

The Lost Books 1&2

Evangeline Anderson



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ISBN 978-1-59632-994-2 Available in PDF, HTML, Microsoft Reader, and Mobi Editor: Barbara Marshall Cover Artist: April Martinez Printed in the United States of America

Published by Loose Id LLC 870 Market St, Suite 1201 San Francisco CA 94102-2907 www.loose-id.com

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About this Title

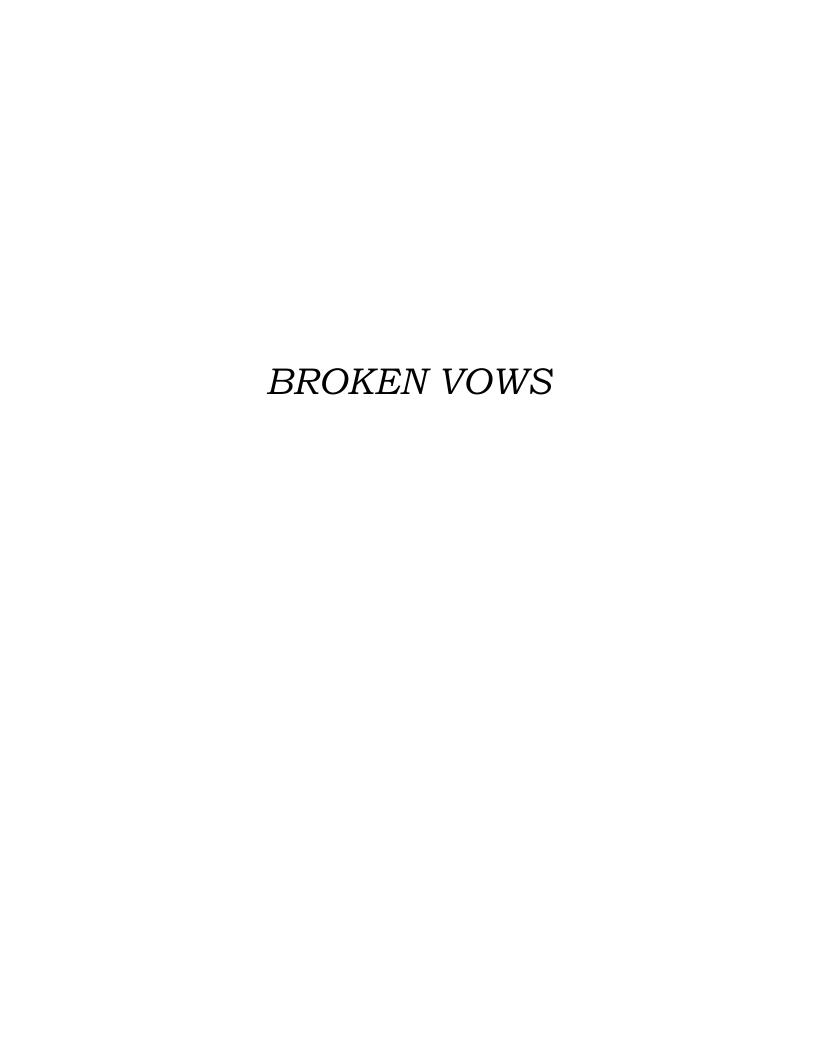
Genre: LGBT Vampire Paranormal

Enter the world of *The Lost*, a tribe of vampires who are sworn to coexist with humans while leaving them strictly alone. However, that isn't always possible...

The Lost 1: Broken Vows: Daniel's looking for answers about his sexuality. He's sure just one night with an older, experienced man will finally answer the questions that have been tormenting him for years. But he doesn't expect the older man to be a gorgeous vampire named Gabrielle. It's love at first sight for Daniel but Gabrielle has made a vow not to interfere in human affairs.

The Lost 2: Blood Hustler: James became a vampire almost two hundred years ago and recently lost his only companion. Even though he's lonely, the grief's too fresh to be looking for another man to fill the hole in his heart. Then Tad, a young street hustler, offers to sell James the best sex he's ever had. James knows he shouldn't bind a human to him, especially one as young as Tad who hasn't experienced life yet, but the boy's hungry heart calls to his own.

Publisher's Note: This book contains one re-edited, revised story previously released by another publisher, and one new, unreleased story. It also contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices, violence.



Chapter One

"Sixth Street and Main." The bus driver's gravelly voice cut through Daniel's dull contemplation of the darkness outside the dirty rectangular window. Around him the other passengers were frozen to their seats like frightened sheep unwilling to be herded off at this particular destination. Everyone knew that Sixth Street was where the deviants played. It was where you could get a blowjob if you stepped into the right back room of the right bar. Where men wearing black leather and chains waited to beat you or suck you or fuck you—or to be fucked by you. However sick your preference was, however twisted your desire, you could find it on Sixth Street, or so Daniel had heard.

Cowards, he thought contemptuously, looking around at the anxious faces. But he knew it wasn't just the gay element keeping his fellow passengers glued to their seats. There were other things that stalked the night in this part of town—one bus stop down to be precise, on Seventh and Main—the Crimson Quarter, as it was called.

Vampires. The thought gave him an uneasy rush of adrenaline, and he looked out the smeared glass window again, as though one of the Lost might appear out of the neon-lit night. It was a foolish fear. The vamps kept themselves quarantined to the Seventh Street block. As long as you stayed out of their area, they wouldn't bother you. It was the best compromise the city fathers could arrange, and to give the vamps credit, they hadn't crossed the line yet. Too many curious humans were willing to risk becoming prey—so the vampires never went thirsty.

And anyway, he reminded himself, it wasn't vampires he was interested in. He had boarded the bus for Sixth Street with one intention. To find out if he was...

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Queer. "Are you queer, boy? Are you a faggot?" His father's harsh words rang in Daniel's head like the clanging of a bell, and he clenched his jaw. If only he had hidden his sketchbook better. If only the old man hadn't come snooping around his room, looking for God knows what. Maybe evidence that his only son was gay, or maybe something to refute that fear. If he had been hoping to find a few *Playboy* or *Hustler* magazines half hidden under the bed, he'd been disappointed. All he found was the expanse of creamy drawing paper filled with nudes—male nudes—and all drawn by his son.

