

# Persistent Memory

*Elizabeth Jewell*

*Changeling Press*



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**Abused by his father as a child, Alex has found healing in the arms of Liam, his vampire boss. But when strange magic bares the darkest sides of their souls, will their tentative relationship be shattered beyond repair?**

## Chapter One

"At some point," Liam says, closing the massive, musty research tome, "you just have to take a break."

Alex nods, though he's disappointed. They've been working together for several hours, trying to identify the strange artifact their latest client has asked them to research. It's a cross, wooden, with arcane carvings over its surface that neither of them has been able to identify, much less translate. "Where else can we look?" It's a legitimate question -- they've exhausted the company library, which is extensive. If they can't track the thing down there, Alex isn't sure where they can.

Liam's the most experienced and successful vampire hunter in the area, at least partially because, as a vampire himself, he has an insider's perspective on those they hunt. The vampires have been quiet lately, though. Liam says it's because the midsummer lack of darkness slows them down. Liam doesn't seem slowed much, though. With the slacking off of hunting season, he's taken on some research work, making use of the comprehensive library and two hundred and seventy-seven years of personal experience to provide clients with information about various and sundry arcane artifacts.

This one has them stumped. Liam has had it in his possession nearly a week now, and has made little progress with identification. Alex is fairly certain tonight's research is a last-ditch effort to keep from losing the client, as well as the nice advance he's already paid them. Unfortunately, the several hours of work have proved no more fruitful than any of the previous work involving the arcane cross.

But Liam seems unconcerned. He shrugs. "I have some sources I can talk to. See if we can follow up some additional leads. We'll figure it out."

Alex and Liam have been hitting the books since just after sunset, and it's heading into the small hours now. It's different, being with Liam when he's at his sharpest. There's an energy there that he doesn't have during the day. It's had an unexpected result on Alex. He's got a raging hard-on, and he's trying to work up the courage to do something about it.

Liam stretches back in his chair, his shirt riding up to expose a strip of skin. Alex's eyes are drawn to the bare flesh. His mind fills up, consumed by the memory of Liam's hands on him, of naked skin against naked skin, bodies lurching together, of penetration, rhythm. The taste and touch and smell of him.

The thoughts have plagued him since that encounter three weeks ago, when he went to Liam's bed looking for... something. Healing. Absolution, perhaps. He's fairly sure he received these, letting Liam's hands wipe away the marks of abuse left by his father all those years ago. But Liam left behind another gift, another legacy. Of need. Want. It makes his skin warm, and when Liam gets to his feet, heading to the office for more coffee, Alex watches him, practically salivating.

He's thinking too hard about it, he knows. He's thinking about what other people might think if they find out. If it means he has to think of himself as a different person.

Fuck that. Liam will understand. The vampire understands that need can have nothing to do with sexuality, that desire doesn't always fit into neat little boxes. So he follows Liam into the office.

Liam looks up from the coffeepot as Alex enters the office. He looks curious, almost concerned. "Did you need something?"

"Yes," says Alex. "I do." And he goes to Liam and shoves him against the wall.

Liam is taken aback, and lifts his hands as if fending off an attack. "What --?" Then Alex's mouth on his shuts him up.

Liam grabs Alex's arms, almost as if to push him away, then his fingers dig in and he pulls Alex against him, kissing him back, kissing him hard.

Alex is trying not to think. If he thinks, he'll be self-conscious and stupid. He knows he wants this, and he knows it'll be good. He doesn't need to think about anything else.

The blood rushing out of his brain helps. His mouth is full of Liam's thrusting tongue, his head full of Liam's smell. Then he reaches out, and his hand is full of Liam's cock. It strains against his palm, through Liam's trousers. The vampire makes a choking sound in the back of his throat, then pushes Alex back.

"God, Alex," Liam says. "What got into you?"

"You," Alex replies, "once. I want it again."

Liam studies him. "Are you sure?"

"I think I'm quite capable of making my own decisions."

Liam frowns a little. He looks perplexed, and Alex is afraid he's going to ask more questions. Alex really has no patience for this. His hand still curls around Liam's erection; he squeezes a little. Liam gasps and closes his eyes.

"How do you want it?" the vampire asks, and Alex smiles, a little smug.

"Surprise me."

Liam opens his eyes and looks at Alex. He's gone, Alex thinks, seeing the lust there. More than lust. Need. Craving. Desire so deep and ancient Alex can barely comprehend it.

Liam lets go of Alex's arms and lays his hands on either side of Alex's face. And kisses him.

Liam can make kissing a sexual act in and of itself. His hands slide down Alex's back, cup his buttocks, tuck his pelvis tight against him. His tongue slips over Alex's lips and into his mouth, stroking his tongue, curling against it.

He turns Alex suddenly, reversing their positions so Alex's back is against the wall. Kisses him harder, deeper, pinning him between the wall and Liam's own wide, solid body.

Alex tenses, then makes himself relax. Liam eases back, slowing his mouth. Alex puts his hands against Liam's chest and pushes gently.

Liam breaks off, pulling his mouth away from Alex's with obvious effort. "What?" His voice is breathy with need, but gentle.

Alex swallows. "I needed to know what it would take to make you stop." As much as he wants this, Alex is still afraid of it on a deep, primal level he can't control. He's been violated, and while he's taken some control over that memory, it still lurks.

Liam's mouth hovers over his, his lips brushing Alex's as he whispers, "Just a word. A touch. Any time you need me to stop, I will." Then his lips flutter, a softer contact, exploring, coaxing. Alex gives in. He has no choice, really. Liam's kisses are intoxicating.

His hands move of their own accord, impatiently opening Liam's shirt buttons. His fingers seem big and clumsy. He wants his hands on Liam's body, and finally they are, his palms against bare skin, his fingers tracing the curves and hollows of abdomen and chest, finding the ridges of ribs. Liam's hands delve into Alex's hair, holding his head still as he plunders and arouses his mouth.

Alex hears his own voice rising, sounds of arousal and contentment filling the back of his throat. Liam's moaning, too, the vibration of his voice passing through Alex's tongue.

His fingers digging into the groove of Liam's spine, Alex rotates his hips, pressing against Liam's body, pulsing against the thick, hard ridge of his erection. Alex is hard, too -- hard and ready, his cock aching to be touched, clenched, to be *inside*.

Liam pulls his head back again, looks at the ceiling, then closes his eyes and draws a long breath as if steadying himself. Alex can feel the tension in his body, the taut ripcords of muscle under the cool skin.

"Alex..."

Alex slides his hands down Liam's back, his fingers going past his beltline, clenching the tops of his buttocks.

"Yes," Alex says. He's not sure what he's agreeing to, not sure he cares. He just *wants*.



