



Unspoken

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by

Willa Okati

Dedication

For “Ringo and Juliet”

Chapter One

Ian lay on his back on a bed of stone, his head propped up by a boulder. A cold gray sun shone down on him, turning the world murky and dark. He felt, deep in his bones, the certainty that he was all alone, but knew he needed help.

“Someone?” he called, trying to clamber up from his bed of rocks and discovering he seemed to be fastened there, as if invisible chains pinned him down. “Anyone? Help me, please.”

No answer.

Ian stared up at the frightening sky, dark red and boiling with stormy weather, with that horrifying granite-colored sun, and felt himself to be small and helpless as an ant. Whatever this place threw at him, he wouldn’t be able to stand up to the challenge.

“Help me,” he begged, tugging at his unseen bonds. “Someone? Anyone?”

“Hush, now.” A figure appeared out of the swirling smoke that choked the air. At first just a silhouette in the murkiness, as the person stepped closer he solidified into what Ian could tell was a man. He looked somehow familiar, tall and broad-shouldered, with a tribal tattoo wound around his right biceps and sleek black hair down to the edge of his ears. A face both handsome and cruel at the same time gazed down at Ian.

“There you are,” he said mildly. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

Ian began to shake. "I don't know you," he quavered, shrinking back against the rock. "Why are you here? What's your name?"

"Lover, you know my name." The man sank to one knee on the stones, bringing his hand to rest on Ian's chest. "Know it as well as your own. Haven't we spent the last year together?"

Knowledge burst into Ian's mind like an icy sweat. "Gabriel," he gasped, the fear growing ever more intense. "What are you doing? Why did you come back?"

"To hear your sweet voice again." Gabriel trailed his fingers along the length of Ian's chest, circling his pectorals, drawing curlicues around his nipples, plucking at his navel. "Why did we never get this pierced?" he wondered aloud, his voice at once lazy and harsh. "You'd have looked good with some decoration. Something hidden, though, meant for only me to look at."

Ian shook his head. "I don't belong to you anymore." He tugged at his restraints. "I don't know how you're holding me here, but let me go."

"Sweetheart...you will always belong to me." Gabriel shifted to where he could kneel over Ian. Those clever hands, cold as ice, went straight for his cock. The organ had been lying limp and dormant against his leg, but under Gabriel's skilled touch—oh, God, such a familiar sensation—he sprang to life, filling and lengthening. "You know you want me," Gabriel crooned as he stroked and rubbed at Ian's member. "You could never say no to me, not about anything."

Ian, bound to the rocks, gazed up at Gabriel with a mixture of lust and fear. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing but enjoy you." Gabriel flashed Ian a wicked smile. "Isn't that what dreams are for? An escape from the everyday."

"Why here, though? In this godforsaken wasteland?"

"There's a time and a place for everything."

“And this is what you chose?”

“It’s what your mind thinks of when you remember me,” Gabriel uttered simply. Spreading his knees wide, balancing one on either side of Ian’s hips, he pressed the seam of his ass to Ian’s hardened cock. “Feel me? I’m all stretched and ready for you, like I used to be when you finished with a long day’s work. Remember how I’d wait for you in the bedroom, naked as I am now, just aching for you to come inside and play?”

Ian moaned softly. The familiar feel of Gabriel’s backside and the way the cheeks parted for his member made his chest feel tight. “But then you went away,” Ian accused. “You left me to fend for myself while you made another life somewhere else. With someone else. You sent me a postcard picture of yourself and your new lover. Young, like you, inked up and rebellious. You said you didn’t want an old man like me, over thirty, past his prime.”

“Still talking too much,” Gabriel snorted, shaking his head back and forth, tick-tock. “Let’s see if I can’t shut you up.”

“Gabriel, don’t, don’t, don’t—”

“Easy, baby, easy.” Head thrown back, throat working and taut stomach muscles rippling, thighs quivering, Gabriel lowered himself inch by inch onto Ian’s cock. “There,” he whispered breathlessly. “Better. So much better.”

Ian hissed as tight, wet heat surrounded him, squeezing like a velvet vise. “God,” he managed to say. “Good as always. Oh, fuck, the way you feel...”

“Do I make you crazy, baby?” Gabriel’s teeth flashed in the hazy gray light. Clouds of vapor passed between the two of them, thick enough to blur Ian’s vision. One second he could see his ex-lover’s face, and the

next, he was gone, with only the fierce pressure around Ian's penis letting Ian know Gabriel was still there.

Hard, cold hands planted themselves on Ian's chest as Gabriel sank down the rest of the way, rotating his hips with a wicked shimmy that sent shock waves of sensation coursing through Ian. "Good," Gabriel breathed. "Always so good."

Ian struggled to lift his hands, to grasp Gabriel by the arms, the waist, the hips—anything. "Help me get free," he begged. "Turn me loose so I can love you back."

"Love?" Gabriel laughed. "Who said this had anything to do with love? Look around yourself, Ian. This isn't about candy hearts and pretty flowers. This is the deep, dark place of the soul. A nasty corner of their heart everyone hides away and hopes they never have to visit." He rose up and slipped back down, squeezing his internal muscles. "Shut up. Enjoy."

Ian thrashed his head back and forth, feeling the hard stone beneath his skull. "You're not here," he accused. "This isn't real."

"Course not," Gabriel replied shortly, raising and lowering his body, fucking himself on Ian's cock. "I'm not here. Not what you think of me."

"I feel you. So real. How can you be—"

"Shut. Up." Gabriel snarled at Ian. "No more. No more words. Just feel. Enjoy." He laughed. "Better than the last we really had, in life. Remember?"

Ian shut his eyes tightly. His fingers curled into fists. Even though his cock throbbed with pleasure, he knew he didn't want to be here, didn't want to be doing this. "Get off," he asked meekly. "Off of me, Gabriel."

"Ian, shut up," Gabriel growled. "Did you hear me? Why don't you shut that big, important mouth of yours for good? I don't want to hear

another sound out of you.” A wicked smile tipped up the corners of his mouth. “In fact, I’ll make sure you never say another word again.”

Ian froze as Gabriel’s finger descended like a mighty, flaming sword, so hot the tip glowed cherry-red. “No,” Ian begged. “No, please, don’t.” He fought at his bonds. “I’ll do anything. I’ll be quiet. No more arguments. Don’t do this to me.”

“Too late, lover.” Gabriel’s fingertip pressed against Ian’s lips, sealing them together with a hiss and the stink of cooking flesh. His mouth closed tightly, the screams inside struggling to get out, making only a muffled noise.

“That’s better,” Gabriel said, slipping off Ian’s cock. He draped himself over Ian’s body, holding him in place just as his unseen manacles did. “This is so you won’t forget me,” he whispered into one ear. “Not now, not ever.”

Then he bit Ian’s ear, and Ian *screamed*...

“Hey—hey, Ian!” A rough hand jostled Ian’s shoulder, startling him into opening his eyes. “You all right? Sounded like you were having a nightmare, there.”

Ian sat up and blinked, staring around himself. Yellow sun, blue sky. No rocks nor heavy fog. He sat in the passenger seat of a pickup truck, bouncing and jolting as they went over a gravel road.

He touched his throat, and his lips, then shut his eyes for a moment.

“Ian, you all right?” the driver, his friend Slate, wanted to know. “Do we need to turn around and go back to the doc’s?”

Ian swallowed, still tasting the sulphur in the air from his dream. He turned to the man behind the wheel and shook his head emphatically. He’d had enough of doctors for the time being. What good were they for except looking wise and telling you they didn’t have any answers?

“You sure?” Slate asked, reaching out to touch Ian, easy as breathing. Ian jerked away before the fingers could make contact. He nodded, shrinking into his corner of the truck cab.

Slate gave Ian a long, odd look after he navigated a curvy twist of road, then finally sighed. “It was the dream again, wasn’t it? I can see it on your face.”

And how I wish I’d never written it down for you that one time, Ian thought.

“You’ve got to remember it wasn’t like you see in your sleep,” Slate told him kindly. “Gabriel up and left you, which is hard enough on a man, but there were no rocks and no mists that choke. You’re awake now, and you’ll be all right.”

You can say so. You haven’t been there in my mind. You don’t know what it was like, the last time Gabriel fucked me and then walked out. No stones, no mists, but the rest is just about the same. And the way my voice went with him... Ian shuddered hard.

Slate shook his head. “I’ve already used up my one wish for this lifetime, but if I had another it’d be to free you from the state that bastard left you in.”

Ian half-smiled. Although he was able to make sounds, just not words, he chose to remain silent and leave things unspoken. Instead of grunting, he simply pointed to a photo propped up on the dashboard with a bit of tape holding it in place. Slate and his lover, Ash, taken recently, their arms around one another as they sliced a birthday cake decorated with purple flowers and thirty violet candles.

He traced around the edges of the picture, shaking his head. *Don’t waste your wishes on me, Slate. You’ve already been lucky enough for two lifetimes, possibly three. You have your Ash again.*

Slate always had been good at understanding what a man meant, even if he had no words to speak with. After another moment Slate nodded and turned his attention back to the road. “You just hang tight, then. We’ll have you home in a few.”

Home, Ian thought. Where I’ll be alone, with no one to fill the silence, not even me. A silent tomb of a place, unwelcoming as the grave.

No Gabriel. No anybody.

When a house is not a home, what does it become?

Damned if Ian knew.

They rode for a little while longer in silence, then Slate coughed. “Ian,” he said casually, turning from one graveled road onto another even less traveled by, full of tire pits and mud hillocks. “We’re just about to the final stretch, here. You got everything you need together?”

Ian felt at his pocket for his wallet and keys, checked into the thick, dog-eared folder of papers he carried around from doctor’s visit to doctor’s visit, the latest copy of test results on the top, and sighed. He nodded, knowing Slate would be watching him from the corner of one eye.

“You want to come over for dinner?” Slate offered. “I can’t promise you much, as we need to go and stock up on groceries and sundries, but I think there’s a casserole Marianne made once upon a time sitting all wrapped up in tinfoil in our freezer. Be no problem to heat the thing up—believe it’s some kind of noodle dish—and there’d be plenty for three.” Slate hesitated. “No need to face an empty house before you have to,” he finished in a low voice.

Ian closed his eyes. Part of him, the man he’d been when he first met Slate and Ash, jumped at the thought of spending the night with friends. He might not have been able to speak, but they’d have filled the air with

conversation sparkling as wine. Loving words, bandied to and fro. They'd include Ian somehow. Always had, always did.

