and drank to love.

Chapter Two

“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s *amore* ...” Liam warbled, flitting his way through Simon’s apartment like the greatest Nelly who ever lived, all but doing a little jig on the perfectly vacuumed carpet.

Simon winced at the sight of slightly dirty footprints scuffing up the neat ivory nap he’d paid more than a considerable sum for. He stifled the urge to run in the crazy little homosexual’s wake with a vacuum cleaner and a damp sponge. Liam being Liam, he’d either take it as a challenge, think Simon was playing a game or laugh him to scorn for being such an incredible priss.

Simon didn’t feel like being laughed at. He got enough of that during his everyday life, thanks. Even more whenever the Brotherhood met. Oh, they might pretend they were grateful to him for winning most of their cases in the courtroom, and they showed up for the support group-style meetings for the food and wine, but he knew they respected him about as much as -- he winced -- carpet fuzz.

“Liam, really!” he had to protest at last, when his unwelcome visitor burst into *Figaro* and began doing pirouettes. “If you must do that, at least take off your sneakers!”

Liam paused mid-swirl and grinned at Simon with a saucy wink. “What? Do you begrudge me my good mood?” he asked, the picture of innocence. “Come, Simon -- laugh, live, celebrate! Tonight we visit Amour Magique. I’ve dreamed of this moment for ages now.”

“All of a week or more,” Simon mumbled, giving in to his urge and going to hunt down his Dust Buster. He paused at the first stain on the carpet and stared in horror. “Liam, what is -- what did you walk through on your way here?”

“Oh, a bit of construction.” Liam waved Simon’s gasp aside. “Be at ease, tidy man. I shall see to it that a proper housekeeping staff comes to polish your oh-so-pristine condominium back into perfect condition tomorrow morning.” He gave Simon a sly wink. “If you wish for company besides that which you bring home, I mean to say.”

Simon huffed. He had a terrible urge to plant his hands on his hips and glare, but discarded the notion as being too fey even for dealing with Liam. “Please believe me when I say you can go ahead and place the call to a top-quality cleaning service right now,” he said flatly. “I have no intention of bringing anyone home with me.”

Liam made a moue with his lips. Almost girlishly pretty, his pout. Simon shuddered. “Spoilsport.”

“I am not. I’m just ...” Simon ran a hand through the short hair on the back of his neck. “Practical. God knows someone has to be, and it certainly isn’t you.” A thought occurred to him. “You haven’t been filling the other Brothers’ heads with this kind of talk, have you? Encouraging them to bring home one-night stands?”

Liam looked innocent as a baby angel and actually said, “Who, I?”

Simon felt his temper rising. “You have. Don’t try to cover your tracks. You *have* been filling their heads with stories about ...” He made a face. “... hot, sweaty musclemen aching for a heartbroken beauty, just waiting for them to come along. A real Cinderella story. I can almost hear you now, promising them sex like they’ve never dreamed of and pretty boys

panting at their heels. It's the kind of rubbish you'd come up with, and I won't stand for it, do you hear me? Do you?"

Liam shrugged airily. "I have boosted the confidence of a few," he said, as casually as if they were discussing lamb chops and peas. "Those who needed it. Bree, Christian, David, Quentin ..."

"Liam!"

"No, I am quite secure in my own appeal, thank you." Liam dimpled at Simon. "You, on the other hand, now. I wonder if perhaps you do not need a pep talk yourself?"

Simon's temper clicked up another notch. He was sure he could feel his blood pressure spiking. "Liam, you irresponsible, devil-may-care, fly-by-night, idiotic play-boy boy-toy, you have absolutely no sense of responsibility, and you were clearly off enjoying an orgy when they handed out a sense of moral conscience."

In response to Simon's tirade, Liam collapsed into a leather chair and laughed himself almost sick. He even rolled back and forth, holding his ribs while he gasped for air. Tears ran down his cheeks with each spurt of giggles.

The gauge on Simon's temper reached its top and cracked. "Liam!" he thundered in his best courtroom voice. He reached for the young man's cell phone and shoved it in his pretty face. "You get on here right now and call all the Brothers. Every single man. You're going to tell them you made a mistake, and that this whole charade is off."

"Off?" Liam snickered again, looking up at Simon with bewildering fondness. "Tonight will proceed exactly as planned. I have said this will happen, and so it shall come to pass."

"I see." Simon scowled. "And do you plan on paying for HIV tests, herpes medication, drug rehabilitation, and therapy bills, as well? Because unless you've been living in a cave for the past few years, you don't understand the Brothers. Some of them may look tough or act rough, but they've all been hurt, Liam. Badly hurt."

He dropped to one knee, all the better to gather his strength and look Liam in the eye. “Liam ... how can I explain? How do I make you understand where they -- we -- are all coming from? They’ve gone to courts of law to find some sort of justice against the kind of damage caused by the idiotic love-’em-and-leave-’em hook-ups you’re deliberately influencing the men to try again. Have you lost your mind?”

“Oh, no, no, not at all. I --”

“You can’t lose what you don’t have,” Simon said bitterly. He hunkered down to vacuum up a red clay smudge from his pristine carpet. It smeared wetly into a Rorschach splotch and refused to budge. He dropped his head onto his knee and sighed. “I should have put a stop to this before it ever even started.”

Silence ruled behind him. Simon vaguely registered the leathery slither of Liam lifting himself gracefully off the leather seat, but still jumped when he felt a slim, warm hand come to rest upon his shoulder.

“Simon,” Liam crooned. “So full of fears. You doubt and question every good thing that might come your way so that you do not have the sense to seize a blessing when it is handed to you. So accustomed to the worst of circumstances and luck that you cannot see the fortune for the trees bent in the force of the ill winds that blow.”

Simon gritted his teeth and rolled his shoulder, trying to shrug Liam off. “Don’t presume you know anything about me,” he warned. “I mean it. Stay out of my affairs.”

“Ah, but there lies the problem! You have no affairs. Not *affaires de coeur*, the affairs that matter.”

Liam had the nerve to begin rubbing Simon’s shoulder. “I know you fear,” he said softly. “The man who did you so very wrong and etched the dread of diseases and betrayal deep into your heart will not go unpunished in the long run, even though your own lawyer lost your case against him.

“I know this is why you have devoted yourself to helping out the Brotherhood, even though you scarcely like half and can hardly stand the others,” Liam recited with the cadence of a storyteller. “I know you think they laugh at you, Simon, but what do you do to discourage them?”

“They see you as a stern father from olden times best forgotten, not a gay man, not a modern fellow, but one who is forever frowning and scowling, forbidding them to live and laugh and love again. If you were only to relax your grip on your determination to keep them safe from themselves ...”

Liam sighed. “You are like a parent, Simon. So fixed on keeping them from falling that you refuse to let them learn to walk on their own two feet. That is the purpose of this visit to Amour Magique. Some may be in for a tumble or two, but I believe most, if not all, will pick themselves back up and stride strongly toward a better future. You could join them, if you would only let yourself.”

Simon stayed still, face buried in his knees. He took deep breaths, steadying himself. He’d known everything Liam had just told him was fact, but gods, it hurt, having each of his faults laid out so plain and bare. “Liam, go away,” he muttered. “If you’re not going to call the Brotherhood, then I will.”

“It’s too late,” Liam said simply. His hand left Simon’s shoulder, and he stood. “In one hour, we are to meet outside Amour Magique. Many have already begun to travel or are making ready to. You cannot turn this evening aside. Neither a change of venue, nor a motion to dismiss.”

“You dare to mock me with my own vocabulary --”

“I dare, I dare, I dare.” Liam sounded impatient. “Swallow this truth, Simon, bitter as it may be, for you will not allow yourself any sugar to sweeten the dose. Our adventure tonight has been decided upon, it shall be accomplished, and the only thing I may suggest to you is this -- make the best of it.”

Simon shook his head. "It's dangerous," he whispered. "Do you know what kinds of things can happen to people who trust strangers without making sure they know that person inside and out? It's what brought us all here. Only fools trust."

"Why do fools, then, fall in love?" Liam asked quietly.

Simon found he had no answer.

"Simon," Liam said, still calm and patient. "You fear disaster so much that you refuse to take a chance on victory. Here, let me give you a gift. No matter how awful things may seem, any piece of bad luck can be changed to good fortune, and fortune favors the brave among us. Fear not, but sally boldly forth. You, too, may find the pot of gold that men quest for, the prize you sought before you became too afraid to hunt."

Simon felt Liam's warm fingers brush through his hair, trailing across the tips. "Someone to love, who will love you in return. What does it matter where you meet him -- in a pick-up club or on the job or through a Yenta who has matched you point for point? Love comes where it will, to whom it will, and I have gone to much great trouble to give every Brother his best chance tonight. Perhaps their last chance."

Liam chuckled softly, though Simon couldn't see the humor. "Be brave, Simon. I know what's on your mind and in your heart."

Simon stiffened. Liam couldn't -- He didn't -- How? "What?" he rasped, looking up.

Liam was smiling at him, beatific as an angel, far more beautiful than any being had a right to look. He held out a brown paper bag, the top neatly folded down, which Simon had stashed next to his briefcase.

"Here," he said. "I am not easily fooled, you know. You crave one hour in the glory of the spotlight, Simon, and I believe that you will get it. But do not expect the world to conform to your standards, or you will be sorely disappointed."

He placed the bag by Simon's foot. "I go now and will leave you in peace. But I trust you will arrive at Amour Magique by the appointed hour," he said. "Carry this in secret if

you feel you must. But trust me, Simon, when I say that tonight is the first night of the rest of your life -- if only you will let it happen.”

Simon rested his head on his knees again, too embarrassed to look up at the other man. He heard the sounds of the nancy little Nelly mincing out, graceful as a *danseur*, shutting the door behind him with a dignified soft *click*.

Only then did he relax his total self-control and begin to shudder. Liam did this to him every time. He knew things he shouldn't. Things he couldn't. He slipped into a man's mind and twisted his thoughts like a sourdough pretzel, leaving one kinked up in mental knots for hours. He'd done that since the first day he'd been with them ... whenever that was.

Simon didn't remember exactly when Liam had joined the Brothers. There was a gray spot in his memory, fuzzed-out like a photograph out of focus, where Liam had entered his life. One day, not there. The next day, exploding in their midst. Simon didn't like what he didn't understand, and he didn't understand Liam. Never had and, he suspected, never would.

Sometimes -- and there, he stifled a laugh -- he wondered if Liam was really human. It often seemed like he couldn't be. Everywhere at once, knowing every hidden secret ... like the contents of the brown paper bag. Simon hadn't seen him open it, hadn't heard the paper crinkling, so unless Liam had been lurking behind a rack when Simon had made his purchase, there was no way he could have been aware of the contents. Yet he *was*. And, of all things, it felt like he'd given Simon his blessing. As if he needed Liam's approval!

Simon sank back onto his ass, letting himself be even more undignified for the moment. He knew what he had in mind was farther down the crazy path than Liam's idea to attend Amour Magique *en masse* in the first place. Yet from the moment the idea had become a plan, Simon hadn't been able to shake his crazy yearning to be ... free.

He knew he was a hopeless fogley. Just thirty-eight years of age. It was his job and his duty as the head of the Brothers that had made him ... careworn. He knew how to have fun.

Honestly, he did. Still, the role he played made him too old to be attractive, too starchy to be appealing as a friend, and too cautious to be any fun. But for one night -- no, not even one night. For one *hour*, he ached to let his hair down. To do everything he'd counseled against with all his common sense strongly at the fore.

He wanted to laugh. To love. To dance. To live. Just for one hour.

And Liam knew it.

Simon stared at the shopping bag, half-tempted to throw it in the garbage, then lock the door to his condo, unplug the phones and indulge in the good Scotch he kept for special occasions and drink himself to a solid, dreamless, stupefied sleep.

He would, if he could have taken his eyes off the bag and stopped himself from dreaming about what lay inside.

Slowly, slowly, he reached out and picked it up. The sounds of rustling paper, sliding raw silk and the slithery notes of leather sang a sweet song of temptation in his ears, infecting his mind. Simon could feel his good sense sliding away like a protective shell, and it terrified him.

He hugged the bag to his chest and let out a deep sigh. "Just one hour," he promised himself. "One hour, and no one else ever has to know. And I'll be careful. I'll watch out for the Brothers the rest of the time. I'll keep me -- *them* -- safe. I swear." A broken chuckle escaped him. "I don't care about luck, good or bad, but I want my one hour in the sun. God help me, I want it too much to say no.

"That'll be enough for me. It will have to be enough."

Opening his eyes, Simon gazed at the bag as if seeking absolution. It crinkled back at him, offering nothing but temptation.

A treat he knew he couldn't resist biting into.

He stood, straightening his crumpled suit. Tucked the bag under his arm and made for the door that would let him out into the big, bad world. To his surprise, he found himself singing softly, under his breath, “Some enchanted evening ...”

Chapter Three

Nine o'clock, and all was definitely not well -- at least not for the sorry bastards stuck in the Last Chance Bar & Grill, Amour Magique's home for the hopeless. Trey didn't seem fazed at all. However, as the view screen filled with writhing bodies, some half-naked, some oiled down deliberately, and some slick with sweat, humping and bumping and grinding, the Chancers grew ever more glum and dour. Most had long since sagged into their parti-colored glasses of filthy-tasting mixed drinks.

Finn watched the main dance crowd with a mixture of awe and jealousy. Gods of Old Ireland, had he ever been that young, that enthusiastic? These hot-blooded gay men threw themselves into the music and the crush of eager, horny bodies as if they had only a few hours left to live -- live, dance, and fuck. They tore into the thumping beat like death row inmates devouring their last steak dinners.