Liam's fingers find Alex's belt, unbuckle it, and open his trousers. Then he drops heavily to his knees, pulling Alex's pants with him.

Alex isn't sure what to think of this, of Liam on his knees in front of him, then Liam licks his cock and he can't think at all. The vampire's cool tongue slides up the underside of his erection, wet and slick, and, God, Liam knows how to do this, too.

Liam works him, his hand curled around his shaft, his mouth on the head of his cock, tongue laving, curling. Then his hand loosens, lets go, and he draws Alex all the way in, deep down his throat.

Alex lets his head fall back against the wall. Everything he knows has been reduced to this -- Liam's mouth on him, the wet pull, the laving tongue, the deep, burning suction. Liam's hands clench his buttocks, holding him steady, but Alex's instinct is to pulse into the vampire's mouth. So he does, Liam's hands controlling the speed and the depth.

God, he's good. Alex weaves his fingers into the thick, dark hair, not directing Liam, just holding him, caressing. It's an acknowledgement of sorts, his fingers against Liam's scalp to remind him exactly where he is and who he's with.

The pressure builds, the fire swirling taut in his pelvis, and, God, he's going to come in Liam's mouth. He hopes Liam doesn't mind because there's not much he can do about it. He pulls at Liam's hair to give him fair warning. Liam responds by reaching between Alex's thighs and pressing his scrotum up against his body. Alex's testicles are already high and tight but the extra pressure, the sure touch of Liam's big hand, sends him over that last precipice. He's done, it's over, and he ejaculates down Liam's throat. He feels the convulsive pressure against the head of his cock as Liam swallows.

Liam makes a soft noise, as if he's enjoying this. Alex just moans, incoherent. The moment of ecstasy seems timeless, as if it will never end, and then it does. Liam tips his head back. Alex's cock slides out of his mouth.

"God," says Alex, and Liam chuckles. He leans in again, nuzzling Alex's groin. He's all about contact, all about touch and caress, skin, heat. He's rubbing his face into Alex's hair, against his thighs, his belly, letting Alex's softening erection trace his cheek.

Alex closes his eyes. It's too much, too intimate, too strange. Too hard to admit to himself that he wants this, enjoys it. The only thing tempering his discomfort is Liam's ease. Liam's okay with this -- why shouldn't Alex be okay with it, too?

"You think too much," Liam says suddenly, his lips moving against Alex's stomach. He licks him, tongue cool and soft, making wet circles on his skin. Alex shivers.

"I know."

Liam scrapes blunt teeth across Alex's belly. Then he comes to his feet, stands eye-to-eye with Alex. "What are you thinking now?"

"That you're fully clothed and I have my trousers around my ankles."

Liam smiles. "Not necessarily a bad thing." But he slides his unbuttoned shirt off his shoulders, languidly. Suddenly Alex stops thinking and his hands go to Liam, sliding over his skin, taking in the width of his body, the coiled strength under his skin.

"That's better," says Liam, and presses against him, pushing him back against the wall. He ducks his head to mouth Alex's neck, runs his tongue up over his jaw to his ear. God, Liam has no compunctions about this at all. He's just there, all over Alex, taking everything he can get.

And it feels so damn good. Alex can barely get his head around how good it is. Certainly can't quite acknowledge how much he wants it.

His body knows, though. His hips buck against Liam's, and it annoys him that Liam still has his pants on. Alex grabs Liam's belt buckle. Liam's unbuttoning Alex's shirt, and they're both going to be naked in a minute.

Liam's mouth has made it to Alex's by now. He kisses the vampire as he shoves his shirt off over the wide shoulders. That tongue is pure magic, Alex thinks, then Liam pulls back and nips at his throat.

"What do you want?" Alex manages. Liam's chest is hard and solid against his, and he's finally got his hand inside Liam's trousers. He cups Liam's shaft, thick and hot against his palm. "What do you want to do?"

Liam plows a hand into Alex's hair. "I want to bend you over that desk and fuck you silly." His other hand clasps Alex's ass, fingers digging in hard. His cock twitches in Alex's hand. But he draws back a little, looks carefully into Alex's eyes. "What do you want?"

Alex can barely breathe, can barely hear over the pounding of his own blood. "That... that bending over the desk thing sounds good."

"Are you sure?"

Alex nods. Liam kisses him again, tender this time, soft, careful. "I'll be gentle."

"Actually..." Alex hesitates, and Liam waits for him, patient. "Actually, I think it would be okay if you weren't."

Liam studies his face, nods, kisses him again, a little harder, then draws back. "Are you sure?"

"I trust you."

Liam blinks, obviously taken aback. Alex is suddenly embarrassed. This has gotten deep and scary. It's not what Alex is after. At least he doesn't think so. He just wants the sex, not the emotion. He wonders if he should stop Liam before they go any further, but he can't bring himself to speak.

Liam steps back, toeing off his shoes, and as he shucks his trousers the playing field feels a little more level again.

"Where are you going?" Alex asks when Liam turns away.

"There's got to be something around here we can use."

"Use for what?" Then Alex realizes he knows the answer, and is embarrassed by the question. But Liam either didn't hear him or is pretending he didn't, for which Alex is grateful.

Liam is right -- Alex thinks too much. He's busy thinking about all the reasons he should be uncomfortable or embarrassed instead of all the things he likes about having Liam's hands on him, his mouth, about having Liam's cock inside him --

"Here we go," says Liam. He turns back toward Alex, holding up a bottle of olive oil. He's naked and hard and looks more than a little pleased with himself. Alex remembers one of the secretaries bringing the bottle in last week for her salad.

Alex looks dubious. "That'll work?"

"Sure." He sets the bottle on the desk and comes back to Alex, who's still just standing there against the wall.

"Isn't that for salads?" he protests weakly, but Liam just shrugs.

"Technically, I suppose, but --" He breaks off. "Unless you want to go upstairs."

Alex just shakes his head mutely. Hesitant, he takes a step toward Liam, then stops, realizing his trousers are bunched up around his ankles. Flushing, he forces off his shoes, steps out of his trousers.

When he straightens, Liam is right there next to him. He reaches out, cups Alex's face. "If you're uncomfortable --"

"Kiss me," Alex says, because he knows it'll strengthen his resolve.

Liam obliges, pulling Alex full against him, chest to chest, cock to cock. Alex is mostly flaccid now, but Liam's rock-hard. Alex clutches at him, kissing him, and he's not thinking anymore, he's just feeling. He grabs Liam's erection, pulls a little too hard, working the skin. Liam makes an odd sound, and suddenly Alex finds himself being lifted, moved. Then Liam's mouth breaks free. Liam turns him and, as promised, bends him over the desk.

