

WILLA OKATI



SINGLE
WHITE
FANG

THE BROTHERHOOD 7

Loose Id

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 7: SINGLE WHITE FANG

Willa Okati

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Warning

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

The Brotherhood 7: Single White Fang

Willa Okati

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Dedication

To everyone who wrote me with a request for David's love story. Here you are, and happy reading!

Chapter One

On leaving the meeting in Simon's condo -- immediately after Liam proposed a visit to a club, which took place in The Brotherhood 1: Amour Magique ...

"I can't believe it," Christian babbled excitedly, jumping in and out of David's silhouette as they made their way down the sidewalk outside Simon's condo. "Amour Magique! I mean, that place just opened up, and they already have a line of men three deep every single night, but you heard what Liam said; he's gonna get us in, VIP, free of charge!" He mimed a flying kick at a lamp post. "Might just have to change my mind about him!"

David caught Christian's foot in one hand as the other man overbalanced and spun around. Laughing, Christian tumbled to the pavement easily as an acrobat, tucking and rolling and coming back up again.

"Gotcha," David said with a grin. "Almost. How'd you get to be so good at that, anyway?"

Christian shrugged, flipping up the collar of his thin jacket. "Gymnastics in high school," he said, so easily that David knew it was a lie. That stung a bit. Whatever Christian

did to earn money, he wouldn't tell anyone about it, not even David. Not that David couldn't guess.

"You are careful when you work, aren't you?" he asked, as gently as he could. "I understand you don't want anyone to know."

Christian looked at him quizzically, though with over-bright eyes, and lied transparently. "What are you talking about? I only got burned once by the deep-fat fryer, and after that I learned to wear the apron they give us."

"Aprons. Right." David rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Christian, you know you don't have to ... I mean, I could help ..."

"Help who? Me?" Christian's laugh sounded brittle. "Keep your help for someone who needs it." He punched David in the stomach he'd been working so hard to whittle down. "You're saving your money for our shopping trip, anyway."

"Since when are we going shopping?"

"Since I'm the college boy who knows where to buy the hottie hot outfits, and we're going to Amour Magique. We're gonna dress you up like you've never seen." Christian blew David a kiss. He grabbed another lamp post, swinging around it. Fat drops of rain began to splatter around them. Christian chortled in delight. "Just like that movie, *Singing in the Rain!*"

David watched Christian with wistful envy. Not lust, of course. He couldn't have seen himself as sexually interested in the guy ... Christian had to be five years younger since he was a senior in college. Besides, the odds of someone like him being interested in David ... not that great. Christian was young, hot and athletic, and most likely up to his eyeballs in dates.

Not for the first time, David puzzled over how Christian had come to join the Brotherhood. In fact, he wondered the same thing about most of the Brothers. For a group that was all about sharing their feelings, he really didn't know much about anyone. Well,

except the certainties that Micah was a diva, Bree had a really high pain threshold -- all those piercings, ugh -- and Lawrence was deep in the closet.

Speaking of whom, Lawrence passed them on the way to his beat-up compact car, grinning wryly. "Some kind of luck, huh? If this gets out, I'm finished at work. They'll fire me before you could strike a match."

David put a hand on Christian to stop him from shadow-boxing, then tried to soothe Lawrence. "It won't be like that," he said. "Maybe comb your hair differently. Grow a goatee or something. Besides, if anyone sees you there, won't that mean they're gay themselves? You'll have it over them just as much as they would on you."

Lawrence looked startled. "That's true. Never thought of it that way. Thanks, David!" He slapped David on the upper arm. "You're a good guy, you know that?"

Now, Lawrence, with an adorable boy-next-door face and sparkling green eyes, David could have been interested in him. The man was around his own age, slender as a lathe, red-haired and good-natured. But the man was so deep in the closet David doubted Lawrence could see daylight, and he'd never looked at David with anything but friendship. No one had.

David watched as Lawrence neatly folded himself into the driver's seat of the compact, turned on the ignition, and drove away at a leisurely pace. No undue rush, no hurry that would draw suspicion as to where he'd been and what he'd been doing.

Not even Liam, and Liam would flirt with a *wall* if he thought it had an attractive knothole.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," a small figure said, ducking between David and Christian. Liam himself, huddled in a coat against the rain, heading off to wherever it was he lived, going on foot. David frowned. Come to think of it, he'd never seen the little man use a car. Did he walk everywhere?

"Christian, see you next week," David said, rubbing a quick circle on the younger man's back. "You be careful on the bus, okay? You sure you don't want a ride?"

“Nah, man, I’m good. And be careful of what?” Christian demanded. “You worry too much.” He wouldn’t meet David’s gaze. “See you next time!”

He took off at a run, pelting toward the bus stop. David watched him go with regret, wishing as always that he could have done more, but he couldn’t save anyone, no matter how hard he tried. He wasn’t good enough and he didn’t have enough to give.

David watched Christian for another moment, full of half-formed wishes that he could help, then sighed and turned after Liam.

God, the man moved fast -- must come of being so small -- he seemed to dodge through the raindrops that were picking up speed.

“Liam!” David chased after him and took in a deep breath, determined that he wouldn’t be panting when he caught up to Liam. It was bad enough to have thirty extra pounds on him, which he hated displaying to others and the reason he always wore baggy shirts and pants -- although Micah always seemed to have no problem pointing them out.

“Liam!” he called again, gaining on the figure. “Slow down!”

Liam turned. He made a face as a blob of rain splatted his nose. For just a moment, he looked old and terribly sad. David pulled up short, startled. Liam looked like ... someone else. Beautiful, but tortured. “Saint Sebastian,” he blurted.

Liam cocked his head, understandably baffled. “Could you repeat that?”

David felt a hot blush climb his face. “Never mind,” he said in a rush. “It’s nothing.”

“David, you always say these words. Never do I hear you telling someone what is really on your mind.” Liam reached out and touched him, the warmth of his small hand seeping through David’s long shirt. He squeezed his arm with a feather-light grip. “You have so little faith in yourself. Come, then. What were you saying to me?”

David shuffled his feet. “It really is nothing. I mean, not much. It’s just, for a second, you looked like a beautiful painting of Saint Sebastian,” he mumbled. “He died a martyr from

having arrows shot into him. Some people thought the artist was gay, and that's why he made the saint so pretty. I mean handsome, not pretty. I mean --"

"David." Liam squeezed again. "It is quite all right. I am no saint, but I am honored that you thought of me in that fashion for a moment." He looked like regular old Liam again, pint-sized and pixie-like, with a grin that wouldn't quit. "I was sad, yes. But it is of no consequence."

"No, it is," David insisted. He felt himself flush even deeper, but went on. "I saw you walking ... and I thought maybe you don't have a car, so I was going to offer you a lift. It's raining," he added, then winced. It was kicking up to be a real storm, and he had to go and mention the obvious? He couldn't believe how much of a dork he sounded.

All the same, Liam tilted his head to the sky. "So it is," he murmured, as if he was just now noticing the drizzle, despite being wet. He turned back to David, his eyes twinkling with good humor. "A ride in your large, comfortable truck with the leather seats? Have I earned such a treat?"

"Oh, God, no. I mean, no, it's not about earning," David babbled hastily. "I mean, I didn't want you to get soaked and maybe jumped by someone who's out looking to bash people, but you can probably take care of yourself, and I should really shut up now." He clamped his lips tightly together.

"David, David ..." Liam caressed his arm. His expression had changed to a thoughtful one. "Only you would make such an offer. Such a generous heart. The others think I am just a crazy little gay man, who lives for nothing but fun and the next time I can hook a man for my bed."

"You do get laid more than the rest of us ..." David swallowed. "Not that I know, you know. You just have that look. Like you aren't going without." He ducked his head. "I'm sorry."

"Do not be. David, you have the largest heart I have ever known. Do you realize that?"

“Oh, yeah. That’s me. Large.”

“Stop that,” Liam reproved. “You have a little extra padding? Pfah! What does that matter? The world would be a dull place indeed if everyone were a model like Micah. Ex-model, pardon me. There is a place for bears. Many of us like a larger man in bed. We do not have to, how do you say it? Search the sheets for you.” His eyes twinkled roguishly. “There is a perfect man out there for you, David. I think you will find him at *Amour Magique*.”

David shook his head. “I might not go ...”

“Not go?” Liam looked genuinely shocked. “But of course, you will go! You will be a tremendous success. Of that, I am sure.”

“I don’t know, Liam. It might be okay for the other guys. I mean, all of them, even Simon, they’re cute. They have a personality. They’ll do all right. I’m just ...” David lifted his shoulders helplessly. “Me.”

“And that is what makes you remarkable.” Liam reached up to straighten the lapels of David’s shirt. “You try to watch out for young Christian, even though he rebuffs you. You give Lawrence good advice. You make sure Quentin feels loved. There is so much good that you do, and you ask for no reward.”

“I don’t do it to be paid back,” David said, stung. “I just ... care. That’s all.”

“Then you deserve to have someone special care for you in return.” Standing on his tiptoes now, Liam patted David’s cheek. It was almost a fatherly gesture. “You manage the antiques barn out on the highway, do you not?”

David blinked, startled by the change in subject. “Yeah. For almost ten years now. I didn’t get to go to college, but I got lucky with that job.”

“You love it, yes?”

David could feel the grin lighting up his face. “I do. I really do. The best part is finding something that someone’s about to throw out because it’s been used too hard or socked away

in an attic, and they think it's junk. I love refurbishing those old woods, making them look as good as new again."

"Treasure from trash," Liam mused. He rocked back and forth on his feet, as if thinking carefully about something. "Do you know about the Midnight All-Night Flea Fest just outside of town?"

David wanted to laugh. Liam hopped from topic to topic just like a flea himself. He smiled. "I wish I'd gotten to know you earlier," he said impulsively. "You're ..."

"Yes." Liam smiled. "I am. But come, the rain is increasing and there is a sheltered doorway close to hand. Step in here by my side and tell me, why are you not attending the Fest?"

David followed Liam and, once settled under the doorway's eaves, shuffled his feet again. "Well, I kind of missed out on the vendor entry. And it's -- well, it's dark." He wrapped his arms around his chest. "I'm not really crazy about being out after the sun goes down."

Liam was looking at him all too carefully. "And there are reasons why," he said. It wasn't a question, but David nodded all the same. His ex ... he'd used the darkness of night and the shadows to do what he'd done. David felt at his ribs. They still hurt sometimes when he strained himself. Bad breaks would do that, or so the doctor had told him.

"Go to this Fest," Liam said abruptly. "I think you will have a grand time, and there should be no fear about the time of night. There are so many lights, you would think it the sunniest of days. Fun at the fair. Is fun not what this is all about?" He gave David a playful push -- a ticket suddenly appearing in one hand. He let it go, David catching the chit automatically.

"Where did you get this?"

Liam shrugged. "From a friend. I had thought I would go myself, but I believe you will have a better time than I." He folded David's fingers around the ticket. "Go, and enjoy yourself."

"Liam, these are fifty dollars each. I can't just take it. That Fest is serious business."

"Did I say I paid for it?" Liam's tone and face were mischievous. "I told you, it was a gift. Now I give that gift to you. Go, and have fun. As for myself, I must be getting home."

David felt a twinge of envy. "Do you have someone waiting for you?"

"Not precisely." Liam's face flickered back into a semblance of Saint Sebastian for a moment before he shook the gloom off with a visible effort. "I have an errand, and then I go to sleep alone tonight."

"At least let me give you a ride."

"No, no, there is no need." Liam waved him off. "Look, the rain is already stopping. A brief squall, and then the skies are clear. Go on. Will you do this for me?"

The ticket felt sharp and cool in David's hand. The thought of being outside, by himself, after dark ... he shivered. But how could he say no? Liam really seemed to want him to go. And maybe he'd find something good for the Barn or his own collection. Maybe.

"Okay," he said, feeling awkward. "Thanks. It's really good of you."

"A heart big enough to embrace the world, and yet he thanks me." Liam smiled up at David. Before he could stop the little man, or jump back in surprise, Liam raised up with both hands on David's shoulders, and brushed a kiss across his lips.

David raised his hand to touch his mouth. "What -- why did you --"

"For luck." Liam's eyes sparkled again. "Move along now. Have a good time. No worries about me. I will be fine. Just fine."

And with that, he turned and walked away, too fast to follow, but with his head up instead of hanging low. David caught a snatch of music floating back. Liam was singing, something sweet and lilting, in a language he didn't recognize.

He looked down at the square of cardboard in his hand. “Midnight All-Night Flea Fest,” he read aloud. He hadn’t dared to even think about going. But now ... now he thought he would. And maybe, just maybe he *would* find something good.

Standing in the dying rain, David began to smile. He felt something he hadn’t in a long, long time.

Liam’s kiss must have worked. He felt ... lucky.

Chapter Two

Liam had been right ... the Fest *was* lit up almost as brightly as day. David pulled into the spot near the entrance he'd been able to find almost immediately, marveling at the stroke of good fortune. Funny how no one else had taken it. Someone must just have left early; there had been at least three cars in front of him doing the slow circle-up and turn-around of someone hunting for a space.

The parking slot proved to be a tight squeeze for his truck, but he guided Sweet Rose in with remarkable grace for the old junker.

"Good girl," he crooned, patting the leather seats. Old, cracked material. He should get her re-upholstered, he knew, but by that logic, he should rebuild her engine, buy new tires, and have the entire chassis reworked. In fact, he should probably just get a different truck altogether, but he didn't think he could stand it. Sweet Rose had been his first big purchase after saving up enough at the Antique Barn, and she'd carried him for almost ten years.

You didn't let a lady down by putting her out to pasture like an old nag, especially when she still had some good miles left in her. She fit him just right, too, the legroom exactly as long as he needed and tall enough for his head not to bump the roof, and her radio always tuned in the sweetest country music to be found.

Humming along to three angel-voiced women, David gazed out the window at the throngs of people making their way through the Fest. He could see vendor tables stretching on for what seemed like miles, mostly under tents in case of more rain, but some were out in the open.

What beautiful lights and colors! He loved looking at houses come Christmastime, but something like this was almost better. It was like an ocean of light, color, sound, and smell. David could see old sewing machines, tallboys, wardrobes, and fainting couches standing out among the booths. With his window slightly cracked, he smelled the air and scented the sugary sweetness of cotton candy, the saltiness of pretzels, yeasty beer, and the pervasive scent of popcorn. At this kind of celebration, he knew there would also be tables with homemade jams and jellies, hand-dipped candles, and sculpted soaps.

Even inside the truck, David could hear people's voices rising and falling in waves of excited laughter, whoops of jubilation, and below it all, the lulling chatter of vendors hawking their wares.

Felt like home. His hand hesitated on his seatbelt. If only it wasn't *dark* ...

It'd been dark like this a little over a year ago. He'd finally had the nerve to take out the restraining order against Tommy. Good old Tommy, who'd hugged David in public, pinched his stomach and teased, kissed him in front of his family -- and liked to use his fists whenever David screwed up, which he couldn't seem to help doing.

Tommy'd been waiting in the shadows.

David had been walking down the street to get an ice cream -- comfort food -- and his ex-lover had been there. Bigger and stronger, he'd dragged David into more darkness and used his fists and feet ...

The EMTs had said David was lucky to be alive. One more kick to the head and who knew what would have happened. One more broken rib and it might have punctured a lung. Thing was, it could happen again at any time. Cops didn't jail men who battered their wives,

kids, or girlfriends. Who'd keep a gay man locked up for whaling on his boyfriend? Ex-boyfriend.

David gave a bitter laugh. If he hadn't known for sure that Tommy had moved out of town and found someone else to party with, he'd have wondered and worried that the man was still out there somewhere. Stalking him. Waiting in the night for another reminder that no one walked out on him -- it was Tommy who told you when he'd had enough. He didn't have to be afraid, though. He *didn't*.

Sweet Rose gave a rumbling cough. "It's all right, girl." David reassured the old truck, then turned the engine off. "Sorry. I forgot you don't like sitting in neutral. How about I promise you some shiny new hubcaps? I see a display of those."

Rose gave the *tink* of a rapidly cooling engine. David laughed as he caressed her steering wheel. "You're a good friend," he sweet-talked his old baby girl. "You wait here for me. I'll be back soon with some treats for us to haul home."

He took a deep breath and undid the seatbelt, which crank-rolled back against the door. Watching his hand, ashamed of how it shook, David reached for the handle and pressed. The door popped open into the night air.

Whew. David exhaled heavily. *Okay, step one down.* He reached up above the visor and got his glasses. He didn't usually wear them because he thought they made him look even worse, but he'd need the things to examine the goods and to see the prices written in teeny-tiny print on discreet little tags. A place like the Fest might have the atmosphere of a carnival, but the really hard-core vendors were out there, and they knew the value of what they were selling down to the penny.

He grinned again, hoping he could get in a serious haggling session. It was the one time he wasn't afraid to speak up. Felt good, freeing. And the looks of respect he got, well, those didn't hurt, either. He thought maybe the sellers could tell he loved antiques, and the old things loved him back, too.

Huh! Pushing the glasses up on his nose, David thought hard. *I forgot to be scared. Maybe Liam did give me some luck with his kiss. That'd be really ... cool.* Or maybe it was just that he was coming into his element.

Was his hair messed up? He didn't carry a comb. Running his fingers through it would have to do. He was beyond late for a haircut, but Christian kept coaxing him out of it. He said the shaggy, tousled look was "way sexy," and had once dragged David away from the old barber shop he frequented.

David thought for another second, then decided not to check in the rearview mirror. He didn't like mirrors. A quick glance after he brushed his teeth, to make sure nothing was buttoned wrong or smeared on his face, was all he could take. Mirrors weren't kind.

With that, and another deep breath, David stepped out into the Fest.

The second Sweet Rose's door closed behind him, the sounds and smells rose up to engulf David. He let the crush of people carry him along, at first alarmed by the way people kept moving, but then easing into it. Up and down, sidestep and shimmy, just as if they had their own soundtrack. It felt like the dancing he did in his apartment when no one else was around.

On impulse, he stopped at the first table he could break away to. Directly underneath a bright light, the display held jars of sweet clover honey, harmonicas shining brightly in their cases, homemade silver jewelry, and expensive-looking cowboy hats racked up on poles. David laughed to himself at the eclectic collection.

The woman manning the booth grinned at him. "Hell of an assortment, ain't it?" she asked. "Hey, you remember me? You bought that Victorian chair from me back when I was cleaning out my granny's attic."

David took a second look and burst into a smile. "Doralee! How are you? It's been, what? A year, two?"

“Try three!” she fired with a chuckle, leaning back in her rocking chair and folding her hands over her stomach. “You’re lookin’ good, boy. Lost some weight, have you?”

David blinked. Had he? “Maybe a few pounds ...” he said slowly. “A friend of mine gave me this citrus diet.”

“And all that citrus gave you the runs, didn’t it?” Doralee cackled. David blushed. “Ease up, there, I’m just teasing. Fruit’s good for you. Here, take a look at this. You should just taste it.” She closed her eyes and kissed her fingertips.

With a wink, she reached underneath the cloth covering her table and drew out a different jar of honey. It had a red ribbon tied around the wide Mason mouth. “This is from a different hive. Special. I set it up right underneath the cherry trees on my Granny’s land. Nothing like it before or since.”

David held the jar up to the light, admiring the way its contents glowed amber-warm. He could almost smell the cherries. The honey looked smooth as velvet and rich as butter. “This is wonderful,” he said reverently. He’d have loved to eat it himself, but even better was the thought of giving it as a gift.

Liam! Would Liam like honey? The thought of slipping his small benefactor the jar filled David with delight. “How much is this?”

“For you? Not a damn penny.” Doralee smiled from ear to ear. “I figure I owe you a lot, son. You got me into this whole party circuit when all I wanted to do was have a yard sale. The money I got from Granny’s houseful of stuff set me up just fine for a good year, and I used some of it to get into things I always wanted to try out. Honey. Playing the harmonica. Mandolin, too, though I don’t have any of those.” She whistled. “Those are pricey, and I’m not a luthier. Maybe someday, though.

“Oh! And one more thing. Haberdashery.” She nodded at the rack of hats. “You take one of those, too. I’d like to see you fitted out like the good old cowboy I know you are at heart.”

David chuckled, feeling his cheeks turn pink. “Doralee, I can’t take this stuff for free.”

“You want to bet? You *are* taking it, every bit that I offer.” She gave him a stern stare. “I owe you this life I enjoy so much. You might brush that off, but I surely don’t. You take that honey and you take a hat right this instant. I want to see it on your head before I count ten!”

Hastily, David snatched a hat off the rack and jammed it onto his head. He started laughing just as Doralee did. “Well, maybe I should have asked you for your head size,” she said as David passed it back over, grinning sheepishly. “You’ve got a good-sized noggin on you. Here, try this one. It ought to fit.”

The old woman handed David a rough-riding black cowboy’s hat. He held it respectfully for a moment, recognizing good workmanship when he saw it. Made by hand and made well, it was a hat that a real Texan could wear and not be ashamed.

“You’re going to make me want a six-shooter next,” he said with a shy smile. “Maybe I can find someone selling kids’ toys.”

“Water pistols, fifteenth table on the left.” Doralee leaned forward. “Don’t be bashful, now. Put it on.”

A little nervous, David settled the hat on his head. It fit to perfection -- he knew as much right away. So comfortable he felt like he’d had it for years.

His benefactress gave an approving murmur, nodding her head. “I knew it,” she said proudly. “Now, with that truck of yours, the music you love, and your good working hands, you could catch any man you wanted.”

“Doralee!”

“What? You thought I didn’t know? Sweetheart, there ain’t much you can hide from a good old country woman.” She patted his hand. “Unless you’re still with that big old rawhide and bloody bones of a linebacker you used to date. Oh, no, I didn’t think you were his

‘assistant.’” She snorted. “That man looked like trouble with a capital ‘T’ to me back then, but I hadn’t been around plain-speaking folk long enough to tell you as much.”

Narrow eyes examined David from head to foot. “He ended up hurting you, didn’t he?”

David winced. “It’s all right,” he muttered, looking down. “I’m ... I left him. Almost a year ago now. He’s not coming back around.”

“He better not,” Doralee said firmly. “I’ll find myself a voodoo woman and hex his balls off if he does.”

David couldn’t help chuckling. “Lord help us, Doralee!”

“May He help us, indeed.” Doralee winked at him. “Sounds like a story.” She glanced around herself. “Not too many customers right now. They always glance and move on, but then they catch me on the way out. No one can resist a sweet tooth.” One hand waved at her gleaming jars. “Come sit a spell and talk to an old woman.”

David wavered. With her open friendliness, Doralee had won his heart way back when. She’d cooked him and Tommy a big breakfast when he came to appraise her collection. Bacon, eggs scrambled into fluffy white and yellow peaks, fried tomatoes ... his stomach rumbled at the memory.

He’d talked to her about all the things she was getting rid of. Her plan had been to lay it all out on blankets in her front yard. Tommy, bored, had been all for that. Not David. He’d seen the value in every one of the pieces that had been gathering dust for years and, slowly but surely, he’d talked her into selling them to the Barn and to other dealers.

Come to think of it, she’d been coming out of her own breakup, hadn’t she ...?

David ducked his head, but came up smiling. “Got an extra chair?”