Sensitive, artistic, creative. Weren't those different words for faggot? Daniel knew his father was disappointed that he wasn't on his college football team like his old man had been before him. But at five-seven and one-sixty, he could hardly be a linebacker, and even if his body had been fit for the sport, his face would have ruled him out at once. Thick, dark blond hair; wide, dark blue eyes; and a mouth like a pink bow looked back at him from the bus's dirty window. Handsome wasn't the word to describe him—pretty was the correct term. He had carried that burden all his life.

But pretty or not, he'd dated girls, even kissed a few. Hell, his senior year at Dumont High, Prissy Rogers, the class slut, had gone down on him behind the bleachers. It had been a disappointing experience to be sure, but a heterosexual one all the same, one Daniel had felt no need to repeat. He liked girls—they made the best friends, the most willing confidants, and they were easier to be around than the testosterone-driven jocks who had clogged the hallways of his high school. But...they weren't much good for anything else, in Daniel's opinion.

Still, just because he had little interest in the opposite sex didn't make him gay, did it? What he needed was a trip to the wild side—just one experience with another guy—another *man*, he hoped. Someone older, someone experienced. Someone who could show him the way. Then he would know for sure. Knowing the worst would be better than not knowing at all, or so he told himself.

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"Are you a faggot?" His father's words poked him again, like a hot needle inside his brain. "Well, are you?"

"I don't know, Dad," he muttered under his breath, staring at the pulsing neon lights of Sixth Street sliding past his window. "But I guess I'll find out."

"Seventh Street and Main. Everybody for Seventh and Main out now." The bus driver's voice cut through his reverie, and Daniel jumped up with a curse. Seventh and Main—the Crimson Quarter! He'd been sitting here feeling sorry for himself and not noticing that the bus moved to the next stop. Now he'd gone one stop too far.

A limp gray man sitting across from him looked up from his paper with something like surprise in his bespectacled eyes. "You getting off here?" he asked Daniel, who stood, undecided, in the aisle.

Daniel swore again, more loudly. Get off or stay on? Risk the danger of Seventh to get back to Sixth, or sit back down like a good little lamb and ride to the end of the line where he could catch another bus home? Home, where his father sat and waited to demand where he had been and what he had been doing. And let's not forget with *whom* he had been doing it.

The grim image decided him. A whole pack of vampires wasn't as scary as the thought of his father, half-disappointed, half-enraged as he questioned and badgered and probed to find out where, why, who, when.

"Seventh and Main? Anyone?" The bus driver, an older black man with knowledgeable yellow eyes, stared at him in the rearview mirror.

"Yes," Daniel said, moving to the front of the bus. "Me. I'm getting off."

"It's suicide," the bus driver said amiably, with no excitement in his tone.
"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Daniel walked to the folding doors and waited for them to open with a muted *whoosh*.

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"Suit y'self," the bus driver said, and before he knew it, Daniel was standing on the corner of Seventh Street and Main, watching the bus disappear into the distance.

Seventh wasn't nearly as brightly lit as Sixth, he noticed, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and shivering against the icy blast of air that swirled around him. In fact, it was damn dark—even the streetlamps were burned-out husks. The city couldn't pay workers enough to come into the Crimson Quarter to change them, and the vampires plain didn't care. Why should they? It was rumored that they could see in the dark as easily as they could in the light.

The neon lights of Sixth beckoned him, only a block away. The lights of experience, the lights of knowledge. Daniel squared his shoulders, shoved his hands tighter into the pockets of his jean jacket, and headed for them, his steps quick and light. On either side of the dark street, signs glowed in dim, flickering red. CRIMSON QUARTER HOUSE OF PAIN, UNDER THE FANG, and THE BLOOD LUST beckoned him, and he passed by them all. He was more interested in the dance and leather clubs of Sixth Street than the dank and dangerous blood bars of Seventh.

Nothing to it, Daniel told himself, keeping his chin high. Just stay out of the bars and keep moving. The green street sign that proclaimed SIXTH STREET came into view, and he felt a renewed sense of confidence. After all, it wasn't like the vamps could appear out of thin air, was it?

"Hello there, my pretty one." The low, grating voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Daniel stopped dead in his tracks—he had to, or he would have run into the tall, cadaverously thin man who suddenly stood directly in front of him.

"Going somewhere?" the man inquired, grinning widely to expose a pair of long, yellowish, needle-sharp fangs. A vampire—one of the Lost. Daniel had never seen one before, but this one looked like he had imagined—dark, foul, wicked.

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He swallowed hard and heard a clicking in his throat. His mouth was dry, and his heart pounded so hard that he felt like it made his entire body shake. The skeletal vamp was dressed in black and had long, greasy, black-gray hair straggling down his skeletal shoulders. He looked like a concentration-camp survivor, but there was something about his face that spoke of ancient evil and hideous strength.

Stay calm, Daniel told himself. Let him know you're not interested and move on. "I'm going to Sixth Street," he said, moving to step around the vampire. "Excuse me, please." It sounded ridiculously polite, but you didn't piss off creatures that were capable of having you for supper if they felt like it.

"I don't think so." The vampire moved to block his path almost before he could take a step in the new direction. "You're too tender a piece of meat for Sixth Street, my pretty. The likes of you belongs down on Seventh with us—in the Crimson Quarter."

"Please." Daniel took a step backward, nearly stumbling. "I...I got off at the wrong bus stop. I didn't mean to come down here at all."

"That's too bad. You're here now." The vampire grinned wider and leaned forward to nuzzle Daniel's neck. His breath was cold and foul—a rank odor of stale air and old blood like meat gone rotten in the refrigerator.

Daniel flinched away, but the vampire had his arm in a horribly strong, bony grip, and he seemed to be everywhere at once. No matter which way Daniel moved, he couldn't get away. He was going to die here, with the lights of Sixth Street shining mockingly in his eyes, without ever really knowing the truth about himself.