The other half of him, the one who knew what Ash and Slate had been through not too long ago, knew better than to horn in. It was good enough of Slate to take a day away from his lover and escort Ian to the doctor's, when he knew he'd be too worn out with nerves and upset to drive himself. Ian wouldn't take up another unnecessary minute. Slate and Ash deserved time to themselves, for they knew how precious the commodity was.

Slowly, he shook his head.

Slate exhaled. "Don't expect I can change your mind, can I?"

Ian shook his head once more. *Go on home, Slate. You've a warm and willing lover there who'll no doubt have finished his day working in the garden and stillroom and already whipped up something savory for two to share. Eat your dinner and leave the dishes for morning as you carry one another up to bed.*

He didn't begrudge the pair the love they shared, but oh, how he wanted a taste of the same nectar for himself. It'd been too long since Gabriel left, and still longer before then that he'd felt someone embrace him without wanting anything in return, but who'd take on a man with no voice to speak any words of love?

Ian made an "X" in the air, emphatic in his movements. Slate drummed his fingers on the wheel. "All right, then. You do what you have to. Lord knows I had to cope my own way when Ash was...well."

Ian gave Slate a cutting look. The two situations didn't compare, they were like pomegranates and pears, and Slate should have known it. Both were losses, true, but they were not the same thing at all. Slate had recovered that which was lost to him. Ian might not, ever. Still, what Slate had lost was far more than just a voice, and Ian appreciated the

difference. He even sympathized with the man. Didn't mean he didn't want the thing he'd lost back too, though.

Slate gave Ian an apologetic smile, his hawk-like face somehow warm and gentle. "Look, friend, I don't mean any harm. Just know you're welcome with me and mine any time you choose to join us, understand?"

Ian shut his eyes briefly, tightly. He nodded.

"That's all right, then." Slate pulled his truck over onto the shoulder of the dirt road. "Ian? We're here."

Ian opened his eyes, startled to realize they'd traveled all the way back to his home without his even knowing how far they'd come. But no, sure enough, there stood his house. Much too big for a single man, designed for a big farm family with half a dozen children, he often felt as if he rattled around in there like a dried pea in a tin can. The old place was falling to bits, and had been for a while.

When he'd been earning his living reading audio books, his rich and mellifluous voice a hot commodity, the money had been coming in hand over fist and he'd made plans to have every inch of his home restored, from the floorboards on up to every bit of gingerbread trim. Now, though, since he was living off his savings he made do with a ladder, cans of paint from the hardware store, and all the spare time a man could bear to handle. A ladder stood in front of one cracked bay window, reminding him of jobs left unfinished.

"You're sure you'll be okay?" Slate pushed gently. Ian's shoulders tightened. He gave a short, jerky nod and fumbled for the door handle of the truck. Slate popped the automatic lock for him, but before Ian could scramble out, he put one warm hand on Ian's back.

When Ian turned back to look, Slate murmured quietly, "I know what's on your mind, old friend, and this isn't the end of life as you knew it to be once upon a time. There'll be a way out for you. Have a little

patience and you'll find the path your feet need to be set on. When you find that road, walk it straight."

Ian stared at Slate, shaking his head. He ached to burst into words, letting the man know he didn't need mountain homilies or down-home wisdom. He needed a miracle to lift this curse, or barring that nigh-impossible chance, something hard and cold and scientific to open up his throat again and let him speak. Speak, sing, chant, recite and chatter. He needed to hear his own voice again.

"I know," Slate said, giving Ian a light kneading with his fingers. "But you of all people should know what I know—anything can happen, Ian, and it most often does. Usually when you least expect it."

Ian gave up trying to communicate with the man. Sliding away from Slate, he opened the truck door and slipped out into his yard, the new batch of fallen leaves crunching golden and orange beneath his feet. He took a deep breath and smelled the rich fecundity of the harvest season, heady enough to set him spinning.

He turned with a smile for Slate, a way of offering up his thanks for the ride, even if the journey had proved fruitless. "Call me up any time you need some company," Slate ordered in response, draping his arm across the wheel. "Me an' Ash, we're just down the road a piece. Dial our number, give a couple taps on the receiver, and we're here."

Ian's throat tightened. He nodded again—all he could do—and raised his hand in a wave good-bye. Slate waved in return, then reached to slam his truck door shut. Ian stepped a safe distance out of the way as Slate pulled out of his yard onto the rocky road, motoring away to his home and a man who waited for him in the gathering dusk.

Letting out his breath in a great huff, Ian turned toward his house. The big, empty shell seemed to glare back at him, asking—*well, what are you going to do about me?* Damned if Ian knew. Maybe he'd try a little

more interior painting that night. Too late and soon to be too dark to return to mending trim. He didn't expect he'd sleep. More often than not, he couldn't get to rest by himself in a big and lonely bed.

Yeah. Painting it'd be, then.

Starting off toward his front door, feet crunching through the freshly fallen leaves, Ian had reached the stand of maple trees halfway there when he heard something which made him stop in his tracks.

He shook his head. Surely he hadn't heard...

Music?

Frowning, Ian tilted his head, listening intently. Yes, music, coming from his backyard, otherwise known as the tangled mass of undergrowth he hadn't bothered with in the long months since he'd lost his voice. There were some statues back there he'd carved once upon a time, just for fun, battered and broken with ill use, tangles of weeds, overgrown grass, and one oak tree. The whole of it was wrapped around with a high fence, and no way in except through the front gate. He would have noticed an intruder.

And yet...music.

Ian shook his head. He didn't know who had come rapping at his chamber door, but by God he intended to roust their ass out of his private space before the musician could blink. What kind of crackpot broke into a place just to play a song? Some sort of fool or magician?

A chill ran down his spine. Ian paused, hesitant, before scoffing at his own cowardice. From the tangle of fallen brush beneath a big oak tree, he plucked a good strong, heavy branch, solid as a piece of pipe and one hell of a weapon. Whoever was out there would be in for a shock. No one bothered Ian without an invitation except dreams, and if he could figure out a way to keep those at their distance, he would have.

Gripping his weapon in his right hand hard enough that his knuckles went white, Ian forged a path toward whoever had the nerve to invade his property and bother him at home.

They'd soon see what was what.

Chapter Two

As he approached, Ian knew he had to have been overheard. His feet made noise, at least, crunching over dried weeds and the debris of last year's fallen leaves. As he passed an old iron trellis he raised his branch and gave the metal a hard bash. The *thump* echoed through his ruined yard loudly as a gong.

But against all odds, the music went on. Carelessly strummed chords turned into a thoughtful strain of melody, and then coalesced into song. Some old tune Ian didn't recognize, with a Celtic flavor to its sprightliness. If he closed his eyes for a second, which he did, he could almost imagine bonny young lads of Ireland springing up into a dance. The music had an infectious quality to it, dancing its way into a man's blood and making his heart beat faster.

Ian swayed back and forth a moment, caught in the spell—then, with a snarl, shook free. No one bothered him. He wouldn't *let* himself be bothered. The sound was coming from the far side of his huge oak. One good smack with the stick he carried and whoever the nervy musician was, they would be silenced. Ian kept that thought foremost in his mind until he rounded the tree—

—and stood still at the first sight of the musician.

My God, was Ian's first thought after his initial shock. *He's beautiful. An angel's fallen into my ruined garden.*

The man didn't seem to notice or care that he had gained an audience. Skilled fingers armed with a turkey quill danced over the strings of a mountain dulcimer, an old but obviously treasured instrument. Ian recognized a new melody as Appalachian, one of the ancient songs that some still treasured. This man would be one of those who cared for the old tunes as the heirlooms they were. He could tell. This man was an artist...of sound.

As the man played, he seemed to have fallen so deeply into the spell of his own music nothing could disturb him. Wisps of sandy-colored hair fell into deep green-gray eyes, the color of a stormy sea, but the player took no notice. Ian felt himself begin to sway slightly, recognizing the sort of spell which came on a man when he was caught up in the magic of the aural moment.

Long, slim fingers coaxed sweet music out to float like silver threads on the still night air. Ian gazed at the man's hands in a sort of envy, jealous of their ability to create such beautiful sounds—and then felt shamed, unwilling to begrudge this player any of his own good fortune just because Ian's own had fallen to the bad side.

Such wonderful hands the man had, though, dancing over the strings or otherwise. Ian kept his eyes there longer than he should have, aware if he looked up at his intruder's face a second time, he would be teetering on a precipice over which, if he fell, there would be no coming back from.

A trill of notes, and Ian couldn't help himself. Strengthening himself against the inevitable, he took a gander at the player. Head bent over his instrument, caught up in the enchantment of the music he created, he looked more like the fallen angel Ian had first likened him to than he did a man. Yet at the same time, he was so very human.

No young man, perhaps Ian's own age, he had lines in his face that time and good humor had etched deep. This was a fellow who'd savored life, and that enjoyment had left its mark on him. Even in the rapidly darkening evening light, dusk hastening on with a rainstorm behind it, Ian could make out a sparkle of pure enjoyment in those light, twinkling eyes.

Against his will, Ian sank into a crouch, watching his visitor play on. The turkey quill spun and danced against the strings, wielded by those nimble fingers. All the while, the man smiled, as if he couldn't help being touched by the eager sprightliness of the tune he played. Surely he'd noticed Ian's presence by then, but the music held him fast in its grip. He wouldn't look up until the song had finished.

Ian sat, and waited.

Finally, the last notes drifted off into the falling twilight. Hands still at last, the man caressed his instrument fondly. "Good girl," he murmured. "Still faithful after all these years."

Then he looked up. "Evening."

Ian nodded back, carefully and on his guard. A simple greeting. He could still manage that much.

"You're going to tell me to get out, and I don't blame you." A rueful grin creased the man's lips. "Sorry about barging in like I did, but all the lights were off and I had hoped no one would notice until daybreak. I've been walking a good long time, and this seemed like a good place to spend the night. But then I couldn't help playing just a little bit. That's always the way, though, isn't it? A few scales turn into a song before you know it." He put out a hand. "I'm Andy."

Ian clasped the man's fingers, keeping his mouth shut even though his knees went weak at the feel of another's touch after so long. The hand he'd been offered was better than he could have imagined, the

callused fingertips sending tingles through his own palm, up his arm, and across his chest.

Shame turned Ian's cheeks dark. No longer intending to throw the man out, though when he'd arrived at the decision he couldn't have said, Ian wanted nothing more than to welcome him inside. At a closer look, he could believe the man's story very easily—he had a small satchel with him, a case for his dulcimer, and nothing else but the clothes on his back. His shoes were worn and frayed, as if he had in fact been walking all day—for days on end.

This man had a story to tell, and Ian ached to be able to ask the questions that would make it unfold. Had he run away from a complicated life with too many burdens and cares, choosing the simple road and the life of a modern-day busker instead of a day-to-day grind? Was he on holiday from his job teaching music? Or had he simply walked down from the not-too-distant mountains like a vision from the past, slipping soft-footed into their modern day?