The olive oil is room temperature, much like Liam himself, slick and soft on Alex's skin. Liam is careful, but Alex is facedown and helpless on the desk, and suddenly the memories flood him. The darkness, the furtive secrecy, the fear.

He clenches. And it hurts. Shit, it hurts. It's like being stabbed. Alex drives his fingers into the desk, almost sobbing. He expects to be driven into, hard, brutal, with no consideration for his pain. Because that was the way it was before, in the dark, pinned into his own bed by his father's body reeking of cigarette smoke and whisky and why would it be any different now here in this room that smells of coffee and dust and vampire, pinned to the desk by Liam's heavy bulk...

"Alex. Alex, it's me." Liam's gentle voice reaches him. Liam has stopped, barely inside, and his hands slide soft down Alex's back. "Alex, it's okay."

Alex reaches back, one hand flailing, and Liam catches it in his own, weaves his fingers between Alex's. They are both still for a time. Alex makes his breathing slow down, makes himself remember exactly where he is, who he's with. Liam's free hand strokes him, soothing, and finally Alex lets his body loosen and relax.

"Are you okay?" Liam finally says. "We can stop. It's okay. Just tell me."

"No." He speaks firmly. He will not let his father control him, not now, not here. "I'm all right."

Liam still waits a bit longer, caressing him, before he starts to ease in again. Alex relaxes into it and it's okay now. A little at a time, slowly, more oil, a little deeper, until Liam's sheathed and Alex is ready. The deep sensation of penetration fills him, hot and intense. It's just the two of them now, sharing this, and everything else is gone.

Liam moves inside him, slowly at first, then faster. Alex is starting to get the hang of it, too, starting to understand his body's own signals. So he knows when it's okay to shove back hard into Liam, to take him in deep, and Liam answers his signals until he is, as promised, fucking Alex silly.

Alex gasps and clutches the desk, his eyes watering from the intensity. He's hard again, mostly. He's almost positive he's not going to be able to come again this soon, but it doesn't matter. This is just good, so damn good, Liam so deep inside, humping him hard.

Then, unexpectedly, Liam slides his arms under Alex's chest, drawing him up from the desk. Liam's still inside him, still fucking him, but he slowly, carefully aligns Alex against him and holds him. He nuzzles into Alex's neck, his hands slide down Alex's belly, cup his scrotum, slip down his half-erection. Alex loses himself to all of it, lets his head fall back against Liam's shoulder as his body produces a soft, sweet convulsion that's almost but not quite an orgasm.

Liam clutches him tight then and comes with a wrenching sound that's almost a sob. He cradles Alex against him, clings to him, and when he's finished he just holds him, his hands clutching, until finally, gently, he eases himself away and out.

And, strangely, goes to the floor behind Alex, catching his hand on the way, pulling Alex down with him.

Alex turns toward him, concerned. "Liam..."

But Liam just draws him in, cradles him. Alex returns the embrace, sensing that Liam needs this, that it's more than lust or desire. It's purely a need for human contact, to touch and be touched, to feel a warm body.

Liam holds him for a time, half in his lap. Alex is just beginning to get used to the embrace when Liam says, "Stay tonight. Would you?"

"Of course," says Alex.

## Chapter Two

Upstairs, they shower, separately and quickly. Alex is relieved Liam didn't suggest they shower together, but a little disappointed, as well. He takes a little longer in the shower than Liam; most of the contents of the bottle of olive oil are either on him or inside him. The oil comes off easily with soap and warm water.

Toweling off, he comes out of the bathroom to see Liam already in bed. He's lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. As Alex emerges, Liam turns to look at him.

He says nothing, though. Alex goes to the other side of the bed to climb under the covers. Liam moves across the bed to him, and Alex allows himself to be held. Liam spoons against his back, burying his face in Alex's shoulder.

"I never remember how much I miss it until I get it," Liam says quietly. "How much I need it. Not just the sex. Just... contact. You know?"

Alex says nothing. The vampire's hands are splayed on Alex's stomach, and he caresses one of them. Liam's hands are big and well-made. Alex traces a vein across the back of one hand, up to where it snakes around a knuckle. He feels Liam shift against his shoulder, feels his lips soft on the side of his throat.

"Thank you," Liam says. The words are profound in their softness, their sincerity. Alex is touched. Then he wonders why he's so touched, wonders why he's lying here in Liam's bed when he could be at home asleep in his own.

"You're thinking again," Liam says. "What are you thinking about?"

"Just wondering what this means." His fingers move over Liam's wrist, toying with the brown hair that covers his forearm.

"It doesn't have to *mean* anything."

Alex flinches. "I know," he says, to cover the reaction. "Just a casual shag."

"That's not what I meant. I know what's running through your head. You're wondering what it says about you that you're here. You're wondering what your family might say. I'm saying none of that matters. This is just you and me. It doesn't have to mean anything beyond that."

"So... I don't have to buy you anything for Valentine's Day?"

Liam chuckles. "I could use some socks. Black."

Smiling, Alex closes his eyes, finally relaxing in Liam's arms. The vampire's fingers move softly against his stomach in an absent caress. His chest is hard and solid against Alex's back, and Alex feels safe here. Protected.

"You probably want to sleep," Liam says.

"I suppose."

"I can leave if you like."

"No." He's used to falling asleep alone, but right now the thought of Liam's leaving hurts a little. "It's all right. I can sleep."

"Okay."

Liam settles down, utterly still, his body warming as it takes in the heat from Alex's own. He still holds Alex, his strong arms loose and heavy. Alex closes his eyes.

\* \* \*

In spite of the time of night, Liam falls asleep with Alex's weight warm and heavy against his chest. It feels good to have someone in his arms, someone who trusts him enough to fall asleep in his bed. It hasn't happened in a long time.

He dreams.

The darkness of his early life as a vampire always lurks along the edges of his consciousness, but he keeps it at bay. If he revisits those memories too often, he'll never be able to forgive himself for what he's done. If he revisits them too often, he'll want to go back there and never leave.

It was easier then. Letting the darkest side of him, the carnivore, take control, was the easiest thing he ever did. With no allegiance to conscience or morality, he functioned on feral instincts and dark hungers. He slaughtered indiscriminately, ate



when hunger prodded, without consideration for who or why he killed. Innocent blood was sweet, and slaked his thirst in ways no other blood could.

It's been a long time since these dreams have come to him. Usually he sleeps with a peacefully clear conscience, knowing he's done everything he can to help those he once preyed upon, and to destroy those who still preyed.

But tonight, he remembers.

The alley is dark and silent, and the woman is alone with her child. They have been tossed on the streets like so much garbage by the child's father, a man of some standing in the town who wants nothing to do with the child of a serving woman he may or may not have fucked on a passing fancy the year after his marriage. His wife is well-to-do, if frigid, and he can't afford the scandal.