Finn found himself drooling and dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a crumpled bar napkin he'd been playing tic-tac-toe on. Smudged his one-man losing streak all to hell, but what did it matter?

To amuse himself, he waved his napkin at the screen like the Queen of Olde Merrie. "Pip, pip, boys, good show!" he chirped. "Carry on!"

“Finn!”

“Finn, shut up!”

“You’re gonna spoil it!”

Other napkins, wadded up, used straws, and bits of unsalted pretzel, burned popcorn, and bitter peanuts flew threw the air. The luck of the Bar & Grill would have caused most to miss, but Finn’s own twist meant that almost every projectile pinged off his scalp or tangled in his elf-knotted hair.

“Hey!” He twisted around and glared. “Anyone in here want me to wish them the best night of their lives? Huh? Anyone?”

The Chancers shrank back into their seats, suitably quelled. Finn harrumphed and settled down to watch the show. He tilted his head with interest as a knot of unknown men entered. Unknown except for the one fellow whom he recognized -- Liam, the incubus. He who’d bartered one of his mother’s -- Lilith’s -- tears to Silas for some big-time favor. Lots of folks talking about it, but no one knew the truth. He wondered, idly, what Liam had reckoned worth trading.

Then he wondered who the hell Liam had seen fit to drag in there with him. A crowd of men, twelve all told, of the flavors a good fellow came in and only one of them not a mundane. They’d end up as tasty treats for some ravening beast if they didn’t watch out. Some were hauled into the dancing mob right away, a few ran as fast as they could and others -- well, they went *blip* and vanished off the screen.

Finn knew what that meant. Amour Magique had other plans for them. He almost raised his glass, then carefully put it back down and pressed his hand atop the rim. He wouldn’t wish this lot of men good luck. He actually wanted them to have some.

Wistful, he glanced back up just as the camera zoomed in on Liam’s laughing face. All curls and laughter, smiles and fine times. Marvelous things followed in the wake of an incubus bent on blessing his chosen friends. Especially if they liked sex.

Gods, would Finn like some sex. Lots of it, yes, please, the good old meat and two veggies, with a side of prime beef and some cheesecake for dessert. He looked the crowd over, idling for a second over a daydream involving the incubus himself. Some whipped cream, cherries and, possibly, yes, possibly chocolate syrup or melted caramel ...

Ding!

Finn flinched as he, and the rest of the Chancers, looked up automatically. The bell over Trey's bar only rang when another loser had entered the club.

Someone who'd never find anyone outside in the sweaty masses yearning to break free and boogie.

Someone doomed to enter the Last Chance itself and spend his evening, his week or the rest of his life waiting with a hope that would never ripen into reality.

"Bet it's one of Liam's friends," Finn heard someone mutter behind him. He tensed, gritting his jaw. It had better not be. He didn't know why, but he was rooting for all those blokes to succeed. Find someone well worth their while and have a happy round of orgasms to celebrate.

"Shut up," he muttered, then winced and covered his ears.

Sure enough, the man who'd dared to snark started singing at the top of his lungs under Finn's bad-luck curse. He decided not to lift the ill-wishing right away -- bastard deserved it for being such a sourpuss.

Of course, that meant he was in for some punishment himself. Hunched down to avoid another barrage of objects being thrown at him, Finn focused hard on the view screen instead.

Come on, he urged the knot of dispersing men who'd entered Amour with Liam. *Come on. Win one for the home team, boyos! You can do it!*

"I can't do this," Simon muttered to himself, even as he latched closed the bathroom stall door. "I have no idea what even caused me to begin to think that I could do this." He placed his paper bag neatly on the back of the toilet, on the pristine lid, staring at it uneasily as if it might bite.

Pinching the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb, he groaned -- softly. This restroom seemed rather posh for what he'd expected out of a dance club, but honestly, from the stories he'd heard, one never knew what went on inside washroom stalls. He certainly didn't want anyone thinking he was getting, er, "seen to" by an amorous lover. Oh, hell.

Yes, he *did* want someone to think that very thing. At the very least it would take away the sting from the looks the Brotherhood had cast at him as they waited outside Amour Magique.

Look at Simon -- he wore a suit! Can you believe it? A suit!

Disgust, embarrassment, amusement, and an arch, all-knowing look from Liam. It had been almost more than he could bear. He'd bee-lined into the men's as soon as he could extricate himself, but now that he was here ... was he losing his small store of nerve?

The bag shifted slightly, contents settling, but Simon eyed it with sharp and wary suspicion. Was the awful thing *tempting* him? Taunting him? Challenging him that he didn't have the ner-- the *balls* to take the contents and make good use of them?

Well, the hell with that. Simon gave his tie a sharp jerk, loosening it with the practice of a man who'd worn them every day for over a decade, and threw it to the spotless latrine floor. They'd see who was braver than whom, they would!

Then he bent and picked up the expensive scrap of silk hastily. Germs. Holding it between two fingers, he deposited it on the hook behind the stall door.

He stopped and laughed at himself. Really, it was too ridiculous. And, he felt, the time had passed to stop playing games and acting the circus clown, whether one wreathed in smiles or tears. Time to put on the Harlequinade instead.

Reaching into the bag, Simon pulled out the items he'd bought three days before -- after midnight in a small downtown shop that catered to a certain ... clientele. He'd never have been seen in there during daylight hours, and if any of the Brotherhood had heard rumors of his visit, he'd have denied them to his dying day. But once he'd seen what hung in their windows, he'd been no more able to stop himself from going straight in to be fitted than he would be able to tell his heart to stop beating or his lungs to stop breathing.

The fitting had been an experience in exquisite torture. The shop boy had grinned and flirted, making no bones about the fact that he thought Simon was "damn edible, man," all the while taking deeply intimate measurements and then kitting him out to the nines. He'd even insisted on Simon trying the whole ... outfit ... on, just to be sure it all fit.

Simon had almost, almost invited the boy back home. Only good sense had stopped him in the nick of time. Who knew what diseases the stranger could carry? And he had good reason to know that, despite all precautions, condoms could rupture. He still broke out into a cold sweat at the thought of Roger and the diseases he'd carried, all unmentioned, until Simon had found out that his ex-lover had been cheating.

Simon paid for his mistake in trusting Roger once a month. So far all his results had been negative. He knew it was foolishness to keep checking, especially as he'd been celibate, but he still paid the lab bill every thirty days with a prayer of thanks that he had somehow escaped any diseases himself.

Sober now, he held up a handful of leather straps and gave them a serious look along with a series of light tugs. He thought he remembered how they all connected, complicated snaps and zips notwithstanding. The vest, the PVC pants, the boots, all of them in unrelieved black. They even displayed the tattoo he'd been foolish enough to get in his younger years -- an innocent enough shamrock and thistle, gotten to impress a fiddler in a Celtic band. The crush he'd had on that lovely, lissome young man ...

He'd give anything to recapture one of those golden hours spent sipping mead and listening to the songs of Ireland. On the other hand, the thought of tarding himself up in

leather and bondage gear was just about as appealing, startling even himself. But really -- talk about hiding in plain sight! Once he'd dressed himself up and even applied a light coat of makeup the way the shop boy had instructed, no one would recognize him as Lawyer Simon.

They might even cast a glance his way and think, *Fuck, he's hot. Wish I could get lucky with someone like him.*

Grinning, Simon began to unbutton his neat, white linen shirt, folding it carefully to go in the bag. One hour, he'd promised himself, and one hour he would have. He'd be Cinderfella at the ball; he'd dance, laugh, and perhaps even share bittersweet, yeasty, beery kisses with some of the beautiful men he'd seen.

For one hour, he would *shine*.

And after that, he'd go back to being his old self in every way that mattered. But he'd be all the happier for it because he'd have the memory to keep him warm at night in his lonely bed. He'd know that for one moment, he'd been wanted. He'd been golden. He'd been a god.

A memory like that could keep a man going for the rest of his life.

Simon sighed happily in anticipation, and began to dress himself in the finest of the skimpiest submissive gear available in the Charlestonian gay-friendly markets.

He didn't even flinch when he fastened the cock ring into place.

Tonight *would* be a night to remember.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

Finn glared up at the bell over the bar. Then he turned his gimlet eye out on the crowd of Last Chancers, all of whom were quiet as little mice. He hadn't let up on the song ill-wishing until after the third chorus of "How Great Thou Art," and none of them wanted to be in that particular set of shoes, thanks very much. But all the same, they knew what that sound meant.

Someone was definitely coming their way tonight.

Trey glanced at the bell, then at Finn. He raised one shoulder, ennui radiating off him in nigh palpable waves.

Finn bristled. “No one says a word,” he bit out, quickly following it with, “Everyone speak up!”

Mouths that had flown open snapped shut. A barful of terrified eyes were riveted on Finn. One man slowly raised his hand. Finn rolled his eyes, but nodded. He could speak, since he’d shown a bit of manners.

“Finn, we can’t help him,” the guy ventured, tugging at the hem of his glow-in-the-dark, light-saber T-shirt. “I mean, whoever he is, the club knows. The bar knows. He’s gonna end up here, and we can’t do anything to help him.”

Finn bared his teeth. The man stumbled over his words, trying to backpedal but hold his ground at the same time. “Look, it might not be one of those guys who came in with Liam. I know you want them to have a good time. I don’t know why, but, hey, not questioning you there, buddy. I wish everyone could have fun. But some of us ...” He lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. “Some guys just belong here. It’s where Fate puts us.”

Finn glared at the geek, then deliberately turned his back, watching the screen. He could just pick out Liam dancing in the midst of a crowd, his laughter soundless in the midst of the chaos, but oh, he could imagine the joy it held.

Well, he didn’t know why he was rooting for the lot of the incubus’s men, either, but be damned if he’d go changing his mind about them now. No matter who, no matter what.

Simon stepped out of the *Amour Magique* rest room and stopped to shiver. By God, it was colder in the club than it had felt when he’d been swaddled up in a three-piece suit! Bits of leather and non-warming plastic didn’t lend themselves to keeping a fellow toasty -- that was, until he got out on the floor to dance.

He glanced down at himself, silently approving. The shop boy had told him he looked good enough to lick up, and while he'd gone red and embarrassed at such frank wording by a stranger, he'd secretly ... agreed.

He wasn't in bad shape at all for a man his age, although it wasn't quite so awfully advanced. He had yet to see forty for another couple of birthdays. He jogged and occasionally lifted weights -- he'd seen too many other lawyers either grow sour and painfully thin from living on coffee, or bloated with lunches at their local diners, and dreaded the thought of ending up in that condition. Therefore, while he might not make the cover of *Fit Monthly*, he had nothing to be ashamed of with his tone and tautness either.

He straightened up with a brisk shake and tested out a bold stride toward the doors that would lead him back onto the main dance floor. As he passed a bank of pay phones, out of the corner of his eye he saw a ripped young ebony man and his partner, skin tone rich as butterscotch, twined about one another. The dark man glanced at Simon and grinned as their eyes met, letting out a low wolf whistle. His partner dropped his eyelids to half-mast and blew Simon a kiss.

Simon had to laugh for glee. Fortunately, he thought they understood he wasn't amused at them. The dark man said in a heavy Jamaican accent, "Pants like that, I can tell a man's religion." He gave Simon a cheerful leer. "Jewish, no?"

Simon winked, rocked his hips, and sailed on, proud as he could be. The men's appreciative laughter behind him gave him all the hope he felt he was possibly able to hold.

Opening the doors to the dance floor, he took a deep breath of men, sweat and sex. The aroma washed over him in a dizzying wave.

Oh, yes.

This is my moment.

The bell above the Last Chance bar sounded like a damned dinner gong. Finn glared fiercely at Trey, who, without so much as a blink, took it down and wrapped it in a towel, then shoved it underneath a box of empty bottles. They could still hear the chimes, a sort of damned tell-tale heart, but at least they were somewhat muffled.

“Finn ...” the light-saber shirted twit dared to venture. “Come on, man. Be reasonable.”

Finn winged an empty martini glass at him. Well, a plastic glass, if that was even a viable phrase. It didn’t hurt the guy, just splashed him with a bit of leftover day-glow strawberry juice, but it got his point across. He hoped his glare conveyed the message. *Not another word. Not another single word from any of you.*

Gods, one would think they were happy to have another poor bastard join their ranks.

Reasonable? *Fuck* reasonable! Simmering, Finn turned back to the screen. He couldn’t bear to look away for long -- the need to seek out Liam or one of his groupies had almost become an obsession. He jonesed after the sight of the men like a hooker after grade Z street crank.

The camera angle switched suddenly and Finn groaned, wishing he had something else to throw. It had trained its all-seeing eye on the opening doors to the main dance floor, through which was entering ...

Finn’s mouth fell open. By gods, by gosh and begorra, if that wasn’t the most delicious looking piece of sub candy he’d ever seen in his hundreds of long-lived, bad luck-filled years. Dressed in straps of leather and barely there PVC pants with clear plastic windows that displayed one shapely ass cheek and lengths of thigh and calf, as well as a seriously impressive package right where it should be -- oh, sweet Patrick, have mercy!

He ignored the tortured, longing groans going up from the Last Chancers behind him. Anything besides the sight of that man, every bit of him on display from kohled eyes to trim black boots, from tousled hair to bulging cock -- which had to have a ring or a cage on underneath those pants -- wasn’t anything Finn wanted to be distracted by.