Looking at the bard, Ian burned with the need to speak, but though he tried, not even the smallest of words emerged from his lips. Silent, he sat there, waiting for his secret and his shame to be exposed.

Andy gazed at him with a peculiar, placid expression. "Your name?" he asked gently, somehow in control of the situation where he shouldn't have been.

Ian gave his head one single shake, pointing at his throat. With his secret out, he waited for the pity that always crossed a person's face when they first understood.

Waited in vain.

Instead of exclaiming in dismay and without any shadow of repulsion, Andy nodded once, then stroked his quill across the dulcimer strings in a honeyed trill of notes. "Do you mind me staying out here for

a while?” The chords followed his question like dancing maidens, trading kisses for shining coppers. “Or would you be willing to direct me to a place where I could go?”

Ian swallowed, the motion hurting his throat, suddenly so dry he felt like a man parched in the desert. Jerkily, he stood, beckoning for Andy to follow suit. Without a change in his gently benevolent expression, Andy did so. On his feet, he was an inch or so taller than Ian and broader in the shoulders, more so than a man would be if he’d led a more sedentary lifestyle instead of constant walking about, carrying heavy bags.

Patient as the day was long as they stood together in Ian’s yard, Andy tipped his head to the side, waiting for Ian’s lead.

Ian wasn’t sure of his next move. Trusting this man was idiotic and made no kind of sense whatsoever. All the same, he knew he couldn’t have stopped himself. The instantaneous attraction he felt for Andy wouldn’t have allowed him to do anything else, regardless of knowing nothing about the man except his ability to create beautiful sounds—that, and the sense Ian got of his innate gentleness. Beneficence draped itself around Andy’s tough shoulders like a cloak.

For the first time in months, Ian faced a man down and felt neither fear nor shame. He couldn’t leave this one shot at something strange and miraculous alone; couldn’t let the chance at something he didn’t even understand pass him by.

Come inside, he shaped with his lips, beckoning with a tilt of his head toward the house.

Andy followed Ian’s gaze to the back porch. “You’re sure?” he asked, getting a better grip on his dulcimer. “I’m a stranger. Do you trust me?”

Ian did. He wasn’t sure how he’d come to the decision, but he decided not to question himself. Didn’t a man have the right to live foolishly, casting caution to the wind, if he was to truly live at all?

He nodded once and then beckoned again, holding out his hand before the thought occurred to him that Andy might not want to take it. He made to jump back, but as if everything were perfectly normal on this fantastical night, Andy's hand enveloped his own in a cool, soothing grip.

"All right," he said, eyes twinkling at Ian. "Inside we go, then. I promise I won't hurt you. Do you believe me?"

Ian did...and he didn't. For all that, though, he knew one thing for sure—there was magic in the air, one he couldn't walk away from. They'd go inside, and he'd let the night unfold.

At the heart of the matter, he had no choice.

Andy smiled at him, the expression turning his captivating face into something marvelous to look upon. "It'll be all right," he said kindly, utterly without pity, but suffused with empathy. "You'll see."

And with that, Ian still not quite believing this was happening, the two men made their way toward the house, and whatever might chance to come next.

The rain began to patter down in slow, fat drops as Andy's foot left the dead grass in the backyard and stepped onto the flat, weatherworn boards of Ian's porch. Ian grimaced, knowing they looked shoddy and in need of repair. Just another thing on the list...

"I don't mind a creak or two," Andy said, still letting Ian lead the way. "It's all music in the end, right? A note here, a note there—houses play their own songs if you only know how to listen."

At this statement, Ian let his eyebrow quirk up with good humor. Andy grinned at him. "All right, so there's more settling of casements than music to the songs I hear, but allow a fellow his harmless flights of fancy, would you?"

As they entered the darkened hallway, which led to the flight of stairs heading up, Andy lowered his cases to the floor and spread his hands.

He stood still for a moment, then spun in a slow circle, as if he were a needle on a compass seeking true north. When he came to a stop, he shook his head. "Sadness," he murmured. "Sorrow. So much pain in this one small place."

Ian glanced down, wishing he had something better to offer. In a moment, though, he felt the touch of a hand to his elbow. "I think I'm beginning to understand now," Andy said, ironically cryptic. "Where will you take me inside this house? To a mudroom, to a guest room, to a kitchen?"

Kitchen. It didn't seem such a bad idea. Ian's stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten all the day long. Sandwiches, those would be good. He had cold cuts, cheese, loaf bread, mayonnaise, mustard... Yes, he could feed them both. Nodding, he beckoned with one crooked finger and took the turn that would lead him toward the old attached room with its stove and a few of the modern amenities. A glance behind showed Andy to be following, hands pushed into his pockets. A lock of hair fell across one cheek and he tossed it back.

As they entered the clean eating space, Andy laid a hand on Ian's shoulder to get his attention and smiled ruefully when he turned around. "It's just come to me that I'm a bit too dirty to be entering a spotless kitchen like this one." At Ian's puzzled look, Andy tapped the side of his nose. "Give me a moment. Does this door lead to the outside?"

Ian nodded. Andy brought his hands together in a clap of satisfaction. "Wonderful! I won't go any further than the yard, I promise."

Before Ian could think to stop him, Andy had plunged outside again, into the thick of the pelting, cold rain. Ian darted to the window and stared in disbelief. *The man's insane.*

Outside, Andy whooped and spun in circles, his feet dancing an almost Irish jig through piles of leaves as the pouring water soaked him

instantly to the skin, his shirt going transparent. Ian's gaze was drawn to the play of muscles in the man's chest and the two dark brown nipples showing through. Thirstily, he drank in the sight until he realized what he was doing and stopped himself.

I'm lusting after this stranger now? Ian, get a grip.

"This'll take care of the worst of my road grime!" Andy shouted, running both hands through his sopping hair. He loosed a burst of wild, fey laughter. "Here now, come and join me!"

Ian withdrew slightly, startled. Go out in the middle of a storm? Not on his life.

"Ah, come on, man. This'll put color in your cheeks, so it will." Andy spun in circles and went jumping through small piles of leaves. He stopped with his hands outstretched toward the window where, no doubt, he saw Ian watching.

Their eyes met. A pulse of something—odd—passed between them, jolting Ian's bones with a low thrum of electricity. He flinched away from the sensation at first but then, sensing how a cord of the tingling power stretched between himself and Andy, relaxed into the feeling. His very bones began to warm as he turned away, feeling Andy follow, attached to him by the strange sort of chemistry they shared.

Ian had never felt anything like this with anyone. Gabriel had had his charms, as had the other men Ian had kept company with from time to time, but there was never a moment of pure connection where two souls had been laid bare to one another. Ian had the oddest feeling that when Andy had looked at him, he'd seen beyond flesh and bone to something deeper within. Something he recognized—yes, and approved of.

Was it all a little too strange to be real? Too sudden? Oh, yes. Ian had no illusions that he'd stepped foot-first into sheer madness. On the other

hand, did he want to question that which made him feel safe and protected? Oh, no.

The sound of rain, lulling and soothing, pinged off the old tin roof above Ian's head. He paused for a second to enjoy the sound, one he'd favored since his childhood, at the same time wishing he were brave enough to go pelting outdoors with this wild king of the road.

Watching Ian, Andy came to a stop and favored him with another of those wide, warm grins. "It's all right," he called easily. "Try it someday, though, will you? You'll love the way this feels. Coming in, now. Have you a towel so I don't drip on the floor?"

Still slightly shell-shocked, Ian stood for a moment, puzzling until the request became clear. Oh! The wet. Andy didn't want to drip on his floors. Holding up a hand, Ian ducked out of the kitchen back into the hallway, headed for his linen closet. A few moments' rummaging and he came up with an oversized towel, royal purple.

Returning to the kitchen, he waved the towel at Andy, and watched as the man came back to his door. Andy accepted the towel with pleasure. "I thank you." Briskly and efficiently as a man who'd had to do this many times before, Andy wrung out his shirt and scrubbed the towel over the whole of his body, soaking up the rainwater he'd danced in.

Watching him, Ian felt his mouth begin to twitch in amusement. *Just like a big kid.* With one finger, he pointed toward the gas radiator, hoping Andy would get the idea to finish drying off there. Andy followed his gesture and made a noise of appreciation. Politely hanging the wet towel on a hook, he bounded to the heater and stretched his arms over the rising heat. "Ahh—heaven."

Ian shook his head indulgently as he turned toward the old but still smoothly humming refrigerator. He'd fix some food while Andy dried.

They'd eat, and then... Ian frowned. What would happen next? Would he show Andy to the guest bedroom, and have that be the end of that?

Somehow, he hoped not, but he didn't understand why.



Ian still had no idea what to do after Andy was dry, both were full, and he had begun leading Andy away from the kitchen. No, no, he wouldn't lie to himself. He wanted to kiss this man, but hadn't a clue if his advance would be accepted or, more likely, repulsed. *Wanting* might not be a strong enough word, though. *Aching* fit the bill much better.

Caught up in a moment of indecision, Ian came to a stop. He peeked around to see Andy close on his heels. Another of those strange pulses of energy passed between them, Andy's eyes all but flashing with the power in the moment.

Embarrassed, Ian turned away, then drew up short as he felt Andy's warmth suddenly right behind him, pulled up close, but pausing as well. Ian stood still, filling his ears with the melody of the falling water.

"In Amsterdam there lived a maid," Andy sang softly into Ian's ear, light tenor voice pure as crystal. "Mark well what I do say. In Amsterdam there lived a maid, and she was mistress of her trade. I'll go no more a-roving with you, fair maid."

He paused. Ian felt the lightest of pressures on the tip of one ear, as if a finger—or a lip—were brushing the curve of skin. Andy stood close behind him, perhaps closer than a perfect stranger should, although Ian couldn't find it in his heart to step away. "Do you like my song?" Andy whispered. "There's more to come—a chorus, and another verse." Ian felt the faint touch again. "Do you want me to sing to you?"

Ian closed his eyes. All along his back he felt the heat of Andy's body coating him as would a warm skin cape, sheltering him from the storm without and the tumult that never ceased inside himself. Slowly, he nodded. *Please. Keep singing.*

"A-roving, a-roving, since roving's been my ruin," Andy whisper-sang, "I'll go no more a-roving with you, fair maid." He paused. "It's a sad song, don't you think? I like the words, though. They fit me. I've been a long time a-roving myself, and sung this more than a time or three."

Ian inhaled deeply as Andy laid one hand on his elbow, holding him so lightly he could break away at any moment. Should. Didn't want to.