Liam watched when she was pushed from the house into the street. He watches her now as she walks, gripping her daughter's hand, moving from one puddle of darkness to the next, afraid of what might lurk in the shadows. He saw the man shove her on the doorstep, send her sprawling into an awkward landing as she twisted to cushion her daughter's fall. He knows she was hurt -- he can smell the blood and bruises.

Her name is Naomi. The child is Mary.

Liam approaches them in the darkening twilight. It's an easy enough thing. They are in need, and he is a gentleman. His very clothing excludes him from suspicion in the minds of most. He is also charm itself, and the soft pulse of vampiric compulsion he slides into his speech makes it all that much easier.

"I'll see you to shelter," he tells them. Fifty years of immortality hasn't yet taken the Irish lilt from his voice. "You'll be fine, I promise you. That rake -- the one who hurt you -- I'll see he pays."

In a later day, that would have been true. He would have done what he could for the woman and child, then hunted down the man who had hurt them and drunk his fill. But the dream has taken him to an earlier time, when he is still happy to quench his thirst with a purer vintage.

In the dream, he remembers what he did to them when he took them back to his fine house. Remembers the taste of the blood, its thick, sweet heat sliding down his throat. The blood of a child is the sweetest, finest taste a vampire can experience, and he slaked his thirst on it that night.

He feels his fangs slide into the small throat, piercing the skin. She is small and soft, the blood hot, intoxicating. He feels her heartbeat, fast like a bird's, slow gradually, until it stops.

He opens his eyes. A faint light drifts in through the window. Morning is close -- he can smell it.

And he smells warm, human flesh, feels a body pressed against him. Hears the slow, sleeping heartbeat, the drowsy breathing. He turns his head. His lips meet warm flesh. His tongue slips out to taste the salt of skin.

The dream lingers, with it the memory of the hot, sweet blood. The memory of what he was. It seems so natural to turn his head and let his fangs trace along the warm column of neck, to taste the beads of blood that blossom on the skin, just above the steady pulse.

The body jumps beneath him, jerks away. Liam blinks at wide blue eyes, shock and fear warring in their depths.

Alex.

Who is this he's awakened next to? Alex. Who is Alex? Then he blinks again, clearing some of the strange muddle from his head, and realizes what he's done.

Alex's hand lifts to his neck, touching the scratches, the oozing blood. The wound isn't deep enough to consider it a real bite -- it's barely more than a scratch. But the shock in Alex's eyes is real, and intense, and startles Liam the rest of the way into consciousness.

"Alex..." His voice is burry with sleep, the name coming out heavy with pain, shock, his own fear.

Alex lays a hand against this neck, lowers it to stare at the spatters of blood on his palm. "What..." He looks up at Liam, realization taking over his face. His

understanding seems to intensify the fear rather than temper it. Liam starts to reach for him. Alex responds to the abortive gesture by leaning back. It's subtle, but it spears into Liam's heart. He's hurt Alex. Betrayed him.

Violated him.

He can hardly think it. Of all the things for him to do, this is the worst.

"Alex, I..." He can't find words. "I'm sorry," won't be enough, but he says it anyway.

Alex scoots away from him on the bed. "I don't understand."

"It was a dream."

Alex turns blood-tipped fingers toward Liam. "This isn't a dream."

"I know. I --"

Alex shakes his head, cutting off Liam's words. "I'm going to go clean up." He slips off the bed. Liam watches him go.

He hears water splashing in the bathroom, the usual sounds of a human's morning rituals. Then Alex emerges. He is still naked, and he looks vulnerable, uncertain. His hands shift as if to cover his groin, then withdraw.

"My pants are still downstairs, I think," he says quietly. He looks toward Liam but not at him. The marks on his neck are clean, no longer bleeding, but still stand out against his skin in bright accusation.

"I'll get you a robe." Liam slips out of the bed, also naked. He feels as uncomfortable as Alex seems to, but he won't cover himself. It won't help. What has been revealed of himself here has nothing to do with bare skin.

He finds a robe in the closet and gives it to Alex. Alex puts it on, fumbles with the ties, while Liam sits back down on the bed. Even though the wounds have been cleaned, he can still smell the tang of blood. To his chagrin, the need for it shoots straight to his groin. He shifts his position, trying to cover or at least disguise the evidence of his arousal with his hands.

But Alex notices. "Is that for me, or for my blood?" His voice is toneless.

"Both," Liam says honestly. "Alex, I'm sorry. It was... I wasn't really awake."

It's a ridiculous thing to say, and Liam knows it. Alex's lips thin. His eyes meet Liam's briefly, but long enough for the vampire to see the raw bitterness there. He stammers on.

"It's been a long time since I've been... intimate... with anyone. When I dreamed... my subconscious took over, made it into something else." He's not explaining well, mostly because he doesn't really understand, himself. "That part of me -- it took control. Just for a few seconds."

"I suppose I should count myself lucky I'm still alive, then."

Liam starts to speak again, but a curt movement of Alex's head cuts him off. "I need to get dressed. I'll see you downstairs." He slips out of the room before Liam can say anything to try to stop him.

Liam dresses slowly, giving Alex time to adjust, to think -- to leave if that's what he decides to do. But he doesn't hear the door close, or hear Alex's car drive away, and when he makes his way downstairs, Alex is in the kitchen. He's retrieved his clothes from the office and is wearing them now. They're rumpled, but serviceable. Liam's robe lies folded over the back of a kitchen chair. Alex has made eggs and a pot of coffee, and as he turns to greet Liam, he seems calmer.

"Coffee?" he asks quietly.

Liam nods. "Are you all right?"

Alex pours more coffee into a mug. "I think so. I just... I needed to think, was all. I think I understand."

Relief clenches Liam's stomach, but it's short-lived. He knows what he has to do, for Alex's sake. Possibly even for his own. "We should talk."

Alex hands Liam his coffee. Steam curls off the surface, over the rim of the mug. "We can. But I'm okay. Really."

Liam takes the mug and stares down into the dark surface. "I'm not sure I am."

There is silence for a moment. Liam can tell Alex is absorbing what he's just said. His expression, which has softened with the evidence of his acceptance, closes off again, his eyes darkening.

"I don't understand." Alex's voice has gone toneless and dead again. Liam doesn't want to hurt him. Not any more than he already has. So he has to stop this before it gets any worse.

"I didn't know this would happen. It's been too long. Maybe I'm not ready."

Alex's mouth thins again, his lips a hard line. Liam wants to take it all back, take Alex in his arms, kiss him. He's afraid to.

"I'm all right," Alex says stubbornly. "I understand why it happened."

Liam swallows. "I violated you. I'm no better than --"

"No." Alex cuts him off sharply. "It was nothing like that."