“I keep one special just for handsome young men like you.” Once again, Doralee reached under the table and came up with a roomy folding stool. “Keep me company, like a good old boy would.”

David couldn't help widening his grin at that. "You really think so?" he asked bashfully. "That I'm a good guy?"

"Darlin', I know you are, for damn sure." As he settled down next to her, Doralee continued thoughtfully, "Now, all we have to do is find you a good man."

David fell off the stool. "Doralee!"

"Bless you! You say that one more time, I'm gonna think I've started forgetting my own name and need reminders." She gave him a hand up and dusted him off. Her laughter was infectious, making him want to chortle himself. Impulsively, he gave her a hug.

She leaned into his big arm, poking him in the side. Not meanly, like Tommy used to, but gently, like Quentin or Christian might. "I'm serious, now. You finally got shed of that loser, then that's good. But we have to find you someone proper to spend your time with. Someone who'll appreciate a fine figure of a man like yourself."

David shook his head. "Aw, I'm okay alone ..."

"You are *not*." Doralee gave him a severe look. She began fussing with her harmonicas, aligning them just so. "I found myself a good girl. Emma Ann and I get along just fine. We're both a little past the sex part, but she keeps herself in shape and I find that there's just something about a woman who knows how to use a vibrator."

David almost fell off his stool a second time, guffawing. Doralee's apple cheeks were red, but she grinned so broadly he could see her gold tooth. When he'd steadied himself, he hugged her again. "I'm glad. Not that being gay is the only choice, but I'm happy you found someone who makes you talk like that."

"Like how, sweetie?"

David considered his answer. "With a chuckle."

"Then that's the sort of man we need to find for you," Doralee said decisively. "Someone like you, who's kind enough to spend his time with a foolish old woman."

"You have a grandson or a nephew?"

“Oh, go on with you.” Doralee rocked for a moment, humming to herself. “Now, I have me a few ideas in mind, but what I need from you are some guidelines. Tell me. Who’s your ideal man?”

David’s mind flashed on a few images, most of them X-rated. Doralee nudged him again. “Once more, out of the gutter.”

Trying to be serious, David made a second attempt. He skimmed past images of Lawrence, funny and friendly; Collin, big and solid but so cold; and Liam, tiny and warm. Finally, he shook his head. “I don’t know, Doralee. I guess I never dreamed up my perfect guy. I just sort of ...”

“Took what came along?” she asked shrewdly, peering at him. “I thought as much. Why else would someone like you end up with a loser like that Timmy?”

“Tommy.”

“Big fartin’ deal.” Doralee stopped fiddling with her harmonicas and turned back to him, folding her hands on her knee. She pursed her lips and eyed him up and down. “Someone right about your height, I think. Probably about the same weight, too, which, regardless of those baggy clothes you wear, I can tell ain’t anywhere near what you think it might be. You’re too hard on yourself.”

David felt a spark of anger. Everyone seemed to be telling him that lately. Why shouldn’t he be? What was he but a high-school graduate who worked a retail job on the highway and drove an ancient truck, bless her sweet mechanical soul? A fat loser who couldn’t find anything to say back when a cute guy smiled at him. He was worthless, and he knew it.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop it. Stop it right now, you hear me?” Doralee rapped David hard on the knee. “I’m working up some good country mojo now. All the spirits out there who might be listening, perk an ear, ’cause I’m putting in an order. One prince of a

man for this boy, if you please. A good ol' boy who is truly *good*, who'll treat him like a king, and love him tender every damn night."

Her grin turned wicked. "Make him cute, too, huh? A real jewel of a guy. There!" She nodded firmly. "That'll do the trick."

David shook his head. "You're something else, you know that?" Feeling an overflow of warmth toward the woman, he reached out to grasp Doralee's hand, giving it a squeeze. "I've got to be getting along, now. Behave yourself, okay?"

"Never! That's no fun. But you, mister, you go on. Enjoy your presents."

David nodded, smiling again. "I surely will." Suddenly, he bent down and kissed Doralee's cheek. The instant his lips touched her, he almost froze up. What the heck? He never did this sort of thing!

Her face was aglow when he backed off. "Now that'll bring me good luck!" she exclaimed. "A kiss from a handsome man. I'd say that's a fine payment for a hat. A copper for a kiss. You ever hear that?"

When David shook his head, she patted his hand. "Try it out some time. Oh, and don't you miss the country band setting up down at the pavilion. They'll be playing at midnight. Local boys, but they're good. I listened in on their practice earlier."

"A finger in every pie," David said with a grin. He looked at the old woman with real affection. "You take care, Doralee."

"Only if you do the same." She shooed him away. A customer had wandered up to her booth. "How about this, then? Real clover honey ..." he heard as she started on her spiel.

Smiling to himself, David tipped his new hat at her and walked away. He felt himself swaying with the beat of the crowd. Just like ocean waves. In the water, it didn't matter if you were fat or if you didn't know how to move. You just went with it.

This was his ocean.

Doralee watched David go, admiring the way the cowboy hat sat on his head. *He does cut such a jaunty figure*, she thought, wistful for her own youth. *In times past, they would have sung songs about a highwayman, just after a glance at his face. Even the spectacles he hates so much set him off to a very T.*

With a tap on her nose, Doralee morphed into Liam, who sat back kicking his legs merrily. The old woman would be due back from her vendor's meeting at any moment. He shouldn't have played such a trick in her likeness, but how could he have resisted? It had been hard enough to conceal his glee at seeing that David had come to the Fest after all. How better to celebrate it than giving him a blessing he would accept, and another kiss for even greater luck?

"There y'are, young man," the real Doralee said, thumping Liam's shoulder heavily as she sat down. "Did you take yourself a jar of that honey and a hat, like I said, for minding this place? Sorry it took me longer than I thought."

"I did at that." Liam stood, bussing her cheek, exactly where David had kissed him. "Good night and good sales to you, and may pretty fortune follow such a pretty lady!" Waving off her chuckles, he made his way through the Fest. He had one more errand to run, just to ensure the pieces were set in motion, then he would be able to rest.

David was special. He deserved the best Liam could give him.

Yes, David was worth more than the price of a Tear.

Chapter Three

One thing about Flea Fests like this, even the pricey ones -- you had the joy of sifting through the trash and the treasure. David had his eye out for the latter and not so much for the former, but he found himself stopping at almost every table he passed. Everyone had a story to tell, and he could take all night if he liked; besides, he loved to listen.

"You had to close down your store?" he asked the thin Mexican-American man standing behind a folding table filled with candy, potato chips, and a few things like spiral notebooks and Band-Aids. "I'm sorry, *amigo*. The tax man isn't fair."

"No, he is not." Manuel shook his head. "You want to buy one of my goods? I make you a special deal. Two for the price of one. A man like yourself, he enjoys his candy, no?"

David forced down a flinch. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I do." And it wasn't like he could walk away after talking with the man for so long.

He scanned the rows of brightly-printed labels and, to his pleasure, spotted a kind of chocolate he'd seen Christian munching on whenever they visited each other outside of the Brotherhood meetings. There were also a few good gold-wrapped pieces, the quality candies ... Those would be nice for Quentin -- too often he forgot about eating and keeping his blood sugar up.

"I'll take these," he said, pushing them at Manuel with a smile and a folded five-dollar bill.

"I get your change." Manuel began opening a small wallet, pitifully flimsy.

David pushed his hand aside. "It's okay. Keep it."

"I don't take charity."

Crap. David scanned the crowd, but of course there weren't any children out this late. He held out the shopping bag he'd bought from a strolling merchant. "Fill it up, then."

Manuel's grin as he tossed in handfuls of candy was almost worth being loaded down with fattening treats. *It's okay*, David consoled himself. *I can give it all away. I don't have to eat it. I don't.*

Manuel clapped David on the shoulder as they parted ways. "You're a good man," he said before turning to his next customer. David shook his head as he meandered away.

The next table held candles molded and carved into all sorts of amazing shapes. Thumbing his cowboy hat back a little to get a better view, he was impressed with the craftsmanship. There were dolphins, mermaids, simple columns with gold-leaf runes, and ... oh. He dropped one with a blush. Dear God, they were all dildos!

The vendor, a sharp-eyed young woman, leered at him. "You don't want one of these?"

David knew he'd turned dark red. "No, sorry, no." He hastily backed away. He had been thinking of one for Liam and, truth to tell, even now that he knew what they were, Liam probably wouldn't turn one down, but ... uh-uh. Besides, wax? Sounded kinky. He wasn't all that sure about melting temperatures, either.

The woman laughed at him as he went. David shoved his free hand into his pocket, sinking into a light gloom.

If I'm a good man like everyone says, why do I invite so much trouble? First Tommy, then ... well, everything else that's happened during the year. Micah and his diets, now this

woman. I guess maybe I should read that book about why bad things happen to good people. But -- am I good? I don't know.

I think I'm just David. Whoever that might happen to be.

With that thought in mind, David continued to drift from booth to booth, admiring all the handiwork. Looked like the jewelers were out in force this year. Some of them had such a delicate hand with the silver and gold they crafted.

He couldn't help stopping to admire each one, no matter how long he was taking. The pieces didn't have any collector's value yet, but give them fifty years and they'd be prizes. Especially the cameos he saw at one table and the gorgeous mosaic pendants at another.

The beauty of the crafts lulled him into a good mood once again. By the time he hit his first "serious" vendor, he was revved up for a proper haggling session. Oddly, the place didn't appear to have anyone in charge in sight.

"Hello?" he called, weaving his way between a tallboy and a roll-top desk. "Anyone here?"

No answer. A little puzzled, David began examining the antiques. Unless he missed his guess, these were worth a nice chunk of change -- and when it came to assessments, he was hardly ever wrong. A lot of Depression era glass caught his attention for a minute, but it was dusty and chipped.

Making his decision, he abandoned them for the wooden pieces. Those were what he really wanted.

What was that there, underneath a lace tablecloth that, while yellowed, looked handmade? David squatted on his haunches and pulled the cloth off, carefully folding it. Oh, the material was a prize. A definite buy. He knew how to make it snowy white again. And beneath it, just as he'd hoped -- a trunk.

David's heartbeat sped up. Of all the things he ever found, trunks were his favorite. Were they empty or were they full? Sometimes people didn't bother to look and just sold the entire thing wholesale.

This one looked old, too. It had leather straps and buckles on it, and seemed worn all to hell, as if it had seen hard use in its years. All the same, there were plenty of people who'd want it.

Caressing the scarred wood, David admitted to himself that he wouldn't mind owning the thing. It'd go great at the foot of his bed. And, if it was full, that'd be double the pleasure, no matter what the contents held.

"Nameplate," he muttered to himself, craning to peer at the small brass placard, and doing so made David feel as uncomfortable as he did when taking rubbings of old gravestones. It'd corroded almost beyond legibility. He thought he made out a J ... and a W ...

A voice startled him. "Hello! Oh, my God, an actual customer. Hey, there!"

David turned sharply, heart thundering in his throat, to see a man standing above him, wiping his hands on a craftsman's apron.

David flinched violently, almost knocking the trunk off its mount, then steadied himself and stood up. "Whoa! I mean, hi."

"Did I scare you?" The man smiled. "Sorry, didn't mean to. I was taking care of some business back behind the old iceboxes. Splinters, you know? They can be kind of dangerous." He shook his head. "You're a buyer, aren't you?" Out came a hand. "I'm Jory. Westcott. Jory Westcott."

David tried to make his own tongue work around shaping his name, but it refused to function. He stayed glued to the spot, staring up at Jory. *Oh ... God.* He'd never seen anyone cuter than this man, but he couldn't call the guy handsome, not as such. Still, the instant attraction hit him like a fist to the gut. Took his breath away. Hard.

Jory was about David's own height, with a little softness to him and no hard edges. Even his dark hair waved softly around his face, messy like David's own, as if he'd been running his fingers through it while trying to price his load of wares. He had sweet hazel eyes warm with good humor, and a smile on his lips that invited more than just conversation. David could see himself kissing that mouth.

The image came to him much too easily.

Flushing again, David managed to put out his hand and shake the other man's. God. The guy even had great hands. Square and broad, but with long artist's fingers. Rough and dry, as if he worked hard for his living. Exactly like David's own. And when he touched Jory's flesh, David felt a snap of static electricity ... or was it? He'd never felt such a spark from anyone before.

Jory tilted his head aside. "You're staring at me. Do I have something on my face?"

"What? I -- oh, man -- sorry, no." David felt his ears begin to burn. "I didn't mean to stare. Sorry."

The man was wiping at his mouth. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said with a rueful grin. "I'll 'fess up. I wasn't getting rid of splinters. Just having a snack back where no one would see me." He gestured at his body. "I've been trying to diet, but when you're nervous ..."

"Boy, do I know." David shared a grin of fellow-feeling with Jory even as his heart began to beat faster. He loved the sound of Jory's voice. Warm, like Liam's, but even better for the soft southern accent that made it sound lazy and sweet as the best Kentucky bourbon. "Something messy?"

"You know it." Jory licked his lips. David caught a glimpse of a red-stained tongue. "Popsicle. It's hot out. You'd think it'd be cooler nights, but sometimes it gets even muggier."

"I know." David found himself sweating a little. *Nerves*, he told himself. *Don't go all flaky, now. This is an ordinary and nice guy. You haven't met too many of them lately. You shouldn't scare him off. Maybe this man can be a ... friend.*

"... your hat," Jory was saying.

When David looked at him, puzzled, Jory touched his own head. "I was just mentioning that I like your hat. Did you get that from Doralee?"

"You know Doralee?"

"Everyone does. I think she came around to investigate every single table to give it her stamp of approval before the Fest kicked in." Jory cocked his head again and looked past David. "Oh! You found the trunk. Mind if I join you? Come on, crouch down, that's the way."

Before David had a chance to get more rattled, the other man dropped into a kneeling position beside him. "This is seriously old," he said soberly. His fingers stroked the scarred wood with something close to awe. "All of these things have been in my family for a long time, but I don't know how to fix them. I figured I'd be better off selling to someone who knew how to take care of the stuff, then go in for Formica."

They shared a quiet laugh. "How old is this?" David wanted to know, touching the corroded name plate again.

Jory looked thoughtful for a moment. "Civil War -- I mean, that's my best guess."

"How do you figure?"

"Well, there's this." Careful fingers directed David to a small patch on the lid. "Tiny print. Took me a while to figure out what it said, but I think it's 'Twenty-Second Richmond.' Must have been a company sometime during the War Between the States." He shook his head. "Not like I've ever been able to get it open, though."

David perked up with interest. "You mean it might still have things inside?"

“For sure. Here, lift it.” Jory moved to one end. After a second’s startlement, David followed suit. “One, two, three!”

They struggled together, managing to lift it a few feet. Jory gave the box a gentle shake, then lowered the box with David’s help. The contents -- lots of them -- had rattled.

“Who knows what’s in there? Books? Letters? Maybe some actual clothes from the era. Probably mildewed all to hell, though -- this isn’t exactly airtight -- but it could be anything.”

David had to laugh. “You know, if you’re trying to sell me on this, too late. It’s already a done deal.” And it was. No way could he turn down a prize like this. It wouldn’t go to the Antique Barn, though. No way. This would be a part of his private collection and sit at the foot of his bed, just like he’d envisioned before. The mental image made him feel a deep contentment, as if this were meant to be.

One thing, though ... “Why haven’t you been able to get it open?”

Jory winced. “Don’t call me sentimental, okay?” He pointed to the lock on the trunk. It had long since rusted shut. “No key, and I didn’t want to break it.” For a second, he squinted. “Kind of hard to see. I need a pair of glasses in the worst way.”

David self-consciously nudged his own higher on his nose. “You have problems with seeing?”

“Only when I read.” Jory rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s not a problem, honest.” He turned to David with an open grin. “I can see you just fine, for example.”

Quickly, he backpedaled. “Not that I’m staring at you like some kind of a stalker checking out his prey, mind. It’s just that you’re close and I couldn’t help but get a good look -- ah, Christ. Sorry.” He shook his head, turning faintly pink. “Open mouth, insert foot. I have it down to an art form.”

“It’s okay,” David found himself whispering. He found himself winking at the man. “I blush easily, too. I won’t tell.”

"You're a good guy." Jory stood and offered David a hand up. "So. You want the trunk. Anything else? That lace cloth?"

"Is it handmade?"

Jory nodded, running the material through his good workman's hands. "I know for sure this is pre-Civil War. It belonged to my ... great-great something or another. She made it with her own hands. Maybe you'd like it for your girl?"

David took a step back. "Uh ... don't so much have a girl. Unless you count my truck. She's a great ride." He stopped, mortified. "That came out a lot different than I'd intended."

Jory laughed, but didn't seem to have a mean streak about it. "Well," he said, reaching for an old pocket watch David had missed among the Depression era glass, "what about this? For your guy?"

"My gu-- I don't --" David lowered his voice. "Honest to God, do I have a sign on or something?"

Jory shook his head. "Nah." His eyes twinkled. "A man can hope, that's all."

"Oh." David blinked. "Oh?"

"Well, yeah." Jory caressed the watch. "This is old, too. And I'm just keeping you here talking about all this stuff because I love the way you love it all. And because I like talking to you." He shook his head. "Man, I'm sorry. It's just been a long time. I'm not used to -- y'know. Flirting." He peered at David. "How am I doing?"

David's mouth felt dry. "Not bad at all," he managed. "I'd give you an 'A' for effort."

"No gold star? Do they still do gold stars?" Jory toyed with the watch. "I'm wishing this was your hand in mine," he admitted. "Metal is nice, and it warms to your touch, but it's nothing like someone else's fingers."

Glancing around, David found the small vendor's arena to be empty. He moved a bit closer. "You're working your way up to the gold star," he said, a little shocked at his own daring. "Effort counts." He half-grinned. "It's been a while for me, too."

Jory blinked, as if surprised. "You're kidding me. You? Really?"

David felt something in his middle tense up. "Yeah." His tone was more clipped than he'd intended, but he couldn't help it. "Come on." He gestured at himself. "Look at me. I'm not that popular with the guys."

"Damned hard-body culture." David stood up straighter with shock as he felt the pressure of Jory's hand on his arm. "I hate that about this day and age. If you're not a perfect ten, you're not worth going after." The other man squeezed David's bicep gently. "In my book, you're at least a nine."

David's grin grew broader. He couldn't believe Jory's words, but if he wasn't playing from the bottom of the deck ... "Gold star," he said. "You've definitely earned it."

"Good." Jory moved in a little closer, or was it David himself who'd shifted position? Did it even matter? They were face to face now, close enough to kiss.

David gazed at Jory's boyish face from his new vantage point and found that, more than anything, he did want to kiss those cute lips until they were pink and swollen.

He cleared his throat. "Can -- can I?"

"Really wish you would." Jory dropped the watch. "Is anyone looking?"

"I don't care," David said, and meant it. He dipped his mouth to Jory's, just an inch difference between their heights, and brushed his lips over the other man's. He tasted sweet, like cherry Popsicles and powdered sugar.

David wasn't sure who moaned -- maybe him, maybe Jory -- but the other man's arms came up around his middle, hands locking behind his back.

When they pulled away to breathe, David realized that he'd gotten hard off a simple kiss. And, if he was any judge, so had Jory. "Sorry." He apologized with a deprecating chuckle. "It really has been a while."

“Yeah. Me, too.” Jory looked as if he were torn between what he wanted to do and what common sense dictated he should do. “Do you want to ... hell, does it have to end here? Just one kiss, I sell you the trunk, and we say goodbye?”

David’s cock twitched. Oh, God. Was this guy propositioning him? He stared at Jory’s face, but hard as he tried, couldn’t find anything there except honesty and, in the darkened hazel eyes, longing. “We don’t have to stop,” he whispered, surprised at himself. “Is there anyplace ...?”

“My trailer.” David watched the man’s throat work as he swallowed down some words. “No pressure, though. This is only if you really want to.”

David realized Jory was still holding him. Shy, he edged his hips forward, bumping hard pricks with Jory. “I do,” he confessed. “But this isn’t like me. I don’t do one-night stands.”

“Good.” Jory smiled. “Neither do I. I’m kind of a monogamy guy.”

“So this is crazy.”

“Pretty much.” Jory kissed the corner of David’s mouth. “What is it they say in that movie, *Casablanca*?” he asked against David’s skin. “This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship?”

“You think so?” Tentative, David reached out to cradle Jory around his own waist. He ignored the fact that people might be looking on, laughing at two fags swooning over antique trunks and broken-down furniture. “I think I’d like that.”

“Thank God.” Jory started chuckling when David gave him a curious look. “From the instant I saw you, I started hoping. From the very second I got my first look at you ...”

“I felt the same about you, too,” David confessed. “You’re gorgeous.”

“No, I’m not.” Jory looked to the side. “I’m ordinary, just a guy, David.”

“I like ‘just guys,’” David told him honestly. He gathered his courage. “Your trailer, where is it?” Asking the question sent a hot surge of blood through his veins. He felt like a

superhero. Twelve feet tall and bulletproof. Giddy, he decided that arousal, almost unfamiliar after so long, was making him bold.

“You know, it’s funny.”

Jory gazed at him. “What is?”

“Someone put in an order to the gods that I’d find a good man.” David cradled Jory, amazed at how right and familiar he felt. “I think I did.”

To his surprise, Jory shook his head and looked away. “I’m not that kind of man,” he said quietly. “I’m nowhere close to that. I’ve done ... things. You know? I mean, everyone has, and I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, but don’t make the mistake of thinking I’m ‘good.’ Okay?”

“Hey.” Still braver than he would normally have been, David nudged at Jory’s chin with his own. When Jory’s eyes met his again, he whispered, “You’d never hurt me, would you?”

Jory blinked in what looked like shock. “Hurt? Hurt you? God, no. Who’d want to do anything so wrong to you, to someone ... gentle?”

David pulled Jory in tight. “There isn’t enough gentle out there to go around,” he said, his voice rough. “Let’s go. I don’t know what’s going on, but it ...”

“... feels right.” Jory pulled away from David, but only long enough to grab his hand and secure his booth. “Come with me.” His voice was stronger and full of desire -- yet still good-humored. “The way my luck runs, you could wake up from whatever spell this is any second now, and you won’t want to mess around with someone like me. I want to catch the magic. Like a butterfly in a net.”

David couldn’t resist another kiss. Soft and gentle, slow and sweet. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay. Lead the way.”

Chapter Four

Following Jory to his trailer, David felt like a teenager again, like his first crush, sneaking underneath the bleachers with a guy from the fencing team. They'd both hung out there every day to watch the football players, not really talking about anything, but both somehow knowing why the other was there.

One day the guy had tapped him on the shoulder and nodded at him to follow. David still remembered how surprised he'd been at being invited anywhere. He'd always been picked last for teams, no one wanted big David, so he'd followed, more from curiosity than anything else.

What a shock he'd gotten. The fencer had been waiting for him, pants already unzipped. His cock hadn't been out, but it was obviously hard. David had been able to see it outlined through his pants before the young man had cupped himself and started rolling his balls.

"Come on," he'd said. "No one else is going to give you a chance. Suck me off."

And he'd tried. Man, how he'd tried. But he hadn't known what to do with his tongue, or how to keep his teeth out of the way.