"A-roving, a-roving," Andy sang tunefully. "Her eyes are like two stars so bright, heed well what I do say. Her eyes are like two stars so bright, her face is fair, her step is light. I'll go no more a-roving with you, fair maid." He bent his head to Ian's, and now Ian knew it was Andy's lips he'd felt on his ear earlier. They brushed his temple now. "Do you feel the grief of the man who sang this first? Listen. You can hear the chorus of thousands who've repeated the words down through the ages, who've settled in one spot instead of traveling on with their starry-eyed lover."

Ian shivered. The hallway was growing cold from the rain outside and the lack of central heating, something which rarely bothered him, but should have caused Andy to shudder. Not so, though. The man radiated warmth as he leaned into Ian, his arm circling Ian's chest now to toy with one button on his shirtfront.

"I've another version of the song," he murmured. "Do you want to hear it, country gentleman?" He half-laughed. "I've no idea of your name, and it's just occurred to me that I have nothing to call you. No matter, though."

Ian shook his head. Reaching out, he rapped on the wall to draw Andy's attention, and traced with three trembling fingers the letters I-A-

N. He felt Andy watch, then felt the nod of a head tucked into the crook of his shoulder, as if Andy were well satisfied.

“A good old-fashioned name,” Andy said after a moment. “Do you want to hear my folktale, Ian?” His fingers stroked a light trail down Ian’s chest. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

Ian *believed* him. Though the entire moment had taken on the qualities of a dream, misty and immaterial around the edges, he felt absolutely no sense of danger or threat coming from Andy. The man gave off a sense of peace, of hope, of excitement, which Ian had been missing out on for far too long. Wherever their skin touched, he felt a spark of connection.

Ian craved that touch of chemistry. He seized it with both hands and hung on tight, nodding. What would Slate say if he could have seen him now? Probably warn him to run while he could.

Or would he? Slate’s life had been touched by things men were not meant to understand. Perhaps Slate would have given his blessing, and gone back to his Ash with a smile on his face.

A smile much like the one Ian felt growing within him. He nodded, asking without words—*sing?*

“Very well, then, I will.” Andy’s arms cradled Ian. “Near Asheville-town there roved a man, mark well what I do say—and he was leader of his clan, a-roving, roving, oh.” He paused. “Do you know how far I’ve walked, Ian? I’ve crossed hundreds of miles in these self-same shoes, from the edges of one state to another, forever seeking, searching, hunting for something—someone.” He rocked Ian back and forth, then sang again. “Near this small town he met a man, who brought him tumbling down to land, from roving, roving, oh.”

Ian began to tremble.

Andy whispered the last words of the chorus into his ear: "I'll go no more a-roving, for I've found my fairest lad." He pressed a little harder with his fingers, tracing over a ridge of Ian's stomach muscle. Slowly, he made his way down to the snap and zip of Ian's jeans, his hand hovering there like the final chord of a song.

"Do you want to sing?" Andy asked quietly. "We've not laid eyes on one another before this night, but I think I'm meant to be here. I wonder if I haven't been a-roving, roving, oh, just in search of you. Does that seem odd to you?" The tip of a tongue came out to tickle Ian's ear. "You must tell me, though. Is this what you want, Ian? You're no boy, but a man, with a man's wants, a man's needs, and a man's right to say yea or nay. Shake your head, and I'll be out the back door you led me in by, dulcimer in hand, wandering on down the crooked lane to find my shelter elsewhere."

Andy brushed his hand back and forth over Ian's lower belly. "Say me yea, and I'll stay the night with you, fairest one. There's a song in the making here, a story that'll be told over and over for years to come, and I'd be a part of the creation. Nod once, and let me know I'm welcome in your home. Your arms. Soon, your bed."

Ian tilted his head back against Andy, who was there to kiss his throat, wonderful lips pressing with a gentle rhythm. Above them, the rain pattered down steadily, the storm growing heavier and heavier, surrounding them with the noise of water striking tin. Ghost melodies.

He wouldn't allow himself an easy out of this. In a way, he'd known since allowing Andy to stay and play in his garden that they would be a part of something bigger and infinitely more wondrous than a simple night's shelter would involve.

He *wanted* Andy. Craved the man whose golden voice lulled, soothed, and yet excited him, sending prickles of arousal down the length of his

cock, dormant for what seemed like ages. Empty of seed as his throat was of speech.

Andy could fill him up. It might be insanity, but Ian decided he'd had enough of passing his chances by. Lifting Andy's hand from his waist, he pressed the fingers to his mouth and kissed them, tongue flickering out over the callused pads.

Then he nodded, and their bargain was made.

Chapter Three

A long moment of utter silence echoed between the two men, Ian's acceptance loud as if it had been shouted instead of going understood but unspoken. Ian found himself wondering at how the air between himself and Andy felt charged with anticipation at what was about to happen, how the desire newly awakening within his veins seemed to be a live thing.

This might be madness, and he might be about to make the biggest mistake of his life. But, Ian decided, if he was, he'd throw his whole self into the night. No half measures for him—if he was going to do this, he'd do every scrap of it right. He just had to take a moment to catch his breath and...

"You won't regret any of what we do together," Andy's molten-honey voice whispered against his temple. The man cradled him so kindly, rocking them both to and fro as if they needed some soothing. "Even though I'm a stranger to you, Ian, and you've no reason to trust me, I'll bring no harm to you. Only good." His tongue came out again to trace an earlobe, then his teeth bit and his lips sucked at the flesh. "This much I swear," he spoke, lips tickling against the wet flesh.

Oh, I know you're telling the truth, Ian thought. You've done enough seducing for the moment. Now, it's my turn.

Turning in Andy's arms, Ian used the strength he rarely got a chance to display anymore and pushed him up against the hallway wall, pinning

him in place with one hand on both wrists, above Andy's head, and pushing their hips hard together. Andy hit the painted plaster with a solid thump and a brief moment of startlement, but then, when he felt how Ian had taken hold of him, grinned. "So you've a mind to be masterful? I can play that game."

Ian reached up and pressed a finger to Andy's lips. *Quiet. For a bit.*

Andy's smile wouldn't be restrained, and neither could his words. "You can't tell me to shush, Ian. I was born to talk, and I'll likely drive you mad." His eyelids drooped. He moved just so in Ian's grip, mimicking a lover falling against his partner. "But there's more than one way to lose your mind, man. Would you like to try both and see which suits your taste?"

Ian gave Andy a half-fond, half-annoyed look, and tapped the impertinent lips. Then, he tapped his own. *You can talk all you want to. Soon. For the moment, let me enjoy this.*

To his surprise, Andy, looking at Ian eye-to-eye, seemed to comprehend what rolled through his thoughts. His gaze turned dark. Yet another pulse of that strange—*understanding*—rolled between them, a chemical burst flushing Andy's skin and turning Ian warm with pure desire.

"All right," Andy whispered. "For a moment only, mind."

Ian sighed in relief. He took a moment to coast on the burst of energy pulsing between them and then, like a surfer, rode the wave, surging up to Andy's mouth. Their lips met with a hard clash, teeth clattering together before Ian caught himself. Andy needed no coaxing to join in the kiss, and even pinned as he was, by wrists and hips and now by mouth, he pushed back. When Ian thrust at Andy's lips with his tongue, Andy opened up and allowed him inside, twining his own tongue around the insistent intruder.

The moment was over all too soon, there being too much more Ian wanted to do to linger in one place for long. He tore his mouth away from Andy's, exhaling a heavy breath over his lips that would have to do in place of a promise of better things to come. Andy licked over the path Ian had traced with air, his gaze patient but heavy with want.

The sensation went to Ian's head. Not only wanting, but wanted in return, he dove in with heedless abandon. Rapping Andy's wrists sharply to remind the man to keep them in place, Ian brought his hands down to put them to better use, splaying both palms wide over Andy's broad chest. It heaved beneath his touch, Andy's breathing already rough and ragged.

"Just the very touch of your fingers," Andy broke the silence to say in a low voice. "The smallest feel of you will drive me wild, Ian."

Good. Ian took another second to linger over the feel of hard, planed muscle underneath his touch, and then began to act on his first impulse, the one that seemed best to him now—to see beneath the thin shirt and feast his eyes on the flesh now hidden. Andy's shirt had to come off. Hell, all of his clothes did, but the shirt first.

Toying with one button, Ian snuck a look up at Andy's face. Andy nodded sharply, giving permission, although Ian wasn't sure he could have stopped. With permission, though, he let himself drown in the bliss of opening a lover's clothes as if he were a present all wrapped up for his pleasure.

One button at a time, then, each one slipping through the worn hole with ease, as if the shirt had been washed a hundred times. The material felt soft as spider web silk beneath Ian's touch. He wondered how easily the garment would tear, and then forced himself away from the notion. Andy would need the shirt back, for surely he didn't own many. But no,

those thoughts were for later, when he had come down from the heights he raced toward.

Ian gave in to impulse and laid his lips over the spots where the buttons had held Andy's shirt in place, hiding the smooth, fine-grained skin from his sight and touch. He pressed his mouth to the dent between Andy's collarbones, then began a series of kisses down as he undid button after button. He found a patch of coarse, roughly curled hair, and buried his nose in the crispness, inhaling the smells of soap, honest sweat, and something which had to be purely Andy's personal scent. Ian licked at the skin above and below the hairs, swirling his tongue in a pattern of figure eights.

Ian was not alone in his appreciation of the moment. Andy moved with Ian's kisses and caresses, caving backwards and bucking forward as Ian hit particularly hot or ticklish spots. "Ah, by God, man," he groaned, his hands twitching as if he ached to bring them down and touch Ian. "You'll drive me mad, that you will."

Ian grinned over Andy's navel, satisfied, then drove his tongue in, a sharpened point probing deep. The moan which followed his movement more than pleased Ian, as did the soft sounds that came when he moved further still, down to Ian's lower belly. The Andy-smell grew richer the further he pressed on, until his lips were resting on the ragged-edged waistband of Andy's jeans.

Tugging lightly at the denim with his teeth, Ian wrestled playfully, like a dog with a bone. He could sense as well as feel the rising hardness of Andy's cock beneath his chin, a solid lump of weight, which made his blood sing in anticipation. Surging back up, fingers going to the button and zip, he pressed his lips to Andy's again, mouthing the word *please*?

"Let me bring my arms down," Andy rasped. "God, man, I've gone raving mad from the need to touch you."

Ian let the wave of delicious insanity wash over him, rocking him to and fro as if he were a ship at sea, and reached for Andy's hands himself. He lowered the arms to mid-level, then dropped them, letting Andy do as he wanted. What would the man choose?