He lifted someone else's glass to his mouth and gulped to ease the dryness. He fidgeted to take off the pressure in his suddenly aching cock. That man was an invitation to boner-dom on legs, he was, and if there was one piece of good fortune ever due to come Finn's way in the past present, or future, he'd have wished for it to be that gorgeous, drool-worthy hunk of man, on his knees before him.

"Ah, gods," he whispered, completely forgetting himself. "May you have the best night of your life, laddie."

The Last Chance bar went utterly silent and still.

They all heard the Loser-Bell pop out of its hiding place and hit the floor, chiming like a cuckoo clock gone mad.

Finn shut his eyes and groaned. *Oh, shit. Oh, gods. Oh, no.* He looked up, praying he could fix the damage before it was --

Nope. Already far too late.

Chapter Four

The music hit Simon like a thousand volts of electricity, straight to the chest. An anti-heart attack. He arched backward, supple as he hadn't been in years, feeling the sounds of men and drums racing through him better than any drug he'd normally counsel the desperate not to use.

Tonight, he needed this fix. No, more than needed it -- he craved it, was desperate for the roll of lust as powerful as a blast of uncut cocaine, or so he imagined. He'd never dabbled in the real pharmaceuticals, but if they gave a man a rush like this, he thought he might begin to understand why others so often fell into their trap and craved them.

But no, he didn't want to think. He didn't want to be Lawyer Simon, analyzing and weighing each fact before formulating a cunning strategy to beat the others at their own game. He wanted to *play* the game. Play to win, yes, but not to defeat the other contestants.

With a wild laugh of abandon, feeling as unlike his three-piece-self as he could possibly be, Simon threw himself bodily into the crush of dancers, moving as best as he was able to the beat. He hadn't danced in years, but this wasn't like a tango or a foxtrot, was it? This was more making love -- no, *fucking* -- with your clothes on, or what little clothes one did have.

It'd been a long time since he'd done that, too, but he decided he'd give it his best possible shot. And, hey, it seemed as if he wasn't making too big a mess out of it. He felt the weight of eyes landing on him everywhere he thrust and whirled. Saw smiles, bright and white and approving, on men's faces when they looked at him in his leather and plastic.

One man in particular, young, hair buzzed so short as to be almost not there at all, caught Simon's eye. Too muscled and too brutish for his everyday taste, but then, this wasn't every day, was it? Rocking to the beat, the man held out a hand and beckoned Simon to him. A Dom calling his potential sub? Simon's heart beat fast enough to hurt -- such a delicious pain.

Smiling back, coy and seductive, he danced his way toward the one who called him.

In the Last Chance, every man Jack sat fastened to their seats as if they'd been bolted in place, staring at the "D"-for-"delicious" sub as he made his way through the crush of dancers on Amour Magique's main floor.

Finn fumed at the whole of the viewing audience, each member bearing the same expression of scorching lust and cringing pity, with a dash of shame for spice.

The poor bastard submissive might have thought he was doing well, dancing like a practiced seduction artist, but in truth he was living proof of the time-honored axiom ... white men truly, absolutely, could not dance. He jerked like a spastic puppet on a set of epileptic strings, each move clumsy and uncoordinated, all but knocking down and out several men as he passed them by.

Finn's teeth were gritted so tightly he thought they might crack. It wasn't fair, by gods, not fair at all! This man, whoever he might be, was a tasty enough candy that he deserved far better than he was sure to get. He needed someone to teach him how to use his body as a weapon in a sexual war, not fling himself about like a whack-a-mole hammer.

A physique like his, a smile like the one he wore, full of childlike glee, glowing with happiness -- it'd all but kill Finn when the inevitable came crashing down. Amour Magique's dancers on the main floor were very, very good at what they did, and they knew the power of dance -- which were originally the tools with which gods were summoned and were now a physical prayer to the deities of lust for getting lucky. They wouldn't take kindly to the uncoordinated and ignorant man crashing into their midst. If the sub got off with his life, he'd be lucky. But Finn knew he might well wish he hadn't been so fortunate when they were done with him.

He took a sip of bitter beer and shuddered as it washed down. He'd all but begged Trey for something seriously hard and alcoholic, like Jaeger or Absolut, but the bartender, with his usual blank-faced apathy, had given him a longneck Bud Lite instead.

Finn knew better than to argue, but as he sucked on the grain-flavored water he thought Trey might have been trying to make a subtle point with his choice. The beer was as salty and stinging as tears.

Rolling the bottle against his forehead, Finn sighed. He'd tried to take the ill-wishing off, really he had. But it hadn't worked. No idea why. Perhaps the club had been well and truly determined to make sure the sub ended up in Last Chance. He wouldn't mind seeing the man in person, not at all, but he couldn't bear the blows that would fall to drag him down into their depths.

"Oh, no," he heard someone mutter behind him. Finn glanced up at the view screen and froze in dismay.

Ah, crap, crap, shit, crap! His sub, as Finn had begun to think of him at some unknown point, had fallen into the trap of a nasty sorcerer, Zachary, who loved nothing better than playing vicious little tricks.

Even as he watched, Zachary beckoned, and *Finn's* sub danced spastically straight for him.

I can't watch. But how can I look away? Miserable, Finn stared at the screen, and watched the scene play out before him.

Come on.

Simon read the young stud's lips, as he couldn't hear his voice for the din of the crowd and the blasting, pulsing thump of the music.

Over here, boy. I want to dance with you. His leer, and the added twist of emphasis on "dance" told Simon exactly what the man had in mind but, giddily, as if drunk, he found he didn't mind or care a bit about what a foolish idea it might be.

He shimmied his way up to the muscled god and found himself to be several inches taller. That wouldn't do. Savoring the thrill of playing his role, he sank to one knee in front of him -- only realizing a moment too late what the move made it appear he intended to do. He quailed briefly, wondering if the dancer -- a Dom, definitely a Dom -- would take him up on the unspoken offer. Instead, he heard the man's laughter, audible now that they were close together.

"Stand up," he said, grabbing Simon by the straps crisscrossing his shoulders. "I want to see what kind of man you are."

Simon let himself be manhandled, pulses of excitement throbbing through his heart and shocking down to his groin. He'd been hard before, enough to make sure his cock ring fit snugly, but now he began to ache. His mind might usually have better sense, but his dick wanted hard, fast, and now. He let his head tilt to a side, coy and teasing, his lips parting slightly. The heat of the Dom's eyes felt as if it were literally scorching his flesh and, oh, God, he could die happy right there, right then.

The Dom looked smug as he ran his thick, tough hands down Simon's forearms. "You're a normal," he said, sounding absurdly pleased by the equally absurd statement. "A mundane."

Normal? Mundane? What did he mean? No matter, though, and no time to think on it, for the Dom was leaning in to nip at the nape of Simon's neck. "You couldn't hurt me if you wanted to," his lips buzzed against the sensitive skin. He sounded ... smug?

The first twinge of *wrong* tingled through Simon. Automatically, he tried to pull back a little, but the Dom's grip tightened, leaving him without the choice. "Oh, no," he said. "You're not going anywhere. You're staying right here, Shamrock."

"It's -- it's Simon, actually," Simon said, small-voiced, almost feeling as if he were breaking the rules by correcting this Dom.

It seemed his supposition was correct. The Dom shook him once, hard, like an annoying kitten in a lion's jaws. "You're called whatever I want to call you, Shamrock," he warned. "Do you understand?" He pressed his overheated body close to Simon's, letting him feel the rock hardness of a solid erection. "I said, do you understand?"

Simon sagged. Easy, it was so easy to play the game if he only let himself go. "Yes, Master," his lips formed. The words were barely audible, but they appeared to be good enough.

"That's what I like to hear," the Dom purred. "Just so you'll remember me, my name is Zachary. But from you, I never want to hear anything but 'Master.'" He licked a wet stripe up Simon's neck to his ear and bit the lobe. "Say it again. Call me Master."

Simon's knees went weak under the lustful touch. "Master," he whispered. "Please, Master, please ..."

Hard fingers seized him by the jaw. "Please what?" Zachary asked, far too innocently. "There something you want, Shamrock?"

Simon shivered, reality melting away to the rules of the game ...

Finn could feel his temper rising, mounting to a boiling point. Since he was keeping his mouth shut for fear of cocking up the situation even further, the Last Chancers were making

the most of it and being bold. Behind his back, he heard someone running a pool on how long it would be before Zachary humiliated the sub -- Simon, he'd said his name was -- into running straight into the arms of their Bar & Grill. Cold, unwelcoming arms, the chilly embrace of men who found Simon just as ridiculous as Zachary obviously did.

Finn's grip on his empty beer bottle tightened until he felt it start to creak under the pressure. Bleeding and gashes were not his favorite look, so he eased up. Besides, his words had been bad enough. Spill a little anti-lucky leprechaun blood and who knew what would happen? No. He had to be careful.

"Twenty on Zachary dragging in his friends!"

"You're on. He's way too much of a chicken-shit to bully someone around without backup."

"How many of them? Two? Three?"

"My money's on four."

"I call six."

Finn's gritted teeth ached. He longed to bang his fist onto the table. Not fair, not fair, by all the gods, it wasn't fair! More than anything, he yearned to be able to bust loose of the Last Chance, plow his way to the dance floor, and yank Simon as far and fast away from Zachary as he possibly could.

But -- ha! Amour Magique didn't want the likes of him out and about. It wouldn't let him out the doors of this bar, much less into the main drag. No. He had to sit quiet, still, tortured, and watch the scrumptious sub with his heart as plainly on his lack of sleeve as his beautiful Irish tattoo. Observe as Simon was drawn down into the depths of humiliation ...

"Come on, Shamrock," Master said, hooking Simon via one finger through a leather strap that crossed his chest. "I want you to meet some people." He raised his voice. "Boys! Boys, come here. Look what I found for us to play with."

Simon felt the pressure and heat of several bodies surrounding them on all sides. He dared a peek up through his eyelashes to take in the sight. At least six men, all muscled and close-clipped as Master Zachary, grabbing each other's asses, pinching nipples, seizing hard, biting kisses. Each one's grin was equally predatory as they reluctantly separated to obey Zachary's bidding. If they weren't playing a game he'd think they were vicious, as if they looked forward to biting chunks out of his hide.

Hands, too many of them to count, pawed down his shoulders, arms, back, and across his ass and hips. Murmurs of "Oh, yeah" and "What a pretty little boy" filled his ears under the thrumming of the music, the deep bass beat and the electronic tempo. He couldn't help swaying, caught up in its spell.

"You like the music, don't you, Shamrock?" Zachary asked, pulling Simon closer to him. "Love the way it feels, racing through your veins. Makes you hot, makes you horny, makes you hard." He groped Simon's stiffened cock as best he could in the PVC pants, slowly molding themselves to him as the material warmed up.

Simon nodded, his head as loose on his neck as a broken daisy stem, lazy and drunk on sound and sensation. "It's wonderful," he breathed. "I never dreamed."

Zachary dealt him a cuff to the jaw. Simon flinched and almost reared back to protest, but no. No, it hadn't really hurt, and this was all part of the game, wasn't it? He couldn't break the scene, not without driving his admirers away. He couldn't bear it if they left him all alone. Not now, not when he was as high on their interest as he'd seen men on uncut cocaine.

"Did I say you could talk, Shamrock?" Zachary growled. "No? You'll know better next time, won't you?" He pushed Simon a few steps away from him, laughing as he staggered. "You want to dance, don't you? Nod yes or no."

Simon hesitated, then tentatively nodded.

“Good boy.” He sensed Zachary look around at his friends, forming a circle around Simon. “So, dance. Show us what you’ve got.”

Simon stood frozen with a sudden twinge of fear.

“Go on, Shamrock,” Zachary warned, his voice promising punishment and pain. “Dance.”

Simon swallowed down his doubts and uncertainties. He took a deep breath, letting the music fill him.

And, all alone within a ring of men, he raised his arms and danced.

The Last Chance Bar & Grill roared with laughter.

“Oh, my God! He looks like a chicken with its head cut off!”

“I thought *I* didn’t have any sense of rhythm.”

“Man, how can any one person be that bad?”

“He must have sucked up all the spazz vibes everyone else checked at the door.”

Hoots and howls and high-fives sounded behind Finn, who decided, right about then, he -- had -- had -- quite -- *enough* -- thank you. Slamming his beer down onto the table, he noticed with satisfaction that he’d put enough force into it to make the can crumple.

Sudden silence drowned the Chancers as he made for the doorway. So he might not be able to get any further than the ashtrays just outside the entrance. He could at least be there when Simon showed up, and maybe be a pair of sympathetic arms for the man to run into.

Besides, he couldn’t bear to see what would happen next. Bad enough he could hear the roars of hilarity not from the Chancers, but from the view screen, which had chosen that moment to give one of its rare doses of sound feed-through. A circle of men, cruel bastards to an inch, were laughing their foul asses off at Simon, who’d only wanted to have a good time.

At *his* Simon.

Finn's brows lowered and he stalked onward, so deep in his black mood that he didn't notice Amour Magique was letting him in until he realized he was turning a corner. The club was allowing him to exit from Last Chance.

He stopped stock-still, frozen. "Holy shit!" he murmured, almost too amazed to move.

Not quite, though. He considered it far the better part of valor to run on as fast as he could, before whoever or whatever decided that turning him loose had been a mistake or realized he'd broken out of the paranormal Alcatraz. He had better things to do than stick around and wait to be caught, thanks.

He had Simon, a sweet Shamrock, to find and tangle in his own, much kinder sort of web.

All that glitters is not gold, Simon thought dizzily as he staggered away from the dance floor, legs like rubber beneath him. He cursed his clumsiness, then blamed it on his shattered nerves and kept on going. He had his gaze fixed on the double doors, and he didn't plan to stop until he was back outside and safe again -- or safer at least.