"So sweet, my pretty," the vampire hissed. Needle-sharp fangs grazed the vulnerable flesh of his neck, drawing droplets of blood, and he tasted terror, slick and hot, at the back of his throat. He would disappear off the face of the planet without a trace. His father would probably be glad.

A deep voice cut through the frantic sound of his heart pounding in his ears. "Let the boy go, Baird." Abruptly, the stale, foul breath of the creature

holding him was replaced by the clear night air. Daniel gasped it gratefully, feeling like he might hyperventilate.

"This is none of your concern, Gabriel." The thin vampire still held him in an unbreakable grip, one arm locked around his throat, but there was unmistakable tension in his grating voice.

"I'm making it my concern." The speaker came into view: a big man with thick brown hair and hazel eyes that flashed in the darkness. He was dressed in faded jeans and a cream-colored cable-knit sweater that emphasized the width of his shoulders. The look on his face was stern, determined. "The boy said he didn't mean to come here—he's not fair game. So let him go."

"Too late." A cold tongue traced the shallow wounds on his neck, and Daniel shivered with helpless disgust. "I've tasted him now," the vampire called Baird said. "I've marked him as a willing victim—he's mine."

"Do you want to go with him?"

It took Daniel a minute to realize that the man with brown hair and broad shoulders was talking to him. Mutely, he shook his head. He wanted to say something more definite—wanted to scream *no* at the top of his lungs—but his tongue was frozen to the roof of his mouth.

"He doesn't want you, Baird. He doesn't choose you," the man called Gabriel said. "Release him now or suffer the consequences."

"I'll show you consequences," Baird growled. He let go of Daniel and launched himself at the man. There was a white blur as Gabriel met him halfway. Daniel watched, wide-eyed and unable to move, as a fight so rapid it was impossible to follow took place in front of him. He barely had time to stumble backward out of the way before it was over.

"There." Gabriel appeared in front of him, brushing dust off his sweater and not even breathing hard. Of Baird, there was no sign. As suddenly as he had appeared, he had vanished, much to Daniel's intense relief.

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"I... You... Thank you," he managed to stutter, staring up into the face of his savior.

"You're welcome, little one." Gabriel smiled at him. "Now let's take a look at your neck."

Before Daniel could protest, strong hands tilted his face to one side to expose the long, ragged scratches the vampire had made. It made him feel vulnerable to expose his neck like this, but not in the horrible, helpless way caused by Baird's ugly touch.

"This isn't good." Gabriel was frowning. "Baird really did mark you as willing."

"I don't know what that means. I just want to go to Sixth Street." Daniel looked at him pleadingly. "I want to forget this ever happened. I swear to God, I won't ever cross over to Seventh again."

"It doesn't matter if you cross or not. Baird's mark on you will draw other vampires to you. You won't be safe anywhere in the city." Gabriel shook his head. "I can't fix this here. You will have to come home with me."

Daniel gaped at him. Being invited home with a handsome stranger was exactly what he had been hoping for, but not under these circumstances. He wanted to get some experience, some self-knowledge, not some first aid from a well-meaning but probably straight man who just happened to be wandering in the Crimson Quarter at the right time to rescue him. Besides, what did he really know about the guy?

Gabriel didn't give him time to decide. Taking Daniel's hand in his own, he led him down a side street and into a maze of dark alleys deeper into the Quarter. Before Daniel could protest, they were standing in front of a set of steps that led down to a basement apartment.

"Wait a minute." He pulled his hand out of Gabriel's, eyeing the subterranean dwelling with sudden unease. "What is this place?"

"My home." Gabriel turned to face him. "I'm making myself vulnerable bringing you here, you know..." He frowned. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Daniel," Daniel said. "But I don't want..."

"It's not about what you want—it's about cleaning that mark and making you safe." Gabriel tugged him down the steps. Before he knew it, Daniel was through the door and into a small, warmly lit room.

As apartments went, it wasn't stylish or expensive, but the overstuffed furniture and the flames crackling in the small fireplace made it look cozy and inviting. The walls, a warm pale gold, were lined with bookshelves. He noted the worn but clean red rug on the hardwood floor. A fluffy white Persian cat came up to Gabriel and wound around his ankles while voicing a rusty purr.

"My cat, Isabel," Gabriel said apologetically. "Excuse me a minute while I feed her, won't you?"

"Uh, sure." Daniel felt the knot of tension that had been building in his chest all night loosen, just a bit. He was an animal lover himself. Surely a guy who had a cat and treated it well couldn't be bad. He settled onto the couch, which was a few shades darker red than the rug, and shrugged out of his jean jacket.

"Now that she's contented, we should have some peace." Gabriel came around the corner, startling Daniel. How could he move so quietly and so quickly? For the first time, Daniel wondered uneasily exactly how Gabriel had been able to defeat the vampire. Everything had happened so fast. Weren't vamps supposed to have superhuman strength? So then how...?

"I hope you don't mind, but it's too damn hot in here for me." Gabriel interrupted his thoughts by pulling the sweater over his head, exposing a bare, muscular chest. He kicked off his shoes too, so he was wearing only the tight, faded jeans. The firelight licked across his body, turning his skin golden and adding red highlights to the rich brown of his hair.

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"I...um..." Daniel tried hard not to stare. Whatever Gabriel was, if he was straight and decided Daniel wasn't, and caught him staring... Well, he'd been beaten up enough after gym class in high school to know how that scenario always ended.

"It's just that my body temperature is naturally lower than yours—than a human's," Gabriel explained. "So I feel hot more quickly."

"Than a..." Daniel's head whipped up, and he stared at the man beside him on the sofa in sudden terror. "So you're...?"

"A vampire." Gabriel said it as though it was the most natural thing in the world. He smiled, revealing fangs every bit as sharp looking as Baird's, although considerably whiter. They glimmered like twin pearls in the firelight.