His question was answered quickly, as Andy seized Ian by the waist and swiveled them about, so that the slightly warmed plaster was now behind Ian's back and Andy stood as the aggressor, his shirt hanging open and small red kiss-marks running in a line up and down his chest.

"Now," he breathed, "my turn." The kiss Ian received was no less eager than the one he had initiated earlier, but just as hungry and anxious. Above their heads, the rain washed down in cascades, splashing hard against the tin roof. Andy mimicked the rush with a hot plunge in and out of Ian's mouth, tongue slipping across his own and flickering in his mouth as if he could coax noise out of the man he was about to make love to.

Time to surprise him, Ian thought. Twining his arms around Andy's neck, he loosed a deep groan, filling the other man's throat with his own noise.

Andy jerked back from the kiss. "So you can make some sounds?" he asked, startled for a moment—but then, a lustful twitch curled up the corners of his mouth. "We'll see what loudness I can drag from you, then," he said, darting in for a quick, biting kiss. "Wicked Ian, though, to hold back, aren't you?"

Ian gave a whistling breath, a sort of challenge, knowing Andy would pick up the gauntlet in a heartbeat. Laughing low, underneath his breath, the man put his hands on the hem of Ian's shirt. "Turnabout is fair play, wouldn't you say?" He plucked at the garment, rolling it up Ian's chest. "I'd see your chest, as you've had an eyeful of my own."

Ian shook his head, tugging, then pushing at the opened gateway of Andy's shirt. He pulled at the thing, wanting the cloth off his soon-to-be lover completely. *Equals*, he shaped soundlessly, knowing Andy would read his lips and understand.

Andy grinned savagely, then nodded. "All right, you. Fair is fair." He shrugged, and the worn blue fabric he wore tumbled off to fall down and puddle on the floor. "Now, your turn."

Ian undulated with pleasure as Andy dragged the garment off him, then, as if he couldn't bear another moment of being separated, pressed their chests together. Clever musician's fingers came up to tweak and tug at Ian's nipples, sending shocks of need through him. God, but it had been so long, and he'd swear, the play had never felt so good before.

"Oh, yes," Andy whispered, rocking against Ian. "Like this, do you? We'll see what else you enjoy, won't we?" His strong thigh came to rest between Ian's own, nudging them apart.

Shameless, Ian let them fall apart, spreading wide enough to let Andy in. He sucked in a hissing breath as Andy pressed up close, pushing their cocks together through the toughness of double denim, the jeans not enough of a barrier to disguise heat and hardness. Andy pinched Ian's nipples hard enough to cause him a shock of mixed pleasure and pain, then put his hands on either side of Ian's hips.

"Now," he said, "we'll see what noises you make after this." Coming in close to Ian's mouth, breathing the words against Ian's cheek, he murmured, "We'll coax a word or two out of you yet."

Ian's heart sank, and he shook his head. *No*, he wanted to say, even through the pulses and jolts of pleasure racing up and down his cock and lower stomach, tingling through the whole of his body to his very fingertips. *No words. They were stolen from me.*

“Sleeping Beauty,” Andy murmured, following the odd words with another bruising kiss. He kept his mouth fastened on Ian’s as he began to cant back and forth, bringing their erections together, apart, and back. Ian couldn’t help moaning hungrily, arching his back like a cat, struggling for more and still more contact. Andy laughed into his mouth as he solidified their connection and began to gyrate in earnest, friction building up between cocks and jeans until Ian thought they would start a fire.

Ian had used a hand to bring himself off a handful of times since Gabriel had left, but that was so many months ago that the feel of another human pressed against him was enough to drive him wild. In time with the lashing waves of rain falling outside, he sensed himself rising level by level, rocketing toward an orgasm.

No, he wailed to himself, not yet—not over so soon!

“Ssh, ssh,” Andy murmured into their kiss, fingers squeezing Ian’s hips. “You’ll see. Ah, Ian, God...!”

Ian felt Andy pulse against him, and couldn’t hold his orgasm back any longer. Hips bucking hard against Andy’s, he gasped as the shock of pure ecstasy rocketed up through his spine through his balls and the length of his shaft. He burst out with a wordless cry of purely male exultation, a rush of noise, as he felt himself come...

...dry.

Ian clutched at Andy as he slowly ebbed down from the mountaintop, not understanding. He’d come, and he’d been aware of Andy’s body starting to seize before he lost his mind in the moment. Yet there was no wet patch between them, and no stickiness inside his jeans. His cock stood up hard and strong as ever, as if it were ready to go again, and again.

What magic was this? Ian raised his face questioningly to Andy, who winked at him with more than a little mischief and glee, making him look like an imp out of legend, a modern-day Puck playing a lover's trick. Ian shook his head, shaping his lips around the word *how?*

This time, it was Andy who touched Ian's lips, tracing their outline with a thumb. "Why question?" he asked softly. "Accept. Enjoy. My gift to you."

Ian gazed at Andy in wonder. *Who are you? What are you?* He burned to ask the questions, but did they need an answer? At the moment—no. Exhaling heavily, Ian nodded, then caught Andy's hand in his own. He drew the man's questing thumb into his mouth, sucking on the callused pad, lashing it with his tongue. *Thank you.*

He moved on to the forefinger, working hard with his lips, letting the sucking speak for him. *Thank you. Whatever this is, thank you.*

Index finger. *I want you.*

Ring finger. *I need you.*

Pinky. *Take me.*

Andy's flesh tasted salty and slightly metallic, the toughness worn in by what must have been years of playing the dulcimer making his skin rough and soft as a cat's tongue. Ian lashed his own against each pad, savoring the flavor and the way Andy's other hand, still on his hips, flexed and clenched with each suck.

"Oh, aye." Andy's breathing came in quick bursts, the man clearly struggling to control himself as Ian fellated each of his magical music-making fingers. "You have the knowledge in your mouth. Use what you've confidence in, Ian. What's within your grasp."

Ian bit down on a fingertip, not hard enough to break the skin or draw blood, but roughly enough to gain Andy's attention. Looking up at the man, he began to mouth words, despairing as air rushed over his

vocal cords with no sound. He shook his head before Andy could say those dreaded words, “I don’t understand”, and tried again.

Suck. You. I. Want. To. Let me. Please?

Andy’s hand clenched Ian’s hip hard enough to leave bruises. “Do you really want to?” he asked in a low, husky tone. “What of your own needs?”

Need this. You. Begging. Andy...

Andy shut his eyes. “God, yes, then. Yes. But let’s turn about once again. Three times turn and turn about—it’s a magical number, you know—”

Ian silenced Andy with a kiss. He drew back, feeling his face light up with a touch of Andy’s own puckishness, and bit at the finger still in his mouth. Then, in a whirl of movement, he twirled Andy around again and pressed him against the wall. Ian playfully pushed him flat against the abused surface, shoulders flush and level, legs molded to the wall. All of the movement an excuse, of course, a delaying tactic and a chance to get his hands over as much of Andy’s body as he could possibly grope.

“Ian.” Andy’s voice stopped him. “No more playing about. If this is what you want, then get on with what you’ve in your mind. I’ll burst with the need of you.”

Ian met Andy’s gaze and held it for a long moment, feeling the strange pulsing energy leap and pulse. The tenor of the charge between them changed from thrumming and playful to deep and dark, the rough waters of passion between man and man. The power of the feeling all but choked Ian, yet he managed to nod.

“My pocket.” Andy reached into the back of his jeans and drew out a small square of foil. “We’ll use this, Ian. I know I’ve got nothing I could pass on, but there’ll be nothing to make you feel unsafe.”

Ian took the silver-wrapped condom, wondering at himself. Until Andy had reminded him, he'd all but forgotten the need for safety. He, who'd always been so careful in his previous encounters, had lost his head. Nodding gravely, he laid the packet on the floor for grasping later, then did what he'd been aching to for what felt like ages now—undid the snap on Andy's jeans and, fingers shaking, drew down the zipper in a hurried rush.

Andy's cock fell into Ian's eager palm with no underwear to block its way. Ian held his breath as he gazed at the length for a long moment, breathing in the scent of utter masculinity and drinking in the sight of another man's member. Andy could not have been more to Ian's liking if he'd been custom-ordered. Fully erect, he must have been a bit more than seven inches, and thick around as four folded fingers, good-sized fingers. Uncircumcised, but with the foreskin already drawn back around a blood-darkened tip, the slit gaping.

Ian's tongue twitched in his mouth. He ached to reach out and take that tempting treat into his mouth, to poke his tongue in and taste the salty fluid ready to bubble out, but—ah, Andy had insisted. Reluctantly, he held up the condom and gave Andy a pleading gaze.

Andy looked down at him with a strangely fond smile in the middle of his passion-strained face. His hands were clenching into fists, but his voice gentle. "You must, Ian. It's the best way, and it's for your own peace of mind as well."

Ian struggled within himself. He knew, *knew*, deep down, that the square of latex represented every ounce of common sense that remained between them. He'd adjust to the taste in his mouth, the despised flavor of rubber that barred him from the raw musk of a man's skin. He'd be able to feel and all but taste the come in the reservoir tip.

But for all that, the madness in the air raged through Ian's veins. What else did he have to live for, if not the moment? With a sigh of regret, he swiftly rolled the condom on and, almost in the same motion, fluid as the ocean, sucked Andy's cock into his mouth. Andy gave a mighty shout, but whether it was that of a man who was about to enter paradise or a roar of triumph, Ian didn't know. Enthusiastically, *ecstatically*, he pressed his hands to the sides of Andy's hips, then tugged down his jeans for better access.

"Oh, you were gifted with a fine mouth, Ian," Andy said, hands coming down to stroke their way through Ian's hair, fingers trembling in an effort to be gentle. "You've trusted me this far, and I—God almighty..."

Ian had begun to suck. His mouth might be useless for producing words, but his tongue remembered, as if he'd never had a pause of months and months, how to drive a man insane. Short, slow flicks around the fat crown first, the latex all but tasteless and Andy's natural flavor coming through with mouthwatering pungency. Ian savored the taste of Andy's uncut skin, breathing in the aroma of arousal. He indulged himself by spearing his tongue into the slit and all but tasting the bead of salty fluid that would have rolled over his taste buds. He swallowed around the fat head, knowing this was insane, but not caring in the slightest.

Tightening his lips around the girth of Andy's cock next, Ian began to slide his way down the length, applying suction with enough force to make his cheeks hollow out, then bulge with the dimensions of the member filling his mouth. Careful of his teeth, he continued to torment Andy with his tongue, drawing patterns and tapping out staccato rhythms that matched the rain outside.

"Fuck, Ian, fuck," Andy groaned, hands tightening in Ian's hair almost to the point of pain. "Do you know what you're driving me to?"