In tune with the shouts of vicious, gleeful laughter following hot on his heels, Simon giggled to himself, the sound a little crazy even to his ears. *I thought I would shine*, his jumbled thoughts formed into sentences chiming inside his mind. *I thought I'd gleam like gold. But they showed me the truth -- I'm a tarnished old brass ring. No one knows what those are anymore, and no one wants to grab them. Instead, they use them to yank your chains and show you how archaic you really are.*

He'd done as Mas-- no, Zachary, the bastard! -- had asked. He'd danced his best for the group of men, and he'd been lost in the beauty of the sound and fluidity of his muscles, but then ... then ... He'd heard them start to cackle. Forgetting himself long enough to look up in surprise, he'd seen a look he recognized all too well on every haughtily handsome face -- scorn, derision. High school-maturity pointing and grinning at the trained ape making a fool

of himself to try and win their favor. When he'd stopped dancing in shock, he'd stumbled, landing flat on his ass.

Oh, they'd really laughed then. Almost fallen down themselves, hanging on to each other for support, the pack of jackals.

Zachary alone had stood tall, his grin cold and cruel. "Go back home, normal," he'd said, each word sharp enough to cut, digging deep. "No one wants you here, even if you have wrapped yourself up like a present. Get out of this place and go where you belong, Loser. You've probably even lost out on your Last Chance."

He'd even kicked at Simon, huddled on the floor. "Go on, or if you have the balls, stay and let me and my boys take what we can from you." Zachary had leered, no longer an appealing look, but a terrifying one. "Do you want that, Shamrock? Hmm? Want us to pass you around like a toy? The way you're dressed, I bet you'd be glad to give us anything we want. Suck my cock, lick his ass, take one up your hole while another goes down your throat and --"

The air had escaped from Simon's lungs in a noisy gasp. He'd skittered backward, crab-crawling on the floor. Zachary had exploded with mirth.

"Thought you were just mutton pretending to be a lamb," he mocked. "Go on, get! Go before we decide to take you without bothering to ask what you want, Amour's rules be damned. Go!"

And Simon had gone, never before in his entire life so humiliated as he was just then. All he'd wanted to do was *run, run, run*, get away from there. Shed his stupid, *idiotic* costume and hide himself back in the three-piece suit. Scrub off his makeup and comb his hair back into neat precision. Put on the mask and armor that he knew too well. At least if people scorned him then, he'd have a reason why, and he could to fight back.

Yanking open the doors that would take him off the main dance floor, Simon charged forward -- and banged directly into another body, a warm, male body, almost knocking the

other man to the floor. The stranger cursed loudly and fluently in what sounded like Gaelic as he stumbled back a few steps, then -- looked up to meet Simon eye-to-eye.

Both men stopped, utterly still. Simon felt his lips falling slightly, softly apart. Dear God. He'd thought Zachary's rough bluntness attractive? He could never compare with *this* man, whom Simon had almost pile-driven over.

Tall and slender, he was, though his bare forearms were as toned as Simon's own, and pale as sweet milk with a dusting of freckles and a tangled mess of sunny red hair. His eyes, green as some exotic sea, stared back at Simon with shock, quickly changing to amazement and -- no, he didn't dare trust it -- delight?

The music seemed to stop, filling their ears with nothing but silence and the sound of one another breathing. The Irish stranger's hand reached up slowly, shaking a bit, reaching out to touch Simon, to pull him close --

Simon's nerve broke. Stifling a low cry, he barreled past the man, running as fast and hard as he could away from him. He didn't dare trust anyone. He'd known it once, and he'd learned his lesson six times over again this night.

He ran, knowing only one thing for sure.

He had to escape the clutches of Amour.

Chapter Five

Escape, yes, sure, escape would be *wonderful*, but where on earth -- or in Amour Magique -- could Simon go? Wait -- the washroom, where he'd left his suit. Unless someone had stolen it, blessed salvation lay waiting for him, neatly folded up in the paper bag tucked beneath a sink.

If he could get there, he could get out of his awful, stupid, humiliating leather straps and stiff pants and peel off the three-times-thrice bedamned cock ring, just about to slide off his cock, flaccid as it was.

Yes. He had to get out of this outfit. If he could only put his regular clothes back on, they would serve to protect him well. He'd be able to cope again, to face the world as Simon the Lawyer, leaving Simon the Stupid, Simple Simon, in his pit of shame back there on the main dance floor.

He'd known coming to Amour Magique was a bad idea! *Damn Liam!*

"Hey, stop, man. Stop!" the Irishman blurted behind him.

Simon continued in a dead run for the men's room. It shouldn't be far. Just off the front entrance, and then --

But there wasn't --

What the ...?

As Simon passed the bank of phones, he screeched to a dead halt for the space of a breath. The rest room was gone!

He hadn't forgotten where it was -- he was absolutely sure of that. For heaven's sake, the Jamaican and his mocha lover were still necking in a pay booth! But where the facilities had been, there was now nothing but a blank space of wall with a startlingly graphic piece of erotic art under a warm yellow light. Golden. Welcoming. Scary as hell -- a sub bound up in leather straps, kneeling before his Master's cock.

Simon panicked.

Turning on his heel, he raced as fast as he could in the next available direction, back past the phones -- ignoring the Jamaican's startled cry of, "Hey, man! What's wrong?" -- and down a long corridor decorated with yet more art under gilded lights, each one an act that he'd dreamed of late at night, safe and alone.

Slaves beneath their Master's crops or paddles. Masters etching words into tender flesh with sharpened feather quills. Subs on St. Andrew's crosses, their faces full of joy. Masters resting their hands on slaves' shoulders, approving of them, allowing them to suck their cocks, nestle their heads against their Masters' legs, loving and being loved. Each one of them drawn with reverent attention and respect and awe for what they depicted. Works of erotic art that a museum would kill to own.

Simon couldn't stop himself from glancing at each painting as he passed, but he looked away from them with a small, sharp moan of misery. What a fool he'd been! He could win prizes for being the moron of the year.

Desperately scanning each side of the hall, he searched for a bathroom, a coat closet, a janitor's cubby. Somewhere he could compose himself. Any place where he could hide until the club closed, and he could sneak out alone. Tuck his misery and humiliation away in a box

within his mind, lock it, and throw away the key. Bottle it up and shove a cork in good and tight.

He couldn't allow himself to keep thinking about the laughter of Zachary and his bully boys. Neither could he let himself dwell on what a fool he must have looked, all decked out in his "sub special." What an idiot he had been, to imagine for one second he could present himself as young, attractive, or the least little bit desirable.

"Wait! Hey, wait, wait!"

Simon stiffened. The Irishman! Calling to him. From the sounds of things, his feet were pounding along the carpet, running to catch up.

Oh, no. Oh, God, no. The man had said "wait" -- and Simon found himself almost frantic to escape. He wouldn't let himself be embarrassed again. Finding a new burst of strength, he added some speed and zoomed away down the corridor, determined that he would find some bolt-hole to flee into.

Anything but face another living person, even -- especially -- the Irishman!

Simon ran as if his life depended on it.

A small, warm hand had seized Finn by the upper arm.

"Hey! Hey, there. What's happened? What's gone wrong?"

Finn had done a double-take as the voice faded from a rich Jamaican accent to another, one made up of thousands of cultural influences, nothing you could pin down but as sexually inflaming as Spanish fly for the libido. Whipping his head around on his neck as if it were a pivot, he'd stared down and seen -- Liam.

Finn almost had the urge to bow and give honor. He might have, if Liam hadn't given his arm an impatient shake. "You are the leprechaun, yes? The one with a so-unfortunate height problem? From Last Chance?"

When he nodded, the incubus got a determined look on his face that would have sent lesser men yelping into the night -- if they hadn't been dead set on giving poor Simon a hand. Sensing Liam had much the same in mind, Finn paused a second to wonder how he knew that, then figured to hell with it. He'd suss out the details later.

"They made a mockery of him," Finn said hoarsely, jabbing his free thumb at the dance floor doors. "He needs comforting, yeah?"

Liam eyed him up and down. "Comforting, yes. More than he knows, he also needs to cede control and let another person take the reins. In submitting, he will come into his power."

"Natural born sub, then, eh?"

Liam slitted his gaze. "And I suppose you would know from the Master's point of view." It wasn't a question, or an insult. Three more heartbeats thudded past, then the incubus nodded. "I was right. You can be the one to help him. Go to him, Finn, once of Ireland. Rescue him from himself and bring him into a better life." He slapped one petite fist between Finn's shoulder blades. "Go!"

And Finn went. Yelling after Simon all the way.

It was only when Simon put on the Road Runner burst of speed and became a blur in motion that Finn realized what he'd been doing. He stopped long enough to slap himself brutally hard on the forehead.

Eejit! Of course he's running like the devil's on his heels, considering the curse your words always bring! Use your big head, man, and think!

Finn looked up. Simon had vanished around a corner. He swore, silently, lest anything more absolutely awful happened, then started his chase again. He wasn't a shape-shifter so he couldn't track by scent, but he could see fresh, hasty footprints in the freshly-vacuumed carpet. And by gods and begorra, he'd find Simon once more.

And when he did? Well ... he'd be careful with his mouth and pray that Simon understood.

Given his luck, though, he didn't hold out a great deal of hope.

Restraining a groan, Finn flew onward, following his would-be-conquest's footsteps.

Simon wasn't even looking for a bolt-hole anymore. The impetus was on him to run, run, run and not turn around to see if anyone was following. He *knew* someone was, and it made his chest squeeze with the incipient signs of a panic attack to imagine some beast all but on his heels.

This is stupid, a tiny corner of his mind tried to argue. *There's no one coming after you except that Irishman and, come on, face it, you think he's more than handsome -- he's beautiful. You want him, and you know it. Why don't you stop, let him catch up and just see what he has to say for himself? Give him a chance. Come on!*

Simon shook his head and kept running. A stitch in his side added to the pain he felt in his chest, but he couldn't stop. Terrified, he suddenly began to wonder if he'd ever be able to come to a rest, or if this was some twisted version of "The Red Shoes." Just as the poor fairy-tale child had been made to dance forever, he'd be running from the dance forever.

And what exactly was the situation here in this strangest of clubs? As long and as far as he'd been running, more or less in a straight line with a few rights and lefts here and there, he ought to have been halfway to the old district of town by now.

Instead, he was still firmly ensconced within Amour Magique, tearing a path down hallways full of incredibly erotic art. Art that, despite his terror and his need for speed, aroused him until the cock ring squeezed tight again. A unique agony, given how he happened to be sprinting for his life at the same time.

He would have laughed but it wasn't funny at all from his perspective. Chased to death while he had a hard-on fit to break some rocks!

“Hey!” a frighteningly familiar voice sounded some distance back. “Hey, you! Simon!”

Simon’s heart bucked and squeezed. Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God -- the Irishman had found him! He knew he shouldn’t be as terrified as he was, but he couldn’t help it.

It would come down to a contest of blows, he knew it. He thought he was a little taller than his pursuer, but they’d be equally matched in mass and muscle. It would be a close and dangerous thing.

Why was he planning for a fight? For all he knew, the man just wanted to tell him he was heading toward staff-only areas of the club. But he couldn’t believe him that innocent. Better to be prepared. Far, far better. So he needed -- a weapon. Yes, something to fight with. He didn’t think the Irishman had anything but his own two hands.

What could he ... ah!

Simon reached up and jerked hard at the leather bands across his chest, yanking and tugging until, with a wet, living *snap!* they broke free and the mass of them slithered, tentacle-like, into his hands. Now his chest was bare and all the more vulnerable, but he could wind the bands’ ends around one fist and use them as a whip if need be.

Still running, he practiced one *whish-crack!* through the air. It made a deeply satisfying noise, although the thought of using it on someone, even a man bent on chasing him down like a dog, made his stomach flip with nausea. He wasn’t one who wanted to do the whipping ...

No. No! He had to keep his head on straight. Had to keep going. Surely he’d come to an exit sooner or later. There had to be a way out into the Charleston night.

Didn’t there?

Holy mother of... Finn’s tongue almost unfurled like the wolf from those old cartoons as Simon unexpectedly ripped off his vest-like get-up of straps, bits and bobs, leaving a nicely firm back right above a seriously shapely ass and two fine, sturdy legs with muscles working

ever so nicely as he fled. Not to forget gloriously bare arms pumping with the rhythm of a habitual jogger, someone who knew how to run and do it right ... er, yeah, that was a bit of a shame, given the current situation.

But ye gods and little fishhooks! If Simon hadn't upgraded himself from cordon bleu to filet mignon with that little maneuver. Finn was so entranced by keeping an eye on the man while both of them ran that he almost missed what Simon was doing with the strips of leather until he heard them *crack!* against the air.

His hackles raised. Oh, no. No proper sub would ever dare take up the whip. And Simon was going to be his sub, yes, indeed he was, but Finn planned to be a proper Master. None of this humiliating, sharing round-about, and cruel jokes for him. He'd give Simon his head when he needed it in public; in private, he'd love him and lash him until they were ready to fuck each other through the floor ...

A bolt of pure lust shocked through Finn's loins. His already swollen cock gave a jump for joy at the mental image of Simon on his knees, head bowed, not in fear but in love and respect. *Easy!* he scolded it. Hard enough to run fast enough to keep up with Simon without being ... hard.

He just prayed Simon kept everything else on.

Once again, Finn's mouth jumped ahead of his brain. "Those pants had better stay on," he muttered, "but even if they don't, I think I can keep a hold of myself ..."