Daniel jumped up, panic buzzing in his head, but Gabriel's long, strong fingers encircled his wrist. The vampire wasn't squeezing or hurting him in any way, but it was clear he couldn't break free.

"Sit down," he said in gentle voice. "I didn't mean to scare you. What did you think I was, anyway?"

"I don't know." Daniel sank unwillingly onto the edge of the couch, keeping as much distance between himself and the vamp as he could. "But you don't...you don't look like a vampire."

"Really?" Gabriel smiled at him again, an expression that reached all the way up to his hazel eyes. "And what do vampires look like, Daniel?"

"Like...like him—the other one that attacked me. The one you called Baird."

"Oh, so all of the Lost are evil and ugly? Slimy wretches climbing out of the sewer to prey on the innocent human boys they find trying to escape their territory?" Gabriel's voice wasn't angry, but sad, with a tinge of sorrow in its soft tones that made Daniel swallow hard.

"No, I...I didn't mean it that way," he protested. "I'm sorry if what I said came out wrong. I just..."

Gabriel released him. "Don't apologize. To be honest, there are more vampires like Baird out there than like me. I'm a Guardian—sworn to protect the innocent against my kind. You're lucky I happened to be out tonight instead of home in front of the fire with a book." He sighed. "But it gets lonely here with no one but Isabel for company, so I came out just in time to find you."

"Yeah—uh, thank you." Daniel licked his dry lips. "So you're not going to hurt me? Bite me?"

"I didn't say that," Gabriel said quietly. He reached out again, catching Daniel's wrist before he could rise from the couch. "Settle down, I'm not going to bleed you dry. But I'll have to clean the wound Baird made and put my own mark on you to keep you safe. Then I'll let you go." He tugged on Daniel's arms, pulling him closer to his broad chest. "Come a little closer, and we can begin."

Chapter Two

"But..." Daniel felt like his head was spinning—everything was moving so damn *fast*. Gabriel had somehow captured him in his muscular arms and was nuzzling at his exposed throat.

"Take off your shirt, little one—it will make things easier," the vampire breathed in his ear. This close, Daniel couldn't help noticing that Gabriel's golden skin had a warm, faintly spicy scent. But as much as he might secretly have wanted this seduction to happen, he still wasn't used to being manhandled by another guy.

"Wait a minute." He fought to be free of Gabriel's embrace, and the vampire let him go. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "When you said you'd clean my cuts, I thought you meant with some kind of first-aid kit or something."

Gabriel threw back his head and laughed, a warm sound that seemed to flow through Daniel. "Not to worry, little one, I'm not trying to seduce you. But no first-aid kit in the world can rid you of the venom of a hostile vampire. Only the touch of a Guardian can do that."

"The touch?" Daniel looked at him doubtfully. "But you were..." He gestured at Gabriel's full red mouth. "I mean, I thought you were going to, uh, kiss me or something." He blushed like an idiot. Damn it, no one watching him would have been able to tell he had actually gotten on the stupid bus in the first place looking for an encounter with another man. Not the way he was acting.

"I wasn't," Gabriel denied softly. He reached out and stroked along Daniel's flushed cheek with one finger. "I was going to lick your neck and suck it to draw out the venom." His voice grew more serious. "I have to do it. Otherwise the wounds will fester and poison your blood. Come." He tried to draw Daniel close again, but he resisted.

"Wait... Will you...will you promise not to bite my neck?" Daniel eyed the pearly fangs doubtfully, his heart pumping in his chest. Here was a chance to be close to another man—as close as he'd wanted to be. But under circumstances he had never imagined. He was scared, he admitted to himself—scared to death to let the strange, handsome Gabriel touch him again, no matter how badly he wanted to give in and do what the vampire ordered.

"Daniel." Gabriel stroked his cheek again, a tender smile creeping over his face. "I swear on the soul I lost when I became what I am that I will *not* bite you on the neck. Will that do?"

"I...I guess." Daniel fidgeted. "You lost your soul?"

Gabriel shrugged, apparently unconcerned. "Why do you think they call us the Lost? When my earthly body is destroyed, I will go neither to heaven nor to hell. I will simply cease to exist. But that is many millennia in the future, and I need to clean your wound before it starts to fester *now*." He leaned forward, a stern look in his eyes. "Take off your shirt, Daniel, and come here."

Feeling dazed, Daniel did as the vampire commanded, pulling off his pale blue T-shirt and moving into Gabriel's arms. Instead of going for his neck at once, however, Gabriel enfolded him into a warm embrace. His skin was a little cooler than normal, but it felt good against Daniel's own overheated flesh.

"There," the vampire murmured softly into his hair. "Relax, little one. You have nothing to fear from me."

Daniel didn't know if he believed the vampire, but he found himself relaxing all the same, sinking against Gabriel's muscular side even though his heart galloped in his chest. At Gabriel's urging, he laid his head against the vampire's right arm and felt the biceps flex against his neck as he bared the wounded side of his throat.

"That's good," Gabriel whispered, his cool breath sending a shiver of chill bumps down Daniel's spine. Then his tongue began a slow, sensual journey down the scratches on Daniel's throat.

Daniel's breath caught in his chest, and he was instantly hard. Damn! If only this were happening under different circumstances, he would have been delirious. As it was, he wasn't sure about Gabriel's orientation, or for that matter, his own, and it was getting more awkward by the minute. On one hand, the vampire had told him he was cleaning the wounds to prevent infection. On the other hand, the way he was licking and sucking Daniel's throat felt undeniably sensual—hell, *sexual*.

He shifted uncomfortably in the vampire's embrace, a thousand questions running through his brain. Do I like this because he's a guy or just because it feels good? Does he mean anything by it? Is he straight? Gay? What if he notices I'm hard? The last question made him feel so self-conscious that he didn't think he could stand it. His cock throbbed like a bar of hot lead in his jeans, and he longed for a blanket or something to cover it. His denim jacket lay just out of reach, over the arm of the couch.