The guy had pushed him off in disgust after a few minutes. “You *are* useless,” he’d snorted. “Stupid fag.” He’d left David on his knees on the muddy ground, not even hard himself, trying his damndest not to cry.

And then there had been that guy at his prom. David had been outside on the swings when the multiple-pierced punk, a little like Bree, had come up. He’d liked that guy, with his rough cigarette voice and his tattoos. But he still hadn’t had any experience at that point.

He’d told that story to The Brotherhood once. What he hadn’t said to anyone, not even Tommy, was how kind the punk had been afterward about turning down the “fresh meat.” The memory still embarrassed David. After the punk came on to him, discovering David was a virgin had been more than the man felt up to dealing with -- he must have liked a little experience in his men. He’d helped David up off the ground and even offered him a smoke, although David had been too embarrassed to accept.

“Take it easy, kid,” he’d rasped. “It’s not an easy life, being like we are. You think I’m different? So are you. So’s everyone who likes guys better than women. Just remember, when it gets hard -- and I don’t mean that way, kid -- you’ve got friends out there you never even knew you had. And,” he’d added, brushing dirt off David’s tuxedo lapels, “the next guy you meet could be The One. Capital letters and all.”

David had tried to say something, but Punk had just thumbed his cheek in an easy caress and winked. “Don’t spoil the moment. I don’t get to play older and wiser too often.”

After meeting Tommy at a country and western bar, he’d followed the big bruiser’s silent request to go to his own truck, then had been struck blind by all the hot touching, groping, and slurred words of affection that had ensued. He’d thought that Tommy was The One. And he’d been nice at first, all warm hugs and cold beers, holding hands and kissing. Tommy’d taken David’s virginity and accepted him for who he was ... at first.

But then ... David shivered. Up ahead of him, Jory stopped. He turned around, curious and looking more than a little nervous. “Are you all right?”

David nodded, summoning a smile. "I'm fine. It's just ... memories. And stuff."

"I know how those go." Jory hung fire for a second, hooking his thumbs into his belt loops. "It's okay if you've changed your mind. Cross my heart and hope to die, I promise I won't be mad at you for deciding this is nuts."

That made David want to laugh. "I still want to go to the trailer with you," he said softly. "But let's take it slow for something this fast. That is, if that makes any sense."

"It makes perfect sense." Jory studied David's face. "Wish I could kiss you right here," he said frankly, if quietly. "We took a big chance earlier, modern laxity aside. I guess we're lucky, huh?"

David touched his lips. He could still feel Jory on them. His ribs twinged, in remembrance of the beating he'd taken. "Yeah," he said. "We're really lucky."

He eyed Jory warily for the first time. He was a big guy, but not as big as Tommy had been. If things went wrong and Jory turned out to be a creep, David could take him. Christian had taught him a couple of ways to fight dirty.

But for all that, he didn't *want* this to go wrong.

Simon's voice argued in the back of his head. *It could. What are you thinking, to run off with a man you barely know? What about HIV status? Do you want to risk another bashing?*

"You are ... on the level, aren't you?" he asked suddenly. "This isn't some kind of joke or game, is it?"

Jory's eyes widened. "Jesus, no. Did you think --? You did! David, no. If you'd let me, I would touch you again right now. I'd show you how much this is definitely not a sick prank."

David shook his head. "I'm putting a lot of trust in you."

“And I mean to make sure I earn that trust.” Jory brushed a curl off David’s cheek. “Come on, cowboy. We’ll be all right. I promise.” He drew an X over his chest. “Scout’s honor.”

“I think you have that wrong. Isn’t it like this?” David held his fingers up in a gesture. Jory made a face. “Actually, I think that one’s ‘Live long and prosper’ -- or something obscene in the UK.”

When David broke into chuckles, Jory grinned, his face lighting up. “Made you laugh.” David felt a sort of warmth stealing through him. “Yeah, you did.” “Good, ’cause ...” Jory stopped and laid a hand on a small trailer’s door. “We’re here. It’s not much, but it’s home. Or at least it’s home away from home. The actual home is a basement apartment on the West Side.” He grimaced. “Kind of the wrong side of the tracks for someone like me.”

“Like you?” David had to ask, puzzled.

Jory gave him a curious look. “Well, gay,” he said. “There’s all this stuff going on about how enlightened people are, but there are plenty of guys out there still who’d kick the shit out of us for what we’re about to do.” He flashed David a hopeful grin. “Which we are, aren’t we?”

A vision of the punk from so many years ago flashed through David’s mind. In his gravelly voice, the man ordered David to shut them both up -- they were talking too much.

David agreed.

Heedless of whoever might be lurking in the dark, spying on them, he took Jory by the waist and touched his lips to the other man’s. Jory stiffened in surprise, but then, with an appreciative murmur, let his mouth fall open. David tried sliding his tongue over Jory’s lower lip, and when Jory gave a soft sigh of pleasure, stroked in deeper. Jory’s tongue twined with his in a gentle give-and-take.

That close, it wasn't hard to imagine what they were feeling for each other. David had the evidence pressed hard against his thigh. So good. It'd been over a year. Since Tommy, of course. He'd wondered if there would ever be another someone in his life, and if he'd ever again be able to handle the feel of a man's cock without flinching or stop being afraid of a fist to the head if he moved wrong.

And yet, he'd never expected anything like Jory. The man moaned and moved against him, rocking his hips into David's. Both gasped as their cocks bumped.

"You're amazing," Jory whispered into their kiss. "Do that again? Don't make me beg."

"Inside." David kissed Jory. Once, twice, possibly five more times. "Now."

Jory pulled away. His lips were swollen and looked even better than before. He bore a little redness on his cheeks from David's own five o'clock shadow. David impulsively put out a hand and touched it.

"Beard burn," he explained in response to Jory's blink of curiosity.

"Mmm." Jory put his hand over David's. "You put your mark on me." He bit David's thumb lightly. "I like that."

Another wave of arousal washed over David. He hadn't had anything but his own hand for too long, and he thought he was going to explode if they didn't get inside that trailer right away. "Jory," he begged. "The door. Please."

"Oh! Yeah, right." Jory half-laughed as he dug in his hip pocket and pulled out a small brass key chain. His fingers were steady and his expression that of a man concentrating hard as he inserted a key into the cheap lock on the trailer door. "Be damned, it opened without sticking. You *must* be good luck. Come on in," he said, almost formally. "Just don't expect the Ritz, all right?"

David pinched his own waist, then he jostled his bag. "I don't need a mint on the pillow. I've got enough candy for both of us, anyway."

“Hey. Quit that.” Jory’s hand touched David’s, pushing it away. “Would you please cut it out? You’re not fat. You’re just not a waif, that’s all. If you were all bones, I wouldn’t want you. I like someone who’s more than half an armful. And I want you, okay?”

David’s eyes stung. “Thank you,” he said. “Um ... thanks.”

“Welcome.” Jory gave a half-bow, indicating that David should go in first. “After you, milord.”

Both were laughing as they stepped inside. Jory fumbled at the wall, flicked a switch and ... nothing. “Aw, damn. Out again,” he said, sounding chagrined. “Careful you don’t trip over anything. Stand still for a second while I get my bearings.”

David kept his place by the door. The sudden urge to be playful seized him and he went with it. Felt so good to give in, to grab Jory by the hips and pull him close.

They kissed again, even sweeter for there being no sight or sound to distract them. Nothing but the noise of their mingled breaths and the sound of mouth moving against mouth.

Even bolder, David slipped his hand between them. He traced one finger down the length of Jory’s erect prick, loving the way the man gasped and swore under his breath.

“Much more of that and I’m going to go off like a Roman candle.”

David didn’t take it as a scolding. He could hear the teasing and urgency in the other man’s voice and wanted more of it.

Just as if he were young again, he began swinging slowly, rocking the two of them in an impromptu dance. “Listen,” he said. “Can you hear it? The fiddles have started up. Must be that band I heard would play tonight.”

“Mmm. Yeah.” Jory slid his arms under David’s, resting his hands on both shoulder blades. “You make a great romantic date.”

David could feel himself burning up. “I’m not romantic.”

As if he could see in the dark, Jory zeroed in and nibbled on David's lower lip. His teeth were sharp, but he didn't hurt. "You are, too," he said firmly. "A great man in my arms, sweet country music starting to play. All we need are candles -- hey, candles!"

He jumped out of David's arms.

"Ow!"

David winced, having heard the sound of impact. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"My ankle, damn it. I forgot I left a wooden box of lockets and cameos in here. I didn't want to take them out front. Little things get stolen so easy."

"Oh, God, your booth!" David froze. "We forgot about it!"

"It'll keep. I know how to secure stuff for when I step away." Jory stopped cold. "Hold on a second, David. I know what you're thinking, and I didn't mean --"

"You do this a lot?" David backed away, feeling the metal of the trailer cold against his back. "I should have known."

"No! David, I swear it. No." Jory tugged at him. "Keep on dancing. You're a natural, and you feel so damn good in my arms. I'm on the level, I swear."

David exhaled heavily. In a sliver of moonlight, he could see Jory's face, turned to his, almost pleading. As if playing it up, Jory grinned, tickling his fingers up David's chest. "Don't be mad at me. Wait until I really screw up to bring out the anger."

He couldn't help it; David chortled. "Stop! That tickles." He moved into the embrace Jory sought, gently touching their foreheads together. "It's going to be hard to stay mad at you -- ever -- isn't it?"

"Glad you think you'll be with me for a while," Jory said, sounding breathless. "I know I will. And I want you so much right now." Arms tightened around him. "How about less talking, a little more action, a little more satisfaction?"

“Sounds about perfect to me,” David agreed. He fell into another kiss, knowing what to do this time, remembering the little moves to make that would draw needy sounds from Jory.

They kissed faster and more frantically, mouths roaming over each other until their movements were desperate. Both rocked against each other, ravenous for more contact but not willing to let go. Not yet. But if they didn’t ...

Jory took David by the hand. “Mattress. On the floor. There’s a candle.”

“Lighter?” David *felt* light-headed. “For the candle?”

“Got it covered.”

Covered. David’s mental Simon jumped in. “Oh, shit. Condom?”

“Damn it!” Jory sagged against David. After a second, he laughed. “You can really tell I wasn’t expecting company tonight, can’t you?”

“Ssh. It’s okay.” David nuzzled Jory’s cheek. “Take it easy. I have one.”

“You carry?”

“I have a friend who watches out for me.” David grinned bashfully, thankful Jory couldn’t see his face clearly in the dark. He reached for his wallet and drew out the small foil-wrapped square. Pressing it into his new lover’s palm, he stole another kiss. “Lead me to the bed.”

“It’s right here. Lie down. I won’t let you fall. But first, this.” David felt clever fingers plucking his new cowboy hat off his head. “Don’t want to crush your chapeau.”

“Big word,” David teased, easing himself down slowly.

Jory followed, as if they were connected with rubber bands that might stretch but held tight, keeping the two men together. David landed on his back in something soft that smelled April-fresh. A worn old comforter, but clean.

“Nice place,” he said, meaning the words.

Jory lightly draped himself on top of David, body to body. "I try." He wriggled. "Pull the lighter out of my back pocket. You'll notice I'm giving you a chance to grope me. Actually kind of shamelessly begging for it."

"All you had to do was ask." David ran his hands down and over the twin mounds of Jory's ass. He hissed in appreciation. Jory had a great butt for a big guy. Tight and shapely. "You are so --"

"Yeah?" David could hear the delight in Jory's voice. "Thanks. And you, mister ..." Clever fingers teased his shirt buttons. "I want my turn to feel you up. Fair's fair, after all. But just a second."

He took the lighter David pressed into his hand and turned to one side. A rasp of flint later, and a flame lit up the small trailer. He touched it to a square candle next to the mattress, half-used and smelling sweetly of beeswax. "Let there be light."

"And there was light, and it was good." David ran his hands down Jory's arms as Jory sat up, knees to either side of David's hips.

The tenderness in Jory's face was almost unbearable as he spread his hands over David's chest. Moved, David reached up to touch him. "You're special," he said, hoping Jory would understand more than just the words. "I don't know how I can tell, but I can."

His hair dangling in wisps and curls around his face, Jory looked like an angel smiling down at David. "I'll try my best to live up to your expectations," he said. He played with one of David's shirt buttons. "Do you only have the one condom?"

"Just the one." David sighed. Then he chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"It's just ... I never thought I'd actually get to use the *one*."

"A guy like you?" Jory set up a slow rocking, thrusting their groins together. David sucked in a breath, grasping at the comforter. "That feels good to you, huh? To me, too." He sounded breathless. "Okay. We've only got the one. I want to make it count."

“We can’t both ...”

“I know.” Jory sounded tender. “It’s okay. David, I can wait. I want this to be for you.”

David frowned. “What do you --”

“Ssh.” Jory placed one finger on David’s lips. “Let me do this, all right?”

When David nodded, Jory grinned like a boy and scooted further down David’s legs.

“Can I come in?” A little embarrassed, David spread to let Jory between his thighs. And how strange was it, that taking it to another level made him blush all over again?

“You’re so warm,” Jory whispered, working his way down David’s shirt. One button at a time came free. “Do you know how good you feel?”

“As good as you do?”

Jory chuckled. “And it’s a great view from down here.” His hand hovered over David’s zipper. “It could be a lot better. May I?”

David’s breath caught in his chest. “Yeah,” he managed to say. “You’re not ... by the ...”

“Hey. I said no more of those sorts of comments, and I meant it.” Jory stroked David’s stomach. “So you don’t have a six-pack. You’re just a big guy. I *like* big guys.” He stroked a little lower. “Really big.”

David closed his eyes in bliss. Having someone else’s hand on him felt better than he’d ever dreamed. That the touch was gentle made it better still. When he did touch David at all, Tommy had always been rough, grabbing and stripping his cock, not caring if he was pleasuring or hurting.

“Don’t stop ...” he breathed.

“Don’t plan to. Just going to take it up a notch.” Jory slid the zipper down click by click, then undid the top button. He paused for a long second, then drew out David’s cock. “Sweet mercy,” he breathed reverently. “It’s been worth the wait for both of us, yeah? But let’s fix that, huh?” Jory moved still further down, stopping between David’s knees. He held the foil-wrapped condom up to the candle light and squinted at it.

Carefully, and all too slowly, he tore the packet open and pulled out its contents. "I want to ... let me put it on you," he said in a voice like rough, raw silk. "Please?"

David couldn't speak. All he was able to muster up was an eager nod. Then, thank God, fingers were on him, smoothing the rubber down his shaft. When Jory finished unrolling the thing, David felt a gentle kiss on the tip.

"Okay?" Jory asked. David nodded again. Finally, with a soft, appreciative murmur, Jory lowered his mouth over David's cock and began to suck.

David arched, his back almost clearing the mattress. His hands reached out for something to grab onto and were rewarded by one of Jory's, flexing and gripping. The other kneaded his thigh softly, the way a cat would. All the while, that clever mouth kept on working and, damn, it knew what it was doing.

"Harder," David begged. "Jory, please." His partner made a soft noise and increased his suction, flicking his tongue the length of the long vein.

Jory began to move like a god, like a wet dream, rubbing himself against the mattress, his mouth sliding up and down David's cock as he did so. His tongue glided on the down stroke and it tapped on the way up, the sensation better than heaven could ever be to David. He circled the tip and bit ever so gently.

David clutched at Jory's hand. "Can't ... too long since --"

Jory lifted his mouth away. "It's okay. Everything's fine. You're covered. Let me have this." Then, he lowered and gave a hard pull, drawing David deep into his mouth, almost into his throat.

That was it. David gave a harsh yell and bucked again, feeling the orgasm explode out of him. Pulse after pulse, like the rhythm of his wildly beating heart.

Through it all, Jory never let go of his hand, even when he himself stiffened and gave a deep groan. Their fingers were still entwined when Jory pulled off with a sigh. "God, that was ... you're beyond belief," he murmured. "Thank you."

David laughed sleepily in disbelief. “You’re thanking *me*?”

“Yep.” A little clumsily, Jory stripped off the condom, tied it in a knot, and dropped it in a box off to the side. “Trash can,” he explained. “Well, close enough.” He hesitated. “Can I ... ah, hell with machismo. You want to cuddle for a minute before we have to go back to the real world?”

David’s heart swelled so much that he thought it might burst. “Oh, yeah,” he said, opening his arms. The other man curled against him, tugging David over onto his side. They spooned up just like they’d been made for each other.

For a few moments they lay there, their breathing settling down. David played with Jory’s hand, splayed across his chest, and gathered his courage.

“So ... I can see you again?” he asked, keeping his voice steady. “I meant what I said. I’m not much on one-night stands.”

“Yeah, and I told you I was into monogamy.” Jory sounded drowsy. “Don’t worry, David. I’ve been waiting for a guy like you to come along. I’m not about to turn my back on you now.”

Closing his eyes in relief, David kissed the knob of Jory’s knuckle. “Good,” he said simply. Then, he nudged the man in his ribs. “And I still want that trunk.”

“It’s yours.” Jory wriggled forward, fitting them more closely together. “We’ll go get it in a minute. After a change of clothes for me.” They laughed at the same time.

“Fair deal,” David agreed. “Less stickiness for you, a trunk for me. And ... your number?”

“Promise you’ll get it.”

“Good.”

“We’re going to move any minute now, aren’t we?”

“Oh, yeah. Any old minute.”

“Yep.”

Liar, David thought fondly, holding Jory by the arm, tight as he could. *But for once, I don't mind. God, it's unbelievable that I should have gotten so lucky, but you know what? As long as it lasts, I'm not going to question this. Liam's kiss did bring me good fortune.*

Blissfully tired, he closed his eyes. He'd just nap for a minute ... just a minute longer ...

Chapter Five

“So this is Sweet Rose?” Jory, a little more mussed than before, helped David lower the tailgate on his truck. “She looks like a faithful old girl.”

David tipped his slightly battered cowboy hat. “Been with me for almost ten years. That’s almost unheard of for most relationships these days.”

“I don’t know.” Jory took a glance around himself. The parking lot was almost empty and dawn wouldn’t be far off. He and David had spent the rest of the night in his booth, selling off almost everything. “I might be around that long. Feel like giving me a try?”

“I could be persuaded.”

Jory wound his arms around David’s neck and gave him a hearty kiss on the lips.

True to his nature, David grinned and kissed back before scolding, “Public!”

“And your point is?” Jory didn’t release him. He knew David better than that by then. They’d had the whole night to get to know each other. How fortunate was he that David hadn’t taken off with his trunk as soon as they’d woken up from their brief nap? Nope, not his David. His good old boy had stuck to Jory’s booth all night, helping him out.

And sharp? Talk about needle-keen. David knew the market down to the last cent value on everything from iceboxes to fainting couches.

Jory counted himself blessed in more ways than one. If he hadn't had the big man beside him, he'd have no doubt been fleeced countless times and made a pretty poor shake of the whole affair. He wasn't so much into antiques as he, well, was one.

Not that he planned on telling David ... yet. It was too soon. He couldn't believe he'd been able to coax the shy fellow into his bed. If only they'd had more protection, he might have kept David there all night long. Not that he could transmit diseases, but humans tended to insist on the little details, and he couldn't have explained without giving away a lot more information than he was ready to divulge yet.

The way he figured, getting David to accept the possibility of love was a great big step. Asking him to believe in vampires? Jory whistled inside his head. Whole other ball of wax there. Can of worms. Whatever.

He'd just have to win David's trust as much as he could, and then ... and then tell him he'd been lying by omission the whole time.

"Hey."

Jory snapped back to attention, returning his gaze to his new lover's face. Boyish and good-natured to the last detail, and handsome? Lord, you'd have to travel far to find someone that cute. Jory hadn't been lying. He liked big men, close to his own build. They'd have to work on that self-esteem thing, but there would be time. He hoped.

"Hey," David repeated, so tender and gentle that Jory's unbeating heart ached. He reminded himself to keep breathing. So far David hadn't noticed the lack of a pulse, but he couldn't push the little things to the side forever. He had to keep his wits under control.

"Where'd you go?"

"Go? I've been right here." Jory swung in David's grip around his waist. "Oh. Was I really a million miles away again?"

“You keep disappearing.” David bent down for another brief kiss. God, they could barely keep their mouths, much less their hands, off one another. “Someday I’m going to find out where you go.”

Try a hundred and forty-change years ago, on the battlefields of Gettysburg. Where I was wounded by a cannon blast and left to die, until the one who made me came walking through the carnage by night ...

“Nowhere special,” he said, returning David’s smile. With difficulty -- because he didn’t want to let go -- he pulled away. “Come on. Let’s get this trunk loaded.”

It had been his own, but he hadn’t exactly lied. The key had been lost over a century ago, and he’d hung onto the thing for sentimental reasons. Somehow, though, it felt right to let it go with David. David would take care of the trunk and give it a good home.

If he managed to open it, though ... Jory winced internally. He was pretty sure there was a daguerreotype of himself inside, resplendent in his uniform. Also, probably the one thing he’d like to get ahold of again was a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. Whether hunting through rubbish bins or, nowadays, off the discount rack at drugstores, he’d never had been able to find another pair that worked right. And doctors tended to specialize in the living.

He would be the first to admit, though, that he made a pretty pathetic vampire. Working at the Red Cross and sneaking home outdated bags of blood so he wouldn’t have to kill anyone. Coming out at night to volunteer at homeless shelters.

There were only a few others of his kind in Charleston -- pretty much contrary to popular belief -- but now that Amour Magique had moved in, there would be more.

Jory really *hated* that club. The last thing he needed was the attendant crowd of paranormal creepy-crawlies invading the town where he’d made his home, possibly deciding to make him a target because he wasn’t quite your ordinary flashy, capes and “doom-gloom squad” attitude type of vampire. So the club was gay-centric, that was great, but was it appealing to a guy who liked the simpler things in life -- or an easy unlife? Not so much.

“You left again,” David chided, bringing Jory out of his reverie. “Come on. Help me lift.”

Jory gave David a sheepish shrug as he bent toward his trunk. Truth to tell, he could have raised the thing with one hand, but then again they would run into that awkward vampire thing. Damned if it didn’t seem to crop up at every turn of his thoughts and actions.

Screw it. He’d just enjoy the moment with his new squeeze -- hopefully, his new, long-term honey. That was one positive thing about living in the modern day and age; bashers aside, a gay man could live openly in society.

All the same, he sensed that David was more afraid than he was of an attack. Something about the way he held himself. Also, there were the mended ribs Jory had felt while running his hands over the other man’s chest.

He wasn’t the kind of vampire normally inclined to violence, but if he ever came across the guy who’d dared beat up his David ... well, he just might break more than his own rules.

David wiped his forehead and patted the trunk with satisfaction. “I’ll just tie her down so she won’t go sliding around,” he said, rummaging in a covered bed bin for some rope.

Jory’s eyes almost crossed. Tied ... down ...

David elbowed him on his way back. “I know exactly where your mind just went,” he teased.

“Mmm. Want to follow me there?”

“Don’t tempt me. I have to be at work in a couple hours. Only a half-day on the weekends, though.” David leaned against Sweet Rose’s fender. “Lucky me. I need to catch up on my sleep.”

His sweet smile was enough to make Jory fall with a crash that could be heard around the world -- if he hadn’t already taken the plunge. “One more kiss for the road?” those sweet lips said.