R-r-r-r-r-i-p-p-p-p-p-p!

Both Simon and Finn came to a momentary, terrified stop as Simon's PVC and plastic trousers fell apart at their seams, flapping and slapping down around his feet and leaving him in nothing but what he'd been born with. Simon's head turned around, and Finn got a good look at the horror on his face. He opened his mouth, as if to apologize --

-- and the second proviso of his ill-wishing kicked in.

Loosing a roar from the very pit of his belly, Finn's id took over, and what it wanted, right away, no waiting, was Simon, on his knees, taking Finn's own hardened cock deep down his throat. If Simon thought he'd been running fast, Finn would just see what kind of match the man was for a leprechaun with his own pot of gold in sight!

Simon kicked off the remains of his pants, then fled again. All the same it didn't look like the race would last too much longer. Just ahead of them, far enough that the sounds of feet pounding and breath heaving lasted fit to drive Finn mad with insensate lust, but close enough that he knew he'd developed a maniacal grin of glee, was the end of the road, a dead end. No rights, no lefts, just a full stop to a blank wall. Bless Amour Magique and all her quirks!

An inner voice screeched at Finn, all but yanking at his ears to get his attention.

You're gonna scare the poor man witless, you fool! He's had quite enough to deal with tonight without having a ravening Irish boggart chewing at his heels! How much do you think he'll enjoy being forced to his knees, all but raped, while your own ill-wishing does irreparable harm?

And, hey, here's this -- what d'you think Liam is gonna do to you and your family jewels when he finds out you abused his friend? Eh? Think on that, you gormless tit!

Finn struggled to catch hold of that screaming harpy, at first wanting to smash it silent against the wall, but then realizing it spoke the truth.

Calm, he had to calm down, and he had to say the words. Change his ill-wishing, even if it confused and alarmed poor Simon. Better a little bafflement than a full-body bashing or worse.

Apparently, Simon had recognized the dead end for what it was, too, for he had his hands out to brace himself for impact when he banged smack into it. Rebounding just a bit, still light on his feet like a natural runner, he sucked in deep and lusty breaths, his shoulders working, then turned to face Finn straight on, head held high.

Head high and proud, and erection very much to the fore, wrapped up pretty as you please in a leather-and-silver cock ring. Finn came to a halt himself, fixated on and fascinated by the sight of Simon's prick. A finer specimen he'd never seen, and he'd seen many a pecker in all his years. Simon's was long enough to impress, but not to go playing hockey with, thick enough to make a man's mouth water, but not to make him want to cross his legs and squeak.

The smell rising off him was pure honest sweat and male musk and, for those who could scent such things, courage rising triumphant over terror. Finn looked at Simon's face, at the frightened eyes, the firm-set lips, the stubborn chin, and knew. Here was a man who knew he might go down, but by God, he'd do it with some dignity.

If he'd had a hat, Finn would have whipped it off in respect for the man's balls. Which, by the way, were wonderfully shaped, full and heavy, and ... He shook himself.

Back on task, man, back on task.

Slowly, forcing the words through lips that didn't care to cooperate, he said, "I am not responsible for what I do."

Sweet relief swept over him. Whining and howling, his disappointed inner sex beast crept back to its cave within his psyche, leaving only the Irishman to deal with the sub who had long and lovely legs. Tension ebbed almost tangibly from the air, so much so that Finn realized even Simon could feel it.

Frowning, the man demanded, bold and brave in his need for answers, "What just happened? Who are you?"

Finn opened his mouth to explain -- then shut it in dismay. Oh, by all the gods. How the hell could he explain himself to anyone non-paranormal and have a prayer of being believed when every truth was a lie, and every lie the truth?

How did he get himself into fixes like this?

Chapter Six

Well, this is another fine mess. Only you, Finn, only you. Face to face in Amour Magique with a man who's got the balls to stand up to you -- and may I say again 'cause it bears repeating, some delightfully fine balls they are -- and you're frozen to the spot like a brainless nit.

Look at him! You think you got off on giving chase? Dare say he got off on being caught. His cock, your cock, fully cocked and loaded. So pull the trigger, man, and go boom, would you? It's been long enough and that's a fact.

Finn scowled at his inner leprechaun, which was wagging its finger coyly at him. *Sod off, you prick. How exactly am I supposed to get close enough to get him to let his guard down? I've got this little problem with my speech patterns, or hadn't you noticed after what, five, six hundred years? I can't tell him to believe me, or he'll be convinced I'm the worst liar ever.*

Can't tell him I won't hurt him, 'cause then he'll have a heart attack from fear right before I rip him into gooey shreds. And if I play by the rules of this tongue-tie, he might do as I want, but I know he won't connect words to actions, or even if he does, he'll be terrified and confused.

Bugger it! Bloody, fucking bugger it!

As the thoughts raced through his mind, Finn drank in his fill of the vision that was Simon. Just the sort of man he fancied, on his own accord. Older, no callow youth or dangerous jailbait, and probably experienced, knowing what he liked and how to help another fellow get off to their satisfaction.

Not bulgy as a stack of rocks piled together, then lightly coated with flesh. Just nicely toned, with muscles that were defined, not sharp-edged. A grand face, just the sort made for smiling or for being serious. He pictured it grimacing in the throes of passion, man's ugliest and most beautiful expression, and went weak in the knees.

Then, there was that delicious subby side he'd shown off earlier. Finn did love a round of "Master and slave." To find someone like Simon, who enjoyed the play, yet promised to be a fantastic partner otherwise ... well, it seemed like a dream come true.

Finn knew better than to believe in such good luck. There was always some little catch. Take, for example, his current situation: one hundred percent unable to convey a word of what he was thinking to Simon, lest he frighten the man to death or put him off the taste of Irish for life.

Even now, Simon was looking nervously from left to right. Gauging whether or not he should make a break for it, no doubt. Finn's pulse began to gallop. No, no -- he couldn't have Simon slipping loose now, before he'd even had a chance to try his bad luck fortune.

An idea occurred to him. "Run," Finn said, his voice low and sultry. Dangerous.

Simon blinked once, twice and again -- and settled down to stay put, even though his face registered fear. "Who are you?" he repeated. "No -- *what* are you?"

Ah, God, he'd have to ask, wouldn't he? Desperate, Finn tossed aside his worries and just went for broke. What could it hurt? He was sure to lose the tasty Simon anyway, so he might as well let 'er rip.

It always hurt less when the wound was sharp and swift.

“You don’t want to be here with me,” the Irishman said, moving stealthily closer to Simon. Simon stared at him, baffled. All the cues of human nature he’d learned through life and in the courtroom were belied by the differences between what the man said and how he moved and acted. His words signaled *danger*, but they made Simon feel warm and content, sleepy and sluggish and happy to stay put.

Added to that, the man’s expression and demeanor suggested he was trying his best to put Simon at his ease and coax him to stay and listen. It made no sense at all, and in a way, it was worse than what Zachary had done. That had been a trick easily figured out, once he’d gotten a clue. Here, with this Irishman, Simon had no idea which set of cues were the real ones.

He edged backward automatically, stopping when the Irishman looked surprised. “What’s your name?” he blurted.

The man’s eyes widened. He paused, then bit off one syllable. “Finn.”

“You’re Finn?”

Finn winced. “No,” he said, sounding dejected.

Simon shook his head, baffled. “I’ll call you Finn, then.”

“No, you won’t.”

This was beginning to make Simon’s head hurt. “Do you enjoy confusing the wits out of people?” he snapped.

Woeful hangdog expression. “Yes.”

Simon sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. More than not understanding a thing about Finn’s moves and words, he couldn’t begin to fathom his own reactions. It was as if ... as if ... everything Finn said gave him a definite opposite response. If Finn told him to run for his life, that there was a dragon behind him, Simon felt sure he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from turning around to give a cheery wave into its vicious maw.

What was going on? He had to understand. There had to be a key, a clue, an answer somewhere ...

“Let me talk,” he said abruptly. “You nod yes or no. My name is Simon. Someone told you who I was. Yes?”

Finn boggled at him. After a moment, not seeming quite to believe he could handle this, the Irishman nodded *yes*.

It was a start. “Are you going to hurt me?”

Finn seemed to be fighting within himself, given the expressions that flashed across his face. Finally, he shook his head *no*.

Simon paused for thought. He looked ruefully down at himself. “I’m going at this like you’re on the witness stand,” he murmured, “but I don’t think I’ve ever been less appropriately dressed for court.”

Unexpectedly, Finn grinned. Simon arched a look up at him. “You ... like this, don’t you? Like seeing me in the all together.”

Pause and struggle, then a nod.

“But it isn’t your goal to embarrass me, is it?” Simon probed.

Pause. Shake of the head.

“Why did you come after me?” Simon regretted the open-ended question the instant he saw Finn’s expression twist in misery. He struggled for a way to rephrase it, but his thoughts were broken by a soft and ragged whisper.

“I had to make you run.”

Finn looked unhappy as a man possibly could, shrinking in on himself in an effort to look harmless. Simon eyed him sharply. “Am I crazy?”

Vigorous shake.

“You’re sure of that?”

Definite nod.

“Then here’s my theory, as outlandish as it might seem -- you can’t tell the truth. Or rather, you can, but everything you say has the opposite effect. If you told me I was sane, I’d be convinced I was a lunatic. Am I right?”

Finn regarded Simon with wonder. *Nod*.

“What sort of place is this?” Simon growled, placing his hands on his hips. He winced as the movement jarred his stubbornly persistent erection, still jutting out swollen, proud, and dark purple with arousal.

God, he couldn’t help it! Just looking at Finn, even through all his contortions, sent Simon’s lust into overdrive. Slim yet strong, tall and well-shaped, sunset-red hair that begged to be tangled further by hands running through it ... not to mention that hard-on tenting the front of his loose jeans. If he wanted Finn, he somehow knew that no matter what Finn might say, the Irishman wanted him even more.

It was crazy. Insane. It made no sense at all. But Simon thought he was beginning to understand. *Amour Magique* was a place where everyday common sense did not greatly apply. Liam had said anything could happen within the club’s walls. He had an inkling of how very right the little man had been.

Had Liam known, Simon wondered. Known that he would come face to face with this mystifying Irishman? He’d have to collar Liam for an answer. But later, later. Right now, he had a riddle to solve. And he thought he had an idea worth attempting.

“If I understand the way this works,” he said slowly, feeling his way, “it’s the listener who determines how your words affect them.” He tapped his chin in thought. “Try this, Finn. Tell me I won’t believe a word you say, and that I’ll be terrified of anything you tell me about yourself.”

Finn's eyes grew wide as saucers. He gaped for a moment, almost making Simon want to laugh, then stammered, "You won't believe a thing I've got to say. I'll scare you half to death with anything I have to tell."

There was a moment of silence. Somewhere off in the distance, someone dropped a tray of glasses or perhaps smashed a mirror. Mirror? Simon frowned. Why had he likened the sound to ... something about seven years of luck. Good or bad? He felt odd, as if a weight had been removed from his shoulders. Like the air was cleaner and easier to breathe. He turned to Finn, wanting an explanation -- but the man seemed gobsmacked. The Irishman must have felt it, too. Simon thought that if he were a superstitious man, he'd have sworn it felt like a curse was being revoked.

Finn was blinking, working his jaw as if he couldn't quite believe what he was about to say next. "You ... you can understand me now," he ventured carefully.

Simon weighed his own response. Yes, the words had come through loud and clear. "I can," he said. "Go on. Who are you? What are you?"

Finn blushed, the way only a true redhead could, crimson from his ear tips, spreading down his neck. "You won't believe me."

"Try me."

"I'm a ... a leprechaun."

Simon stared, then burst into laughter. Laughter that took him over from top to toe, bending him nearly double. His erection protested the vigorous movement, and the pain almost brought him to a stop with a yelp, but he couldn't help it. "A ... leprechaun?" he gasped. "You're not lying to me, are you?"

Finn glowered and shook his head.

"Forgive me." Still chuckling, Simon straightened up, wiping his eyes. "Aren't you a bit tall for a leprechaun? Say, by about four or five feet? Where's your pot of gold? Your yellow stars, blue moons, green horseshoes --"

"I'm not the fuckin' cereal elf!" Finn burst out bitterly. "I swear, if I could get my hands on the bastard who came up with that marketing idea ..." He gritted his teeth. "Leprechaun. Yeah. S'me, it's what I am, only it's not what I do."

"I've got a height problem, you see, as you so kindly pointed out. I lost my pot of gold to the first prick who came looking for it, and I bungled nine out of ten wishes my first days out in the world. This would be several hundred years ago, in case you're wondering. So they kicked me out of Eire and sent me wandering the world."

Simon's grin was still broad and smirky, but at least he was paying attention, and trying not to burst into another fit of giggles or hysterics at believing Finn was indeed a creature of legend, albeit a rather fractured fairy tale. "How did you end up here?"

Finn blushed. "Er ... Amour Magique's a bit special. I'm guessing you've figured out as much? Yeah. It's been around longer than I have. Jumps about from place to place. Whenever I find it, I come and have a drink."

"Thing is, the club -- it's alive, you knew that, right? -- like a bloody chameleon or something. Knows what you're thinking and you're doing -- hey, now, are you all right?"

Simon's chest squeezed tight as he fought between terror at the thought of being swallowed deep inside the bowels of a living, sentient building, and the soothing layer of *blasé* that Finn's words cast over him. He nodded. "Go on."