"Almost done, Daniel." The sensual voice in his ear made him feel closer to panic—what if the vampire noticed the state he was in? Then a large, warm hand reached down to rest lightly on the tent in his jeans. The gesture wasn't lewd or seductive, more reassuring. "Don't worry about this," Gabriel murmured in his ear. "I am incapable of giving healing without pleasure. No matter what your preferences, your body is bound to react to it."

"Oh." Daniel's mouth felt as dry as a sandstorm. "I didn't... I mean..." His cock ached to thrust against the hand cupping it, but he didn't dare. When the vampire moved his hand and turned his attention fully to Daniel's neck, Daniel wished he hadn't.

But soon the sensation of Gabriel's mouth on his neck drove every other thought from his mind. The vampire's tongue was warm and wet and thorough, stroking along the side of his throat, and every once in a while, Gabriel would stop licking to suck at the sensitive flesh. Daniel felt the sharp edges of his fangs brushing his throat, but they never drew blood.

Unable to help himself, Daniel groaned low in his throat. A girl had given him a hickey once, on a dare, when he was a junior in high school, but that had been nothing compared to the sensual rush of pleasure he experienced under the vampire's gentle touch. God, it was driving him insane! He was sure that if Gabriel didn't stop soon, he would come just from having his neck sucked.

Just as he felt he was going to explode, the sensations stopped. Daniel didn't know whether to feel relieved or frustrated. His cock throbbed in his pants, and his balls ached with pent-up tension.

"Are you all right?" Gabriel looked at him, a concerned expression in his hazel eyes.

"Sure." Daniel made an attempt to sit up straighter on the couch and took a deep breath. "Are, uh, are you done?" He hoped he didn't sound too disappointed.

"Not quite." Gabriel smiled at him and stood smoothly in one motion, like a cat arching its back. "But you've lost some blood, and you're going to lose a bit more before we're finished. Do you want something to drink?"

"I, uh..." Daniel licked his lips. "What do you mean about losing more blood?" he asked suspiciously.

Gabriel sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Baird put a mark on you when he bit you—a mark of willingness. It's like...almost like a beacon to other vampires. It will draw them to you no matter where you are, unless I do something to negate it."

"What are you going to do?" Daniel drew back, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"You still don't trust me, do you?" Gabriel looked at him sadly, then shook his head. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. I'm going to put a stronger mark—my

own mark—on you. That way if you run into any more of the Lost, they'll see you're under my protection and leave you alone."

"But..." Daniel put a hand to the scratches on the side of his neck. "You promised you wouldn't bite me on the neck," he protested. It was all he needed—to come home with obvious teeth marks on his throat for his dad to see. There would be no use trying to convince his father that the marks had come from some amorous woman he'd managed to pick up while he was out. Besides, wouldn't he, Daniel, be the one putting hickeys on the girl's neck if that were the scenario? Letting another man mark *him* seemed strange...almost wrong in a way, even if it did excite him. Submissive—that was the word he was looking for.

"I'm not going to bite your neck," Gabriel said, interrupting Daniel's confused thoughts. "In order to negate Baird's mark, mine must be in a more intimate place."

"More...intimate?" Daniel felt his mouth go dry.

Gabriel nodded. "The femoral artery should do."

"Femoral..." Daniel frowned, trying to remember the cat he'd dissected last semester in Biology 101. Being an artist, he'd been more interested in the muscles and form than the function of the structures he was studying.

The vampire sighed. "High on the inside of your thigh." He gestured at Daniel's jeans, where, thankfully, the embarrassing hard-on had gone down at last. "You're going to have to take off your pants."

"I...I..." Daniel was up in a flash and backing away. This time Gabriel didn't try to stop him.

"I know it's not easy," the vampire said. "Especially if you have no interest in other men. But you have to trust me on this, Daniel. It's necessary." He was between Daniel and the door in a move so fast, it looked like a blur. "Come back to the couch," he said, putting a comforting hand on Daniel's shoulder. "We'll talk awhile first until you get used to the idea."

Feeling like he had no choice, Daniel allowed himself to be led back to the couch.

"Do you want something to drink?" Gabriel asked him again. "I'm sorry; I don't have anything to eat but tuna, and that's Isabel's. Vampires can't digest solid foods."

"Do you miss it? Eating?" Daniel was surprised that the question came out so naturally, but he found he was genuinely interested in the answer. What must it be like to live as one of the Lost?

"Sometimes," he admitted. "Although I probably don't miss the same foods you would. Cuisine was much different back at the time I lost my soul." He put an arm over the back of the couch, just behind Daniel's head but not quite touching him. "I guess your favorite things to eat are those meat patty things and those chocolate-flavored ice drinks."

"Cheeseburgers and milkshakes?" Daniel couldn't help smiling. "Either you got made a vampire in the fifties or you've been watching too many McDonald's commercials. I'm more into Red Bull and tofu."

Gabriel shrugged. "Tofu, meat burgers, it's all the same to me. I can have none of it, so it all runs together." He smiled. "So tell me, Daniel, how did you end up in the Crimson Quarter tonight?"

"Like I told the other vamp—er, guy. I got off on the wrong bus stop." Daniel stared into the fire and tried to keep his face expressionless.

"You said you were trying to get to Sixth Street." Gabriel's voice was soft. "Any particular reason for that?"

"No, I just..." Daniel wiped his sweating palms on his jeans. "Just wanted to check it out. It... My buddies dared me to. To go down and see what...what they do down there." The lie left his lips unconvincingly, and he stared harder at the flickering flames in the grate, feeling miserable. If he'd been sure of the vampire's orientation...but no, he couldn't tell. He wasn't about to risk coming

out to someone who could bend him into a pretzel if the mood took him. Even if he were sure he wanted to come out—which he wasn't.

"A bet, hmm? Is that right?" Gabriel sounded amused.

"Yeah, that's right." Daniel nodded, never taking his gaze from the fire.

"Well, then I won't hold you up any longer than necessary. You could still win your bet if we hurry." Gabriel shifted closer to him and reached over to tilt Daniel's chin so that he had no choice but to look at the vampire. Gabriel's hazel eyes looked golden in the flickering firelight. "We need to do this, Daniel. Take off your pants. I have to mark you."