Jory fell gladly into David's arms. Their mouths met and clung for one perfect moment, and then David was pulling away. "Gotta go."

So did he, Jory realized. The sun would be rising soon, and he had to be inside his trailer with the UV shades pulled down. "I have your number," he said, regretfully letting David climb into Sweet Rose's cab. "I'll be calling. Maybe I can see you soon?"

David paused, half in and half out. "I'd like that," he said simply. "Next weekend? I wish it could be sooner, but I'm double-shifting after tomorrow. Money." He laughed. "I sure spent enough of it tonight, but it felt good. So many treasures!"

"Speaking of which, don't forget this." Jory passed over David's bag of treats, augmented by a few candles, the lace cloth, and his own cell phone number written on a sheet of yellow legal paper. "Important things in there."

"Very." David patted Jory's front jeans pocket, where his number nestled. Right next to his cock. From the wicked look he gave Jory, his not-so-shy lover knew exactly what he was doing, too. He gave Jory one last caress, kissed his forehead, and hopped into the truck cab. One turn of a key and the engine was revving.

David leaned out the window. "Be good," he said seriously, albeit with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Spoilsport," Jory said just as solemnly. "Go on, now. But call me!"

"I will." David withdrew, rolled up the window, and put Sweet Rose into reverse. He waved from behind the window, and Jory waved back.

Then, with a small puff of gravel dust, he was gone. Driving back to his mortal life in a human world full of sunlight.

Watching him go, Jory felt suddenly small and cold. "Bye, hon," he said to himself. With a sigh, he turned around to head back to his trailer --

-- and ran smack into a really solid chest. One that smelled familiar.

“Oh, great,” Jory mumbled. He looked up into an all-too-well-known, haughty face, far more handsome than he’d ever be, surrounded by loose, shining red hair. “Julian,” he said. “What’s up?”

Julian, the bane of Jory’s undead existence, ignored his greeting. He nodded over Jory’s shoulder. “Who was that?”

Uh-oh. Questions already, from the so-called “Master of the City.” Not a good sign.

“Just a friend,” he prevaricated, retreating a few steps. “Listen, do you mind if I head for shelter? You might want to look for some yourself. It’s going to be bright and sunny out here pretty soon.”

More ignoring. Jory rolled his eyes. He’d gotten pretty used to that treatment from Julian. The older vampire kept his eyes fixed on a spot in the distance. “He is one of The Brothers,” Julian pronounced. “I have had my eyes on him for a while.”

Jory bristled at that. “Hey! I laid claim to him.”

That got Julian’s attention. He favored Jory with an amused smile. “Did you really? Hmm.” He shrugged elegantly. Damn him, how did he pull the gesture off? “I care not. So long as you keep away from the Brother called Bree. I want that one for myself.”

“Don’t have a clue what you’re talking about, Julian, and I frankly don’t care.” Jory backpedaled around the other vampire. If it came down to things, he wasn’t afraid of a fight. He wasn’t anywhere near Julian’s age, but he knew a thing or two and, hey, he didn’t have to depend on glamour to hide his true face. He could mark Julian up pretty good if he had to.

Lucky for him, Julian didn’t seem to be in the mood for a fight. He shook his head. “Go find shelter, weakling,” he said dismissively. “Just remember what I have said.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hulk smash if I touch Bree. Whoever the hell Bree is. Have a good one, Julian.” Jory hustled past the older vampire, heading toward his trailer posthaste. He could feel the dawn approaching and was cutting it too close for his liking. David had been worth it, though.

Lost in his thoughts, he slogged on through the parking lot, head down --

-- and bumped into the second person he most hadn't wanted to see that night. A small man, neat and trim, looking a little tired around the eyes, but unshakeable as Gibraltar. The incubus Liam.

Jory heaved a sigh and decided the Fates really, really hated his ass. They sure seemed determined to fry it.

"Liam," he said, going for casual. "What's up?"

The guy *sniffed* him, then drew back with a satisfied smile. "Nothing much, and everything at all." He folded his arms across his chest. "You met up with my David, I presume?"

"*Your* David?" Jory blurted. "Oh, no. Hell, no. How many people do I have to explain this to? He's mine. Sealed with a kiss. Do I have to fight you for him?"

Liam held up his hands. "Fight me for David? You have me all wrong. If you treat him right, I have no objections to David being with you." The incubus's eyes narrowed. "Treat him right, I said." His tone and demeanor turned menacing. "I believe that would include telling him the truth about yourself, which I suspect you have not."

"Jesus, Liam ..."

"How odd that you can speak that word without it burning your tongue," Liam mused. "Then again, you were always unusual among your kind. How goes the night shift at the Red Cross?"

"Just dandy," Jory gritted out. "Now, can I get inside somewhere? I'm going to toast my buns any second now."

"By all means." Liam stood aside as if to let him by, but as Jory made his way past, fell into step next to him. When Jory glared down at the little man, Liam beamed at him. "Just giving you safe escort," he said. "I have a vested interest in you."

Jory blinked hard. "Me? Why?"

“Because,” Liam said, tucking his arm into Jory’s in a move that sent chills down his spine, “I have an even more vested interest in David.”

Chapter Six

Ring.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Hello, David spea--”

“You know, I once knew a guy named David. Handsome as hell and great in bed but, boy, was he hard to find afterward.”

David’s face relaxed into a grin. He leaned against his kitchen counter, abandoning the midnight snack he’d woken up for and been in the middle of preparing. The warm voice, dripping down the lines like melted maple sugar, sounded as familiar to him as his own. “Jory.” He savored the name on his tongue. “I didn’t know if I’d ever hear from you again.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Jory sounded amused. “You gave me your number, right? I promised I’d call. And, look, here I am. Two voices in the night reaching out to touch someone.”

“Yeah. It’s just, you know, it’s been around five days, so I kind of figured you were giving me the brush-off, which I would have understood, and I was going to just bow out kind of gracefully, and ...” David trailed off. “Except now here you are,” he said in amazement. “You actually called.”

“And you had truly thought I wouldn’t.” There was a slight rustling, and David could almost see Jory shaking his head. “You have no idea what I see in you, do you?”

David glanced down at himself, taking in the loose sweatpants, baggy T-shirt, and bare feet. There weren’t any mirrors handy, but he knew he was sleep-tousled and had a shadow growing in. “If you looked at me now, I doubt you’d have any idea, either.”

“Mmm.” Jory made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that? Open your front door.”

“Jory, are you outside?”

“Little bear, little bear, let me in.” Jory chuckled. “I’m waiting for you by this azalea bush. Make me wait too long, and I’ll start picking flowers for your hair, and we really don’t want to flame that hard.”

“I’m on my way.” Holding tightly to the phone without disconnecting, losing track of the fact that he’d been asleep, disregarding the time on the wall clock -- 2 a.m. -- David hurried toward his apartment’s front door. He’d refinished the door himself, turning the scarred old wood into a thing of beauty. Planted the azaleas, too.

His hand shook as he laid it on the doorknob, but for all his nerves, he turned the latch and let the door swing wide. “It’s you.” He spoke into the phone. “It’s really you.”

Jory stood leaning against the frame, twirling a pink flower between his fingers. “Surprise.” He shut his cell phone, slid the slim piece of plastic into his pocket, dropped the flower, and gathered David into his arms. David’s own cordless hit the floor with a *thunk* both ignored.

“Glad to see me?” Jory breathed in David’s ear. “And before you answer that, can I come in?”

“Yes and yes.” Glad of the strength his size gave him for once, David hauled Jory over the threshold of his home and elbowed the door shut behind them. Both men were laughing, Jory protesting at being hauled around like a sack of potatoes, and then, just as if they’d

never stopped, as if no time had passed between the Fest and this moment, their lips were on one another's, fingers tangled deep in each other's hair, and their bodies pressed together.

David felt Jory's cock coming to a hard rest against his stomach, a long solid length which made his head spin. "Is this where I ask if that's a banana in your pocket, or if you're happy to see me?" he asked shyly when they parted for air.

"What do you think?" Jory rotated against David in a wonderfully raunchy bump and grind, pushing his erection against David's belly. "You ever hear of a booty call, cowboy?"

David felt himself blush so bright a red that he knew his ear-tips were flaming. "You're -- you're not serious, are you?"

"As life or death, but rest assured, I will respect you in the morning." Jory's eyes sparkled, dark and crystalline. He thumbed a wisp of hair away from David's forehead and dropped another kiss on his lips, one that spoke of need and urgency. "I'm on break from the Red Cross. Told them I had an emergency I needed to take care of."

"And you don't?"

"Oh, yeah, I do. I had to see you in the worst way. Didn't know if I'd survive another day without getting my arms around this big hunk of man I've fallen for." Jory seized David by the waist. He pressed his mouth to the edge of David's warm ear and whispered, "Tell me you had a burst of optimism after we first met, and you've got supplies. Tell me you're not afraid of using them."

David began to tremble. "Tonight? As in, right here and now?"

"Right here. Right now." Jory traced the tip of his tongue along David's ear. "I've only got an hour, less the time it takes to drive, and we have to make every moment count." He held David tight. "Look, I know this is sudden, and I have been an ass for not calling before, I'll admit that. But now that I have, I'm here to say I want you so badly I'm about to burst." He licked a stripe down David's temple. "Knock, knock," he breathed. "Let me in, please?"

David's entire body shuddered, but from somewhere -- he had no idea where -- he summoned a wave of courage and rode it in to shore. Turning his face toward Jory's, he kissed the man on his cool lips, tasting the sweetness of sugar. "You've been eating Popsicles again."

"Poor substitute for what I'd like to have my lips wrapped around," Jory murmured, grinding against David once again. "But then again, I've already done that once. A tasty treat, but I'm feeling more in the mood for a little mutual satisfaction tonight."

David glanced at the clock. "What time did you leave?"

"One-forty-five."

"And you have to be back in an hour. Which leaves us just about twenty minutes."

"Sounds like you're with the program," Jory said saucily. He bit down on David's earlobe, teeth almost too sharp, sending a prickle of pleasure-pain skittering down David's spine. "Want to be in me, lover?"

David automatically flinched away. "I can't -- I haven't --"

"Hey, hey, it's okay. You've never been on top, have you?"

"No." David shook his head, ashamed. "Tommy, my ex -- my one and only, actually -- he always had me on the bottom."

From a distance of inches, Jory looked at David through narrowed eyes. "So is it more shocking that someone would want you to top them, or more frightening to think you yourself might want to?"

David began to tremble. "I don't know. Jory, don't make me choose."

"Shh, shh, it's okay. Everything's fine. It doesn't matter if you aren't ready. I might not have ever been in the Scouts, but I came prepared." Jory melted back into the circle of David's arms, cozying back up to his ear. "Do you trust me?" he whispered. "Will you let me inside?"

David shut his eyes and took a deep, deep breath. Slowly, he nodded. His reward was Jory pulling back and kissing him, wet and deep and dirty, all his urgency pouring out through the eager workings of his lips and tongue. No one had ever kissed David that way, as if they were going to fuck mouth-to-mouth, deviant and delicious. Slowly, shyly, he began to thrust and parry back, delighted when Jory moaned into his parted lips.

“Fifteen minutes now,” Jory said, nipping at the swollen edge of David’s lower lip. “I can work with fifteen. Can you?”

David found himself wanting to laugh. “I’m game.”

By fourteen minutes, Jory had maneuvered them around into a position with David leaning up face forward against a wall, bracing himself with his hands while Jory pulled down David’s sweatpants, then undid his own loose beige trousers.

By twelve minutes, the supplies had been unloaded -- some fragrant sort of lube and two condoms -- and Jory’s clever hands were coming around David’s stomach, reaching for and fondling his cock, unrolling a rubber over the rapidly swelling girth, and giving him a hard pump to “Get your motor revved up,” as he put it.

Ten minutes, and Jory’s fingers were in David’s ass, slippery-wet with lube, stretching him wide.

Eight minutes, and the head of Jory’s cock was lined up to David’s hole, nudging past the first tight ring of muscle. Jory hooked his chin over David’s shoulder and whispered soft nonsense words to him as he pushed in one inch at a time.

Six minutes, and David knew he’d never really understood what sex could be about. Tommy had always been so rough, ripping into him like a piece of meat. Jory fucked him hard, but tenderly, and his free hand had reached around to pump David’s dick in time with his own thrusts.

Four minutes, and both men were sweating and swearing, urging each other on with raw, animal cries.

Three minutes, and Jory orgasmed with a strangled shout. Feeling the man throb and pulse in his own ass pushed David over the edge. He came hard enough to see stars and twinkling lights, so hard his ears roared and the room grayed out around the edges.

One minute, and David had been pulled around to kiss Jory, who'd disposed of the condoms and didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave at all.

Zero hour, one final press of mouth to mouth, and a promise to call before much time went by, and Jory was gone, pants fastened firmly in place. Nothing remained to mark his passing but a crushed azalea blossom on the floor, a small crack in the wall where David had leaned his full weight into the cheap plasterboard, a delicious ache deep in his ass, and the weight of kisses still tingling on his lips.

Dazed, but happier than he'd been since, well, the Fest, David unsteadily began making his way toward the bathroom. He needed to wash himself off ... and maybe he'd come a second time, remembering the feel of Jory's hands on his cock.

Oh, God, yes.

I think I love him.

* * * * *

"Not in any hurry tonight?" David used his big, gentle hands to rub circles on Jory's scalp. Jory tilted his head, letting David get at him at every angle possible, half wishing he could purr like the legends said his kind were able to. If it had been within his range of abilities, he'd have burst into a rumble that said, *Oh, yeah. I'm in heaven.*

Then again, doing so would tip David off as to the nature of his partner so, yeah, probably a good thing Jory couldn't purr.

"No rush," he answered instead, arching his neck to let David scrub tart, citrus-smelling shampoo into the base of his curls. "Took the night off."

"No other plans?"

What was that tone in David's voice. Was he --? Was he teasing Jory? The scamp! Jory grinned broadly and leaned back against David's big frame, letting his lover bear both their weight. "Where else would I want to be?" he asked lazily, before turning sideways for a kiss. Their lips met for a brief moment before David firmly moved Jory back, nudging him beneath the water cascading out of the shower head.

"Rinse," he ordered, nimble fingers working soap out of Jory's tangled locks. "Don't want to get soap in your eyes, okay?"

Careful, his David was always so careful of him. If only he knew he couldn't have damaged Jory no matter how hard he tried. "Yes, sir," Jory murmured under the pelting patter of the water. He rolled the thought around in his mind, toying with the idea of playing some real adult games, and wondering how long it would take to ease David's fears enough to get him in some handcuffs or silken ties.

No, he wouldn't do anything until David was ready. He was a vampire, so what did time mean to him? Jory had learned patience over the years and, while parts of his body wanted to hurry up and get to the peak every time he was with the other man, he listened to the part of his brain that told him to slow down and wait.

"So, you skipped out of work for the whole night?" David persisted, fingers still working, although by now they were squeaking through ultra-clean hair. "Then you came over and took everything off both of us?"

"You were the one who led us to the shower," Jory retorted. "I kind of liked what we did last time. You, me, a wall -- it was all very romantic."

"The wall had trouble coping afterward." David's frame shook with laughter. "I had to plaster up a crack."

"Oops?"

"Wasn't any trouble," David reassured Jory. "But I thought, maybe this time, slow and easy ...?"

Jory let his mouth curve in a grin. "So you want this to be a 'next time'?"

"You -- you didn't?" David's fingers stilled. He began to draw back.

Jory scrambled to head him off at the pass. "Of course, I did," he said, catching David by the hand. Tossing hair back out of his face, he stood at his full height to meet the other man's gaze, eye-to-eye. "A guy like you -- how am I supposed to resist?"

A slow smile spread across David's features. Jory couldn't help kissing the budding grin, licking at his lover's lips until they parted for him and let him inside. Seemed like David was a quick study, and he worked that tongue of his with almost as much skill as had taken Jory over a hundred years to learn.

"You're good at this," Jory crooned, cupping David's ass. "I'm impressed."

"Really?" David's grin became crooked. "Then get ready to be totally blown away, okay?" He began to sink to his knees, careful of the slippery shower floor. When Jory put a startled hand out to stop him, David looked up through the droplets of water spattering his face. "There is one thing I know besides antiques and cooking," he said shyly. "Last time, I was on the receiving end. Let me, this time ...?"

Jory felt his mouth go cotton-dry. "Oh, God." He fumbled in the shower caddy for a condom that he'd stuck there earlier with a wicked look at David, which had earned him a smiling blush.

"Is that a yes?" David peered at him like a child asking for a cookie. "I want to suck you, Jory. I've been thinking about taking you in my mouth ever since you took off your pants and I saw your beautiful penis."

"Oh, baby." Jory thumbed David's cheek. He'd planned to lavish David's body with another dose of loving, but how the hell could he say no? Instead, he relaxed against the shower wall, spreading his legs wide. His cock, already hard, hung between his legs as he tore open the condom and rolled it down his member, tingling at the feel of his own hand,

thrilling at the anticipation of a mouth, his lover's mouth, on him. "Do whatever you want, David. I bet you turn in a virtuoso performance playing this particular wind instrument."

David's eyes actually lit with a wicked-looking sparkle. "I've been told I do all right," he said quietly, before spreading both palms wide on Jory's thighs and leaning forward to take the head of Jory's cock into his mouth. Jory had just a moment to register the motion before his world exploded into pure pleasure.

Had he thought David knew how to use his mouth before? Holy fuck, this man could blow for the Olympics. Jory vaguely registered a tongue expertly working up and down his length, warm wetness surrounding him, then a slow ... slow ... squeezing, tight ... slow slide.

He glanced down, saw David's nose nestled in the curls around his pubic bone, and all but bucked in shock. The man had taken every inch of him in, a full deep-throat, without any effort!

And did it feel wonderful! Jory had never been on the receiving end of a full swallow before, and as David worked his throat muscles, he thought he'd died and was actually seeing heaven, no matter what the shouting preachers raved about and thumped their bibles over.

"David, David, David," he babbled, fumbling for purchase and finally finding it with a hand on either of David's shoulders. His lover made a humming noise that sent vibrations through the length and width of Jory's dick, driving him wild, then began to bob up and down, taking him down his throat as easily as cocks slid into asses.

Jory couldn't take this kind of action for long. A hundred years of experience meant nothing when compared with the earnest loving of a man who wanted to do his best and had turned the skill of giving a good blow job into a damned fine art form. Gripping at David's shoulders, he struggled to get his message across: he was going to come, and soon.

David glanced up, briefly, his eyes dark with the sort of passion Jory marveled at for the split second before, like a punch to the gut, his orgasm shattered his mind. Pulse after pulse of seed filled the condom. He found a spare brain cell to mourn the lack of choice as to

spit or swallow -- he'd have loved to see David drinking him down. Had to play by the rules, though. A vampire pretending to be human had to use the damnable rubbers. But then again, who the hell cared when his brains were on fire from coming hard enough to all but fall down on his ass?

Jory wobbled as David slowly drew off him, pulled the condom away, tied it off, and tossed the thing into his trash can. Every movement seemed laced with a drugged stupor. This man, this unbelievable man, belonged to Jory. He could hardly believe it, and he'd just lived through the proof.

David rose to his feet, his expression both proud and bashful. It begged for a kiss, and Jory, shaking his head to clear it first, was glad to oblige, smothering David's face with the scorching pressing of lips to skin. And condom or not, he'd be damned all over again if he didn't give his lover something in return to thank him for that blow job of several lifetimes. Not giving David the chance to say no, or to insist on hunting for another condom, he reached between them and got a solid handful of the man's erection.

God, he loved David's cock -- long, thick, full, and heavy. Silk over steel. He began to pump his lover hard and fast, holding him up when David buckled and moaned. This time he was the one providing support as David leaned into him, the one rubbing patterns and circles into his lover's flesh with his free hand, and the one who felt a cock erupting in his fist.

Best of all, when David came, he sank his teeth into the curve of Jory's neck, right at his hot spot. Didn't break the skin, of course, but the shock of bliss was enough to give him a second small, dry orgasm.

They stood supporting each other, the steaming water showering down around them slowly turning cold, murmuring words without meaning as they ebbed down from the highest of peaks into a warm valley of afterglow.

When Jory could speak clearly again, he kissed David hard and swore against his mouth, "I'm taking another night off again as soon as I can."

“You promise?”

“Just watch me.”

“I always do,” David said, blushing. Watching him, Jory thought his heart might start beating again.

David brought him back from the grave. David made him feel *alive*.

* * * * *

“Oh ... hell.” Jory collapsed onto David’s chest, his spent member still pulsing deep inside his partner’s channel. David, eyes closed, thrilling to the feeling of Jory buried within him, stroked both hands down his lover’s sweat-sheened back and made a low sound of contentment.

“Go ahead and bury me,” he murmured hazily. “Six feet deep, with lilies and chrysanthemums. I’m dead.”

“Oh, no, you’re not.” Jory bobbed up to kiss David all too briefly, then slipped out of his hole and slumped against his chest, ear pressed above David’s heart. “Still beating. You’re alive, me old son. And kicking. God, were you kicking.”

“It’s not much ...” David felt embarrassed, even though it wasn’t the first time Jory had fucked him. He always made such a big deal about the act, wonderful though it was -- as if David were something special and the way he took a cock was worth writing home about. “I just lay here.”

Jory laughed shortly, out of breath. “Like a champ, you lay there. I can still feel your heels digging into my back. Very flexible. Seriously impressive.”

“Sweet talker.” David hesitated, then laid his hand over Jory’s shoulder. He gave the muscle a light squeeze. “You were ... God, there aren’t words. No one’s ever ... not like you.”

Jory raised his head a bit. “David, I’m the one who isn’t world-class,” he said earnestly. “I’m just a guy who happens to love making love.”

“And it shows.”

“Seriously, though. Why don’t you give yourself some credit? It takes more than lying on your back or your belly to be the kind of fantastic bottom that you are.”

David shrugged. “I guess I was trained well.”

“That makes you sound like a dog.”

Dog. David grew still, his fingers coming to a stop on Jory’s skin. “Yeah,” he said through numb lips. “I got the beatings and the treats.”

“The -- you’re serious?” Jory lifted himself onto his elbows, staring David down. “Tommy. Your ex, the one you’ve mentioned. He beat you? Often?”

“Almost killed me.” David shifted. “The lump of scar tissue over my ribs ... that’s from where he kicked my chest when I was down. I told you about the attack ...”

“No.” Jory shook his head. “I mean, I know about the bashing you took, and I swear on all that’s holy and unholy, that for your sake I will kick more than Tommy’s ass if I ever come across him, but he hit you before then?”

David shrugged and remained silent.

Jory swore, low, vicious, and vehemently. David flinched, but the man didn’t seem to notice even as, when Jory’s hands bunched into fists, David found himself beginning to shake.

“He’s dead,” Jory said at last. “I’m going to hunt the fucker down.”

“Jory, don’t.”

“Limb from limb. He’ll pay.”

“Jory, no. Jory -- please!” His lover stopped in mid-tirade and looked down at David, puzzled eyes in an angry visage. David stroked that face and tried to make Jory understand. “I don’t want to talk about him. I don’t want Tommy to be mentioned in the bed where we’ve just ... he’s not part of this, what we have between you and me, Jory. You make me

feel like a man. He made me feel like an animal.” He bit his lip. “I love you for that, you know.”