Finn gave him a dubious look. "I come here when I can, to have a drink. Only thing is, the club doesn't like me. Before now, it's kept me stuck in the Bar & Grill where only the worst of the losers belong. They call the place Last Chance, probably their idea of a joke. If you're there, you've got absolutely no chance at all of escaping. Of finding someone. Of getting an opportunity to laugh and dance. But I got out, got free, and I can even talk to you without you being scared of me. Fuckin' yes!"

Simon swallowed down his fear. He felt ... odd. As if his ability to believe Finn was fading, being replaced by the beginnings of a true panic attack. "I ... I think so," he said,

trying to back up a step or two. “Whatever you say.” He clenched his fist tight around the strips of leather. “Just don’t hurt me, please? I’ll be on my way, and I’ll never tell anyone about this. All right?”

Finn looked shocked and hurt. “Simon? You believe me, don’t you?”

Another crashing sound was heard. Glasses? Mirrors? *Bad* luck, bad! Simon’s heart leapt into his throat and lodged there, pounding rabbit-fast and shrieking with pain. Everything within him sent one single message loud and clear: *Run! Run now! Run fast! Get away from here!*

With a low groan of terror, he tried ducking past Finn to flee.

“No!” Finn yelled, catching Simon by the middle. “No, don’t! Don’t! Please, stay -- please!”

Simon struggled as hard as he could to run.

Finn held him tight and would not let go.

Gripping Simon by the waist, Finn struggled to calm the man down, all the while avoiding a kick to the nuts or an elbow in the ribs. “It’s all right, man, it’s all right!” he soothed desperately. “You still believe me, don’t you? Come on, now, it’s me. We’ve been talking and everything’s been going great. We’ve been getting along. Do you know how many *centuries* --”

Simon let out a ragged cry of horror and struggled all the harder. The penny finally dropped. *The magic’s broken*, Finn realized. *I messed it up somehow. He’s more frightened of me now than he ever was before.*

I can’t let this happen. Can’t let him go. I want him. Want him so much. Gods, I need him. He has to stay and listen -- I have to make the magic work for us again --

Frantic, he grabbed at Simon's thrashing limbs, desperate to make him stand still and listen. "Say it again!" he demanded. "What you said before, to break the geas. Come on, man, talk!"

Simon struggled harder. One blow got lucky and drove into Finn's stomach, knocking the breath out of him in a noisy gasp. He automatically let go, and Simon -- Simon ran, as fast as if the hounds of hell were at his heels.

No!

Finn made a desperate lunge, tackling Simon to the ground. He couldn't let him go -- not now, not when he'd been so close, not when he'd found there was someone out there clever enough to make the magic work for him, not against.

"Listen to me," he ordered raggedly as he writhed his way up Simon's struggling body. "You have to listen. You've got to believe me! I know you remember what it was like just minutes ago. You weren't afraid. You weren't! Come on, man, come on, please, Simon, please!"

Finn reached Simon's torso and grabbed his flailing arms, pinning them in place. "You have to let me in, Simon. Let me talk to you. You have to feel it one more time. You have to let me love you!"

Simon screamed, a low, horrible man's scream, like the sound of a male banshee wailing for the dying. "No!" he managed to choke out. "No -- can't -- you'll kill me -- don't, please don't! Let me go!"

Finn was far beyond common sense and being clever. "You have to feel it," he said, pinning Simon's arms flat. He struggled for something that would work. "I'll hurt you," he said desperately. "Hurt you and whip you and leave you bleeding. Don't believe me. Don't listen to a thing I say. Come on!"

Simon shrieked again, a sound truly horrible to hear. He kept fighting, but beneath his fingers tightly gripping the man's wrists, Finn could feel Simon's heartbeat begin to stutter and buck. *Oh, gods, he's having a heart attack, or just about to!*

"Please," he begged, bending down to rain kisses on the back of Simon's neck and shoulders. "Please, I just want to love you. Why don't you believe me anymore? Why can't I get back in?!"

"You -- *Stop!* Stop this instant! Do you hear me?"

Finn jerked up, stared into the face of -- Liam. A Liam who looked tired and worn, but also definitely and seriously pissed off. Behind him, arms folded with some articles of clothing, face marked with annoyed ennui, was the bartender from the Last Chance. Trey.

Liam turned to Trey. "Yes, I know they are not supposed to break out of your domain. I had thought if Finn and Simon met halfway --" He raised his hands helplessly. "Things were going well."

Trey gave Liam a dry look.

"They were!" Finn protested. Simon gave a low moan.

"I'm sure," Liam said. He sighed. "You have to go back and, Simon, you must go with him."

"No!" Simon begged, although he seemed to have lost the strength to physically fight. "Liam, he's going to kill me!"

Liam knelt and put two fingers under Simon's chin, lifting his face so that their eyes could meet. "He will not kill you," the incubus said gently. "Finn has problems, but he only wants the best, and his intentions are nothing but good. Go with him, and with Trey, this man here, to the Last Chance. You belong there, and so does Finn, but only for the moment."

"Liam ..." Simon begged.

"Hush, now, hush. I know best. Trust me, Simon. Just a little longer, and you will understand it all." Liam bent to press a kiss on Simon's forehead. Finn felt the man's body

shudder beneath him with a ripple of lust, the inevitable side effect of an incubus's touch. It traveled through him as well, filling his heart and his cock with an ache that burned for completion.

Liam fixed Finn with a glare. "You be careful," he said in a low voice. "No more of this foolish panicking. Remember how you did it right, once, and do it thus again."

Finn shook his head. He didn't dare voice any words, but tried to transmit in his gaze. *How can I, when I can't even talk to the man?*

Liam sighed. "Very well. I may yet owe Amour another trinket for bending the rules until they break, but here." He bent, his lips resting first lightly on Simon's, then on Finn's. Finn stiffened with the contact, then felt a roll of something warm rush through him.

"Now, you may at least communicate. Love has many voices. Find the one I have been allowed to give you. Be warned, though, it is only good for the two of you," Liam said, standing up. "Even I have only so much power to share, especially on this night when I am needed elsewhere. So many elsewheres." He rubbed his temples. "Trey, take them now. They are yours until they are no longer yours."

Trey nodded, looking disgusted. He tossed his armful of clothes at Simon and Finn, a worn flannel shirt and a pair of old jeans. The message was clear. Simon should get dressed, and they both had to follow him.

Creakily as an old man, Finn peeled himself off Simon and let the man stand. Simon got to his feet as rustily as Finn had, looking anxiously from Liam, who nodded reassuringly and patted his arm, to Trey, who gave him his patented Blank Look.

Simon refused, or didn't think, to look back around at Finn. Slowly, he bent, picked up the clothes and began to dress. Finn watched him sorrowfully, those beautiful legs and that glorious ass being covered by loose, soft denim ... But the physical aspect was only a tiny part of his overwhelming grief.

In Simon, Finn knew now -- *knew* -- he'd found the one man who could break the magics that had held him prisoner for so very long. The one man he could fall in love with -- no, hell, had already fallen for, hard and fast. But he'd screwed it up, probably beyond all hope of reclamation.

Or perhaps ... Finn paused, touching his lips, still tingling from Liam's incubus kiss. Perhaps he still had one small hope remaining.

He'd find out when they got back to the Last Chance.

He suspected they'd all find out a lot, and probably more than they wanted to know.

Chapter Seven

Blind and dumb, doing only as he'd been told because he could not, simply could not, think for himself just then, Simon stumbled along behind the silent, sullen bartender and in front of Finn. He could feel the man slouching along behind, gazing at him with sorrowful hound-dog eyes.

Simon stifled a hysterical giggle. No doubt the bartender, Trey, thought him quite mad already. It wouldn't do to reinforce the notion. Though if the man was used to the likes of Finn and even Liam, a full-blown fit probably wouldn't dent his ennui.

A small laugh escaped anyway. He was fully dressed, save for his feet, but he felt naked. A shirt on his back and jeans on his legs, all his privates decently covered, but they weren't *clothes*. They weren't *armor*, because they weren't his suit. His three-piece suit, God rest its soul, whatever Amour Magique had done with the thing. Without it, he was helpless as a -- what did children do, when they wanted to be especially vicious? Country or city, it didn't matter. They'd turn turtles or beetles on their backs to watch them squirm, legs flailing about to right themselves.

Simon felt as if he was trapped inside a carapace, unable to protect himself, flipped about at the whim of a larger, carelessly cruel force.

He did not like it.

I'll hurt you, he kept hearing, over and over, ringing in his ears. *I'll hurt you*.

Unconsciously, Simon shivered, wrapping his arms around his chest. He couldn't sort himself out when it came to Finn. The Irishman had been first terrifying, then a puzzle, then a delight, and then the worst possible sort of monster.

What was he now? Simon dared a peep over his shoulder, looking quickly away when Finn's glance flickered up to meet his own. He didn't understand Finn. Out of the terrible loop of physical violence and tongue-ties, the rational part of his brain insisted that Finn was what he claimed to be: a leprechaun, albeit an unlucky one, who meant the best, but achieved the worst. He comprehended how Finn could have panicked and not thought about what sort of effect his words and actions would have.

All the same, Simon didn't know if he could forgive Finn.

In front of him, Trey came to a stop and grunted. Simon looked at him curiously, realizing they were in front of a locked set of double glass doors. Looking up further still as Trey fished a key out of his pocket, he saw the sign formed of half-lit neon, and finally, the crazy mirth burst out of him. "Last Chance Bar & Grill?"

Well, it was either laugh or cry, wasn't it? He couldn't stop giggling, even as Trey bumped the doors open with a hip and led them inside, a crowd of unattractive men gaping at him from every bar stool, table, and booth. This was where he belonged, he supposed. Leave it to even a building to make it clear he had no place with the young and beautiful.

He would go, then, to his appointed doom.

His own Last Chance.

Stalking along behind Simon, with a thousand things to say and a hundred ways he wanted to apologize all but choking his throat, Finn didn't dare open his mouth to let a single one roll off his tongue. Damned if he'd take a chance on being misunderstood, and for pity's

sake, the last thing he wanted to do was upset Simon further. When he thought about what he'd done earlier, so desperate to make himself clear, it made his green blood run cold.

Finn was no rapist. Never had been, never would be, and he hated all the low-life bastards who resorted to violence to get their rocks off. He'd not planned and definitely not wanted to make Simon think Finn would take him by force. But, by the gods, he realized how it would have looked. He should have known Simon would think Finn was planning that very thing. Fuck! He wouldn't be able to blame Simon if the man never wanted to get within five feet of him again.

To be on the safe side, he walked six feet behind Simon, a nice, careful, harmless distance. And if that gave him a fantastic view of the man's long, strong legs in their borrowed, tissue-soft jeans, or his shapely bare feet padding almost noiselessly over the carpet, or the graceful bunch and swell of muscles beneath the well-worn, kitten-fuzzy green flannel shirt, or ... well, he was only male, wasn't he?

A man, and something of a Dom. He'd played at the mental game over the years, but now that he'd been faced with someone who could and would be a proper sub to love and be loved in return -- dangled like a candy and then cruelly and abruptly snatched away -- Finn knew it was the role where he belonged. His new favorite playground. He had a lot to learn, he knew, but the fun he'd have in getting trained up proper!

If his luck ran true to form, though, he'd have to find someone else to play with.

He'd wrecked it all with Simon, no two ways about the matter. From the way he walked, and the courage with which he'd faced down his fate, Finn knew Simon would be a proud man in his day-to-day life. A man like that might play submissive games, but once he got over his shock and dismay, he wouldn't give a damned thing up to someone who actually tried to hurt him.

Nope. Finn could scratch Simon right off his list of ... one.

Finn resisted the urge to kick the carpet as he followed along in Trey and Simon's wake, all the way into the Last Chance. Just inside the main door, he paused long enough to deal a truly filthy glare to the crowd of losers staring at them with open mouths. If they so much as said one nasty word to Simon, so help him, he'd wish them all joy throughout the rest of their lives and laugh at the consequences.

Fortunately for the lot, they kept their mouths shut. No one said a word, but Finn felt a swell of sympathy rise -- aimed not at him, of course, but at Simon as he made his way to the bar and slumped onto an empty high stool, elbows up and his face in his hands.

Finn sat a few feet away, staring helplessly at the man he'd hoped would be his lover while cursing himself for a fool. No glimmer of a daydream left there, now. But all the same, he could keep an eye out for Simon. He could and he would.

So help him, gods of Ireland.

Simon ignored the drink that Trey had fixed for him without asking and slid down his way. It bumped into one of his hands, bounced off the knuckle, and he left it to sit where it would. From the fruity smell, it was some concoction far too frou-frou for even the likes of Liam at his most fairy-like. Strawberries and coconut. The smell of it turned his stomach.

He would have drunk it, though, if he'd thought it could stop his mind whirling and churning on its single focus -- Finn. God! Why couldn't he get the Irishman out of his mind? No matter what he tried to think about, idly or intently -- *Amour Magique*, the Brotherhood, Liam, being trapped in the Last Chance itself -- his thoughts kept flying, arrow-fast, back to the sorrowful green eyes whose gaze he could *feel* fixed upon him.

Never there when he looked up, of course. If he glanced out of his fingers, Finn would be staring glumly at his wine cooler, picking off shreds of the label and rolling them into tiny balls.

What was the problem with the drinks in Last Chance, anyway? Did they have to be as equally pathetic as being stuck there, as pathetic as the men who were caught in its web? A nasty-spirited reminder or a cruel joke?

Simon would have killed for a properly aged bourbon. Neat. He had a feeling Finn didn't like his cooler, from the way he sipped at it occasionally and the faces that he made -- And there, again. There! Finn!

Simon lay his forehead on his arms and groaned, soft enough to avoid notice. He had to get Finn out of his mind. Stop thinking about his lean body that belied the corded, surprising strength in his long arms. The way he'd felt in that moment when Liam had interrupted them.