"You don't understand what I was. You don't understand what could happen."

"If it was going to happen, it would have happened this morning. It didn't."

"I don't trust that."

"I do."

Alex's admission, his willingness to believe in Liam, humbles and frightens him. But he doesn't understand. Liam hasn't slipped like this in a hundred years. Hasn't set his teeth in the neck of a human being without permission until today. It's rattled him, and he can't be sure it'll end here. That he won't want it again, that the need won't become so intense he can't control it. "I need time," he says bluntly, though this seems like a betrayal even worse than what he's already inflicted.

Alex shakes his head a little, his lips trembling. He's holding back anger, not tears -- Liam can see it in his eyes. "This means nothing to you." His voice is harsh and broken.

"That's not true."

"If it weren't true, you wouldn't be able to walk away from it."

"No. I'll explain when you can let me. When we're ready. When this is behind us."

"It will never be behind us. What you've done for me... It means more than you can ever understand."

Liam's mouth opens, but he can't find words. Can't imagine how he can ever express what he's feeling.

Alex pours what's left of his coffee down the sink and walks out of the kitchen.

He heads into the office, the memory of what happened there last night pricking at him painfully. He can still smell the olive oil, though this might be his imagination.

He pulls on his jacket and heads for the door. The wooden cross calls to him from the desk. He's spent hours staring at it, yet when he walks over to look at it, it's a bit of a jolt. His brain takes it in as if he's never seen it before. Was that arch always there, in the spot where the two bars meet? And the filigree... it seemed more feminine when he looked at it before. Or is he misremembering?

Frowning, he steps closer, stands next to the desk and peers down at the ornately carved wood for a few long seconds. The wood seems strangely darker, the patterns on it standing out in more defined relief. He feels strange, as if he's been drinking. Perhaps it's just fatigue, or the aftereffects of the sex. But the cross seems to pulse in his hand as he picks it up. He stares at it, unable to will himself to put it down. His hand feels warm.

A sudden, sharp pain stabs into the bone next to his eye. He blinks, then lays the artifact down. The pain continues to throb. Migraine, he thinks. Not enough sleep.

With one last, perplexed look at the artifact, he heads out.

He starts to go to his car, but realizes he's left his keys behind. Instead he veers down the sidewalk. It's morning, barely, but the morning light isn't quite strong enough yet to signal the streetlights to turn off.

It's early to go for a walk, but he knows the neighborhood fairly well. There's always the possibility he'll get mugged, but usually things are quiet. The breeze is cool and holds that sense of prickly anticipation that often fills the early morning. Alex still feels strange, the pain throbbing behind his eye, his vision losing focus, the pervasive feeling of wooziness still plaguing him. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he walks, hoping the breeze will clear his head.

He's not far from the office when he hears the sounds. Voices, raised in anger, someone afraid, perhaps in pain. He's been working with Liam too long to ignore the sounds of distress. He feels an obligation to help people whenever possible. He has pepper spray in his jacket, but that's it. He goes to investigate, anyway.

He hones in on the sounds and finds his way to an alley -- not quite an alley, more of an alcove -- not far away. A younger, frightened voice leads him, alternating with a rougher, older one.

"Dude, I said okay to the blow job. Nothing else."

Alex rounds the corner to see a younger man, barely a man at all, tugging his arm free from the grasp of an older man. The older man is bigger, with a hard line to his face. He would be handsome if not for the cruel edge to his expression. Alex knows that kind of face. Devastating when he puts the charm on, hard-edged and vicious when the truth comes out. The older man's fly is still open, his erection standing partially out past the zipper. This should make him look vulnerable. It doesn't.

He grabs the young man's arm again. "Fine. I'll pay you for it."

"I said no." He tries to jerk free, but the older man's fingers dig deeper, holding him still. "I sucked you off. Just give me the money and I'll go." He stops, licks his lips, nervous, taking in the other man's expression. "Fine. Forget the money. I'll just go."

The older man jerks him closer, then pushes him around, shoving him against the wall. He yanks at the young man's pants, baring his ass. The curve of muscle is pale, vulnerable.

Alex steps around the corner. "Is there a problem here?" His voice is, to his surprise, rock steady.

The older man regards him with a look that would easily cow anyone who hasn't been working with a vampire for the last two years. Alex just returns it steadily, unblinking.

"You might want to get the hell out of here." The older man's voice is harsh, threatening.

"Let the boy go," Alex says. He tries to mold his own voice into a similar intensity. It sounds dark to him, though perhaps not as threatening as he'd like.

"Stay the fuck out of it." The man turns back toward the boy, jerks at his own trousers. His fingers dig into the young man's ass. Alex can almost see the bruises forming, in the shape of fingerprints.

"No!" the young man cries out.

Alex takes a step forward.

And everything goes black.

\* \* \*

He awakens with the taste of blood in his mouth. His own? He has no idea. He feels no pain. In fact he feels not much of anything, his body caught in a strange, half-conscious paralysis of emotion.

"Alex?" The voice is gentle, seeming to fall down on his face like soft rain. Alex opens his eyes. Liam's face looms over him, peering down into his eyes.

"Liam?" His mouth shapes the word, but he can't really hear it. He blinks. Liam's blurry face comes into sharper focus. His expression is concerned.

"Alex, are you okay?"

Alex isn't sure. He tries to move. Liam's arm snakes under him, helping him up. Alex feels no pain, nothing out of the ordinary. Just the taste of blood in his mouth, draining rich and metal-sweet down his throat.

"I..." He rubs the back of his neck, settling into a sitting position. "What happened?"

"I don't know." Liam brushes Alex's hair back from his forehead and peers more closely at him -- a strangely affectionate gesture. "I tracked you here and found you. You were unconscious and --" He breaks off.

Alex frowns. There's more to that sentence. A lot more.

"What? And what?"

Liam's lips compress. "We should just get you home." He starts to push to his feet, hands moving to grasp Alex's arms, to help him up. "You'll need to rest."



"And what?" Alex demands again. But as he starts to stand, he sees it out of the corner of his eye. Blood, red and thick. Everywhere.

He turns and looks, then turns away again. His stomach roils, then goes still.

"Take me home," he says.

Liam does.

\* \* \*

Liam makes him a cup of tea. They sit for a while at the table in the office, where short hours ago Alex was bent over the desk, fighting his emotional reaction to the sex he'd so desperately wanted, and yet still couldn't quite handle. There was no denying he'd wanted Liam. Still wants him. But the darkness lurks all around his edges, the memories he can't shake, that surged up and drowned him when he saw the young man's pale, vulnerable, naked skin.

He sips the tea, sets the cup down with exaggerated care. "Was he... like that... when you found me?"