“Ah, David.” Jory shut his eyes tightly, then lifted one of David’s hands to his mouth for a kiss. “I won’t mention him again unless you bring up the subject, then. I promise. But listen to me, and you listen good, okay? Don’t you ever let anyone tell you you’re not good enough. David, I’ve been around the block, and you are a jewel among men. You’re the kind of guy everyone hopes they’ll be lucky enough to end up with, male or female. You’re the gold ring on the carousel, and I managed to snag you. I’m grateful for you every second of every day.”

He bestowed a second kiss upon another knuckle, then a third, and a fourth. “And not just when we’re having sex, either. I like you dancing in the kitchen, reading the newspaper on your couch, talking on the phone to those friends of yours, Liam and Christian and Quentin. I love you, too, any way I can get you. And I promise you, that is the truth. Do you believe me?”

David swallowed hard, letting the words wash over him in waves. Safety. Acceptance. Belonging. *Home*. Jory. “I -- I can try,” he said after a long and pregnant pause. “I’m sorry. This isn’t easy. I wish I could give you more, but ...”

“Beatings and treats,” Jory repeated. He lay back down on David’s chest, running his fingers over the ridged scar. “You don’t ever have to worry about me, David. I’ll never hurt you, not if I can help myself. Not on purpose or even accidentally. Strike me down with lightning if I’m lying.”

David held himself still for a beat, then relaxed with a conscious effort. He stroked the flat of his broad palm over Jory’s soft waves of hair, molding them to the scalp and letting the curls spring back. “I’m trying to believe you,” he said quietly, wondering if Jory would hear him.

Jory did. “Then that’ll have to be enough. For now. And I plan on sticking around to show you each and every time we’re together that this isn’t just about sex. This is love. I cherish you, David, and I’ll let what I feel for you shine through every time we’re in the same place. Even when we’re not.” He nestled his head down. “I’m listening to your heart beat. I love the rhythm. Love you. Believe me, David. Please believe me.”

God help him, he couldn’t not. He closed his eyes and let the afterglow take him away into a world of softly glowing curves and planes, Jory curled up tightly against him.

He didn’t realize when exactly he began to hum an old country love song, but it was the best accompaniment possible for the pair of them as they slipped into a sweet, deep slumber ...

David believed.

Chapter Seven

David examined the slip of glossy paper in his hands for a long minute. He turned it over, glancing at the details of another citrus diet Micah had ordered him to start. Orange juice for breakfast with half a grapefruit. Lemon water for a snack. Hmm.

If that was how Micah had lost weight, Micah could keep the secret all to himself. Three more days on a diet like that and he'd start juicing if anyone hugged him.

Hugs ... mmm, yeah. David knew he had a dopey grin on his face, but he couldn't help it. Discovering Jory the way he had still amazed him. The guy was everything David had always wanted. Good-natured, always finding the joke in something. Boy-next-door cute. Great in bed. Didn't know anything about antiques, but you couldn't have everything -- and he actually wanted David, too.

As a sweet bonus, Jory was a closet cuddler and loved to get cozy after sex. And he was also accepting. David never forgot that for a moment. Jory took him for what he was and actually seemed to like him that way.

Yeah, forget the citrus diet. The last thing he wanted was to get Jory all sticky. David paused, thinking about that for a moment, then started chuckling. Well, he *did* want to get

Jory all messed up, but maybe not with lemon juice. He'd learned the hard way that acidic fluids did not make for happy times in the lands down under.

Amused, David flipped the paper back over to the recipe for spaghetti sauce that had caught his eye. It'd been a great half-day at the Antique Barn, with the afternoon off to do whatever he wanted. He'd be stuck going to that weird gay dance club tonight at nine, Liam's orders *Not To Be Disobeyed*, but he could handle it if he had Jory to come home to.

It'd be great if he had something ready for them after he made an early night of it ...

David figured he could either work on the trunk some more, trying some more of the hundreds of keys he'd collected, or he could start on a romantic dinner for two. But pasta? Noodles had the potential to either be a huge mess or a great success.

David hesitated, torn, before the picture of the candlelit table on the bottom of the page decided him. He'd make the sauce, anyway. It'd keep if Jory was busy. Or, if they got busy together. He could only hope.

The one and only problem with dating a night-shift worker was a hell of a big one. They'd barely managed to meet three times in the two weeks since the Fest, all just after sunset, before Jory had to go to work.

Still, all of those times had ended between the sheets. David grinned again. And how they'd ended! He'd even laid in a stock of condoms and lube in his bedside drawer. He'd started keeping fresh daisies on the kitchen table for decoration during postcoital snacks. To his embarrassment, he'd even found himself doodling Jory's name on a customer's receipt.

"You're a moron," he told himself. "All these hearts and flowers are for kids. And talking to yourself is for crazy people."

Yeah, but it didn't stop him from having the time of his life. He reached for his phone, hesitated, then grabbed it up. Jory's number lay beside it on the table, but he knew the numbers by heart already.

David punched them in, then listened to the trill on the other end as he lowered himself onto his couch.

Three-thirty p.m., so he could expect at least three rings. Jory took his sleep pretty seriously. David guessed all graveyard-shift workers did. Fortunately, he never seemed to mind being woken. In fact, he genuinely appeared to like it when David called.

Once again, David marveled at finding Jory. Sometimes he thought about Liam's kiss, but he always brushed that aside as coincidence. Liam wasn't really magic. He'd just had great timing. But then, didn't he always?

On the other end of the line, David heard a loud fumbling sound, then a clatter. He grinned. Jory must have dropped his cell again. There was muffled cursing, then a deliciously pitiful "Hello?" croaked out.

"Hey, Jory," David said softly. "Guess who?"

"Ahh." There was a sound of rumpling and shifting that would be Jory turning over onto his back. He slept naked -- he'd told David as much -- and his sheets would be all tangled around his body.

David imagined Jory running a hand across his chest as he adjusted the cell next to his ear. "If I had to be dragged out of some great erotic dreams, there's no one else I'd rather have call me."

"What kind of erotic dreams?" David stretched out, sighing in contentment at the way the couch cradled his long legs. "Did I feature in them?"

"Lead role." Jory yawned. "Oh, God, sorry. I'm just tired. The yawn is in no way a reflection on your performance. You. Were. Extraordinary."

"Okay, given the extenuating circumstances, and that it was a yawn and not a burp, I'll forgive you."

“Haven’t eaten. There wasn’t time after the shift last night. You know, we caught that college kid trying to sneak back in and donate for the third time this week? He must think we’re either really stupid or totally desperate for O positive.”

“That poor guy. I wonder what his deal is?” David shifted position. Sometimes he wondered if Christian ... but nah. He had more sense than that. David hoped. “It’s not legal to pay for blood donation, is it? That’s a pretty common misconception. Maybe he’s trying to earn a few bucks to eat?”

“Nah, no money. Just juice and cookies afterward. That guy needed them, too. The nurse tried to give him some and send him on his way.”

“Did it work?”

“Nope.” Jory’s voice grew thoughtful. “Whoever Nicky is, he’s proud. Didn’t want to take the free stuff, you know? All he wanted was to ‘earn’ his dinner. We tried to guide him to a teen shelter, but he wouldn’t hear a word about that. He said he doesn’t take charity. You can’t help some people.”

David heard the covers shift again; that would be Jory turning over onto one hip. “Glad you’re letting me in.”

David rested his head on the couch arm and grinned, letting his happiness color his voice. “How could I not? I love the way you ask.” The bold words were still a shock to him; every time he said something he wouldn’t have said before he’d met Jory was a surprise. The words were worth it, though, to earn a chuckle from the man.

If he wasn’t in love already, David knew he was falling fast. Impulsively, he asked, “Hey, do you want to come over?”

“Now?” David could almost see Jory blinking as he tried to focus on his watch. “It’s only three-thirty-five. I still need to sleep.”

“Please?” David moved again, a little uncomfortable. This was the first time he’d really asked something of Jory, and it kind of mattered what he decided. “I’d just like to see you in the light of day for a change.”

“You have no idea how much I want that, too.” Jory fell silent for a moment. “What’s going on?”

David squirmed. “Nothing ... yet.”

“Oh, now that’s nice and vague.” Jory chuckled. “Could something be going on if I came over?”

“Possibly. I was going to make spaghetti. We could try eating it like those two dogs in that cartoon, *Lady and the Tramp*.”

Jory paused again. His voice was warm when he spoke again, his admiration clear. “You really have come a long way. The David I met at the Fest wouldn’t have thrown innuendoes at me like darts.”

“Am I close to the bullseye?”

“Dead center. I so wish I could be there.”

“Then come. I mean, unless you really do need more sleep.”

“Like I could go back to my naughty dreams when there’s reality in the offering? No way. Let me just look outside and see what the weather’s like, okay?”

David frowned. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Er, the car’s temperamental. She doesn’t like to run when it’s too hot.”

“No problem, then. The weather’s gorgeous. Just around seventy.”

“Gorgeous weather.” Jory didn’t sound happy. “That apartment building of yours still has the covered porch, right?”

“God, it’s not like you have to sneak in. After the first time you were here, people were congratulating me the next day. You’re really loud, you know?”

“And you’re not?” David heard, faintly, the rattle of blinds being raised. “Huh. Looks like a storm might be kicking up.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. No! That’s actually good. I like rain. Especially a good rain where it turns the skies almost dark as night. Clouds hide the sun. That’s a bonus.”

“Jeez, man. You really have to get out in the light some time. I know you’re pale, but I promise you won’t go up in flames.”

“Yeah. See, about that ...” Jory paused. “Never mind. I don’t like it, that’s all. I’m so used to living in the dark that I don’t like being exposed to sunlight.”

“There go my plans of a picnic lunch at a beach.”

“I’m serious, you.” All the same, David could hear Jory chuckling. “All right. It’s clouding up pretty good. I’ll be over there soon.”

“Jory, are you really that bad about daylight?”

“It’s kind of like the boy in the bubble. Except, I’m not so much a boy anymore, and I don’t have a bubble.”

“Are you allergic to the sun?” David grew concerned. Jory didn’t always let him know when something was too much. “I mean, if you really can’t ...”

“Hush up. I’ll be there in just a few.” Jory hesitated. “Hey, David? I love you. Just remember that, okay?”

David pulled back from the phone, startled. Sure, they’d said the words before, but for Jory to repeat them out of the blue ... He couldn’t believe his ears. “What?”

“I said, I love you. Make me say it a third time and I’m going to wear a skirt over there. You emasculate me.”

“Can’t have that.” David cleared his throat. “I think I might love you, too. Should that be dresses for two? I think I can get us a bargain at the plus-size outlet.”

“Hey!”

“No fat jokes, I know.” David brushed his thumb against the handset. “Come on over, Jory. I want to see you.”

“On my way.” There was a click as Jory disconnected. David didn’t mind his not saying goodbye. Just another Jory quirk. The man had a fancy cell, but it looked nearly untouched, as if he barely used it. *Just for work*, he’d said.

All the same, he hadn’t given David any other numbers.

David frowned thoughtfully for another moment, then got up and headed back into his kitchen. He could at least have the sauce started when Jory got there. If they got ... distracted ... it could simmer for a while. He closed his eyes for a second, thinking about the ways they could possibly lose track of time.

Had he ever been this happy? Not that he could remember. Jory made his life complete. And if things weren’t perfect all the time -- if Jory had problems with daytime visits and if they couldn’t always come together on the spur of the moment like they’d done one hundred percent that first night at the Fest -- well, he could cope. Relationships took time to work out all the kinks. Jory didn’t seem like he planned on going anywhere.

Good, neither did David. They could figure each other out in time. All that mattered for the moment was learning what made each other tick. Like an old watch with dozens of springs and levers and gears. Learn how it worked, and you had something reliable. Or so he’d learned from watching daytime TV. In real life, who knew? It wasn’t like he had much experience to draw from. Made sense, though.

David nodded decisively as he picked up the pasta recipe. Did he have all the ingredients? He thought so. Tomatoes, red wine, garlic ... He might not have the garlic.

Diving into his refrigerator, he was rewarded by finding a small plastic bag with four full cloves in it. “Gotcha,” he exclaimed softly. He spun the bag open, humming to himself. “This is going to be a night to remember.”

The phone rang again. "Don't you want somebody to love," David sang to himself, walking over to grab it. "Don't you need somebody to love?" He picked it up with a grin. "Hey, hon. Did you forget something?"

"Since when am I your honey?" a familiar voice, cheeky as a chipmunk, asked.

David felt himself going bright red. "Christian. Oh, crap. I'm sorry. I was --"

"Expecting someone else? David, you're probably the color of a stop light right now. Cut it out. Look, I wondered if you could work a favor for me."

"If it's something I can do, sure." David tucked the phone under his ear and headed back to his kitchen. "What's up?"

"I need you to go to Micah's with me."

David almost dropped the phone. "You need me to what with who?"

"Micah." Christian sounded desperately unhappy. "It's more along the line of a royal summons. He wants to teach us how to dress and to help him pick out what to wear tonight."

David frowned. "Us? The ones he calls fashion-challenged every single chance he gets?"

"Yep, that'd be our Micah and, no, I don't know why. But, man, you've got to help me out. I can't face him all by myself. Please, David. Do a guy a favor."

David made a face. He didn't like Micah one bit. There was some good deep down in everyone -- he believed that pretty firmly -- but with Micah it would take a lot of digging. Still, Christian was his pal, and he couldn't let him down. "Okay, but give me a couple hours, will you? I've got someone coming over."

Christian's laughter rippled like water. The kid really did have a great voice. "I don't know how much longer I can keep this secret, man. You've got a hush-hush squeeze on the side. Liam would shit himself if he knew you didn't need this whole trip to *Amour Magique*."

"I don't think Liam would put it that way, but maybe." David checked the clock. He winced, wishing Micah had chosen some other sitting duck to shoot at. "Seven o'clock?" That'd give him wiggle room in case he and Jory got really busy.

As it was, he'd have to hurry. But he couldn't let Christian down. The kid needed someone to help him out, not just with this, but with life in general. He seemed so lost, as if he was searching for something he hadn't found yet and was losing hope that he ever would. David pretty much understood that state of mind. After all, hadn't he been in the same boat before he found Jory?

Speaking of which ... he heard a car pull up outside. David hurried to his window and looked down at the covered carport, but the blue vehicle peeking out wasn't Jory's little red Beetle. Its windows were almost completely blacked out. David whistled. He hadn't realized it was legal to get them that dark.

Shame it wasn't Jory already. Well, as far as David knew, Jory didn't live that close anyway. He hadn't been over to his lover's place yet. He'd asked if they could go there once, but Jory had demurred, calling his place a bachelor's mess. David had teased him about the romance of cluttered trailers as opposed to a basement studio, but Jory had just gone for the gold and kissed him quiet.

He'd sort of forgotten the question after that.

Still, as he took plump red tomatoes out of the crisper, David frowned again. Why didn't Jory want him at his home? Surely he wasn't hiding anything? Jory couldn't keep a secret to save his life -- David felt pretty sure about that. His face betrayed everything he was thinking. Like ... love.

David put the tomatoes down on his chopping block, his mind a thousand miles away. Or, actually, a few dozen, just outside of town, in a trailer. Had it been love right from the start? He kind of thought so. He and Jory had been made to be together.

You thought that about Tommy, too, Simon's lawyer-voice warned him. *Be careful, David.*

He considered the thought for a second, then mentally ordered his guardian angel to take a long jump off a short pier. Maybe this was insanity, but if it was, he liked being crazy.

Singing to himself again, he flicked on the radio and was absurdly pleased when the song matched up.

A knock sounded at the door. Jory already? Frowning, David brushed his hands off on his jeans and went to answer it. Couldn't be, for sure. Had to be a neighbor or someone wanting to borrow a cup of sugar -- did people still do that? Lost in his thoughts, he swung the door open --

-- and there was Jory, looking disheveled, as if he'd been running. His face was lit up with a huge grin, though, as he reached for David and swung him into a kiss. David melted right away, just like chocolate on a sunny day. Dragging Jory in with him, he shut the apartment door.

"Can I come in?" Jory asked when he backed off. "I know, I know, I don't have to ask."

"You? You can always come in." David gave him another kiss, soft and lingering. "How'd you get here so fast?"

"I flew," Jory joked, shrugging off his light jacket. The clothes he wore underneath were rumpled, as if he'd forgotten to fold his laundry and just tossed them all into a pile when they came out of the dryer. David knew the look well.

Not that he minded, of course. It was all gift wrapping as far as he was concerned. What was underneath mattered more. Speaking of which ... "You're pink," he said, puzzled. "Did you get sunburned?"

Jory shrugged. "I told you I wasn't used to the sun," he muttered. "I got a little toasty, yeah."

David flicked a glance out the door to the covered carport. No sign of the Beetle. "Did you drive a blue sedan?"

"Yeah. Borrowed it off a friend. The Bug has a bug, I think." Jory rubbed the back of his neck. "Kind of hard to drive with all that stuff on the windows but, hey, it was better than nothing, and it got me here, didn't it?"

And that was what was important. David took Jory's hand and squeezed it. "Are you too tender for touching?" he asked. "I could get some aloe vera."

"Don't need anything but you." Jory reached for David, the gesture easy and comfortable. He'd had practice, after all.

David backed away. "This isn't a booty call," he said, fumbling slightly over the words. "I mean -- it's not all about sex, Jory. I just wanted your company."

Jory shrugged. "You can have my company," he said, closing the distance between them again. "I'd like it if we shared the space in bed, though."

"Horndog," David accused, but with a smile. "Seriously, Jory."

"I know." Jory cupped David's cheek with one hand. "You wanted to cook? Let's get with it." He turned toward the kitchen, then stopped as if a huge hand had slapped him back. "Whoa. Talk about garlic."

"Yeah. I was about to put some in the press for a spaghetti dinner." David froze. "Shit. You're allergic, aren't you?"

Jory was backing away, his pink face going an unhealthy shade of crimson. "Really very," he said, voice thick and choked. "Could you -- please -- toss that out the window? Maybe now?"

David didn't hesitate. Opening his kitchen shutters, he tossed out the bulbs, then washed his hands in the sink. "Jory, you should have said."

"No. David, don't. I'll be fine." Jory tugged at the neck of his T-shirt. "I'll be okay. Promise."

"You're sure?" David reached for him. Jory skipped out of reach. "What's wrong?"

"Just give it a few minutes." Jory summoned up an attempt at a grin, but gave in to the rueful expression breaking through. "You know, maybe it was a bad idea for me to come."

David felt his heart begin to break. He kept his face still. "Yeah. Maybe it was."

“No! God, no. Not that kind of mistake.” Jory moved back to David, although he was swallowing quickly. He reached up to run a hand through David’s hair. “Look, you. When are you going to learn that I’m not going anywhere?”

David relented. “Even to Amour Magique with me?” he said, carefully taking Jory into his arms. “Pretty please?”

“Not that again.” Jory shook his head. “Davy, I can’t afford the entrance price.”

“What if I --”

“Uh-uh. We’re not going over this again.”

“Okay,” David said quietly. “It would just mean a lot. If I could show you off to my friends. None of them have someone so --” He broke off. Paused. Then, “Special. I want them to see us together. That we don’t need anyone else. So, please?”

Jory sighed. “It really means that much to you? So much you’d torture me by making me go to a gay club full of muscle boys and pretty Nellies?”

“It’s not like I want to go myself.”

“Yet you force us both into it.”

David perked up. “Did you say both? As in, the two of us?”

Jory rolled his eyes, then grinned. “Yes, you and I, and Amour Magique makes three. But we leave early. Deal?”

“Deal.” Excited as a young boy, David picked Jory up and swung him around in a half-circle. When he stopped, both were laughing.

“You can’t just do that,” Jory protested, although he didn’t seem in a hurry to let David go. “I’m as tall as you are. And I am so not the girl in this relationship.” He tilted his head to a side. “What? I said something, didn’t I?”

David turned his head to kiss Jory’s arm. “Relationship,” he said softly. He rolled the word around on his tongue and, to his surprise, decided he liked the way it tasted. He hadn’t

thought after Tommy that he'd ever want this kind of entanglement again. But with Jory ... anything was possible. He just felt it, deep down in his gut.

"Yeah." Jory caressed David's face. "Meant it, too."

David's heart swelled. God. Could he ask for anything more? He didn't think so. "Dance with me?" he asked, wrapping his arms tightly around Jory. "Right here, in the kitchen. Then the bedroom."

"Now you're talking." Jory did a little shimmy against David. "What do you have in mind?"

Kissing him, David reached out blindly to the counter. He broke off the kiss to triumphantly hold up a key. "We're opening the trunk. I finally got all that rust off, and I found one that should work. There's no way I was going to open the trunk without you here with me."

Jory looked surprised. His mouth opened and closed a few times. After a moment, he spoke, but all he said was, "Oh, shit."

Chapter Eight

David stared at Jory. “What’s wrong?” He knew he sounded like a little kid, and he could have kicked himself for it, but ... he’d thought Jory would be as happy as he had been at finding a key that fit the trunk. Jory always ran his hands over the old thing when they went into David’s bedroom. Rubbed it like a lucky charm or something he’d invested a lot of emotion in.

Getting this kind of reaction was more than a surprise.

David could tell Jory was thinking at ninety miles an hour.

“It’s nothing,” he said, his grin definitely half-hearted. “Just had someone walking over my grave, is all.”

“Hey. No graves for you, okay?” David cradled Jory’s ass in both hands. He gave the cheeks a light squeeze. “I don’t plan on losing you to a coffin any time soon.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” Jory brushed David’s cheek with a kiss. Then he shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Are you sure you want to spend time on an old box? There are other things we could be doing.” He tucked his hand into the front of David’s jeans and gave a playful tug. “People that each of us could be doing, people who happen to be conveniently standing in the same room with the other.”

David almost weakened. “You really don’t want to know what’s inside the trunk?”

Jory made a face. “I don’t know. It’s kind of like a ...” He struggled for words. “A Pandora’s Box. Does that make any sense? I get the feeling that if we open it up, anything could come flying out.”

“Worst thing I can think of is a moth or two.” David squeezed again, kneading rhythmically. Jory gave him such courage; it felt so easy to touch the man. “Come on. Do this with me, and ...” He still blushed when he said what he wanted so openly. “You can do whatever you want with me.”

That got Jory’s attention. He glanced up, hazel eyes suddenly sparkling. “Anything? You would go on top?”

“Anything you want, you’ve got, you know that.” David pressed against Jory, chest to chest. “But yeah, I could take a turn in the driver’s seat.”

“Won’t Sweet Rose get jealous if you’re accelerating me around?” Jory got his own handful of ass, but simply cupped David instead of pushing him a little further. “She’s one tough lady. I don’t want to get on her bad side.”

“I think she’ll be all right with the idea. Or,” David lowered his mouth to Jory’s ear, “we just won’t tell her.”

He bit at Jory’s earlobe, loving the way his lover’s breath hitched when he sucked the soft tissue into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue. “Humor me,” he coaxed. “Open the trunk, and then you get to look beneath the hood.”

Jory laughed and shook his head. “Okay, David. You win.” He stared at David, seeming somehow wistful. “Let’s go open that trunk. And if you still feel like it afterward, we can get on with some grown-up playtime.”