What was he, sick? To think in that one moment, when Liam's voice had taken away the panic and fear, to remember ... The feel of Finn on top of him had been unbearably erotic.

He'd had a flash -- what someone else might have called a vision -- of him and the Irishman naked in bed together, Finn above and he below. Arms and legs twined together, mouths pressed tightly, kissing without finesse, but with a definite hunger that could not be denied.

Simon groaned again, but not from despair or dismay. Rather, he felt his cock beginning to rise again for, what, the third time that night? Three erections and nary an orgasm to show for them; he'd get blue balls for sure. Or rather -- he almost giggled -- *green* balls?

He blinked against a sudden visual of himself pressed up against a wall with Finn's hand down his paper-thin jeans, working his cock with those skilled, callused fingers, his mouth eating a trail of kisses down Simon's neck, and *oh ...!*

Simon caved in on himself a bit as he almost came in his borrowed pants. Only a deep, shaky breath and force of will kept him from embarrassing himself. But from the way some

of the men around him raised their noses and inhaled curiously, Simon had a feeling Finn wasn't the only not-quite-human in the Last Chance. Come to think of it, what had that bastard Zachary called him? A "mundane," a "normal"? Oh, sweet Lord, what if he was in the minority, not the majority?

Simon dropped his head back down, rolling it to and fro on his forearms. Keeping all that in mind, Finn didn't seem such a bad alternative. In fact, he seemed more and more appealing all the time, and Simon wasn't sure if that frightened him or, worse, turned him on.

Based on what he knew about Finn, he thought he could forgive the violence the Irishman had shown. Finn's tongue-tie had worked against him, too, ruining what could have been the start of a beautiful friendship for the both of them.

Simon didn't think Finn would have it in him to be violent without his unfortunate geas. Mischievous, maybe, and possibly a dab hand with a practical joke, but not callous, careless of hearts, or deliberately cruel. A true Master.

If it wasn't Finn's fault, Simon could hardly hold it against him, could he? And if he couldn't hold Finn's actions against him, he had no reason to sit and sulk when the man, clearly repentant and hangdog gloomy, sat casting him longing looks and stifling sighs that told a story of wishing for what might have been.

Slowly, Simon sat upright, putting a bit of the lawyer back into his spine. He might not have his suit, and he might be falling for someone cursed with the kind of bad luck he'd spent his adult life, and especially recent years, trying to avoid, but ... Be damned if he didn't want Finn to look up and meet his gaze and understand what he was trying to say without any literally cursed words to get in their way.

As if he felt the weight of Simon's stare, Finn gradually raised his head. Hesitant at first, he took a few darting glances before finally matching Simon look for look. Between

them, they telegraphed a conversation in the language of men who, frankly, didn't often use words to make themselves clear anyway.

I didn't mean to.

I understand.

I'm sorry.

It's all right.

Please?

I know it was the curse.

Forgive me?

I do. I forgive you, Finn.

And Simon did. Without having to justify it to himself any further -- after all, the facts had been presented, the evidence weighed, and he was sufficiently versed in the law to render a judgment of "not guilty" -- he did forgive Finn. Accepted his repentance and offered him a second chance.

And Finn ... Finn smiled. It was clear he understood. Standing up, he pushed his chair aside and began to walk toward Simon. Simon dipped his head in agreement and abrupt decision. He'd meet Finn halfway. And if they could never talk to each other, well, words weren't everything, were they? They'd find a way to make it work.

An unexpected burst of noise startled both of them, and the rest of the so-silent bar, into a flinch. Everyone looked automatically toward the view screen that covered half of one wall ... with its feed of the main dance floor, Simon realized. He felt his cheeks heat up. Had they all seen his earlier humiliation? He didn't know if he could bear --

But wait, wait, wait. The tempo of the music had slowed, dropping into something soft, with Spanish guitar and a Latin voice crooning lyrics made of molten honey, liquid gold, and lazy afternoons in the sunlight. The frenetic strobe lights had changed to a dallying snowflake flurry of soft spots, glittering over the crowd of men. Thrashing knots of dancers

slowly separated into pairs, swaying and rocking together to the sound of the ballad playing just for them.

Simon turned back to Finn and found the Irishman watching him with a shameless grin on his face. The impishness of it infected Simon until he wanted to laugh as well -- a good, healthy, hearty laugh, one from the bottom of his soul. A sound that swelled from taking pleasure in life and the moment.

Finn held out his hand, his eyebrow cocked and his invitation clear. *May I have this dance?*

And Simon, smiling broad and white, ear to ear, met his soon-to-be lover halfway, taking him by the fingers, matching palm to palm as the music wove its spell around them, swallowing them blissfully *alive*.

Chapter Eight

The Last Chance swathed itself in warm silence save for the sound of the song playing over the view screen. Rich and sensual as if the vocalist himself were sitting at the bar with guitar in lap, the lyrics wound soothing tendrils around the room that lulled every man into total calm.

Every man, that was, except for Simon and Finn, both of whom, Simon was sure, felt peace and a burgeoning arousal ripple through them when their hands touched, easy and powerful as the tide. They drew in deep, startled breaths, then let them out softly, smiling at each other. Simon thought they were both probably feeling oddly shy.

Simon stepped in a couple of feet, closing the distance between himself and Finn. The Irishman flushed with a blaze of excitement, cheeks going pink, but for all that his bright green eyes sparkled with merriment -- and oh, yes, mastery. Simon lowered his head and butted it gently against Finn's chin, as would a cat seeking the approval of its two-legged pet. The low chuckle he heard was a definite reward, and told him Finn got the message far better than any words would have been able to convey.

Slowly, they began to sway to the low rolling of the ballad, rocking against each other just a bit, testing their limits and limitations. Simon closed his eyes as Finn slipped arms

around his waist, pulling him a little tighter still, listening to the music and savoring the warm sensation of being embraced.

He'd bet his last buck on understanding far more Spanish than Finn did, years of wandering the world notwithstanding. A good many of his clients were Hispanic, and he'd polished his knowledge of the language until it gleamed. They trusted him because he not only knew the basics of their speech, he understood subtleties and innuendo, often so important in getting one's point across.

Simon laughed as Finn canted their hips together. Points, yes, good ones. But while he suspected the romantic sounds of the ballad were putting Finn in the mood, he probably didn't understand what the vocalist sang about. Listening, Simon suspected he had been right about himself being one of the few "mundanes" in *Amour Magique*.

The song had the sound of being recorded in a small, low-budget studio, though clear and beautiful all the same, and the musician spoke in smoky, honeyed notes of the joy of shedding one's man-shaped skin and falling into the form of a jaguar. Of running into the night, wild and free to hunt what its heart desired, and tracking down the prey it wanted most. It was a story of animal freedom, of the beast caged within a man's heart allowed to let loose to run and play.

Finn turned them slightly, his warm hands skating up Simon's back. Simon let out a soft sigh and pressed closer still to Finn, savoring his heat and the unique smell of him -- fresh green grass, musky peat and rich whiskey. He nuzzled his mouth into the crook of Finn's neck, nipping a small welt without breaking the skin, then soothing the abused spot with his tongue. From the way Finn growled and arched against him, Simon suspected he had liked it.

Good.

He moved with Finn, savoring the music as it washed over them. At any other time he might have been confused by the story of the song, but not now. This night was about

removing one's everyday disguises and letting the true nature inside run loose. The part of a man that hungered, that yearned, that *wanted* without having any rules or inhibitions to hold it back. That in him which ached to laugh, to drink, to dance, and to make love. It had no fears, no doubts, and no regrets -- and neither did he. He was free now, and he planned to make the most of it.

Sucking again on the soft tissue of Finn's neck, knowing he had "permission" to play, Simon tasted the light saltiness of his flesh and moaned against the other man's throat. He felt Finn's fingers working against the muscles of his back and then, with a tug, pulling them closer still, groin to groin and cock to cock, the two of them as hard and needy as the song was soft and sensual.

Simon laughed as he and Finn swung in a circle, aroused as two men could possibly be, and free to let each other know. Who cared if anyone was watching? This moment was theirs, and they would make it last.

Finn would have laid even money on two things. No, three. One, Simon knew a lot more about old-fashioned dancing than he did -- seemed his only problems were with the modern spastic jigginess. Or had that all been ill-wishing? Finn would have loved to take Simon on the dance floor dressed properly. Show him off, deliciously submissive. Maybe even put a collar around his neck and tug on it as they gyrated together. Fucked their way through a dance with the sound and light going supernova around them.

He wanted the chance to find out someday. Just then, though, Simon kept moving as if he wanted to lead, as if this were a proper ballroom dance, but then drawing back, remembering his "place" as a sub.

Finn dragged himself back to his point. Damned hard to do, with a sweet sub-treat wound around him like stripes on a candy cane. Two! From the way Simon kept smiling against the sensitive skin of Finn's neck, he knew what on earth the song was about.

And, three, most important of all, he had set himself loose of any bonds save for those he chose to impose upon himself as a submissive. He'd had a tang of pure freedom to him when Finn dipped down to steal a quick kiss that turned into a long one, a taste that turned into an almost endless drink of one another's flavors.

One more thing he knew for sure: Simon wanted him as much as he wanted Simon, and no mistake. The hardness of his cock bumping into Finn's own groin told him as much, and oh, but that was a welcome feeling. He hadn't lied to. It had been centuries, though not quite a millennium, since someone not paid for it had gotten close enough for Finn to feel the evidence of desire. Better than his few previous encounters, this wasn't motivated by the promise of payment.

Simon wanted *him*, Finn, purely for the sake of Finn himself. No coins, no favors, just pure arousal and yearning for completion. It made his blood run hot and his heart pump fast, faster, fastest ever as he lifted Simon by the waist and spun him in a circle. Their laughter matched the twinkling notes of the guitar strings lovingly plucked, blending in with what sounded oddly like the soft patter of golden coins showering to the carpet.

Finn barely noticed the sound. Still laughing, he stole yet another kiss. No, not stole. He sought it out with his lips and was eagerly given the gift he sought as Simon kissed him back. Flickering his tongue along Simon's slightly parted mouth, he slipped his tongue inside and caressed. He felt Simon stiffen, not with fear but with appreciation, before twining his own tongue around Finn's in an exercise of delight.

Finn groaned into the kiss, no longer caring if anyone heard. Let them watch and be jealous as all hell. Simon was *his*, his last chance come to fruition, and he wasn't about to give up the man now. Simon's hands tangled in Finn's unruly locks as they swayed together, laying his own shy, submissive claim.

Finn was more than happy to acknowledge it and Simon. He nudged his head deeper into the other man's strong, long-fingered hands, all but wishing he could purr. Something in the music made him feel almost feline.

Simon draped himself more heavily against Finn, but wasn't so great a weight that he could knock Finn over. Finn was strong enough in plenty to hold them both up, himself and his new pet. His Simon. Such a good man. And good boys deserved rewards, didn't they?

Daringly, Finn withdrew one of his hands from Simon's heated back beneath the softness of old flannel and trailed it around, fingertips first, to the fastening on his worn, secondhand jeans. He ran the pad of his thumb around the button that closed them at the waist, laughing quietly when Simon drew in a startled gasp of pleasure.

Ah, if you like that, just wait and see what you think of this. Finn flicked the button open, drew the zip down just a bit, click by click and, tickling with the lightest of touches on sensitive lower belly and groin top, slid his hand inside Simon's jeans with the lightness of pure gossamer. Simon's cock, fairy-silver covered by hot, raw silk, all but jumped into his palm, begging for attention.

Finn trailed kisses across Simon's collarbone, mouthing the flannel when it got in his way. His free hand played the notes of the song across Simon's shoulder blade; the other was far better occupied dipping deep into Simon's jeans and wrapping itself around a heated handful of hard, hard cock.

Finn all but moaned and collapsed, even as Simon let out a low, hoarse cry and sagged against him. Gods and goddesses of Eire, had anything ever felt as good as Simon's dick within his grasp? It pulsed with the hot blood thrumming through the swollen length, the slightest bit damp at the tip -- not enough to lubricate, but sufficient to slide the pad of his thumb around in circles.

As Simon writhed against him, Finn slowly let his hand ride up and down the length of the man's cock, teasing him without mercy, but with definite affection.

"Want you," Simon raised his head to whisper, ragged, in Finn's ear. "I haven't -- not in years -- wouldn't, with a stranger -- but you, it's natural. Please. Want you. Can I? Will you?"

Finn felt as well as heard the rough edge in Simon's voice. Heaven only knew what the man, this captivating and compelling mundane, had come to Amour Magique in search of. Probably just one golden moment in the spotlight, one last chance -- he laughed -- to dance and shine.

Yet they'd found so much more, and how odd that they might not have come into each other's arms if it were not for the cruelty of others. Zachary's treatment of Simon had given Finn the energy he needed to escape Last Chance and find the man he was meant to be with, and Simon's understanding of how the magic worked had led him into Finn's very arms.

Magic, yes. It was a mystical moment in this enchanted evening, and Finn wasn't about to let Simon go, or say "no" to his request. If Simon wanted him as much as Finn wanted Simon, and he thought the man did, he'd give him the ride of a lifetime -- if he could wait that long.

One thing, though. He didn't mind putting on a free tease for the crowd of losers in Last Chance, but damned if he'd give them the whole show. It wouldn't be right. Simon deserved more, and he wanted their first time, of hopefully many still to come, to be a memory to cherish.