Ian hoped he did. Splaying his fingers wide, he clutched and kneaded Andy's hips like a kitten, all the while applying the pressure of a python's deadly squeeze to the man's cock. He burned to have the salty fluid run down the back of his throat. He could just about imagine it doing so, and he swallowed eagerly, savoring the slight tingle in his throat, almost like champagne.

Magic, again, this was magic. And more...he had to have more...

"If you're wanting to take further chances with me, let the consequences be on your own head for good or ill, though I mean only well," Andy whispered. Ian felt himself being taken by the shoulders and held still. A tap to the top of his head and he froze in place, cock filling his mouth and flavor filling his senses to bursting. "My turn."

Ian prayed Andy meant what he thought Andy meant.

And oh, he did. Holding Ian in place, Andy began to thrust, slowly at first, in and out, fucking Ian's mouth with gliding strokes. He hissed as Ian let his teeth drag lightly over the tender skin, then laughed breathlessly. "You are an insatiable one, aren't you?" Andy gasped. "So willing to take a chance. Dare this, dare that. You take chances—God, yes—big chances. Invite a stranger in, give in to the magic, take him into your mouth—again, just like you did then, again—and no, I'll not be quiet."

Ian bore down slightly, intensifying his bite. Andy only laughed, the wild, free sound of an unfettered god of legend, and thrust again, letting teeth drag the length of his arousal. Startled, Ian released Andy for a moment, then, just to show he couldn't be caught out, gripped Andy again. He reached for the man's balls, rolling and squeezing them, fondling the two orbs in their sac, drawn up tight against Andy's body. His own pulsed in empathy, so full they ached and yearned for completion.

Andy's legs began to shake. He tossed his head again, just as would a wild lion, hair flying out in untamed, untrimmed waves, and he clutched Ian's shoulders with fingers that dug in just exactly right. "Ian, ready yourself," he managed. "I've enough power for the once, but not twice, not when you're on me like a vise."

Ian sucked harder. *This is what it feels like to be alive*, he exulted inside his head. *No matter the risk or the insanity, I'm truly a man again. I'm whole except for my voice, and I don't need it right now.*

Andy has made me a man again.

"Ian!" Andy cried in warning, stilling for a brief moment.

Hurriedly, Ian pulled back as if to catch the soon-flooding flow of spunk, wishing it were passing across his tongue, salty and tangy, a little sweet, yet strange, effervescent somehow. *It's just that I've gone so long between*, Ian thought, rolling his tongue around Andy's member and swallowing dry, but blissfully. His own cock pulsed for something to push him over the edge, but at the moment he didn't care.

Ian swallowed one last time, letting the flavor linger as long as he possibly could, then eased the member out of his mouth, easing it to rest on one palm. He pulled off the condom and disposed of it, then sat on his heels and waited.

Andy gazed at Ian with lust-hazed eyes, shaking his head. "You are remarkable," he said, voice raw. "Come here, you. Come." He hooked a finger beneath Ian's jaw and prodded him to rise to his feet, chest to chest against one another, as they had been when this whole adventure started.

Andy looked awed. "There's magic in the air," he rumbled, his voice like that of a thunder elemental. "Do you hear me? Can you feel it?"

Ian nodded. He'd have agreed to anything Andy said just then. Making a mewling noise, he pressed up against Andy, his own needy cock seeking completion.

Andy laughed and tossed his head. "Sleeping Beauty," he repeated the odd phrase again. "Awaken, love, and let me hear your sweet voice." He laid hands to either side of Ian's throat, holding him gently. "What do you say, then, Ian? Please, or thank you?"

Ian stopped, stung. He would have looked away, but Andy caught his chin between two fingers and held him steady. One hand slid down to cup his ass as their eyes met, reluctant green to sparkling hazel. "What do you say, Ian?" Andy insisted. "Come, now."

The energy between them gave an insistent pulse.

Ian swallowed hard and opened his mouth, intending to form the words with his lips. They'd come out with no sound, but Andy would understand. He filled his lungs with air, and expelled the oxygen with a rush.

"...I want some more..." he said—*out loud*.

Ian froze. He'd spoken. Spoken! He stared at Andy, silently demanding an explanation, not trusting himself to open his lips again.

Andy smiled, stroking Ian's jaw. "I knew you could," he said simply. "Didn't I tell you? There's something in the air tonight, there's a story in the making, and now we're both part of the telling." He pulled Ian close in an enveloping hug. "It'll be all right," he crooned. "Trust in me, and you'll see soon enough that everything will be just fine..."

Chapter Four

“How? How?” Ian only realized he was pounding on Andy’s chest with both fists when Andy caught them in his hands and forced the fingers open, lacing them with his own. Ian strained to speak, and though it felt as if his throat were filled with broken glass, managed to rasp another question. “You. Why?”

Andy squeezed his fingers. “You’ll see. Come here, now, come here.” With Ian mindlessly wrestling him every step of the way, Andy folded the two of them into an embrace, holding on tight until the fight left Ian’s body and he slumped bonelessly against the man.

“There now, there,” Andy crooned as the rain outside began to pick up again, lashing against the walls and pounding the windows. “Let’s get more comfortable, shall we? Follow my lead, Ian. I’ll direct you.” Gently tugging and pulling, heedless of his opened fly but careful of Ian’s own bulge, Andy maneuvered them into a sitting position on the floor, legs scissored together and arms wound around one another’s backs.

Ian hung on for all he was worth as the storm raged outside. Hail joined the heavy drops of rain, distinctive by their heavy sound hitting the roof and the glass panes. Dimly, he realized they were in the safest place possible—the foyer. Away from any windows. He flinched as, with a gunshot-sharp crack, a large stone struck glass somewhere. Although not a coward, he hid his face in Andy’s shoulder, clinging to him as nature rebelled against its tethers.

The unbearable noise and deafening cacophony seemed to go on forever, but finally, it ebbed away into a gentler rain, an almost musical sound pattering on the tin roof. Ian felt Andy give a heavy breath. "It's all right," the man whispered to Ian, stroking his back. "I don't know what forces cursed you, nor do I know why yet, but I know a thing or two about the spirit world. Them that plagued you are gone now. They weren't best pleased, but they've accomplished the worst they could do, and trust me, please, that they are all no more. I have a way of knowing these things, and I'll find out more answers for you as I may. In time."

"Who?" Ian croaked, his voice muffled against Andy's skin. "Now. Tell. Who?"

"Go slowly. You've only just returned to yourself. Don't take on too much at once, love." Andy pulled back and stroked Ian's throat, the calluses on his fingers tingling as they had before. A pulse of energy passed between them, and the pain eased somewhat. "It only hurts because it's been so long since these have been used," he soothed. "You'll not be able to recite Shakespeare right away, so don't be hoping for great things. A bit at a time, one word and then another, and you'll find your way back."

Ian shook his head. "*How?*"

Andy's face grew unbearably tender. Taking Ian's hands in his own again, he began to squeeze the fingers in a slow and gentle rhythm. "In Appalachia lived a man, heed well what I do say," he sang, soft and low. "There came a man a wandering in, a-roving, roving, oh." He shook his head. "That's me," he admitted. "It's my gift, you might say. When I accepted my dulcimer, long and long ago, I took on the mantle of responsibility which came with it. Of course, it wasn't exactly a dulcimer then, and I didn't go about in worn sneakers and threadbare jeans, but..." He laughed. "You'll think me mad, and no mistake."

Ian frowned, trying to understand. “What,” he struggled to get out. “What? You, what?”

“Something that shouldn’t exist any longer, perhaps,” Andy admitted, stroking Ian’s hands with the pads of his thumbs. “I’ve the gift of music. Often and oft, strange things follow me where I rove and play. Things fall into place, wrongs are righted, inspiration springs alive within dried-up wells, and sometimes, sometimes, there’s a miracle or two.”

Ian gazed at the clear, honest hazel eyes of the man he’d been making love to moments before, and felt his mind reel with a sudden influx of knowledge. “Muse,” he croaked. “Muse?”

“A modern-day remnant, perhaps,” Andy confessed. “This destiny, it follows me around from life to life. I come to the music sooner or later, and the wandering follows fast on its heels. I pluck up my instrument and must go a-roving, roving, oh.”

He let go of Ian’s hands and scooted closer. “The music tells me where to go. Song led me here tonight, and the power I take from each golden note channels through my touch, my fingers, my cock.”

So saying, Andy laid a hand on Ian’s chest. Another pulse passed between them. “You offered something up to me without asking for a thing in return, and you were richly blessed, I think—not that I would not have tried to help you otherwise, in exchange for shelter and salt. I expected only this, but ah, so tempting a picture you made I could not but offer myself up for your pleasure.”

Ian tilted his head to the side, letting his throat rest, telegraphing the question with his eyes. *Why me? What makes me so special?*

Andy understood him perfectly, and Ian no longer wondered how the man could do such a thing—he simply accepted. “Because,” Andy murmured, lightly pushing with the five fingers of his hand, “there’s this.” The flash of chemistry passed between them. “There’s your face,

handsome as the highwaymen of old, with hard-won wisdom shining in your eyes along with the old ghosts and grievous memories. And then,” he added, turning wicked again, “there’s your body, which tempted—nay, still tempts—me beyond compare.” He rolled his fingers against Ian’s bare chest. “There’s more I would do with you this night, if you were willing. But I’ll offer you the same choice as before, Ian. Say me nay, and I’ll leave you alone with what gifts I’ve already given you. Say me yea, and we’ll pass the night together in merry abandon.”

Ian sighed, the mountain cadences and archaic structure of Andy’s speech, spoken in his honey-golden tones, all lulling him into an easy lassitude. *A muse, he marveled. Which one? The muse of song, of oratory? A modern-day muse, here in my house. I would be mad to turn him down.*

What of when he leaves?

I’ll cope with his going when he’s left me. For now, though...there’s a night stretching out in front of us, and I mean to enjoy myself. To give Andy what I can, in thanks, and take my own pleasure as well.

He nodded, just as he had before. Working the muscles of his throat, he forced air across his vocal cords and breathed the word “Yes” for good measure. Then, on impulse, he moved, doing what he had not been able to before with his chest pressed to Andy’s chest, and touched the man’s face, tracing each feature in wonder. He moved from the hawk-like angle of Andy’s nose to the fullness of his lips, brushing lightly over his eyes, stroking down his temples with two fingers on either side. He took particular pleasure in running his hands through the flyaway hair, an untrimmed mane which made the man look so wild and so desirable, like a spirit the night had summoned up for Ian’s especial delight. “Yes,” he rasped again, relaxing so that he was open to whatever Andy might want of him. “Yours.”