There was such a tone of command in that low, warm voice that Daniel shivered. He stood, pulling off his jeans and briefs along with his shoes and socks before he could think about it. Then he sat back on the couch, hyperaware of how the upholstery prickled against his naked backside. At least he wasn't hard—he had that much to be thankful for.

"Very good." Gabriel knelt on the floor in front of him, placing large, warm palms on his knees. The firelight gilded his broad back, casting his face in shadows. "Are you ready, Daniel?" he asked. "I'll try to make this quick and painless."

Daniel nodded. He wasn't sure if this process would be more like being seduced or undergoing a medical procedure, but he had certainly never had a doctor as handsome or tender as Gabriel.

"If it makes you feel better, you can close your eyes." Gabriel was spreading his legs now, gently but inexorably, and easing between his thighs. Daniel didn't know if it would make him feel better or not, but it was a moot point. He couldn't have torn his eyes away from the sight of Gabriel's head bending over his inner thighs even if he knew the sight would make him go blind.

Warm breath puffed against the side of his balls and cock, causing his shaft to stir as Gabriel moved closer. Once again, he wondered about the vampire's sexual preference. If he was straight, could he really get so close to another man *there* without being bothered by it? Was it just business to him? Just food? Daniel was willing to bet a straight guy would've lost his lunch right about now, but Gabriel only nuzzled closer, searching for the perfect place to bite.

Daniel watched in fascination as the vampire's cheek brushed casually against his cock. Then, to his horror, he felt himself growing hard again. *Not now...not now!* Then a hot, wet sensation began at the junction where his thigh met his torso, and he realized that Gabriel was licking him there—sucking the vulnerable flesh the same way he had sucked at Daniel's throat, and with the same result—he was getting hard as a rock.

"What...what are you doing?" Daniel croaked. He wanted to move away, but he was frozen to the spot. Even if Gabriel's large hands hadn't been holding him down, he didn't think he could have moved so much as an inch.

The vampire looked up at him. "I'm encouraging the artery to come to the surface. And I'm trying to give you pleasure instead of pain when I mark you—bite you," he said, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You don't need to do that," Daniel said hastily. He was at half-mast already and getting harder by the second. It was the most agonizingly embarrassing situation he had ever been in.

"Don't worry about this." Gabriel stroked down the length of his cock with one long finger. The touch sent fire to Daniel's bones, and he went from half-hard to achingly stiff in an instant. "It's perfectly natural," Gabriel continued. "And I should warn you that when I bite you, you'll probably come. The chemicals injected when a Guardian marks a human make such a reaction inevitable."

"I... You..." Daniel shook his head, at a loss for words. How could the vampire be so casual about all of this? How could he just...?

Gabriel lowered his head again, and there was a sharp stinging sensation that only lasted for a second. Bit me, Daniel had time to think, and then there was a rush of sensation that traveled throughout his entire body, drowning his thoughts in pleasure.

GodohGodohGod! Daniel fisted his hands at his sides, resisting the urge to bury them in the vampire's thick, silky hair. His cock ached fiercely every time Gabriel's cheek brushed against its length, and he felt himself rapidly approaching the edge of no return. Gabriel had been right—he was going to come and come hard. There was nothing he could do about it. He felt like an invisible hand gripped his shaft, stroking him to orgasm. Going to come!

It was as though thinking about it made it happen. He felt the pressure gathering in his balls, and then he was shooting, coming all over his belly as the vampire continued to press between his legs. It was the most intense orgasm he'd ever had in his life, and Daniel literally couldn't breathe for a moment. He threw back his head, gasping for air, his hands clutching at nothing spasmodically.

"All right, it's all right, little one." Strong hands stroked down his sides, and Daniel was dimly aware that the vampire had stopped sucking at his thigh. Gabriel was still between his legs, but now he spoke gently, trying to bring Daniel back from the higher plane his body had jumped to during the intense orgasm.

"Take a deep breath," Gabriel murmured, still stroking his thighs. "You came hard, didn't you, Daniel?"

Chapter Three

Feeling ashamed, Daniel nodded. He was beginning to get his breath back. What he wanted more than anything was for the vampire to let him up so he could wipe up the mess he'd made. In the firelight, the droplets of cum glittered on his belly like pearls of dew, proclaiming his shame for anyone to see. He started to get off the couch, but Gabriel still held him firmly in place.

"Please." Daniel found he couldn't meet those hazel eyes. "I...I need to get up. Need to clean up."

"I can take care of that." Gabriel's voice was quiet, somehow seductive in its simplicity. He bent over Daniel's thighs again, and this time, his warm tongue traveled over the trembling flesh of Daniel's stomach, lapping at the spilled cum as Gabriel cleaned all traces of his shame.

Oh God! Daniel felt like he could get hard all over again just watching the erotic sight. His reservations about telling Gabriel the truth about himself, or as much of the truth as he knew, melted. No way would a straight guy taste him like this. Unless...maybe vampires didn't distinguish between body fluids? But no, he felt sure no straight guy, vampire or not, would lick cum off another guy's skin.

"I...I wasn't going down to Sixth Street on a bet," he heard himself say in a shaky voice. "I was going there because I wanted to know...wanted to see..."

"If you enjoyed this?" Gabriel took Daniel's semihard cock in one hand and sucked the head into his mouth, cleaning away the last traces of cum while Daniel watched, wide-eyed.

"Yes," he breathed, feeling himself grow hard in the vampire's hand. "See, I'm not... I've never been with another guy," he found himself explaining. "But I thought if I could get some experience, I could find out whether I'm..."

"You want to know if you are a true lover of men or simply curious," Gabriel finished for him, still stroking his aching cock. "Is that right, little one?"

"Yes." Daniel nodded, feeling profound relief at having his confusion relayed so clearly. "Yes, that's it exactly."

"I suppose I could help you," Gabriel mused. He stood up and sat down beside Daniel again, never taking his large hand from Daniel's cock. "If you want me to."