“I’m pretty sure I will.” David gave Jory a light spank before pulling them apart. He caught Jory’s hand in one of his, picking up the key with the other. “Let’s go see what’s there.”

David tried to ignore Jory's lagging behind as they made their way to his bedroom. It wasn't a big place, but then again, his whole apartment didn't have much in the way of square footage. The room had just enough space for a double bed, extra long, a nightstand, his closet, and the trunk.

David had stacked his nighttime reading across the old wood and metal -- antique books that were too worn to be worth anything at the Antique Barn, but that he found fascinating for all that. Seventeenth-century zoology texts were his latest kick. He loved the whole, "Here There Be Dragons" feel of the manuscripts. It'd been medical journals the previous month. Who knew what would come next? Maybe history.

Maybe whatever lay in the trunk.

David pulled them to a halt at the foot of his bed and knelt in front of the piece. Carefully, he lifted off the old books and put them on top of his comforter.

"Mmm," Jory said behind him, surrounding him with cool arms. "A man on his knees. I just might enjoy myself."

"Insatiable," David shot back, although he didn't push Jory away. He smoothed his hands over the top of the trunk. "I can refinish this, you know. Make the wood gleam again and get the brass all shiny. It could look as nice as it did before, almost brand new."

"Wouldn't that be something." Jory had moved on to nuzzling David's neck. He nibbled the sensitive skin where his neck joined his shoulder. David gave a heavy sigh and leaned back, raising his hand to tangle all five fingers through Jory's curls.

"Keep on doing that, and I'll forget what I'm working on here." David thought uncomfortably that that might be exactly what Jory had in mind. "Come on, quit it."

And who ever thought I'd be saying that to a sexy man in my own bedroom? He brandished the key. "It's just like Christmas," he said. "Let's see what's under the tree."

Jory exhaled heavily. "Fine, David." He sat down cross-legged, but for all his curt words, gave David a light scratch on the back.

“Ohh, do that again.” David almost forgot the key in his hand. He arched back. “Harder, and to the left.” When Jory’s nimble fingers obliged, he almost began purring. “That. In my opinion, that is one of the best parts of being in a relationship.”

“What’s that they say?” Jory murmured, sounding amused. He didn’t stop moving his hand, although he was drifting downwards. “I scratch your back, you scratch mine?”

“Keep on doing that, and I’ll do anything you want.”

“Including keeping that trunk closed?”

David stiffened.

Jory stopped plying his short fingernails. “God, I’m sorry. Forget I said anything, okay?”

“No.” David shook his head. Anything was possible, but not if Jory kept throwing up roadblocks. It wouldn’t have mattered if he hadn’t been interested in the trunk, but this almost felt like he was keeping a secret. “What’s in there that you don’t want me to see?”

Jory went deadly still. Even his breathing stopped for a few seconds. Then, with a deep inhale, he shook his head. “I have a bad feeling, that’s all. Whatever’s in that trunk hasn’t seen the light of day in a hun-- probably a hundred years. What if there’s bad luck inside?”

“Oh, come on!” David elbowed backward. “I didn’t figure you for the superstitious type.” He turned to look at Jory. “Are you serious?”

Jory *looked* serious. “No.” He moved in to kiss David’s temple, then ruffled his fingers through the longish hairs curling down over his neck. “Go on, babe. Even if there’s a boggart in there, I think we can take him. You and me, together. We’re a team, right?” He reached for David’s hand and pressed down on it. “Open the trunk.”

David examined Jory’s face for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. He still wasn’t sure what was going on behind those hazel eyes, but he had to trust that what he’d found with Jory was good. This just happened to be a speed bump in the road. They’d get past it.

He lowered the key to the polished lock on the trunk. "It might not work," he offered. Jory made a noncommittal noise. All the same, his grip tightened as David carefully inserted the key.

It fit.

Taking a deep breath, David turned the thing ... then whooped with delighted laughter as the tumblers clicked. He pumped one fist in the air. "It worked! How cool is that, Jory?"

Despite his previous reluctance, Jory was leaning in. He stared intently at the turned key. "I changed my mind," he said abruptly. But before David had time to react, he held up his hand. "Open it up. I do want to see what's in there."

David shifted uneasily, passing his weight from knee to knee. "You're sure?"

"As I ever am, of anything," Jory kissed the edge of David's cheekbone. His eyelashes tickled. "Butterfly kisses," he said softly. "Go on, David. Open Sesame."

David gripped the sides of the trunk lid. "Here goes nothing," he joked, lifting carefully. Old wood and metal creaked in protest, but it came open, sure enough. And inside? A wealth of riches. He stared in reverence, hardly daring to touch.

"Wow," he breathed. "Look at all of this!"

Jory angled for a better view. He reached inside. "It's a whole soldier's kit," he said, sounding awed. He made a face. "Phew. Smells like I was right about that mildew."

David was still too caught up in the trunk's contents to worry about the odor. He gazed at them with the love of the true collector and reached in with his big hands, knowing that at times like these he could be wonderfully deft. "Wood compartments," he said with reverence. "I think this tray lifts out."

"What all is in there?"

"Sundries, looks like. That was probably a needle -- all corroded now. And thread. A whole bobbin of it." David handled the items respectfully, not taking them out of their

boxes. "Oh, wow, look. A pair of stripes. Lieutenant's, I think. This guy must have been going to sew them on."

"Except he didn't," Jory said softly. "I wonder what stopped him? A bullet, maybe?"

David frowned, looking at Jory, who gave a shrug, looking uncomfortable.

"I'm just saying. This is why I never tried to open it. This is part of a real person's past, not just something to go through and be all excited about. Everything in there meant something to a soldier a long time ago."

David nodded slowly. "I get what you mean. Why didn't you just say?"

"It sounded girly." Jory rubbed the back of his neck. "I can't help wondering what that soldier would think about strangers going through his things. It might make him uncomfortable, if a piece of him was still around."

"Like a ghost?"

"Or something."

David stroked his thumb along the tray's edges. "We can stop now, if you want," he said quietly. "Leave all this to rest."

Jory hesitated. "You do what you want," he said at last. "I can't stop you. The trunk is your property now."

David didn't like the way that sounded. "Listen." He gave Jory a light shake. "What's mine is yours, understand? Maybe I bought this from you, but it was yours all your life. If it means that much to you, I'll shut the lid and leave the past to take care of itself."

"Yeah." Jory gave him a half-fond, half-annoyed look. "And you, the soul of antiquities, would be going insane every spare second you had, wondering." He shivered. "Just pick a couple of things to look at. Then close the trunk."

David examined his lover. "You're sure?" When Jory nodded, a strange sadness in his eyes, David bowed his head in agreement. He could sort of understand Jory's point. Even though he spent his time among the relics of times gone past, examining bric-a-brac that had

been precious to someone once upon a time, even sold it on a day-to-day basis, he could see why Jory wouldn't want anyone stirring up the dust of his family's past. It was good of him to let David have a peek.

And who needed a trunk when they had a lover to keep happy? David leaned over and kissed the tip of Jory's nose.

Jory laughed, then sneezed. "Hey, not playing fair!"

"Gotcha." David winked. It felt good to be giving Jory his way. Suited his nature. He liked to give, and he didn't want to cause trouble or make waves. On the spur of the moment, he decided he'd give Jory the key after they'd locked this up. No temptation. The past could stay in the past, except for -- "Two things?"

"Two." Jory was grinning now. "Off the top. Deal 'em straight."

David gave the genuine-looking dress uniform he could see toward the bottom a wistful glance, then reached in and extracted an old, leather-bound book. It was remarkably intact, although the cover bore a dark stain. Blood? Mud? With a soldier, it could have been either.

"A journal," he said, hushed. "Is this okay?"

Jory nodded. "What's that underneath it? Make that your second thing."

David was willing enough to give in. He reached in, grinning as he pulled the object out. "Spectacles! Old wire rims." They were almost perfect, with just a bit of rust here and there. "Didn't you say you needed a pair of these?" Playful, he unfolded the glasses and pushed them gently onto Jory's face. He laughed to see the expression on Jory, first cross-eyed, then startled.

Jory blinked at him. "Wow," he said after a moment. "I didn't realize."

"Realize what?"

"How handsome you are." Jory turned so that he faced David completely. The glasses looked like a perfect fit, his eyes sparkling beneath. "There are these amber lights in your

irises. I thought they were plain brown, but now I see the difference. You have tiger eyes. Anyone ever tell you that?"

Delighted fingers explored David's face. "I didn't realize things were so blurry. I can see so much of you now. The way the lamp reflects off your hair. Your smile -- yeah, keep on grinning."

"They work?" David was amazed.

"As if they were made for me." Jory adjusted the earpieces. "Although those could use a tune-up." He touched David's arm. "Can I keep them?"

David's eyebrows drew together. "What about all of that leaving the past to the past?"

Jory looked guilty. "Well ... that was before I found the glasses. Okay, you got me. Christmas time, presents under the tree and everything." Despite his words, he reached up and pulled the trunk lid shut. "But that's all. You have the journal, I have the glasses. That's all we need."

David didn't understand. His lover, so simple and straightforward at first, was turning into a mystery on him, and he wasn't sure he liked it. "I don't get you sometimes, Jory."

The other man sighed. "I wish I could explain. Sometimes I don't understand myself."

The very thought hurt, but David had to know. "Are you hiding something from me?"

"David ..." Jory bit his lip, then rushed in to kiss David, throwing all his body weight behind the move, knocking David down onto his hip.

"Don't," Jory said into David's neck. "Just don't, okay? Let me love you. That's all we need. Just us and love. Please?" He stroked David's cock. "Let me in."

David struggled. "Don't!" he exclaimed, panic automatically setting in. "Get off me!"

Jory froze, uncomprehending at first. "Oh, God. Tommy tackled you like I just did, didn't he?" He stumbled away from David and landed on his ass. "I am so sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

“Don’t.” David scrambled to his feet, breathing heavily. His heart felt like it was going to race right out of his chest. He wrapped his arms around his middle as his stomach began to ache. “Never do that again, Jory. Not if you care about me even a little.”

Jory stared up with a stricken look. “Never,” he promised. “Honest. I won’t.” He picked himself off the floor and reached for David. When David flinched back, he made a face as if he were kicking himself repeatedly. “I’m sorry,” he repeated quietly.

They stood in silence for a long moment. Part of David ached to reach out and touch Jory, to reassure him that everything was okay. The man meant more to him than almost anything on earth. No, not exactly. No one and nothing else measured up. But to be brought down like Jory had done him ... so strong that it seemed like he couldn’t fight back ... David couldn’t handle it. He hugged himself tightly.

“David,” Jory started. “How can I --”

“You can’t.” David shifted from foot to foot. It tore him apart to say it, but he couldn’t stop himself. “Maybe you should go.”

“Yeah.” Jory raked a hand through his curls. “Maybe I should.” He shook his head. “For good, or just for now?”

“Just for now.” David managed to reach out and touch Jory. “I’ll be all right. I trust you. It’s just ... hard.”

“Tell me how I can make it easier.”

“Give me some distance.” David felt himself getting too warm. “Maybe this is all too much too fast, Jory.”

“David, don’t say that. Please.”

“I’m not sure any more. I don’t get you. Things were so easy when we met. I should have known it wouldn’t last.”

“It can last. It will. All you have to do is trust me.”

David felt his lips twist with bitterness. “Yeah. That’s what Tommy said.”

"I'm not like him. I never will be. David, you have to believe me."

"I know. It's not in you. Just give me a few hours, okay?" David took a step back. Lifting his hand off Jory's arm was an almost physical pain. He blinked hard. "I said I loved you. I meant it."

"Don't quit on me. I need you. Do you know what I've been through, waiting for the right one?"

"Probably the same thing as me." David sighed. "You'll meet me tonight? At the club?"

Jory stared. "You still want me to come?"

"I do. We're still an 'us,' Jory. That hasn't changed."

"But ...?"

"I want to be alone until then. Okay?"

David watched Jory swallow roughly, then nod. He ached to comfort the man, but he just couldn't make himself do it. Things would be okay soon. All he had to do was calm down. He'd be able to think then. Whatever was between him and Jory -- it had substance. It was real. Calm. He needed to breathe.

"I'll let myself out," Jory was saying, voice low. "I'll meet you tonight, at the club. Look for me inside. I'll go early, so you don't have to face that place all by yourself."

David half-laughed, surprising himself. "I'll have eleven other guys with me."

"Yeah, but how many of them are in love with you?" Jory's mouth lifted in a sad smile. He blew David a kiss. "I'll be by your side tonight. And ..." He took in a deep breath. "No more secrets after tonight."

"So there are secrets."

"Some. None I wanted to keep, I swear. Meet me at Amour Magique, and I'll come clean about everything." Jory met David's eyes. "You'll come find me?"

David nodded. He searched for words, but couldn't find any. Jory looked like he wanted to touch David as badly as David wanted to be touched, but neither of them had the courage to cross the invisible barrier that suddenly lay between them.

"I'll go," Jory said. "See you tonight. I'll be wearing -- this." He gestured down at his rumpled T-shirt and jeans. "So you'll recognize me."

David ran his hands over his own red T-shirt. "And I'll be the one in red," he replied softly. "I'll see you later, Jory. Go."

And Jory went. David listened to his footsteps, then the soft sound of the door opening and closing. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, breathing slowly in and out.

What had he just done? What if he'd driven away the one good thing to happen to him in, well, his whole life? He had Sweet Rose, he had his job, and he'd had Jory. What if the past tense became a permanent thing?

The phone rang. David was tempted to ignore it, but it kept on ringing. The answering machine didn't kick in. He stood still, trying to calm the sudden fit of shakes racking his body. Hard to do with a phone jangling at him.

Finally, on the umpteenth ring, he crossed to the bedside table and picked up the receiver. "David here." At least his voice didn't crack.

"David," a familiar voice said, gentle, as if it were petting him. "I sensed you might need a friend about now. Am I wrong?"

"Liam." David sat down on the edge of his bed. "How did you get my home number?"

"From Simon, of course. I am at his condo right now, preparing him for tonight."

Bizarre images flashed through David's mind. He covered his mouth to smother a laugh. Crazy. It was fitting, though. "Liam," he said, steadily. "Can you keep a secret?"

"It is one of the things I was born to do," Liam replied soothingly. "If you have a story to share, it will rest safe with me. Locked in a box, with the key thrown away."

David winced. Slowly, he began to lie down on the bed. "Do you have an hour or two?"

“I have as long as you need, David.”

For some reason, David trusted him. Enough to tell him the whole story, anyway.

“It’s like this,” he began, wrapping the phone cord around his fist. “When you gave me the ticket to that Fest, I met someone there ...”

Chapter Nine

“Liam,” David said, feeling incredibly tiny. He tried again, reaching out for the small man’s arm. “Liam, this place is unreal.”

Liam was beaming with pride. “Amour Magique is amazing, is it not?”

“More than amazing. The size alone ...” David released Liam, albeit carefully, and turned in a slow circle. On the edge of the dance floor, there was no ceiling for four stories ... at the very least. He thought he saw it up there somewhere, but it was hard to tell with the curling tendrils of vapor almost like smoke -- or clouds.

He squinted. Was that the moon? “Liam!”

“Hush now, hush.” Liam patted David’s back. “It is a bit much to take in all at once, I know. You have nothing to fear. That much I promise. Amour Magique is a benevolent sort of place.”

“You say that almost like it’s alive.” David shivered. “Is it?”

“In its way, perhaps.” Liam held up a hand to stave off David’s alarmed questions. “There is much you need to learn, and much you will have to choose whether to accept as fact or fiction. I can tell you this: if you embrace Amour Magique, it will clasp you back with

warm and open arms. If you believe for a moment that buildings have emotions, this one likes you. It can tell you have a respect for old things and that you like to take care of them.”

David felt cold as he turned in another gradual revolution, taking in the vast dance floor of churning, undulating bodies, the rows of bars and balconies lining each level, and Bree, disappearing into the mosh pit. At least, he thought it was a mosh pit. He’d never actually seen one before, but it looked about right from the descriptions he’d heard. Bunches of men with piercings and tattoos and big heavy boots, all of them so unafraid.

“The building isn’t this big on the outside,” he said. “It looked like a warehouse, sure, but nowhere near this size. And all these men -- there’s no way all of them could have fit. We’d be packed in like sardines, and there’s plenty of room to move. Even the Brothers could -- Liam! Where did they go?”

Liam shrugged slightly and smiled. “Here and there, David. Here and there. Each one has found something to amuse himself with inside the walls of Amour Magique. I chose to hold you back to ease you through the transition.”

“Kind of you,” David managed. He felt suddenly freezing in his red T-shirt. He stared up again, shaking his head. “It’s unreal, Liam. I don’t understand.”

“I know,” Liam soothed. “It is not easy. I could make it simpler for you. Would you like for me to smooth the way? A touch to the temples, like so.”

He reached up and feathered his fingers just against the side of David’s head, almost but not quite touching the skin. “You would forget everything you have seen, and Amour Magique, while it would be disappointed, would whisk you away to the place where you need to go.”

David shook his head, dumbfounded. “It can do that? It *is* alive, isn’t it?”

Liam looked at him with interest. “To my surprise, you do not seem quite so startled as I might have thought. Do you have more hidden depths, David? Things I should have seen?”

“Oh, there’s plenty of room in here for depths.” David poked at his waistline.

Liam batted his hand away. “Stop that. Now, if you would be so kind as to answer my question?”

David laughed bitterly. “No, I’m not all that shocked. I work in antiques, Liam. I’m used to things ‘speaking’ to me, if you know what I mean. I run my hands over something, say an old trunk, and I can feel the life in it. I know it’s seen a lot, and that it has a hundred stories to tell. All you have to do is get inside. If you’re allowed to.”

“I see.” Liam put his hand thoughtfully to his chin. “I am proud of you, David. The others? None of them have the nerve to face down *Amour Magique* like you yourself have done without a flinch. Once again you have been underestimated.”

“That’s me. Quick to the point and slow out of the starting gate.”

“Except for this self-esteem problem, I would say you were the ideal man,” Liam scolded. “I would take you myself, if someone had not already laid claim to your heart.”

David felt himself blush. “Yeah. Jory. Look, Liam, I’m really sorry about blubbering all over you on the phone this afternoon.”

“Did I say I minded?” Liam chuckled, a sweet sound like rippling water. “It was most enlightening to learn of your relationship with this man. He sounds like your perfect match, David. You had, what is it? Chemistry? Yes, chemistry. An instant ‘click.’ The flint touched to a wick, and boom! Off goes the Roman candle.” He gave David a sly wink. “Or perhaps other things.”

“Geez, Liam, broadcast it to everyone,” David grumbled, looking around. He froze. “Those guys on the dance floor ... are they doing what I think they’re doing?”

Liam peered. “A blow job? Is that what you see?”

David coughed. “I was actually looking at those two really flexible men and what they were ... God, that looks like a page out of the *Kama Sutra* -- or a blue magazine.”

His eyes lost focus for a second before he shook his head. “A blow job? Where? Oh.”

He considered the man on his knees for a second. "Seems kind of tame in comparison. And they just let this go on all night long? You know what, before you answer that, you haven't answered any of my other questions. How is it possible to have all these men in a building bigger on the inside than it is on the outside? Where do they all come from? The vibes I'm getting ..."

"Hush, David. There's time for everything, and everything will come to you in time." Liam gave him a gentle push. "You said this Jory would meet you here?"

"Yeah. He didn't say where, though." David uncomfortably tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, hanging loose outside his jeans. His cock had given a twitch at the thought of Jory. Made him uneasy. He wasn't even sure if he could handle meeting Jory, but he still wanted to get nasty with the man? What kind of sense did that make?

"I don't know where to go," he prevaricated.

Liam wasn't falling for any of that. "Ask a bartender," he said, giving David a push toward a nearby open pub. "I have the feeling that Jory is probably well known in *Amour Magique*."

"He said he hated it."

Liam pursed his lips. "I suspect that is why they would take notice of his entering," he said dryly. "Go on, then. I cannot hold your hand all night."

"Liam?"

"Hush, now, I said. If I could, I would walk beside you every step of the way. But time, David, it is fleeting. Each second slips away so quickly. I am needed elsewhere. So many elsewheres. You can take care of yourself."

"And my questions?"

"You will find the answers soon enough." Liam caressed David's forearm. "Are you ready for them I wonder? You may have to face many unpleasant truths tonight, David. Including some about the man you love. Do you think yourself prepared?"

David flashed back on a memory of a dark alley. Fists, feet, pain. Then he thought of Jory. Gentle touches and kind words.

"I think I am," he said. "I can't help being scared. But I don't think Jory would ever hurt me on purpose. But I --" He grimaced. "I can't see it happening, but I'm still scared of it. Isn't that pathetic? I'm probably one of the biggest guys here."

"Tall and strong," Liam put in. "Your arms are solid with muscle after lifting heavy things all these years. You cut a fine figure, no matter how little you believe it."

David scoffed. "Then why am I so afraid of meeting Jory again?"

"Perhaps you are afraid of acceptance," Liam said after a moment of intense scrutiny that made David want to wiggle under his gaze. "No, let me finish. You have spent your entire life putting yourself down. Not smart enough or rich enough to go to college, not savvy enough to buy a fancy car."

He held up a hand to keep David silent. "You put yourself down for so many things. Too fat, when you are merely a big man and you are built along good, strong lines. That beast who used his fists on you. You are so used to being 'imperfect' that you cannot accept a man who enjoys you merely for what you are."

Liam's voice was stern, but his eyes kind. "It is time to let go of your safety net, David. I have purposes for all the Brothers tonight, but for you, it is to find freedom as well as love."

He raised up on tiptoe. "Another kiss," he whispered. "One to taste your sweetness, and to give you a small burst of courage."

"You can do that?" David murmured back, caught by the hypnotic gleam Liam gave off. He swayed a little. "What are you?"

"A man." Liam leaned in to touch his lips to David's. Surprised into momentary stillness, David kept his mouth closed. Liam didn't push any further, content to brush against him.

Even though he couldn't help comparing this kiss with the ones Jory gave, David was startled by the tender gentleness in the touch. A sense of warmth began at his lips, spreading throughout his body.

"I am a man," Liam repeated, lowering himself onto the flats on his feet. "Well, perhaps a little more than that. But you will discover all soon enough."

David shook his head. "Liam? What do you mean?"

Liam lowered his head. "Look at me."

When Liam raised his face again, David gasped. "Saint again," he said. "How do you do that?"

Liam, somehow beautiful beyond compare, smiled a heartbreaking smile. "Learn to accept things, David, even if they are beyond your ken. Therein lies your path to true happiness." He let his hand trail slowly off David. "I have done all I can. Now, look over to your right. Begin at the bar I am pointing to."

David obeyed nervously. The place was packed from seat to seat with laughing, joking men. He frowned. "How is that supposed to help, Liam? A bartender that busy won't recognize someone like Jory. He's like me. Ordinary."

"Far from ordinary." Liam's voice sounded far away. "Remember that, David. Trust in me, in Jory, and in Amour Magique. With a trinity like that, you can hardly go wrong." He laughed. "Now, hurry! Find your lover and make amends."