Andy leaned forward so their foreheads touched, rolling them together. "You've no idea how much this means to me. There's been plenty who've taken what I had to offer and sent me on my way with a coin in my dulcimer case, a bare few cents in thanks, but you? You offer up your body."

"Take."

"Ah, so impatient. Although I must confess, I'm thinking much along the same lines," Andy admitted. "Lie down, Ian. On your back, if you can bear the cold floor."

Ian obeyed, Andy's hands helping hold him until the scarred old wood touched his shoulder blades. He rested there, legs spread wide around Andy's body, knowing he looked whorishly eager but not caring in the least. His heart pounded in anticipation and his breath came quickly, rushing in and out of his lungs.

Andy caressed Ian's forehead. "One kiss," he said, as if he couldn't resist the urge. "One kiss, my Ian, to seal this bargain between us." He leaned forward, his weight full on Ian, who welcomed him in with open arms locking around Andy's back. Their mouths met, light and chaste at first, then growing eager for the taste and texture of one another's mouth.

All too soon, the kiss had finished, and Andy, looking a little crazed, drew back. "Forgive me for my rush," he murmured, his stroking hands quick and desperate, "but you tempt me so far, Ian. Too far for good sense, and too much to make waiting a choice for me."

Ian rolled his head on the floor and laughed, delighted to hear a faint ripple of sound emerging. Looking up at Andy on his knees, he crooked a finger. *Bring it on*, he mouthed. *I can take you on, mountaineer. Muse. Magic man.*

Something blazed in Andy's eyes. "You believe me, then," he said, sounding awed. "You recognize what I am, and you're not afraid. Ah, Ian, I'd give you even more for your trust if I could."

You are, Ian shaped with his lips. *Give me the only thing that's left.*

Andy chuckled breathlessly. "It's lucky I'm such a boy scout," he joked roughly, digging in his pockets again and coming up with another foil square and a sachet of lubricant. "Always prepared, isn't that what they say?"

Ian laughed softly. *No more talk.* "Hush," he breathed, feeling puckish mischief sparkling in his veins like champagne. "Off. Jeans. Both."

"Not that you're demanding or anything," Andy teased. But for all that, he obeyed, standing briefly to strip his pants off. Ian had a moment to admire the long, corded muscles of a man who'd walked for weeks upon weeks, tapering from a pair of narrow hips down to a pair of knotted feet he thought beautiful simply because they belonged to Andy.

Only a moment, though, for then Andy was back down on his knees, eager hands reaching for Ian's jeans, undoing the fastenings and dragging the denim off him, two legs' worth at the once. Both men laughed at his eagerness, Ian's own sound growing stronger as Andy tossed the denim over his shoulder.

Then, naked, they gazed at one another. The pause might have taken seconds, or gone on for minutes—Ian had no way of knowing the difference. He reveled in the feeling of Andy's eyes, gone dark, raking over the length of his body, delighting in the knowledge of how actively he was desired. Easy enough to tell, oh yes, from the way Andy's cock rose again from the nest between his thighs, thick and dark with blood. Ian stretched, muscles rippling, hand going to his own erection and stroking it from base to tip. Teasing. Tempting.

Andy knew exactly what he himself was doing, too. With a mock growl, he batted Ian's hand away. "I lay claim to this," he decreed. "Save yourself for me, and I'll get to you soon enough. First, though..." Nimble fingers tore the condom packet open, and with the ease of a man who'd done it many times in his life, Andy smoothed the latex over his shaft. "Safety," he repeated his warning of earlier. "I know I'm safe, but why should you believe me?"

Ian laughed. After all that had happened this night, Andy could still ask the question?

After a moment, a rueful expression touched Andy's lips. "Ah, well, you're right enough. But let me have it my way, will you?"

Ian nodded as the rain lashed gently outside. If things were different, if Andy had long been a regular part of his life, he might have pressed the issue, but for the moment he would let the man have his head. Although a little more hurry wouldn't hurt.

Deliberately tempting, Ian lifted his knees, bracing with a foot flat on the floor, opening himself up to Andy's gaze and presenting himself for whatever the man might want to do.

Andy, hand still on his own cock, froze. "Seducer."

Ian grinned and arched his hips, his erection heavy against his stomach. Yes, he *did* tempt Andy, and had no shame about the matter, either. He closed his eyes in bliss as Andy moved forward with a hoarse, wordless cry, wedging himself between Ian's legs. Lube-slickened fingers found their way to his exposed hole, pushing and prodding. Although it had been months upon months, Ian didn't find it hard at all to relax for Andy, and soon enough, one finger had multiplied to three.

"You want this, do you?" Andy muttered, finger-fucking Ian.

Ian nodded, thrusting himself down on the invading digits with a wanton shamelessness. He made a groaning, disappointed noise when

they disappeared, and then a murmur of satisfaction and anticipation at the feel of a blunt cock head replacing the digits, the man's cock blazing a heat tangible through the covering latex.

"Be ready for me, Ian." Andy pushed forward, butting hard against Ian's opening. "Let me inside. I burn for you."

And I for you, Ian thought, relaxing all his muscles and all but laughing with delight as Andy, startled by Ian's sudden acquiescence, slid in almost to the root of his cock. He caught himself with his hands on the hard floor, held perfectly still for a moment, then laughed. "Oh, I'll have to watch myself around you."

Ian nodded.

"You're a tricky one, you are."

Ian grinned. He arched his hips up, unable to believe how good it felt to have another man's member buried in him again. "Fuck. Me."

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes," Andy breathed over and over again, lifting Ian's legs over his shoulders, bending down for another greedy kiss, and finally, thank God, beginning to move. "Oh, fuck, yes." He groaned. "So tight, so hot."

Ian undulated as Andy began to thrust, drawing back as Andy pushed forward. After a moment they fell into a rhythm, bodies slapping together with a heat and urgency that promised this would not take long, not for either. When he reached for his cock again, Andy pushed Ian's hand away and took the organ in his own rough palm, squeezing hard and then beginning to pump the shaft.

Ian cried out, arching his back. His world dwindled down to two things—the burning heat of Andy's cock up his ass, pounding relentlessly as the rain, and the pressure on his erection. Both were heaven. He ricocheted from glorying in one and then the other, feeling the pressure build and build until, at last, too soon, with another

wordless yell, he burst like a balloon and careened into the soaring heat of orgasm.

When he could see again, when his breath had steadied into an even deepness instead of ragged gasps for air, Ian turned to look at Andy, who had pulled out and slumped on his chest. Though exhausted, Ian managed to bring his hand up to stroke the sweat-dampened, untamed mane of lion-colored locks. "You. Good?" he queried.

"Oh, gods, yes. So very good," Andy mumbled against Ian's chest, his lips buzzing and tickling. He lifted his head to look into Ian's face, grinning in his irrepressible fashion. "And you?"

Ian exhaled heavily, the sound of a man who'd been fully satisfied, and nodded. "Good," he repeated, twining a lock of hair around his finger. "Very."

"I'm that glad of it, and more than you know." Andy quickly disposed of the condom, then wriggled his way up to lie at Ian's side, taking him into two strong arms. "What now, Ian? Shall I sing to you again?"

Ian shook his head drowsily. All he wanted was to enjoy the moment. God, if he had his way, this bliss that came of being close to Andy would go on forever, but such was the fate of falling for a traveling man. He thumped two fingers on Andy's arm. "Stay. For now. Stay."

"Try and catch me moving." Andy wriggled tighter. He nestled his chin with a thoughtful sort of motion into Ian's scalp. "I'm a stranger to you, Ian, heed well what I do say." His voice took on a hint of song. "Should I be a-roving, roving on? I was made and meant to travel on till the end of my days, but I find myself wondering about being drawn to you this night."

Ian rested in Andy's arms, lulled by the sound of his lover's rich voice rolling over him in waves like molten honey. All the same, at Andy's words, his heart began to beat a faster tattoo. Would it be possible...?

“Stay.” He pushed at Andy, then pulled him close. “Stay!”

“Perhaps I can.” Andy sounded thoughtful. “There’s been much magic done here this night, Ian. Your voice is being reborn, and the itch in my feet that leads me ever on has somehow stilled. By now, I should have felt a pull to be roving on, yet I am more than content to lie in your arms.” He jostled Ian lightly. “What say you, Ian? We barely know each other, and I’ve no idea if I should have to travel on again someday, but I’d like nothing better than to hang my hat with you as long as I’m allowed.” He nudged Ian again. “I think you must speak now, lover. Say me nay or say me yea, and then I’ll go or I will stay.”

Ian lay for a moment, feeling the hard chest flush against his own, their tangled legs, the light waft of Andy’s breath on his skin. He thought back to the nightmares he’d had of Gabriel—was it only earlier that day, just a few hours ago?—and then looked up at Andy’s honest, earnest face. He smiled, and drew a deep breath to say—

“Yes.”

Andy enveloped Ian with a bear hug and a glad cry, singing into his ear. “I’ll no more a-roving go, a-roving, roving, oh! I’ve found my home, and found my man, and here is where I’ll stand, no more to roving go.” Ian laughed and hugged him back. He had so much to learn, so many things to figure out and so many questions needing answers, but they could all wait for the moment.

He would have a tomorrow to figure them all out.

There was only one thing he had to do first, though. Pressing a quick kiss to Andy’s lips, Ian wriggled out of his grip and up onto his knees, reaching for the phone. He paused with his finger over a speed-dial button to grin down at Andy, who lay with his arms crossed behind his head, settled in for the long haul. Miracles did happen, and lightning could strike twice, it seemed.

And he knew just the person who would understand.

Blowing a kiss at the new man in his life, Ian pressed the button on his phone and listened to the numbers being rapidly dialed.

Someone picked up on the other end. "Hello?"

Ian raised two fingers and tapped twice on the receiver. Then, with a grin so broad he felt it might split his face in two, he inhaled deeply and breathed out the word "Slate..."

Willa Okati

Willa Okati spends an inordinate amount of time bent over the keyboard, creating all sorts of new stories. If she's not writing, then she's feeding her e-book habit by reading on her handheld. Stories are her life! (And so is coffee, but that's another matter.) Writing about the mountains and the Appalachian heritage she loves so much is her chief delight at Samhain.

To learn more about Willa Okati, please visit <http://www.willaokati.com>. Send an email to Willa Okati at willaokati@gmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Willa http://groups.yahoo.com/group/willa_okati

When Sam Raintree goes to work for Bay City Paranormal Investigations, he expects his quiet life to change. But he doesn't expect to put his life and sanity on the line, or to fall for a man he can never have.

Oleander House

Book one in the Bay City Paranormal series

(c) 2006 Ally Blue

Available October 3, 2006 at Samhain Publishing.