"Would you?" Daniel looked up, filling his senses with the large man beside him. For the first time, he allowed himself to really drink in the sight of Gabriel's broad, bare chest and to wonder what might be beneath those tight, faded jeans.

But the vampire sighed and shook his head. "I shouldn't. You're very beautiful, but you're really too young for me." He moved his hand, as though reluctantly, from the throbbing hardness of Daniel's shaft.

"I'm nineteen," Daniel protested. "I'm in my first year of college. I know what I'm doing."

"I am five hundred and fourteen years old, little one," Gabriel said softly.

"I've seen beautiful boys like you come and go for hundreds of years."

"You haven't seen *me*." Daniel turned to face him, determined to get what he wanted now that he knew he wanted it. "Please, Gabriel," he whispered, daring to use the vampire's name for the first time. "I was going to Sixth Street tonight to try to find someone older and more experienced to show me the ropes. I know you're, uh, kind of a lot older than what I was looking for, but...you're kind. Gentle."

Gabriel smiled sadly. "Is that what you think of me? I only wish it were so." He sighed. "I'm a vampire, Daniel, and I have been for close to five centuries. That means I've been the cause of enough bloodshed to turn the street I found you on into a crimson river. I've caused agony and sorrow, and

many more men have cursed my name as they lay dying at my feet than have called it in the heat of passion." As he spoke, the vampire seemed to grow larger, darker. He ceased to be the pleasant, handsome man who had rescued Daniel on Seventh Street, and became something alien and other—something not human. His eyes glowed softly in the dimly lit room, and his glittering white fangs seemed to elongate and become sharp as razors.

"But..." Daniel swallowed hard. "But you're not like that anymore. You said so yourself—you're a Guardian now. You protect my kind against...against what you were."

"Indeed." Gabriel's face became gradually less frightening until he simply looked troubled. "I am working to atone for my sins, even though I have no soul to save." He sighed. "But I still don't know if I'm the right person to do this for you, Daniel. To show you the way."

"Please. I...I'm not afraid of you." Daniel hoped the vampire couldn't hear the pounding of his heart or sense his uncertainty.

"Maybe you should be," Gabriel said. But he still sounded resigned, not angry.

"But I'm not." Gathering his courage, Daniel leaned forward and captured the vampire's lips with his own. Gabriel's mouth was soft and inviting, and after a moment, he welcomed Daniel's tongue inside.

Daniel moaned, sliding his tongue delicately between the two razor-sharp fangs to taste his own flavor on the vampire's mouth. It was the most daring and erotic thing he had ever done, and he felt his heart pounding in every part of his body at once, urging him on with a rhythm older than time to take what he needed.

"That's good, little one," Gabriel said, breaking the kiss. He stroked Daniel's body all over, caressing the side of his throat, the small pink rosebud nipples, the hard cock that jutted painfully from between his thighs. "But I need to know what you want—how far you want this to go. I don't want to hurt you or take more than you want to give."

"I want it all," Daniel breathed, scooting closer to get more of those large, warm hands on his body. He felt like a man who'd been starving for years finally being led to a feast. There was so much he wanted to do now that he had the opportunity—so much he had fantasized about at night in his room with all the lights off while shame and desire buzzed through his veins like a dark drug. "I want to touch you the way you touched me," he told Gabriel, daring to run his palms over the broad, muscular planes of the vampire's chest. "I want to taste you—suck you," he said, growing bolder. "And then..." His voice dropped lower, almost unable to utter the last shameful wish. "Then I want you to fuck me."

Gabriel growled. "You're a hungry little fledgling, aren't you? You've never tasted a drop, and now you want to drink until you're drunk."

"You make me drunk," Daniel breathed. "Your smell, your taste..." He dipped his head and licked delicately at the vampire's lips once more, until Gabriel captured his mouth, kissing him long and hard. It was so different from kissing a girl; Daniel managed to think past the ringing in his ears and the pounding of his heart. There was no sticky lip gloss to get in the way, and Gabriel didn't wait for him to take the lead. He buried his fingers in Daniel's hair and pulled him close, ravaging his mouth with his rough and luscious kisses, leaving no doubt as to who was in charge.

At last, when he felt like he would never be able to get a deep breath again, Gabriel let him go. Daniel tried to kiss him some more, but the vampire stopped him.

"No," he said sternly, holding Daniel with one hand. "You're going to suck me, Daniel. Just like you wanted to." He leaned against the couch, his bare back against its overstuffed arm, and relaxed, inviting as well as demanding that Daniel fulfill his fantasy.

Being sexually dominated was a new experience for Daniel, but then so was this entire experience. He found he enjoyed the stern tone of command in Gabriel's voice—the way he told Daniel what he was going to do instead of

asking him to do it. It fed a fantasy so secret that he had been afraid to expose it even to himself.

Feeling drunk with pleasure, he bent his head and lapped tentatively at the strong cords of Gabriel's neck. The vampire's skin was still cool to touch, but noticeably warmer than it had been before. Gabriel's skin under his tongue was satiny smooth and slightly salty, a flavor Daniel couldn't get enough of.

He made his way down the broad chest, taking time to suck and lick the round copper disks of Gabriel's nipples, dipping a probing tongue into his navel and following the silky trail of dark brown hair down his lower abdomen to where it disappeared into his tight, faded jeans.

Daniel paused when he got to the prize he had been seeking. He didn't know what had made him so bold, but he knew he needed what was under the worn denim. Gabriel's cock looked enormous as it throbbed beneath its fabric prison. He stroked it delicately, then cupped it in his palm, and the vampire groaned appreciatively.

"That's right, little one," he murmured as Daniel released the zipper with a low purring sound to find that Gabriel was bare beneath. His cock sprang out at once, as though eager to be free, and Daniel took it in his hand, mesmerized by the silky, hot shaft and the broad, mushroom-shaped head. It was the first time he'd ever touched another man's cock, and it was every bit as exciting as he had fantasized it would be. It was firm and smooth and hard in his hand, and he noticed that Gabriel wasn't circumcised.