Liam nods. Alex nods back and stares into the teacup. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a slow movement, and Liam's hand comes to brush lightly against the back of his own. Alex's hand makes a slight, almost imperceptible shift toward the vampire's, and Liam lets his palm settle more firmly against Alex's hand.

"I think it has something to do with the cross." His voice is gentle. "You couldn't have done that. Not by yourself."

Alex shakes his head a little. Part of him wants to accept the easy way out, but another part remembers. Not clearly, not in any kind of intelligent detail, but it still remembers. A red haze drifts at the back of his mind where he can vaguely see the shadows of his own hands tearing flesh open, diving into bloody wounds. The back of his throat tastes like copper pennies.

"But I did it." His voice has gone dull. Inside, he feels like something has shut down, as if a once-accessible part of him has closed itself off. He feels like he's lost part of himself. He wonders idly if he'll need it. If he does need it, will it ever come back?

Whatever the case, he can't ask Liam for any more help. Liam has made it clear he wants to step away from what felt like it was turning into a relationship, and Alex can't blame him.

Slowly, he lifts his eyes to meet the vampire's. Liam regards him with obvious concern. "I'm going home," Alex says quietly.

## Chapter Three

Alex hasn't been back to work in a couple of days. Liam is concerned. He knows Alex wasn't injured in the encounter in the alley. He also knows physical injuries aren't the concern here. Alex has been forced to work through a great deal lately, emotions and old wounds as raw as the torn flesh of the man in the alley. Liam realizes, also, that he's played a part in this, both for good and for ill. He knows he's been a help to Alex, but he's also hurt him in ways he knows Alex will never fully understand.

He also thinks they both could have done without the interference of the artifact.

If only he'd found that obscure reference in the book he'd been keeping in the bottom of his filing drawer earlier. He hadn't thought the book to be of any particular note, but it had held the key to the strange cross. It also explains what happened in the alleyway. And, he's fairly certain, explains Liam's own lapses -- the dream and its aftermath.

The cross isn't a Christian cross, or a religious artifact at all, which Liam suspected, since he was able to touch it. Rather, it's a catalyst item that transfers energies. It finds dark places inside and brings them out, makes them powerful. It's a weapon, making use of the fear and anger that lies inside every person to make that person strong and fearless, but uncaring of the consequences of his actions.

First, it turned Liam back toward his former self, unleashing the carnivore he'd been. Then it latched onto Alex's post-coital sadness, his memories of his abusive father, and turned him into a time bomb. If Alex hadn't run across the rapist in the alley, he probably wouldn't have known the artifact had affected him at all. But fortune had crossed their paths. Without that encounter, Liam never would have worked any of it out.

Liam feels bad about what happened. Not the killing -- as far as he's concerned, the prick deserved it -- but because of the effect it had on Alex, and the wedge it put between them. He cares about Alex, more than he wants to, more than he can admit. They've shared things he's never shared with anyone. This means something to him. To Liam, it's profound.

Carefully, he places the cross in the wooden crate he's prepared for it. It's time for the thing to go home, back to the arcane museum it came from, where it can be kept safely under wraps. He arranges the packing materials around it and activates the spell to keep it isolated in the box so its effects won't spread where they can harm anyone else. He seals the box and affixes an address to the top.

With this finished, it's time for him to go. He needs to see Alex. It's time for Alex to come home.

\* \* \*

Liam manages, barely, to get to Alex's apartment in broad daylight without killing himself. He's steaming a little when he gets to the door, in spite of all precautions. He waits a minute, waiting for the charred vampire smell to subside.

Before he can knock, Alex flings the door open and stares at him. "I can smell you," he says accusingly. "Just come in." He wheels and walks away from the door, toward the desk on the other side of the room.

Liam hesitates, then steps into the apartment. "Interesting change of pace," he comments. "*You* smelling *me* outside the door."

Alex gives a pained smile. He looks up at Liam from the backlit seat in front of the desk. He looks like shit. Like he's been holed up in here for days. He probably has been.

"I want you back at work tomorrow," Liam says. "Otherwise I'm going to have to cancel your benefits."

Alex shakes his head ruefully and looks at the desk, at the papers and pens scattered across its surface. Sunlight falls over him, isolating him from Liam's touch. Liam wonders if he's aware he's done this.

He waits.

"I don't think I can face it," Alex ventures after a time.

"Of course you can."

"You don't know what I did..." His voice catches and there are tears in it. Liam shifts in his chair. He wants to go to Alex, to take him in his arms, but of course he can't, because of the sunlight.

"No. But I know I've done worse."

Finally, Alex looks at him as if he understands. There is relief in Alex's eyes, but he's holding it at bay, as if afraid to acknowledge it.

Liam steps closer, aware of the boundaries of the sunlight. The heat prickles on his skin as he approaches it.

"I wasn't..." Alex swallows, closes his eyes a moment, then opens them again to look at Liam. "I wasn't me."

Liam wonders if Alex realizes how open he is, how vulnerable he has made himself. The look in Alex's eyes hits Liam in the gut; Alex shouldn't suffer like this. He doesn't deserve it.

"I know. I understand." He moves closer. "I know what it's like when your body isn't your own, when something else takes over, some deep, primal monster you can't control..." He trails off. He's only a few steps away from Alex now, and Alex is looking up at him. Looking for answers. Liam doesn't have answers. He has experience, empathy, but not much else.

Still, he's willing to offer Alex what he has. He closes the distance between them and touches Alex's face, there in the sunlight, lets his fingers trace his cheekbone until smoke begins to roll off the back of his hand.

Alex jerks his face back, and Liam withdraws. Alex is looking up at him in shock.

Liam smiles at him gently. "It'll be okay."

He steps back then, out of the circle of sunlight, back toward the door. But instead of leaving, he stops in the middle of the room and begins to unbutton his shirt.

Alex's face convulses, crumples, and he lets out a low, ragged sound, half-sob, half something primal and broken. Slowly, Liam peels his shirt off. Alex watches, staring, then finally gets up and walks to Liam. There are tears on his face. Alex embraces him, lays his face against Liam's shoulder, and weeps.

Liam cradles Alex's head against his chest and just lets him cry.

After a few minutes, Alex tries to push away from him. Liam catches a glimpse of his face, sees Alex is embarrassed now on top of everything else. Liam doesn't let him go. Alex starts to struggle, arms flailing. "Just let me go... Let me go..."

Mortification -- Liam knows the tone well. He pulls Alex against him and kisses him.

Alex fights him for a moment, then stills. Liam can taste the tears on his face, on his mouth, and savors them. He eases his hands over Alex's body, gentling him, as if this is the first time. Finally, Alex eases against him, and this time when Liam kisses him, he responds.