"I still don't see --" David turned to look back at Liam, but he was nowhere in sight. David stood alone, or as alone as he could be in a packed club. Men jostled past him, where Liam had been standing. "Liam?" He searched the crowd with his eyes, puzzled and worried. "Where did you go?"

No answer.

David swallowed hard. "Okay," he muttered. "I guess I'm on my own again. Just like always."

One foot in front of the other, David. Jory means a lot to you? Enough that you're willing to try and work through this? Then go and find him. A single step at a time. It'll get you there.

Careful of the melee of dancers, David began to weave his way through the crowd. "Excuse me. I'm sorry. Oh, God, was that your foot? Don't --"

"It's all right, man," a dark-skinned guy said with a grin. "I'm tough enough, and you barely got my toe." He eyed David up and down. "You are a big hunk of delicious, aren't you?"

David startled. "I'm a what now?"

"Mmm. Fresh. You taste like you've never been sipped before."

"Huh?" David took a step back, but the dark man followed him. He raised his arms to twine around David's neck. "Hey, stop. I don't even know your name."

"Who needs names?" The man began to sway against David. "Let's dance, sugarplum. The night's young."

"No! I mean, no, thank you, but I'm --" He took a deep breath. "Taken. A man named Jory."

"Jory!" His would-be partner pulled back and made a face. "You're kidding. He scored someone like you?"

"You know him?" David seized the man by his forearms when he would have turned away. "Is he here tonight? Have you seen him?"

"Oh, you've been caught good." The man batted huge brown eyes at him, lashes fluttering in a deliberately camp gesture. "Are you a nice little boy for Jory? You'd better be. I've heard him called Father Jory because we all thought he'd be celibate forever."

Dark mocha lips pouted. "You're sure you won't dance just once? Jory can wait on us." He edged closer. "Maybe wait an hour or two ... I have a room not far from here."

David pulled away, more roughly than he'd intended and spoke more harshly than he intended. "Just tell me where I can find him. I'm sorry. You're a nice guy, and if things were different, I'd probably be knocked off my socks that you're interested." He paused to consider the idea. "Actually, I still am, kind of. But I'm taken. I have to find Jory."

"What's the rush?" His would-be partner sulked. "He's over in the corner bar, drowning his sorrows. He won't notice if you take a while. And if he smells me on you, then he'll be jealous."

David jerked back. "Jealous? I don't want --"

"What better way to make sure a man doesn't stray than to think he might lose you?" the dancer purred. His eyes had been rimmed with some kind of dark eyeliner. Or were they? The dark marks looked like they were under the flesh. Then, even as he stared, the man flickered a forked tongue at him, laughing when David flinched. "Come on," he coaxed. "Dance with me."

David moved away carefully, disentangling his arms. "What are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Flick, flick went his tongue. It seemed longer than a human's should. "I'm something that could be your best dream ever. Come with me."

"David!" Liam's voice called.

David automatically turned toward the voice, but there was no Liam in sight. "He keeps doing that," he said ruefully to the man all but clinging to him. Or who had been all over him like plastic wrap. Now, the dark man looked simultaneously turned off and horrified.

"The incubus," he hissed. "You're one of his? Don't tell him I tried to go after you. Be a pal, okay?"

"Incubus?" David blinked. "What do you mean?"

The man hooted. "You don't know? Sweet Jesus, you are in for a night. First Jory, then Liam. Look, I don't want any trouble. If Liam's laid a claim on your hide, I'm not going near

you with a ten-foot pole.” He folded his arms across his chest and leered. “It is a shame, though. If I had permission, we could have had a sweet time together.” His tongue slipped out again, tracing over his brown lips.

David felt slightly nauseous. “I’m sure,” he said. “Please excuse me. I have to go and find Jory. I really came here to see only him.”

“Your call.” The man stepped aside. “Just don’t tell Liam, all right? That bastard has serious juice, and I don’t want him pissed off at me.”

David considered the question. “He probably already knows,” he said as kindly as he could. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but it felt like the truth. “If I were you, I’d either go find someone else to dance with or leave for tonight.”

“Spoil my fun.”

“No, no.” David put his hand on the man’s elbow. His skin felt dry and rough, almost like sandpaper, or ... scales. Exerting his force of will not to jerk away, David guided him toward a group of men dancing in a circle. They were all dressed more or less like his accoster, thrashing to the beat. “Look. See there? Go and have fun.”

“Hmm.” The man took measure of the group. “Okay. But tell Liam nothing happened. I didn’t mean anything except to show you a good time. You are a gorgeous man, you know.”

David felt himself grow warm again. “I’m not, but it’s nice of you to say.” Before the man could protest, David gave him a gentle shove. “Go on, now.”

“Okay. And try that corner bar. I’m almost sure I saw him there earlier.” The man, whose name David had never even learned, melted away to join the circle dance. They parted like water to let him in. David watched for a moment as like came to meet like, and found himself smiling. Things were as they should be. He liked it when people were happy.

The thought made him stop to consider. He’d been selfish, hadn’t he? Thinking only about himself, when he had Jory to keep in mind, too. If Jory was keeping secrets ... he must have a reason. *Accept*, Liam’s voice reminded him from the back of his mind. *No safety nets*.

David nodded sharply. "All right, Liam," he said aloud. "If you're out there, and for some weird reason I think you are, keep an eye out for me, okay? Here I go."

He made his first move. "One small step for man," he said under his breath. "Jory, you'd better be over there."

I need you. I realize that now.

Surely they could work out their problems. He knew, *knew*, Jory would never deliberately wound him.

To his surprise, the music changed to something he liked as he picked his careful way around the edges of the dance floor. Lights softened into muted colors, and the crooning of Hank Sr. started up. David almost laughed in delight.

"Wish I had my cowboy hat," he said, pleased.

He spared a glance for the couples on the floor, amiably switching from bumping and grinding to slow two-steps, wound tight in each other's arms. His heart gave a bump. How good would it be to have Jory with him at that moment? They'd walk out onto the floor and stand close, so close, nuzzling into each other to the slow, sweet strains of good old-fashioned country. Thinking about it, his heartbeat picked up.

Jory, he thought wistfully. Be there for me. I'm coming.

The bar was close now. A cheerful-looking Asian-American with long, shining hair was behind the counter, pouring out drinks with a deft hand. He laughed and joked with his customers as he passed over their beverages and took money or entered information onto a computerized tab. The lights were low and warm. Welcoming.

And there, in the corner, hunched over what looked like a Bloody Mary ...

David quickened his steps. As he got closer, he could see a familiar head of tousled dark hair. Warm hazel eyes seemed dimmed with depression behind their glasses. A hand he had twined in his, which had rubbed his back or wrapped around his cock, stirred a stalk of celery in a red drink.

His heart gave another bound. No matter what the problems were between them, this man was who he belonged with.

Jory didn't look up as David approached his side. Suddenly shy, David reached out to touch his shoulder. "Hey, you," he said softly. "It's me. I came to find you, Jory."

His partner's head snapped up. He stared in disbelief. "David?"

"Yeah, babe." David moved his hand to caress the other man's cheek. His lover nuzzled into it briefly, eyes closing in what looked like relief. "I'm here. For you."

"I love you, David." Jory said, eyes still shut. "Can you forgive me?"

"Already forgiven." And it was true, he realized.

"You don't know everything yet."

"That's okay. I will, soon."

Jory nodded, jostling David's palm. "Close your eyes?"

"What?"

"Close your eyes, and keep them shut. Oliver, you look away." That must have been the bartender, David guessed, because the man chuckled and busied himself with other customers. "Please?"

David felt uncomfortable, but -- *trust*. He let his eyelashes flutter against his cheeks and stood there, blind, waiting. "What are you doing?"

"This," Jory said. David registered the sound of a bar stool being scraped back, then suddenly, blissfully, lips were on his. He let his mouth fall open gladly for Jory's tongue to enter. Arms circled behind him, squeezing hard.

Jory drew back and whispered, "I just hope you're still glad to see me in a minute. Kiss me again?"

"I am. I always will be." David reached for Jory, holding him tight. It felt right to be doing so, even in public, where he'd normally have been nervous of someone seeing him.

Having his eyes shut helped. He felt as if he were free-floating in his own cocoon, without a care in the world.

"I love you, too," he said, meaning every word. "I think I always will."

"David ..." Jory's mouth was on his again. "You don't know what you do to me."

David melted in his lover's grip. "Kiss me again?"

"You bet I will." Holding on, Jory pressed his lips to David's again. The kiss deepened, each man's hands roaming and roving.

"Not bad," David heard the bartender whisper. "Go on, Jory. Let him see."

Jory shook his head. "Not yet, Oliver."

"It's time, Jory. You must."

"Jory?" David began to open his eyes. Despite Jory's panicked yelp, or perhaps because of it, he looked curiously at his lover ...

And saw, instead of the warm hazel eyes, cold yellow. Instead of Jory's sweet mouth, a sharp, cruel one with fangs. David licked his lips and realized that they tasted of pennies. No, blood. He took one terrified glance at Jory's glass and realized that the "tomato juice" wasn't anything squeezed out of a vegetable.

No safety nets. In Amour Magique, anything is possible.

David felt himself trembling. "Jory," he whispered, staring. "Jory, you know those secrets you mentioned? Now might be a good time to start talking."

"Don't run away. Please." Jory's grip hardened.

David swallowed roughly. Only his faith in Liam kept him put ... that, and the familiar smell of Jory, the feel of his arms, and the smell of his hair.

"I'm staying put, but Jory, tell me ... is this a costume? Or how about you tell me the truth. What are you?"

Chapter Ten

“I won’t lie to you,” Jory said, meeting David’s gaze. “I won’t tell you this is a Halloween costume. It’s the wrong season anyway.”

To his surprise, David found himself chuckling. “Yeah. You’d have to go a way for me to believe you on that score.” He reached out to brush his thumb across Jory’s lower lip. “Are these teeth as sharp as they look?”

“Hey, watch it!” Jory cautioned. Too late. David flinched as he nicked his thumb on one fang.

A trickle of blood decorated Jory’s mouth as he pulled away. “Yeah. They do have a good edge on them. Sorry about that.” He made as if to lick away the crimson fluid, then made a face. “I didn’t ... I don’t ... I won’t. My fault.”

He snatched up a cocktail napkin and wiped his mouth. “Did it hurt you badly? I should have said something before. Jesus God, I am such a fucking idiot. David, let me see. Is it deep? Is it bad? Are you losing blood? I --”

“Jory, stop.” David took a deep breath to steady himself. “I don’t know what you are, but can you ... not be like this anymore?”

"I could." Jory shook his head sadly. "Thing is, David, this is who I am. I'm not as bad as some vam-- people I know. They have to use fancy magic tricks to hide their true faces. I can go back and forth."

"Which one is the default?" David delicately traced one forefinger under Jory's yellow eye. "It's actually not bad."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Kind of a turn-on."

"No kidding?" Jory raised his hand to cover David's. He winced. "You're still bleeding. I don't take from humans. I mean ... oh, hell. You're a smart guy, David. You've probably figured out what I am by now." He sat down, seeming to brace himself for an attack. "Go on. Let me have it."

David studied his lover. "Vampire. I'll be damned."

"Actually, that's my line. I think you're pretty safe, yourself."

"Huh." David paused. "No wonder you hated the garlic," he said after a long moment. Then, to his own surprise, he burst into chuckles. "It's a good thing I'm not a devout Catholic, I'd never have gotten you inside my apartment!"

"You're taking this a little too well." Jory shifted in his chair. "Aren't you going to shriek, run, call me names ... maybe all of the above?"

David examined himself carefully. "No ... I don't think so. Truth. You're still Jory, aren't you?"

"Fangs and all." Jory smiled. The effect was adorable, like a puppy who could bite, but whose basic nature was way too sweet to dig in. "I can change back if you want."

"Only if you do." David felt himself trembling underneath the surface, but he was holding it in. *Accept. Believe. No safety nets.* Okay. He could handle it. He grinned again.

"What's so funny?"

"For one thing, you have this lisp when you talk."

"I do not!" Jory touched his mouth. "Do I?"

"A little one. I don't mind. It's kind of charming."

"And once again, I'm wondering why you haven't run screaming yet." Jory shook his head, clearly wondering about David's sanity. "I'm a vampire, lover. Stalker of the night. Prey-er upon the innocent. The thing that goes bump in the dark. You're not even a tiny bit scared?"

David thought about the question. "Do you want me to be?"

"No! God, no. It's just ... you freak over a meant-to-be-playful tackle in your own bedroom but, here, in a club packed full of men who might or might not have good intentions, you can handle a vampire just fine?"

"I can handle you. Somehow, I can't see you out roaming the night after some luscious young thing to sink your fangs into. For one thing, there's your job at the --" He burst into laughter. "Red Cross! Oh, hell, you cheat. You take all the unusable blood, don't you?"

Jory covered his eyes. "Busted." His voice held a trace of humor. "Graveyard shift. Pretty appropriate, don't you think? I drive there in the dark and leave before dawn. Sleep away the days by myself in an apartment that's light-proofed."

"Completely?"

"Oh, yeah. My blinds are rated for darkrooms. You know, where photographers --"

"I know what a darkroom is," David interrupted. "Jory, none of this makes a difference. I've seen you eat food. Cherry Popsicles. Tomatoes. Chile peppers. You know, I'm suddenly seeing a 'red' connection here. Do you just eat those foods to cover up the blood mouth?"

"Sometimes." Jory looked embarrassed. "I'm good about not needing much. Blood doesn't have many calories, though. You'd think being dead -- well, undead -- a guy wouldn't have to worry about the munchies and gaining a few pounds here and there. Well, surprise!" He mimed a shock. "I think they messed up a little when they made me. Some kind of defective mold that broke."

“Really?” David asked, touching Jory’s face. “I think they did just fine. You’re closer to human than some guys I’ve known. Better than the other one I slept with.”

Jory’s golden eyes glittered. “I meant what I said,” he replied, voice heavy with menace. “I ever get my hands on that asshole Tommy, he’s going to regret every single thing he ever did to you, and all the things he should have done for you and didn’t. Someone like you needs to be cherished. Respected. You’re a good man, David. You know how rare those are? I haven’t run into anyone like you in a hundred and sixty-five years, alive and undead, and God, that makes me feel old.”

“That’s how old you really are?” David slid onto an emptied bar stool next to Jory. He took his hand away from the vampire’s face, but instead of letting distance in between them, lowered his fingers to Jory’s thigh. He squeezed and kneaded encouragingly. “Go on. You can tell me.”

Jory peered at him. “And you’re sure you’re not drunk, high, or out of your mind, maybe?” He sniffed the air. “You don’t smell stoned.”

“Why are you so surprised?”

“Well, come on. I’m not exactly used to people going, ‘Oh, a vampire,’ and calmly continuing about their business. It’s not the typical reaction.”

“Maybe not,” David acknowledged. “But from my point of view, things are making a lot of sense now. The daylight thing, the garlic, never getting to see you except at night ... heck, even the candles. That’s classic Hollywood.” He grew sober. “And Liam. Somehow I get the idea that he’s more than what he seems.”

Jory whistled. “You have no idea.”

“You want to teach me?” David tilted his head. “I’m serious. Do you see me running? I told you before, you’re still Jory. The man I fell in love with.”

“Answer me one question.” Jory stirred his blood again with the celery stalk, then let it fall with a twitch of amusement. “Why aren’t you afraid?”

“Well, I had thought you were probably having an affair or that you were getting tired of me. I’m inside a club that’s way bigger on the inside than it looks from outdoors. Liam keeps changing from an annoying short guy into something big and bad -- maybe not bad, but I’ve been told he has a lot of power. Besides, I read. Lots of old books have accounts of the paranormal. I was raised on Appalachian ghost stories. Rawhead and Bloody Bones. You think a couple of sharp teeth are going to throw me?”

Jory began to grin. “David, you are one hell of a man. You’ve got a heart big enough to warm up the whole world.” He reached for and grasped David’s hands.

For the first time, David noticed -- really realized -- how cool they were. He glanced up, and saw that Jory had stopped breathing. Not as if he were choking, just as if it were a natural state for him.

“It’s no wonder you’ve been hurt. You give and give and give, and you don’t ever expect anything in return, do you?”

“I never did,” David replied, tangling his fingers together with Jory’s. “That is, until you. Right now, I think I deserve the whole truth. That’s your trunk, isn’t it? You were in the twenty-second Richmond. It all fits together now. The glasses. Why you kept that old piece. Where did you lose the key?”

“On the battlefield. The guy who turned me wasn’t big on sticking around to take care of the ones he didn’t just eat. He went through my pockets while the change was coming over me, and he took off with anything that looked halfway valuable.”

“Gettysburg?”

“The big one.” Jory pulled away to take hold of his glass and raise it in an ironic toast. “After the third day of battle, a lot of the wounded were left for dead. Too many bodies, and too few survivors to go around checking for who might still be alive. I was. Just barely. I’d bled out most all I had, but there were a few mouthfuls left for the ... guy. I still don’t know his name. Never did.”

He half-laughed. "I thought he'd come to rescue me, at first. Swooped in like an angel, but when he got close enough I screamed even though I hardly had the strength. He bit, he drank, then he made me drink. Don't know why. Never found anyone to explain why I turned out the way I did, either."

David nodded thoughtfully. "You had to make your own way."

"Always have and always will."

"Not any more." David bumped their knees together. "You have me now. I can fit Sweet Rose out with blackened windows. She'll like it. Make her look all snazzy. On nights off, we'll go line dancing."

Jory wrinkled his forehead. "They still do that?"

The question made David laugh again. "Yeah. Hopeless old fogeys like me still enjoy it."

"We wouldn't be able to dance with each other, would we?"

"I don't know." David plucked Jory's glasses off his nose, careful of the curved earpieces. He laid them down on the bar. "There's a lot I still don't understand, and I expect you to tell me. In exchange, I take you for what you are. Do we have a deal?"

Jory rubbed at his face. The vampire visage disappeared, to be replaced by the same rumpled man who'd won David's heart. "You'll get everything you can handle."

"I warn you, I want the whole package." Underneath the bar, David touched Jory's groin. He cupped the man's cock and balls in his big hand, rolling them gently through his loose jeans. "All of you." He hesitated. "That is ... if you want me."

"How could I not?" Jory shifted, letting his knees fall apart. "You accept what I am, and I don't think you're the tiniest bit frightened. I can't believe it, but there it is. You're a mystery, David, and one I want to unravel."

David squeezed gently, making Jory gasp. "We both are. But I think we can make a go of it, together. How about it? You want to try?"

“You still haven’t answered my question. Not really.”

David waited.

“Why aren’t you afraid?”

“Because you’re Jory, plain and simple. You haven’t hurt me yet, not deliberately, and I know you never will. Besides, you did me a big favor.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not scared of Tommy anymore.” He applied a little more pressure, just right to raise Jory’s cock in his palm. Savoring the way the man seemed to be struggling for control, he added, “It’s a lot harder to be scared of shits like Tommy when you know your new squeeze can handle them without breaking a sweat.”

Jory raised an eyebrow. Boldly, he rocked into David’s grip. “Harder. I can take a lot. And, yeah, I’d beat the ever-loving hell out of him if he dares come near you again. But talking about coming ...”

The bartender coughed. “Perhaps you two would like to go somewhere a little more private?”

Jory laughed. “Oliver, this is Amour Magique. I know you have eagle eyes, but come on. Look out at the dance floor. This is just a little playing around.”

“Right. And you don’t play around at my bar. Bad for all the lonely hearts who want to get drunk and forget their sorrows.” Oliver winked. The expression made his face look oddly soft, almost feminine. “Go home, would you? The club’s worked its magic for both of you.”

“How do you know?”

“I can tell. So hands off, gentlemen, and go find a nice, soft bed to lie on. Love each other until the morning light. And you,” Oliver said, turning to David. “You earned him, the Prince Charming of vampires. Take care of each other.”

“Gladly.” Eyes shimmering with good humor, Jory grabbed David by the T-shirt and hauled him in for a long, lingering kiss.

David gave in eagerly, stroking his tongue along Jory's. He found, to his surprise, that he didn't mind the coppery taste anymore. Maybe a little of it had been there all along. He sighed into the embrace, holding his lover close. The reward was worth it: arms took hold of him.

Still kissing, they slid off the bar stools and stood. David inserted his thigh between Jory's, which parted eagerly for him, letting David rock against him. Their cocks, both swelling rapidly, brushed against each other, ratcheting up an already delicious sense of anticipation.

"Want you," David whispered in Jory's ear, after trailing a line of kisses to it. "Can we go to your place? I want to see it."

David felt Jory nod almost imperceptibly. "I'd like you to see it. It's not much, though, I warn you."

"Gentlemen," Oliver chided. "Time to leave. I run a clean establishment."

David kept his mouth next to Jory's ear. "Question?"

"Anything."

"Is Oliver really a woman?"

Jory broke into chuckles. "Yes," he murmured back, "but don't tell anyone she's actually an Olivia. Amour Magique's not big on keeping out those who really want to come inside. Unless you end up in Last Chance, everyone's welcome here as long as they're friendly."

"Really? All those guys out there look big on the hugs and cuddles." David gave Jory a light shake. "For real?"

"Maybe more piercings and tattoos than snuggles," Jory admitted. "But I don't think any of them would do anyone any damage. Nothing more than some teasing. Although there are some big players here tonight. I'd feel better if we, uh ... did what you suggested. And

what Oliver is trying to push us toward. You, coming back to my place. Would you feel okay about that?"

David could feel the anxiety coming off Jory in virtual torrents. He moved against Jory one more time, letting him feel the bulge in his jeans. "No more secrets?"

"None. I promise."

"The vampire thing was the only jack-in-the-box you had in your toy chest?"

"That's all. I swear." Jory leaned far enough away to look at David with warm, shining eyes. "Other than that, I'm just a ... guy, David. One who happens to think a whole lot about you."

David pulled Jory back to kiss him on the forehead. "Then that's good enough for me. Come on." He took Jory's hand in his own. "Let's get out of here. Take me to your home."

"You're sure?"

"Looking forward to it, actually." David gave a little wiggle. "Jory, you make me feel comfortable in my own skin. I think I can handle you having two faces. Besides, for a vampire, you're pretty ... cuddly."

"Hey, now!" Despite his words, Jory was clearly struggling to hold back a fit of laughter. "You take that back. I'm a big, tough guy."

"A tough guy who likes to spoon," David murmured. He felt waves of confidence rolling through him. So this was what it felt like to fly without the safety net. He thought he understood what Liam had been talking about now. Sometimes, when you let go of the ropes, you fall, crash, and burn.

And sometimes ... sometimes, you fly.

"Caught," Jory murmured back. "So, what do you think? Two guys our size, bent on getting somewhere that has a cushy bed and a nice stock of lube. Can we make our way through the crowd of people hunting for love in all the wrong, and possibly some of the right, places?"

David nodded. "I just need to tell my friends that I'm going. Liam --"

"Yes?" a familiar voice asked at his elbow. "Oliver, I trust you are ushering these gentlemen off to more discreet quarters?"

"The King of Hearts encourages hook-ups, but not public displays," Oliver replied. S/he reached over to nudge David's shoulder. "Go on, now. I'll fill Liam here in on all the details."

David blushed. "Not all of them!"

"Just enough." S/he grinned. "But I might spice up the bare facts a little bit. Liam loves a good story."