Sam Raintree has never been normal. All his life, he's experienced things he can't explain. Things that have colored his view of the world and of himself. So taking a job as a paranormal investigator seems like a perfect fit. His new co-workers, he figures, don't have to know that he's gay.

From the moment Sam arrives at Oleander House, the site of his first assignment with Bay City Paranormal Investigations, nothing is what he expected. The repetitive yet exciting work, the unusual and violent history of the house, the intensely erotic and terrifying dreams which plague his sleep. But the most unexpected thing is Dr. Bo Broussard, the group's leader. From the moment they meet, Sam is strongly attracted to his intelligent, alluring boss. It doesn't take Sam long to figure out that although Bo is married, he is very much in the closet, and wants Sam as badly as Sam wants him.

As the investigation of Oleander House progresses and paranormal events in the house escalate, Sam and Bo circle warily around their mutual attraction, until a single night of bloodshed and revelation changes their lives forever.

Enjoy this excerpt:

After dinner, Sam, Andre and Amy headed for the little upstairs parlor. Amy flung open the French doors, letting in balmy evening air. The twilight buzzed with the songs of insects and bullfrogs. Somewhere not far off, an owl hooted. The faint scent of honeysuckle floated in on the humid breeze.

It wasn't long before the rest of the group wandered in one by one to join them. Conversation flowed easily, smoothed by the bottle of pinot noir Bo brought with him. Even Cecile let her haughty attitude drop enough to join in, laughing along with the rest of them. It was nice, friendly and relaxed. Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so peaceful.

As evening deepened into night, Sam found himself drawn more and more to Bo. They ended up sitting close together on the cozy two-person sofa, talking animatedly. Sam liked Bo's sharp, slightly twisted sense of humor, the way he used his whole body to tell a story, his intense focus when he listened to Sam. He liked everything about the man. In a way, it was nice to know he was capable of feeling something deeper than purely physical attraction; he'd wondered sometimes, during his brief, emotionless affairs. On the other hand, feeling anything beyond friendship for a married man could be dangerous.

It was the frequent looks Bo gave him, a look Sam had seen in more than one bar and seedy motel, that seduced him into ignoring the peril to them both and letting it happen.

By eleven-thirty, everyone else had gone to bed. Amy's fierce frown hadn't made any more of an impression than the warning in her voice, both registering in Sam's consciousness for only a moment before

blending into the background. Sam and Bo sat knee to knee on the sofa, taking turns telling stories of strange things they'd experienced.

"So there I was," Sam said, swilling the last of the wine straight from the bottle, "running through the graveyard at two in the morning, screaming bloody murder. The cops were not amused. Neither were my parents, when they had to come to the station to get me."

"I bet," Bo laughed. "I don't blame you, though. Was it really your grandfather's ghost you saw?"

"Who knows? I'd convinced myself it was, anyhow. The old jackass scared the crap out of me when he was alive, and being a ghost didn't improve his disposition any." Sam set the empty wine bottle on the table and leaned back, stretching. "I could've sworn I heard him yelling at me, just like he used to when I was little. And I know I felt him hit me."

"What about your friends? Did they experience any of what you did?"

"Nope."

"Maybe they were just too far away."

"Maybe. Or maybe it was all in my mind, huh?"

Bo shrugged, his braid bunching against the couch cushions. "You were twelve. Imagination's definitely a factor at that age. But hell, he *hit* you. You had bruises, for God's sake. Your imagination can't give you bruises."

Sam thought of the livid purple marks blossoming before his eyes on the pale skin of the first boy he'd kissed, and didn't say anything.

Bo's hand on his knee shocked the painful image out of Sam's mind. "Sam? What're you thinking about?"

"Nothing." The word came out strained and clipped. It sounded rude, but Sam couldn't help it. The heat of Bo's palm on his skin stole his breath and scrambled his thoughts.

“Doesn’t look like nothing.” Bo’s voice was soft and strangely husky. His hand slid up a little, fingers brushing the hem of Sam’s shorts. “You seem upset. I wish you’d tell me what it is that upset you.”

Sam swallowed hard. He knew he had to stop whatever was happening before he lost control of his rising desire. In spite of Bo’s surprising actions, he didn’t think the man would thank him for taking it beyond this enticing but ultimately ambiguous touch.

“I’m not upset. Just...I’m just...” *Just unbelievably turned on*, he thought as Bo’s hand gently squeezed. “Shit...”

Bo didn’t say anything. His hand inched up Sam’s thigh. Sam could hear his own ragged breathing. He turned to look at Bo, and their gazes locked. This time, the heat in Bo’s eyes was unmistakable. Without stopping to think about what he was doing, Sam leaned over and pressed his lips to Bo’s.

Sometimes love catches you by the tail...

Without Reservations

(c) 2006 J.L. Langley

Available October 10, 2006 at Samhain Publishing.

Chayton Winston is a veterinarian. He is also a werewolf. Much to his Native American parent's chagrin, he has always dreamed of a fair-haired, Caucasian mate, however, he never imagined his mate would be male. As a heterosexual man, he's not quite sure what to do with a male mate, but more than willing to find out.

Keaton Reynolds wakes up, in wolf form, and finds himself with a mate. He's instantly attracted to his mate, but not so thrilled to find out the man is straight. Having been in a relationship once before where his partner professed to be "Not gay" left a bad taste in his mouth. Keaton wants to make a break for it and pretend he never set eyes on Chay, but he encounters a problem; Chay is not ready to let him go.

Together the two work to solidify their shaky relationship and battle the prejudices against homosexuals. Chay must deal with not only his mother's prejudices against gay men but also her hatred of white people. When a power struggle in Keaton's pack threatens Keaton's life, the two men learn to depend on one another and their relationship to get them through it.

Enjoy this excerpt:

“You are going to fuck me tonight, baby.”

“But...”

Chay shook his head and put his finger to Keaton’s lips. “I want this, Bit.”

“You’ve never done this.”

“Neither have you. It will be a first for both of us. Besides, I’ve initiated enough virgins, I know what I’m doing.” Chay waggled his eyebrows.

Somehow Keaton didn’t doubt that. The man was as charming as they came, he could very likely talk a nun into not just sex but anal sex and maybe even a blow job too. “I hated my first time.”

Chay raised a brow.

He shrugged. “Well, not hated. Hate might be too strong of a word. But it hurt and it was uncomfortable and I kept feeling like I had to go to the bathroom. And I was terrified of getting caught by my roommate. I couldn’t even get a hard on.”

Chay reached between them, squeezed their pricks together and winked. “I’ve already got one.”

“It won’t last.”

“Wanna bet?”

Keaton chuckled. God, he loved this man. “Okay, you win.”

“I always do, Bit.”

Keaton groaned and sat up. He leaned over and fished through the nightstand until he came up with the lube. He laid the bottle on Chay’s stomach, making him squeak.

“Jesus, that bottle is cold.”

Keaton giggled. "Does this mean you're going to complain if I don't warm the lube up in my hands first? I hate getting lube all over my hands, it's sticky."

"You never say anything about come, but you're going to bitch about a little lube?"

"It's different." Keaton moved the bottle from Chay's stomach and crawled off Chay and slid to his side; Chay turned with him. They meshed together perfectly, kissing, pushing against each other, rubbing their erections together. Before they realized it, they were panting.

Chay reached between them, wrapping their pricks together with his hand, pulling.

Keaton's cock was already slick with precome and he smelled Chay's as well. He started his way down his mate's body, freeing himself from Chay's grasp. He gently pushed Chay to his back and positioned himself between Chay's thighs.

Chay, bless him, just opened right up, spreading his legs even wider. He even handed Keaton the lube.

Keaton took the bottle and applied some to his fingertips, pulled his knees under him and leaned over Chay. He licked a long line up Chay's shaft while he circled Chay's hole.

Chay tensed for a split second, then relaxed.

Keaton continued to tease with his finger, never quite entering, and put his mouth to good use. He loved the musky scent of Chay, loved the feel of cock against his cheek. He dragged his face down Chay's cock and nuzzled his balls. Glancing up Chay's body, he buried his nose in the warm soft sack and inhaled deeply. A tingle shot through him. His mate's pheromones were so strong here. His cock jerked, leaking. He licked and sucked. He took one testicle into his mouth.

Chay's head shot off the bed, staring down at him. His face flushed with lust. "Oh my, Bit."

Keaton took the other testicle into his mouth, sucking lightly. He used his unoccupied hand to lift them and lick under them, all the way to Chay's opening.

Chay bucked against him, spreading his legs wider. "More, babe."

Keaton closed his eyes and pushed his finger in. He got to the second knuckled before Chay moaned.

"Oh God!" Chay dropped his head back on the bed.

Oh God was right. He was so fucking tight. "Oh my God, good? Oh my God, bad?"

"Different. Stings a little. Kind of burns." Chay pushed out and Keaton slid his finger further in.

Chay gasped.

It sounded like a good gasp, so Keaton pulled his finger out slowly and pushed back in. He got another gasp in return. He grabbed Chay's cock and pulled it to his mouth, licking up one side and down the other before taking it into his mouth.

Chay groaned, his cock jerking in Keaton's mouth.

Keaton took it as a good sign and decided to add another finger.

Chay fidgeted a little but other than that he didn't seem to mind. He was too busy alternately fucking Keaton's face and pushing down on his fingers.

He angled his fingers up searching for...

"Holy fucking shit. Do that again."

Found it. Keaton grinned around Chay's dick.

He did and Chay started making these breathy little moans. They were sexy as hell. He added another finger and deep throated Chay at the same time.

“Oh, ow! Oh, God! Ow! Ow! Ooh...”

He stopped, keeping his fingers perfectly still, staring up at Chay. He was trying to decide whether it was an omigod-stop-you're-freaking-killing-me “ow” or a give-me-a-minute-to-adjust “ow”, when Chay started pushing towards his fingers.

He curled his fingers up again, hitting that sweet spot, and swallowed around Chay's cock.

“Stop!”

He froze. He didn't want to, his own cock was throbbing something fierce. He was dying to get the show on the road, but he'd rather cut off his own arm than to hurt Chay.

Chay's head popped up and he reached down and cupped Keaton's cheek. “If you keep doing that, I'm going to come. Come up here.”

He nodded and let Chay's dick pop out of his mouth. “You should turn over. It will be easier.”

“No. Like this. Wanna watch you, Bit.”

“You're sure?”

“I'm positive.” Chay grinned, his eyes twinkling.

Keaton groaned at the trust and love he read in Chay's face. He grabbed the lube and slicked himself and Chay up. He went a little crazy with the stuff, but too much was better than not enough. Tossing the bottle onto the nightstand, he positioned his cock against his mate.

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