Giving Simon's cock one last, wistful squeeze, unable to help himself from craving still more of the satiny-hard touch or resist having Simon cry out low and rock into his grip, Finn decided on his course of action. Drawing his hand away, he reached for Simon's and twined their fingers together.

He still didn't dare trust his voice, but let his eyes do the talking. *Will you follow me?* he asked with a tilt of his head.

Simon's eyes sparkled. He nodded, as eager as Finn himself. Finn felt the blessed warmth of a true grin spread across his own lips. He tugged at Simon's hand. *Come on, then. Come.*

Simon followed.

There wasn't much permitted to the Last Chancers by way of privacy, but even the petty management of a place within Amour Magique allowed its patrons privacy to take a piss. Finn ached to be able to take Simon somewhere better, a place with a soft bed, possibly with a few nice trimmings like candlelight and champagne in a bucket of ice to go on the side, but this was all they had, and they'd make the best of it.

Finn didn't know what would happen when the night was over, though he prayed to gods he no longer believed listened to him that he and Simon could stay together. Still, he wasn't taking the chance. If the magic only lasted until closing time, then by Ireland he was going to have his fill of Simon at least once.

A memory to carry him through lonely years if he were left by himself again.

He thought Simon might feel much the same way. From the eagerness of his step, following behind Finn as a good sub should, their hands squeezing together to the rhythm of their pulses and the throb in Finn's cock, he suspected Simon was tasting the same urgency as he. There was a time to make war, to make peace and to make love, and that last was on them now.

Laughing because he simply couldn't help himself, Finn led Simon into the men's room and closed the door behind them, locking it with a *snick*. Still chuckling, too delighted to stop, he turned around to press Simon up against the wall, putting hands on either side of his shoulders and gazing deep into the man's face.

Ah, but he loved the sight of this fellow, his partner in this measure of the ancient dance. Small crinkles at the corners of his eyes, a few gray hairs among the darker ones, and lips open wide over a broad, white smile. An older fellow, as he liked them, but still enough of a youth that he could let go and let himself fall in love, even if he were shy about it. Old enough to know better, and young enough to let himself decide, just for once, not to care.

Delicious.

Finn leaned in for a kiss and drank deep from the well of love and lust a-brewing.

Simon let himself be pressed into the cold wall of the restroom, chortling to himself in glee and excitement. He'd never have imagined himself in such a place, about to allow his most intimate side to be plundered by a man who was all but a total stranger.

And yet, Finn wasn't quite a stranger. He hadn't known him very long, true, but he didn't feel as if he needed to know him any better. No ... that wasn't it. He didn't need to know any more, because he already understood everything there was to say and comprehend. He saw Finn's soul clearly as a lantern in a window on a dark and foggy night, a lighthouse for a ship long lost at sea. He shone bright as a beacon, warm and welcoming, guiding the way home for a lonely sailor. He was gentle and kind, full of good humor, and his tender hands spoke of love and reverence. With that sort of dialogue between them, who needed spoken words to fill in any blanks?

Simon let his mouth be ravaged by Finn's kiss, savoring every nuance of his taste and texture. Heated hands raced over him, undoing the buttons of his flannel shirt and then racing down to his jeans, pulling his zipper the rest of the way open and shoving the tissue-thin denim down over Simon's hips. Tentatively, asking permission, Simon raised his own hands to reciprocate and got a delighted moan into his mouth in response.

Oh, but he set to with a will and a passion then. He tugged, pulling Finn's own shirt over his head, bitterly regretting the brief moment that their lips and arms had to part to make that happen, but deeply appreciative of the expanse of warm skin it revealed to touch and kiss and lick and nibble.

He discovered Finn's nipples were more sensitive than any he'd ever encountered before, as he covered one breast with his hand, teasing with his tongue, and cupped the other in one palm and gave it a rolling massage. He loved the way Finn groaned and leaned against him, pressing heated kisses everywhere he could reach -- the top of Simon's head, his eyelids, his cheeks, and his nose. Finally, as if he couldn't wait any longer or bear any more of the

inflaming touches, Finn pulled Simon up and brought their mouths together again one more time.

This was it, Simon knew. This was it. Prelude to an orgasm. His aching balls and pulsing cock anticipated the pleasure to be and began to pound, rushing him onward hard and fast. The cock ring, that blessed everlasting bit of leather and silver, wouldn't prevent him from having his golden moment. All he needed was a little more help from Finn ... a ... *ah ...!*

It would seem that Finn, too, had grown tired of the foreplay. He now threw himself into the final stage of the game. Gripping Simon by the shoulders, he pressed their groins together, cock slip-sliding against cock, the brushing of their pricks as inflaming and heady as a drug.

More. He had to have more. "Finn, please," he managed to say. "Inside me. Need you there."

A finger reached around his ass and ran down the seam. "In here?" Finn asked softly. "Good. Right where I want to go. Open up for me, man. I can't wait to feel the heat of you."

Simon let loose with a cry of sheer bliss, flinging himself into a return of the movement. Just frottage but, ah, God, it felt so incredibly good he wished he could lose himself in the moment and never have it come to an end -- yet, as the orgasm rushed toward him, uncurling in a spiral of sparks deep in his belly and pushing forward, he thought he would explode if he didn't -- didn't --

"Hold, hold, hold," Finn said. "Have to finish this off properly." Clearly trying not to be too rough, despite how eager he seemed, he pushed at Simon, turned him around to face the wall. Simon's heart beat faster. *Yes, yes, yes, God, yes ...*

Finn wrapped his hand around Simon's cock, his fingers shaking. Simon thrust into the other man's tight grip, fucking it eagerly. Both groaned. Simon thought about what would

happen next. What he hoped for. He thought, from the way Finn cursed in Gaelic, that Finn wanted it just as much as he did.

“Stand still for me for just one moment,” Finn said, voice shaking. “I’ve got a condom and some slick in my back pocket. I’m taking them out now, right? Going to get you good and wet for me.”

“Don’t --” Simon shook his head. “Don’t take too long.”

He heard the click of a tube snapping open and then, just a second later, felt lube-slippery fingers rubbing against his hole. He groaned as he relaxed his muscles. It felt too good to be true, and he knew he wouldn’t last long. “Hurry.”

“Pushy bottom.” Finn bit Simon’s shoulder just hard enough to hurt, but in the best way possible. “I’m almost there.” Eager fingers stretched him wide. They paused and withdrew, leaving Simon feeling unbearably empty. “Are you ready for me?” Finn asked between deep breaths. “Want this?” He pressed his cock against Simon’s entrance. “Need me? Say you do.”

“I do.” Simon pushed back, feeling the wonderful burn of Finn’s cock beginning to make an entrance. “Please, Finn, do it.”

Finn stilled. “Please, what?”

Simon’s eyes closed in heady pleasure. “Please ... Master.”

“Good boy,” Finn said. Gripping Simon’s hip with one hand, he slid inside with short strokes, each one better than the last, until he was fully seated in Simon’s ass. “God! Ah, God, so good.”

Simon moved against him. The pleasure, the pain, all of it was overwhelming. “Fuck me, Master,” he demanded, struggling to get the words out. “Please!”

Finn grasped Simon’s arms, then began to thrust. They found their rhythm right away, driving and receiving, hard and accepting. Simon’s nerve endings were screaming at him, whooping with a thrill he’d been denied for far too long.

When Finn moved his hand around and started jacking Simon's cock again, he couldn't hold back any longer. Neither could he manage to muffle his cry as a long-denied release burst from him, sticky stripes of come painting the wall he leaned against. Finn groaned, deep, as if the sound came from the center of his gut. His fingers twitched and spasmed on Simon's arms, and he again began chanting something in a Gaelic-sounding tongue. Then he, too, was coming, the friction of his cock blazing a trail deep within Simon, pulsing as he emptied himself in hot jets of spunk.

The moment lasted forever -- and not nearly long enough. Fireworks and spangles of color, brilliant colors, filled Simon's field of vision, fading away slowly, their afterimages burned into his retinas.

When he came to himself once more, he found that somehow he was still upright, but probably only because the wall behind him held him there. Finn had crumpled against him, sagging in his arms, breath hot and fast against his naked shoulder.

Weary from the burst that had drained what felt like all of his strength, Simon somehow turned around in Finn's arms and lifted one hand to tangle in Finn's hair. The locks sifted through his fingers like strands of red gold, sparkling in the surprisingly gentle overhead light. He laughed, not because anything was funny, but because of how odd it was that this felt so good.

Sex with a stranger, or a near stranger -- Simon-the-Lawyer would never have done such a thing. He felt as if he'd been made over in a new image. Been reshaped into a new sort of man. He thought he liked this guy he'd become a good deal better.

Finn chuckled in return, languidly stretching up to brush a light kiss over Simon's lips. Their breaths mingled, slowing down as their pulses did, from a race to a lazy recovery. "Good," he whispered, perhaps forgetting that he shouldn't speak. "You are so good, lover, and so fine to have within my arms."

Simon frowned, puzzled. Had he ... that had made sense. More, it caused no reaction within him save for plain delight in being appreciated. "Finn?" he asked slowly, putting a hand to his new lover's cheek. "What did you say?"

Finn backed up and blinked. Simon could all but see his mind racing, going over what he'd blurted out, and coming to the same amazed conclusion. "I said," he repeated, slowly, as if he wanted to taste the syllables, "You are so good to me. So fine." He shook his head, amazed. "I said it. What I meant to say. How did I do that?"

Simon smiled, feeling as if the sun were coming out from behind a bank of dark storm clouds. He knew the answer, and to hell with logic that tried to deny it. "Magic," he said solemnly, bending to kiss Finn once more, because a face like his, and lips like those, outright demanded it. "There's magic in the air, my Finn."

He let his mouth ghost over to Finn's temple, just above his ear. "Do you want to know a secret?" he whispered.

Finn laughed, weary but delighted and curious. "Yes," he said, rolling the sounds of intentional words coming out right over his tongue like precious jewels. "Tell me a secret, Simon."

Simon closed his eyes and breathed deeply of Finn's scent. "I could fall in love with a man like you."

He would have said more, but then Finn's arms were around him, and they were whooping and hollering, acting as badly as half-mad teenagers and not in the least bit ashamed. They didn't understand the how or the why of it, but they knew -- *knew* -- they'd broken the chains that held each other down. They were free to live, laugh, and make love, not just there and then, but always, and as long as they wanted to go on.

Simon shifted a little to get a better grip on Finn, then paused. The wall seemed to have moved behind him. He laughed. "Did we break the place?"

Finn peeked over Simon's shoulder. He let out a low whistle. "Only in the best way possible. Look, Simon. Turn around and look."

Curious, Simon did as he was directed, leaning back into Finn's arms as the leprechaun held him in turn from behind. He'd been resting against a mirror set into the wall, now knocked loose of its moorings. Behind it, though, instead of still more wall, there was an empty pocket of space. A black void that seemed to have no end.

Fascinated, he reached out to touch -- only to have Finn snatch his hand back. "Careful," Finn murmured. "That's a travel port, that is. I never knew it was there!"

"A what, now?"

"Travel hole. They're scattered here and there throughout Amour Magique. Some folk who live in other times and spaces use them to travel here and back. They'll take you anywhere and anywhen you want to go. 'S a bit like Dorothy in Oz. Just think about there being no place like home, step inside, and right back out where you hang your hat."

Simon gazed at the benign blackness in calm wonder. Odd, how easy it was, once he'd accepted Finn as a reality, to believe in things he'd have considered impossible before. "Anywhere at all?" he murmured.

"Anywhere you like." Finn brushed a kiss behind Simon's ear and laughed. "Must be this is the ticket out! We beat the curse of the Last Chance, love. We won the game Amour Magique set us up to play. This is our reward."

"We can go free," Simon said. He reached down to grasp Finn's hands, locked around his waist. He turned to grin at Finn, delighted with himself for having the nerve, courage, and willingness -- no, eagerness -- to ask the question dancing on his tongue. "Want to come home with me?"

Finn squeezed his hands in return. "Lead the way, lover," he said, voice rumbling against Simon's throat. "Let's find a better life, you and me."

Simon laughed out loud and stepped forward, into the black void, taking his lover with him, and disappearing into both their futures, together.

As they vanished into the blackness, neither of them noticed that Finn left something in his wake. Everywhere he had stepped, a gold coin sparkled on the carpet. Pure gold, leprechaun's treasure, the sign and symbol of the forgiven fallen, welcomed back into the fold.

A happy ending when he would have time to realize it. At the moment, though, neither Simon nor Finn cared for anything else but further discovery of the wonders of one another ...

Some distance away, Trey, keeper of the Last Chance, flipped on the flat-panel computer monitor hidden behind his bar, and gazed down at a familiar face hailing him. The incubus Liam had tapped into a vid-link and gazed up at him, questions written across a tired face. "They have gone?" he asked.

Trey nodded.

"Happy? Satisfied? Together?"

Nod.

"Good," Liam said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Trey cocked his head, examining Liam narrowly. He opened his mouth. "You look like hell, man," he said.

Liam laughed, surprising Trey. "Not yet," he replied cryptically. "Not quite yet, but perhaps soon."

"Say what now?"

"Never mind." Liam brushed his question aside. "I am needed elsewhere."

Trey remembered him saying that earlier, and spoke again. “A lot of elsewhere?”

Liam chuckled. “You have no idea,” he said, and closed the vid-link.

Trey paused to consider that, then all that had happened in his Bar & Grill that evening. To any observer it would look just like Trey were lost in his usual apathetic grouch, but thoughts were flying thick and fast behind his eyes. Finally, he nodded and picked up a bar cloth, starting to polish clean highball glasses.

Whistling an Irish tune.

 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>.