Liam loses himself quickly in the familiar warmth of Alex's mouth. Lust rises in him, a compulsion to take, to possess...

That's not right. That's not what Alex needs.

Liam slips his hands between his chest and Alex's and carefully undoes the buttons on Alex's shirt. His fingers touch the springy hair beneath, brush his skin ever so lightly, just enough to feel the hard, fast heartbeat. Alex is aroused, upset, disturbed... everything combining to make his normally steady heartbeat a raging cacophony inside his lean chest.

"Liam..." Alex says, and his voice cracks and whispers.

"Shh." Liam pushes the shirt back from Alex's shoulders, his hands stroking the warm skin. "I know what you are. And what you are is not what that thing made you."

Alex looks like he wants to protest, but he doesn't. "What do you want?" he asks.

Liam touches his face, tracing the lean lines, sliding a finger over Alex's lips. "I want you to be okay. I want you to understand what happened to you."

"I was violated..." Alex says, and the way he leaves the sentence hanging makes Liam think he didn't plan to say it at all.

"You were. Again. By me, and by that thing." A pang in Liam's heart. Why does Alex have to bear this? It isn't fair.

Alex is silent a moment, then frowns. "Your dream. That was the artifact, too. And so was... what happened after."

Alex's understanding relieves Liam. He was worried about trying to explain it, afraid Alex wouldn't accept the conclusions Liam had come to. But Alex has put the pieces together. He looks up at Liam, hope warring with the devastation on his face. "Do you... do you still want me?"

Gently, Liam kisses his forehead. "I always did. I just didn't want to hurt you." He brushes Alex's hair back. "Can you tell me what you need?"

Alex shakes his head, but it's not negation. It's confusion, then consideration, and Liam watches, quietly, as Alex mulls the question. "I need to know..." Alex stops again, then looks up, directly into Liam's eyes. "I need to know I'm not alone."

Liam smiles a little, then kisses him again. "You're never alone." And slowly, he goes to his knees, pulls Alex's trousers down, and sucks his cock.

It seems like a good thing to do. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's not what Alex wants, or needs. But it seems to Liam that Alex needs to know Liam still cares about him, cares about what happens to him, cares that he hurts. And he wants to fix some of that hurt. Maybe just the part he himself has inflicted, but that seems fair. He can't fix what the artifact did to Alex, and he can't fix what Alex did to the man in the alley. But he can show Alex that he does, indeed, have feelings for him.

Alex makes a strange sound, and Liam thinks at first that he's started crying again. He doesn't mind -- he sees no shame in tears -- but he hopes that's not the case, just because he wants Alex to be all right.

He sucks Alex's cock deep, reacquainting himself with the shape, the length, the taste of it. It feels good in his mouth. He needs touch and he is touched so rarely, and Alex has become something of a lifeline for him, a place he can go for comfort.

He closes his eyes and tries not to think. There are too many things running through his head, and this is about Alex, not about himself. Alex's hands close on his head, fingers digging into his scalp, and suddenly Alex thrusts into his mouth, shoving his cock deep down Liam's throat.

Liam would choke if he were human, but he's not, so it just surprises him. He lets Alex fuck his mouth, hard, sucks him down, feels Alex shuddering against him, hears him still making that odd noise that isn't quite a whimper. Alex pounds hard, then Liam feels his body tighten as he comes. Liam swallows; the come is hot and tastes like Alex's body. He makes a sound, involuntary. It feels so good, Alex's hot cock pulsing against his throat, his fingers digging into his scalp --

Alex drags himself free suddenly, and falls to his knees in a sudden movement. He jerks at Liam's trousers, opening them up, frees Liam's cock and shoves it down his throat.

Leaning back, Liam watches, wondering what exactly Alex is thinking. Of course he understands the self-loathing, the abhorrence of what Alex has been made to do. But unlike Liam, Alex hasn't killed innocents. Alex hasn't killed children, hasn't raped and tortured women in front of their husbands, hasn't slaughtered whole families, flayed nuns alive and lapped up the blood...

He shoves the thoughts back and closes his eyes, trying to lose himself in the sensation of Alex's mouth on his cock. But Alex is pushing too hard, pulling too much of Liam down into his throat, deliberately gagging himself.

Liam pushes him back and Alex lets him go, looking up into Liam's face. The emptiness in his eyes chills Liam. He strokes his lover's face gently. "Don't do this to yourself," he says. "Don't hurt yourself over it."

"You do," Alex says bluntly, and Liam can't deny that. He's surprised, though, that Alex has noticed.

"It's not the same thing," he protests. "What I did -- what I've done -- it's so much worse."



"But what you did came from a demon that was forced inside you. What I've done -- it was inside me already."

Liam regards him, still cupping his face with one hand. He caresses softly, feeling the stubble against his palm. He likes the way it feels, likes the way Alex looks when he's unshaven. "You know nothing about me," Liam says quietly. "You know nothing about what I was before. And whatever that artifact, dragged out of you, it has nothing to do with who you really are. I know that."

But Alex is broken, and Liam realizes, looking into his eyes, that he knows as little about Alex as Alex knows about him. "I don't think that's true..." Alex's voice trails off, but the pain in his eyes becomes suddenly very clear, defined. Liam looks down into it and for the first time sees something there that looks frighteningly like himself.

He kisses Alex carefully. He's feeling far too much, some of it good, some of it like shards of glass spearing into his heart. "Come to bed," he says.

"It's the middle of the day."

"I know. Which is why I'm tired." He smiles a little, and Alex relents. He slowly gets to his feet, pulling his trousers back into place. Liam just leaves his pants behind in a puddle on the floor and, naked, follows Alex into the bedroom.

## Chapter Four

Liam holds Alex in the wide bed, and they lie for a time that way. Liam is weary, because it's daytime, but he doesn't sleep. He lies still, with Alex's back nestled into his stomach, and he listens to his lover's heartbeat.

He nestles more closely and closes his eyes, drawing in the warmth, the scent. Tension rolls out of his body in waves, an almost orgasmic sensation in itself, as Alex's body heat soaks into him. "I was wrong," he mumbles, and the words surprise him.

"About what?"

Liam doesn't want to answer the question. He's not certain why he brought up the topic in the first place. He strokes his cheek against the back of Alex's neck and finally says, "I shouldn't have pushed you away. I should have trusted what we had. Should have trusted you."

Alex is still for a moment, even his breathing arrested for that short time. Then he says, quietly, "You should have trusted yourself."

"I can't," Liam tells him. "I never can."

Again, Alex is silent. Then, slowly, he rolls over to look at Liam. He studies the vampire's face, squinting because he's too close. "I trust you," he says. "I always have. Even when I probably shouldn't have."

"I know," says Liam. "And I'm sorry."

Alex regards him, frowning. "Why shouldn't you have pushed me away?"