"Oh, rubbish." Liam turned David around to face him. David blinked at the easy strength of the little man. His surprise softened when Liam cupped his cheek. "Two for luck, and three for happiness," he said.

But instead of reaching up to brush his lips, Liam picked up David's big hand in both his small ones, and touched his mouth to the knuckles. "No matter what happens to all the other Brothers, it's you I'm happiest for," he said gently. "You deserve a love story of your very own."

David gaped. "You knew! All along, you knew. That's why you sent me to the Fest in the first place. You were setting me up with Jory!"

Liam twinkled. "Not so much planning as hoping," he admitted. "I have certain powers, David. Can you accept this, too?" When David nodded, he continued. "I knew you would find your heart's mate there that night. You did not need Amour Magique for anything but to come into your own. To strip away the secrets and fears in both your hearts."

He offered David's hand to Jory. "Now, the both of you. Move along, if you will. I fancy a gin and tonic. I need to rest just a bit."

David frowned, worried. "Liam? Are you all right? You sound tired."

Liam patted him. "No fear. I will be just fine." He yawned, barely covering his mouth with his hand. "I am just a little divided right now, that is all. Go. Leave with my blessing and that of Amour Magique. Find your happiness." He smiled. "You deserve it."

David stole a glance at Jory. His man. His lover. A vampire. There would definitely be more questions later, and they might just open that trunk after all, but at the moment, they had better things to be doing -- namely, each other. He gave Jory's hand a tug. "Come on," he said. "Time for us to be in bed."

Jory slipped off his chair, eyes twinkling. "It's way too early to go to sleep."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" Sneaking a quick grope of Jory's ass, David winked naughtily. "I don't plan on falling out until the morning light."

"Now that's my kind of plan!"

Chapter Eleven

“This far? Can you trust me this far?” Jory pressed David into the wall. They’d made their journey in short steps: from the dance floor of Amour Magique to the exit, from the parking garage to Sweet Rose, on the long drive back to Jory’s apartment with David navigating, and from getting out of the truck and into the building itself.

Each step had been littered with a minefield of kisses and gropes, eager hands hungrily grabbing at anything within reach. David knew he’d have bruises, but these were the kind he didn’t mind.

The thought tickled him. Being with Jory, technically a dead man, made him feel like he’d never been more alive. Was it the bond they shared? Call it love if you wanted to; the word sufficed.

Or did it? David wasn’t sure. It seemed to go deeper than any hearts and flowers he’d ever seen on a greeting card.

“I can trust you this much and more,” David managed to get out before Jory’s mouth was on him again, tongue invading and hands absolutely everywhere. The loving assault didn’t bother him a bit; in fact, he gave in to the friendly fire force just as he had every stage of the way getting here -- with one exception. He’d had to tease Jory away from inducting

him into the delights of “road head,” because he really didn’t think he’d be able to maneuver the old truck during an orgasm.

God, Jory had pouted so prettily at that one that David had almost given in. If his cock had had a vote, he’d have been one happy man traveling through the streets of Charleston. Didn’t matter, though. They were here now, or almost here, at the entrance to Jory’s apartment. They seemed to have run into a delay at the stairwell.

“Inside,” David said between kisses. “Come on, Jory. Don’t want to -- *oh!* -- put on a show. Do we?”

Jory chuckled as he nibbled a trail of light bites up David’s neck. For a second the thought gave David the creeps as a little voice bounced around in his head screaming, *vampire, vampire, vampire!* After a moment’s thought, he told it to go screw itself. He had more delightful things to do. Namely, Jory.

“Jory, come on.”

“Nah.” *Bite, bite, bite, never breaking the skin.* “This bother you?”

“Nope,” David answered honestly. “Kind of revs me up.”

“Mmm.” Jory undulated against him, letting David feel how hard he’d gotten. “Does a lot for me, too. How’s this for an object lesson? Or do you want the visual aid?”

David gasped out a laugh. “Inside!” he insisted. “I want to see your apartment.”

Jory put both hands on the wall, framing David’s head. “So you’re saying you want to take a closer look at my etchings?” His grin was dazed, but still the same infectious one David had fallen in love with.

“Oh, now, for shame. You can dig up a better line.”

“I’ve already come up with something. Isn’t that enough?”

“Smart mouth.” David shut it with a smooch, a good hearty one, enough to keep Jory quiet for at least a minute. Possibly more, once Jory got his hands involved in the act, stroking down David’s sides and making those small, whimpering moans.

“You,” Jory gasped, once free. “God, I don’t even have to pretend to breathe around you. It’s like my body remembers how to be alive.” He paused. “It’s been forever.”

David touched his lover’s cheek tenderly. “Do you miss it?” he asked. “After a hundred and forty-some years as a vampire, how can you even remember?”

Jory grasped his hand and began to stroke each finger, up and down, slow and suggestive, as if each were a small cock. David shuddered violently. Each touch did go straight to his erection. Was it a vampire thing or a Jory thing?

“Careful, there,” he said, his voice hoarse. “If you don’t want me to go off like a firecracker, we’ve got to save some of the show for *inside*, like I keep saying.”

“Spoilsport.” Jory drew one fingertip into his mouth and sucked, lashing the callused pad with his tongue. David had to draw in a deep gulp of air and hold it, shaking, until the urge to come in his jeans ebbed away.

Jory looked up, unashamed, eyes twinkling. “You liked what I just did. Go on, deny it.”

“If I said no, would you try it again? I have nine left.”

“Hon,” Jory said, leaning in, feathering over David’s lips, “we have all night, and I haven’t gotten started yet. You have at least nineteen more, unless there’s something you’re not telling me about, and there’s at least the big number one. Plus its close neighbors two, three, and four.”

David felt a delicious shiver run down his spine. “You mean ... rimming?” he asked in a whisper. “You’ve done that before?”

“Love it.” Jory pretended to nip at David’s finger. David shook again, a little worried about how much this was working at his pleasure centers. He wondered if, deep down, he might be in denial. Sure, he’d seen the altered face, had even touched it, but what if there was a little part of him still convinced Jory was playing games?

“Jory,” he said, pushing the man away just a bit. “Jory, hold on for a second.”

Jory made a moue with his lips, but to give the man credit, he did stop -- after a quick nuzzle to the back of David's hand and a brief peck on the palm. He laced their fingers together. "What is it, lover?"

David felt warmth roll through him at the word. If he hadn't taken a leap of faith, he wouldn't have been here right now, hearing the man he cared about more than anyone saying those sweet words to him. Shame he had to ask. He didn't want to ruin the moment.

All the same, he had to be sure. "Show me again," he said, keeping steady. "I want to see the real you."

Jory blinked almost comically. "You want the vampire part of me?"

"Is it a part of you, the whole you, or something else?" David shook his head. "It turns me on."

"Does it?" Jory leered, reaching to touch David's cock. "Oh, yeah. Seems to."

"Jory, please." David tangled a hand in Jory's tumbling curls to hold his head still. "I just need to see it one more time, to convince myself that you're real."

"I won't hurt you. Please don't think I will. Have I been biting too much?" Jory looked sheepish. "Sorry about the nibbles. It's kind of a personal kink." He rubbed the tip of his nose. "If I could blush dark red, I really would be right about now. But I swear, it's not about drinking you. I just want to taste you, and this is the only way."

"I know," David whispered. "I trust you this much, remember? If I didn't, I'd have already run. Just let me see one last time. That's all I'll ask, I swear it."

Jory untangled himself from David's grip. He took in a deep breath and ... changed.

David watched in fascination. It wasn't a short, brutal twist, but a slow-motion shift, a bit like someone molding candle wax. His eyes glowed a bright gold, and he was done. Jory, the same man David had fallen for, but at the same time ... not.

Once again, just as he had in *Amour Magique*, David reached out to touch.

"Don't cut yourself again," Jory warned. "Fresh blood shakes my control."

“Is it hard?” David swatted the other man before his broad grin erupted into a leer and his touch into a grope. “I know one part of you is rock-solid.” A thought occurred to him. “Do you have super-strength or something? The ability to get it up and keep it up for hours?”

“Never tried.” Jory grimaced. “It’s pretty hard to find someone willing to give me more than one try. Vampires? They aren’t the most social creatures on the planet.”

“You mean there are other kinds of things out there? No, no, not that you’re a thing,” David hastened to add. “There are other types of humans who are different?”

“All sorts.” Jory shed his vampire face for the vulnerable human one, his eyes warm hazel again. “Elves, trolls, werewolves, you name it. Dragons, even.” He glanced up hesitantly. “Most of them hang out in Amour Magique. You might have guessed it’s a pretty unique place.”

“I had a notion it would be.” David cupped Jory’s cheek, stroking it with his thumb. For the moment, their fires were banked. “Is it all right to be talking about things out in the open?”

“What, here?” Jory glanced around. He grinned crookedly. “Most of my neighbors are pretty much nocturnal, too. Hell, half of them are probably still at the club, trying to score.”

David felt a cold chill. “You mean the other Brothers might be getting chatted up by nonhumans?”

“Hey!” Jory looked stung. “I’m plenty human. I may not breathe or have a heartbeat, and I have a blood habit, but I’m still a man.”

“Pretty strange kind of man,” David said gently, keeping his hand where he’d placed it. Jory’s skin felt so smooth and silky beneath his hand. “Do you think they’ll be okay, though? I trust you. I *know* you. They might not be so lucky.”

To his mild surprise, Jory chuckled. “Don’t worry about your group of friends.” He rubbed his cheek into David’s palm. “They’re all there under Liam’s eagle eye. I’m not saying

things won't happen, but that incubus is going to make sure they all have the best night of their lives."

"Incubus?" David's mind changed tacks quickly as a flash in the wind. He remembered the dark man mentioning Liam was an incubus. "So he's ...?"

"Oh, yeah. Older than Methuselah. He's been around since the Garden. Maybe longer."

"The Garden was real?"

"In a way," Jory allowed. "Look, I'm not an expert on Liam. All I know is that he's old, seriously old, gay as they come, and he has a habit of meddling with humans when he could be partying twenty-four-seven. Meddling being a good thing. He likes to share the joy. He was born to be a yenta." Jory frowned. "If he was actually born. There's some debate over that."

David was still somewhat shocked. "Incubus ... a sex demon?"

"If you want to think of him that way." Jory twisted and bit at David's thumb. A gentle nip, reminding him of where they were, and why. "Do you really want to think about him right now?" He rubbed himself against David. "Do you really want to think at all?"

"I have to. This isn't any small thing, Jory. All of what we've built together started so fast, and I've barely had a breathing space between finding out what you are and what you could do to me. I've had to adjust pretty damn quickly, no matter how calm I seem. You're a lot to handle ... but I've coped. I've accepted you when everything sane would tell me to run for the hills. I couldn't not take you for who you were, no matter what else you might happen to be. More, from all we've shared together, I know you won't hurt me."

"I won't. Promise on anything you hold holy, I would never cause you pain. Never, never." Jory was in David's face. "How do I convince you of that? I'm not like that bastard, Tommy."

David put his hand on the back of Jory's head, touching their foreheads together. He shook them both gently, back and forth. "No. You're better. You don't have any choice about

being what you are, and you still treat me like I'm precious. He was just a sorry-assed human, with no reason to act like he did, but that didn't stop him. If it were a choice between him and a vampire?" He smiled. "Well, look at who I'm with right now."

"You could be a whole lot more with me," Jory purred. "Want to?"

"Let me in," David said, echoing their catchphrase. "On a bed, with good soft light, and some country playing in the background."

"The Southern Queens?"

"Are they men or women?"

"Indeterminate." Jory pressed in for a sweet kiss. "I've got their CD in my player. All I have to do is turn it on. Press the switch. Kind of like this." He cupped David's cock and gave it a light squeeze, then a good, firm grope. "Oh, no, wait. That's already on. Let me test it to be sure ... yep, ready to shake, rattle, and roll."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Jory freed one hand long enough to rummage in his pocket. He came out with a cartoon character key chain with a half-dozen keys on it, fumbled a bit, then held one up in triumph. "How about this?"

David took the thing from him, warming it in his palm. "Cold," he explained. "I thought you didn't like keys."

"When they were opening up a part of my past I wasn't ready to share yet, I didn't." Jory draped himself against David. "Now, I am. The door's just to your left. Open it and let us in."

"Is that a vampire thing? The whole permission to come inside."

Jory came up grinning so hard his nose wrinkled in a way that was almost impossible not to kiss. "Nah. It's just polite."

“Oh, you --” David grabbed Jory and began mock-wrestling with him. They tumbled across to rest with Jory’s back against his own door, both breathing heavily. “I make you forget you’re not alive?” he asked shyly.

Jory’s eyes drifted half shut. “I can imagine I’m myself again,” he said, simple and to the point. “Hungry and horny as I remember being in the tents on Gettysburg, so sure I would die the next day and wishing like hell I had someone warm to wrap myself around. I didn’t have anyone back then. Now, I do.” He nudged David. “Open the door.”

David palmed the key back to Jory. “You let us in.”

Jory looked at David oddly, then nodded. “Into the belly of the beast,” he said, wiggling around to face the lock. “You ready?”

David pressed his hardened prick to Jory’s tight ass. He rocked forward and back, setting up a slow rhythm. “I’m more than ready.”

The tumblers clicked. This time, though, Jory relaxed, as if he’d finally crossed the finish line of some race. He pushed the door open slowly. “Come in, David. You’re welcome here.”

David followed Jory, who walked a few steps ahead, glancing around. “It’s not much.”

“Neither was the trailer. I think we made that pretty memorable.”

“Point. You want another great memory?”

David felt himself tensing in the best possible way. “Yeah. Please?”

“Your wish is my com--” And the rest of what Jory might have said was cut off by his frantic assault on David, as if they only had a few minutes left and had to make the most of them.

David went down under the sensual onslaught, letting it wash over him like a wave. He realized vaguely that he wasn’t afraid at all; he registered a lamp shining softly in one corner; he heard the soft strains of a country ballad start up; then all was Jory, and the man was all he needed in the whole wide world.

David grunted as Jory began to shove his T-shirt up. "Flesh," Jory explained, urging David to raise his arms. "Skin against skin. All right?"

"You, too."

"One at a time." Jory finally got David's shirt off him and paused for a moment, spreading his palms wide on David's chest. He shut his eyes, then began to thrust against David from above. "Feels so good," he whispered. "You. So warm and human. I think that's what I fell for. You're a fine man, David. One hell of a guy."

"So are you." David watched hazily as Jory drew down the zipper on his jeans and slipped in a hand to fondle what he found beneath the cloth. He hissed and bucked up at the feel of cool fingers on his heated cock.

Jory pushed him, wrapping his hand around his length and jacking him way too slowly, up and down, thumbing the tip.

"Stop," David begged after a moment. "Too much. I don't want this to be over in a big hurry. We've got all night. Don't we?"

"All night, lover." Jory didn't let go. "You're young. You could get it up again."

"Doesn't mean I want to spend myself the first time like a randy teenager." David grinned at Jory's dreamy expression, then surged up, laughing as he tackled his lover. His jeans tangled around his knees, bringing them down with a harder thud than usual, but who cared?

With their positions reversed, David above, he caressed Jory's neck. "The man who made you a vampire didn't care for how he was changing you. I do. You might not feel alive, but when you're in my arms you can pretend."

Jory was breathing heavily. "Come on, then," he urged. "Let's get my blood flowing."

David reached under Jory's waistband for a good handful of his own. "Feels like you have good circulation to me."

“Who knows how that works?” Jory laughed. “Let’s get down to the real nitty-gritty.” He sprawled beneath David, loose and easy. “Strip, you. Then undress me.”

David planted a hand on Jory’s shoulder. He knew his eyes were glittering darkly, with a hunger even he couldn’t put a name to. “Do you trust me that far?”

“I do. And beyond.”

“Good.” David bent down for one kiss, then stood up as best as he could. He kicked off his jeans, then slid a finger under the waistband of his boxers. Soft hunter green cotton molded to his ass and thighs. For the first time, he didn’t feel like he was fat or a loser. He felt like someone whose lover had their eyes glued to his body in eager anticipation instead of impatience or frustration with who and what he was.

David felt like someone who loved old things, who loved making them come to life again. He stripped off his boxers and stood tall, his cock jutting out. Reaching for it, he felt the heavy weight in his palm and almost stopped breathing. “I want inside you,” he heard himself say. “Can I?”

“Undress me.” Jory made it a request, not a demand. “I want you there.”

They hadn’t done this before. Jory’d always been as eager as he, both of them shoving off anything that might get in the way. Jory was always the one on top. Not tonight, though.

Carefully, as if Jory were a present he wanted to keep safe, David reached down and helped his lover in getting his shirt off. As Jory had, he pressed his hands to the smooth skin. “No hair,” he murmured. “You’re smooth as silk.”

Jory tossed his head. “Come and taste me, then.”

Unable to resist, David gave one of Jory’s pale pink nipples a pinch, then lowered his mouth to one. He drew the nub into his mouth and bit gently, tasting the sweetness of male flesh. Something else that was a first for him, fresh. Jory seemed to love it, though, moaning and arching to get more, more, more.

"It's like being a virgin again," David said softly as he lifted away, giving the neglected nipple a tweak. "Everything's new."

"All of it?" Jory touched David, gentle as if he were touching china. Then, harder, like a man should. "Even this part? Being on top."

David nodded a little shakily. "But I'm ready. I want you that way. Wide open for me. I love you, so it's fair that you get to be my first time."

"I will kill Tommy if I meet him," Jory swore. His eyes flickered golden for a moment. "Would you hate me if I did?"

David considered the thought. "No."

"Good."

They held still for a moment, drinking each other in. David bent for one more desperate kiss, then, no more stopping, undid Jory's jeans and slid them off. Jory's cock was so hard it lay almost flush against his belly, a small string of clear fluid trailing down onto his belly. "Beautiful," David breathed. "Gorgeous."

"Suck me?"

"Maybe later," David teased. He couldn't resist a touch, though. The skin felt just as velvet-soft as the few he'd laid hands on in his lifetime, although barely warm. "Let's get you heated up." He stroked Jory in a way he knew was too light and too easy to really satisfy. Given how his lover groaned and thrust up impatiently, David figured he'd better get on with the action and give a little more than he was getting.

Slowly, dragging the moment out to make it last, David lifted one of Jory's legs and draped it over his shoulder. Kissing the calf, he guided Jory's other leg around his waist. Jory grasped on tightly, pulling David closer to ground zero.

"Wait -- wait -- lube?" David gasped. Jory swore and dug around beneath the couch they'd landed next to. A second later, a small tube was slapped into his hand. "Condom. Do we need --?"

Jory shook his head. "Vampire. Can't catch or pass anything."

"First time for this, too." David's hands shook as he smoothed the sticky fluid over his erection.

He felt Jory touch him, a little desperate, a little gentle. "You're ready for this? I don't want to rush you."

"Yeah, but I do. I am." He dolloped more lube onto his fingers and probed tenderly. Jory yelled, but in pleasure, as David penetrated Jory's ass with one digit. His lover clasped David's arms, tugging him in tighter with both legs. They were past talking by then.

Two fingers, then three, and David's nervousness slowly changed into something more like confidence. This felt right and natural. Didn't matter what Jory was. All that mattered was the core of the man. The love between them and the lust each charged up within the other.

"Ready?" David asked at last, lining his cock up with Jory's entrance. "Here I come."

"Please ..." Jory whispered. He sucked in a deep breath as David pushed carefully. Short, easy strokes, an inch at a time, until he was seated almost all the way inside. David gripped hard at whatever he was able to reach, trying not to come that instant. The way Jory hugged him from the inside was unbelievable. Maybe they were both virgins, in a way.

Then, as he learned the pace, David began to push forward and pull back. He heard himself voicing loud, rough cries as he thrust, mingled with Jory's own moans and incoherent babblings for more, faster, harder.

Red rolled over his vision and all rational thought melted away. The only thing that mattered was more of the tight wetness, the feel of Jory's heels digging into his back, and the orgasm he felt starting to explode in his gut, and -- *oh, God, God, God!*

David came to and found himself draped over Jory. He'd slipped out and Jory was still hard beneath him, pushing up in a frantic rhythm. Although he felt like he was made of jelly, he managed to push a hand between them and lock his hand over Jory's cock, rapidly

rubbing up and down in a tight grip, hard as he was able. Jory gave a strangled cry, arched one last time, then sticky wetness flooded out between their joined bellies.

There was a long moment of silence, both men inhaling and exhaling raggedly. “Alive,” Jory said abruptly. “It’s almost as good as.”

David smiled, sleepy. He carefully unwound Jory’s legs from around his middle and off his shoulder, arranging them like a display. “I’m heavy. I should move.”

“Not too heavy for me.” All the same, Jory’s arms were there to welcome him as David collapsed by the vampire’s side. “Have to admit I like you there, too.”

“Better than in the other place?” David teased, walking his fingers over Jory’s chest. “That was ...” he swallowed. “Wonderful. There aren’t words.”

“Then there don’t need to be words.” Jory brushed his lips across David’s. “Whatever tomorrow has in store, let it wait for tomorrow. For us, right now, there’s just this moment.” He entwined his legs with David’s. “Let’s sleep, lover. You and me, together.” There was a moment of silence, then Jory added, “You don’t have to be afraid anymore, you know. I’ll keep you safe.”

And lying there, David believed him. He let his eyes drift shut, feeling Jory’s fingers dance light patterns over his ribs. He’d never fear the night again. David knew what was out there, now, and one part of it had promised to protect him.

Safe and secure in that knowledge, and in the arms of the man he loved, David relaxed until soft and easy, he fell asleep ...

His last thought was that he couldn’t *wait* to introduce The Brotherhood to Jory.

* * * * *

Liam had watched the pair of men disappear through the crowd. He turned to Oliver, feeling peace steal through his body. “Another success,” he murmured. “Now, about that gin and tonic?”

Oliver poured for him, his/her hands dancing over the bottles. “You know, you can’t keep this up,” s/he said seriously. “How many of you are there waltzing around Amour Magique? I know you can project yourself in as many shapes as you want, but it can’t be healthy.”

“Ah, well.” Liam accepted the sparkling glass from Oliver. “I promised I would keep an eye on The Brotherhood. It grows easier as each of them finds their heart’s true love, no matter what they go through to achieve it.”

“So, David?” Oliver leaned on his/her bar. “Does his story end here?”

“Oh, no.” Liam took a sip of his drink. “There is, as you might say, an epilogue.” Another sip, and a sigh of satisfaction. “They’ll be on their way to a satisfying climax. And I do mean that in every sense of the word.”

Oliver topped off Liam’s cocktail. “You worked a little of your hocus-pocus to get David to handle what Jory is, didn’t you?”

“No.” Liam turned the glass around and around in his hands. Slowly, he smiled. “David is so much more than he himself believes. His heart was big enough to accept a vampire, so long as that creature loved him. He will be full of questions, but Jory can provide all the answers that he needs.”

“Think they’ll have a happily ever after?”

Liam half-closed his eyes. He toyed with the blue crystal at his neck. “By the Tear ... I think so.” He gave the pendant a spin. “In fact, I am sure of it.”

And, raising his glass, he saluted love given to those who deserved it.



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 willshenillshe@gmail.com or visit her website to check out her work at www.willaokati.com.