Liam looks at him directly and says as much as he can allow himself to say. "I need you."

A moment passes, soft but strained in its way, a moment where everything has been said but nothing has been said at all, and finally Alex lies back on the bed, his head

on the pillow. "I hated him," he says softly. "I can't remember all of it, but I can remember enough. I wanted to rip him to pieces, and... I did."

He stops, and Liam hears him swallow. He turns his head to look at Alex, and sees the tears well again.

"Is that what it feels like for you?" Alex's voice is the knife-edge of a whisper, compressed by tears so that he can barely speak. "Is that what it is to kill, and hunt?"

"No." Liam speaks softly, as well, and he reaches over to touch Alex's face, to brush tears from his cheek.

Alex looks surprised. "What is it like, then?"

"It's cold. There's no hatred. Just a need for blood." He hears the Irish sliding into his voice and makes no attempt to hide it. "Cold, calculating pursuit. Amusement... icy desire..."

Alex is staring at him. Liam stops. They are still for the space of a breath, then Alex reaches out to touch Liam's forehead, just between his brows. "You were there, too."

"What do you mean?"

Alex's finger traces down the bridge of Liam's nose, then over his upper lip. "I hated you. You helped me, you made me care about you, then you hurt me."

"I'm sorry. The artifact --"

"I don't think it was all the artifact. I think you might have done it eventually, anyway."

Taken aback, Liam opens his mouth to reply, then closes it again. Alex is right. Eventually, Liam would have done exactly what he did, artifact or no artifact, abortive biting or not. He would have stepped back.

Alex nods. "I'm right," he says, his tone rueful. Then he shifts forward and kisses Liam's mouth.

Liam lets him, tasting his warm tongue. "Make love to me. Now." He lies back again on the bed, sprawled on his back. He lets his thighs fall open and spreads his arms across the bed.

Alex stares at him. He looks almost afraid. Liam closes his eyes.

He lies there for a time, just waiting. And finally, finally, soft hands touch his body, fingers trailing over his chest. He hears Alex's breath catch, hears his heart speed up and feels the warmth in the pads of his fingers as they caress him, sliding over his nipples, down to his belly. Alex traces the circle of his navel, then his fingers move softly through pubic hair, down to the crease of Liam's groin. His hand moves under Liam's thigh and lifts it, opening him.

Liam keeps his eyes closed. He trusts Alex, even though Alex doesn't trust himself. Fingers -- long, graceful fingers -- Liam pictures them in his head -- trace the inside of his thigh, down to his knee, then drift back up until they cradle his scrotum. Gasping, Liam moves his other leg to the side, tilts his hips up.

Alex's warm mouth closes on his balls and Liam makes a strangled sound in the back of his throat. He squeezes his eyes closed to keep from looking, not sure why this feels important, except that it's a tangible indication of his trust for Alex. He's not sure Alex is quite clear-headed enough at the moment to understand that.

Tongue and teeth massage his testicles and Liam lets himself sink into the pillow. Alex knows how to work him -- he's learned Liam's signals, knows how to tell what Liam likes. Liam thinks vaguely that he really can't express his trust any more profoundly than to let Alex bite him in the nuts.

And God, but it feels good. Alex sucks and laves him, his tongue pushing between his testicles, moving them apart, and Liam feels like he's going to come to pieces. He's tempted to grab Alex's head but he doesn't, clenching the bed sheets instead, crumpling them in his hands, and Alex's tongue is moving and suddenly it's moving down, and back, and circling, and Alex is rimming him. Liam is hot and sinking hard into the beginnings of an orgasm that might bloody well kill him and suddenly he has a thought.

Thoughts are bad in this situation but it's there and Liam can't ignore it. Opening his eyes, he grabs Alex's head and shoves it back. Alex's face is lax, his eyes hazy.

"Why did you do that?" Liam demands.

Alex licks his lips, and Liam doesn't like the look that comes into his eyes. It's too heavy, still laced with guilt and hatred. "You didn't like it?"

"If you're doing it because you want to, that's one thing, but if you're just trying to humiliate yourself on me then I want no part of it no matter how fucking good it feels."

Alex is starting to come back to himself. "I don't know... I don't know... I can't make it go away and it hurts... Liam --"

God, he's crying again. Liam reaches a hand out to him. "Alex..." He leans forward and hooks his hand behind Alex's neck. "Alex, you need to get rid of it. Pound it into me. Fuck it into me. Do what you have to do but get rid of it."

Alex looks down at him, then up at the ceiling. Then back into Liam's face and Liam sees the deep-down revulsion come to the surface as Alex grabs Liam's knees, pushes them wide and back, and shoves hard into him.

Liam flinches. He's clenched without thinking about it, and the sudden penetration slices into him like a knife. He can't hold back a harsh gasp, but when Alex's gaze flickers in doubt, Liam grabs his shoulders and drags him closer. "Do it."

And Alex bends his head and arches his back and slams into Liam over and over, harder and harder. Liam makes his body go loose, to accept the invasion, though it's more difficult without benefit of lube, and it hurts like hell. He doesn't care, though; the pain slices into him in deep stilettos of arousal and he shoves back against Alex, taking him in deep and hard. The line between pain and pleasure, for him, is almost nonexistent -- they mutate one into the other. Rough fucking is as good for him as anything gentle could ever be, often even better.

Alex is sobbing now, letting it out, the raw, animal sound shuddering through every inch of him as his cock spears into Liam. Suddenly Alex howls, arching, and Liam feels him climax inside him. He looks up into Alex's face and finally sees the hatred wringing out of him, leaving his face. Alex fucks him deep, to the root and still pushing, as if there is more to shove in, as if he wants to disappear inside Liam's body.

Liam reaches up and cups Alex's face between his hands. He aches -- Alex has fucked him about as hard as he's ever been fucked and it hurts all the way into his chest. His hands on Alex's face are gentle. "Alex..." He strokes Alex's hair back from his face. It's damp with sweat.

Alex is still trying to regain control, his body shivering, his face contorted and wet with tears. "Liam, I can't... I don't..."

The words come hard, and Alex can't seem to make any more after that. Liam strokes his face, runs a finger along his lips, as the last, shuddering sobs wrench through Alex's body. He waits, quiet, until finally Alex sinks down onto him. Liam puts his arms around him and holds him, and, gradually, he relaxes.

"I hurt you," Alex said.

"No."

For once, Alex doesn't argue. He nestles his face against Liam's chest. "I need you," he breathes.

Liam slides his hand through Alex's hair, accepting the inevitability that he, too, has needs. Not physical. And that Alex, almost by accident, has come to fill them. "I know."

He kisses Alex's hair, and closes his eyes.

## **Elizabeth Jewell**

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