"Lick it." Gabriel's voice cut though his fascination, and he looked up to see the vampire watching him with half-lidded eyes burning with need. "Suck it, Daniel," he commanded, stroking his fingers through the boy's hair once more.

"I will, but first I want to do this." Daniel bent his head and rubbed the hot, hard, silky shaft against his cheek, reveling in the feel of it and the deliciously musky, spicy scent that filled his senses. He rubbed Gabriel's cock over his cheeks, his forehead, his eyelids—feeling it brand him with its heat.

Then he laid a soft, openmouthed kiss on the broad head, tasting the clear drop of fluid that had gathered in the small slit, rolling the salty, bitter, delicious flavor of another man's cum over his tongue for the first time.

He had often fantasized about how it would be to take a cock in his mouth, but he had suppressed these fantasies, feeling they were wrong, shameful. Now, under the urging of Gabriel's long fingers buried in his hair, he threw away his shame and licked a long, wet trail from root to tip, allowing himself the pleasure of tasting the silky, hot skin of Gabriel's shaft and hearing the other man groan his name in bliss.

"Kiss it some more, little one. Take it into your mouth." Gabriel's voice was hoarse with need, and Daniel felt a surge of pride that he was driving such a powerful creature to extremes simply by tasting him.

"Gabriel," he whispered, kissing the head again and swiping his tongue over the thick shaft. "Master..." He didn't know where the word came from, but it tasted right in his mouth, almost as right as Gabriel's thick cock as he took it far down his throat.

"Daniel, that's good, little one. So good," the vampire groaned. Both hands were buried in Daniel's hair now, and Gabriel's hips pumped carefully, fucking into his willing mouth. Daniel moaned around the thick shaft between his lips, thinking that he had never felt anything so good—so right—in his life.

Every doubt he had ever had about himself disappeared. He had been made to do this—made to suck cock. Made to take another man's shaft down his throat and milk it until the hot cum flowed over his tongue and he swallowed submissively while his master stroked his hair and praised his efforts.

Gabriel's cock throbbed in his mouth, but just as Daniel was anticipating the thick, salty spurts of cum across his tongue, strong but gentle fingers pulled him off.

"What...?" He looked up at Gabriel, feeling drugged with pleasure. He was disappointed the vampire had ended it so soon.

"Not like this." The vampire's voice was thick with desire. "I don't want to come in your mouth, as talented as you are, little one."

Daniel felt himself flush at the compliment. "So where...?"

"I want to come buried in your sweet virgin ass." Gabriel stroked Daniel's heated cheek, his eyes blazing with lust. "You're such a beautiful boy, Daniel, so willing to learn, so responsive to my touch." He smiled lazily, showing a hint of fang beneath his full red lips. "It's going to be such a pleasure to mount you and sink my cock balls deep into your tender flesh. To ride you and feel you trembling under me. To fuck you."

Daniel's mouth went dry for what felt like the hundredth time that night. He had dreamed of this moment, he now admitted to himself. Dreamed of being topped by such a dominant and possessive man—a man he could call "Master." But now that the opportunity was right in front of him, he was afraid.

"I...I want to," he said carefully, trying to get the words exactly right. "Want you to, I mean. It's just, well, you're so big. And I've never..."

"Daniel." Gabriel drew him close, pulling him up so he lay draped across the vampire's muscular torso with Gabriel's thick cock branding his belly. "Look at me." Gabriel tilted his chin so that their eyes met. "Didn't I tell you that you have nothing to fear from me?" he asked. "Do you really think I would fuck you without preparing you first?"

"I...I don't know." Daniel found it increasingly hard to keep looking into those golden depths. When Gabriel looked at him, it was as though the vampire knew his darkest secrets and innermost fantasies. It was such an intense intimacy, Daniel found it hard to bear.

"Trust me," Gabriel breathed, brushing a light kiss over his lips. "I'm going to make you ready for me, Daniel. So ready you'll be begging me to sink my cock in you to the hilt. It *will* hurt." He kissed the boy again. "But only a little. And it will be a good kind of hurt, I promise."

The vampire's hot words seemed to burn him, and Daniel took a quick, shaky breath, reading the promise of pleasure as well as pain in the hazel pools of Gabriel's eyes. The thick cock throbbed against his belly, and his own cock pulsed in response. He wanted this, he realized. He had *always* wanted this.

"All right," he said at last, releasing the words on a trembling sigh.

Gabriel gave him that slow, lazy smile once more. "All right, what?"

"All right, I want you to," Daniel clarified.

"Want me to what?" Gabriel was still smiling. Clearly, he intended to make Daniel beg.

"Want you to fuck me. I want you to fuck me...Master." He added the last, uncertain how the vampire would take the word he had moaned in passion before.

Gabriel smiled and stroked his cheek. "You may call me that if you want to, Daniel. In some circles it would be considered a reality, not just a pleasant fantasy as we are using it now."

"How? Why?" Daniel asked eagerly. He hadn't known the big vampire for more than an hour yet, but the idea of having that kind of relationship with Gabriel was instantly and immensely appealing.

"Because of my mark on you." Gabriel leaned forward to kiss him again hungrily. "No other vampire will dare to touch you now that I have claimed you as mine." He sighed. "But that's beside the point, little one. We have a few hours now for love, a few hours for me to teach you how to please another man, and then you must go and forget you ever saw me." He kissed Daniel again, and large, warm hands roamed over his body, stroking from his shoulder blades to his naked buttocks.

"Forget I ever saw you? I don't understand." The heat in Daniel's belly was growing with each kiss, each touch, but the thought that he could never repeat this experience, at least with Gabriel, made him sad.

"Yes." Gabriel kissed him again. "I don't want to corrupt your innocence any further...than I'm about to right now." He sat up, and Daniel found himself being positioned facedown over the plush arm of the couch. All thoughts of the future and what it might or might not hold disappeared from his mind.

"Are you comfortable, little one?" Gabriel caressed the arch of his spine and down his naked back, spreading Daniel's thighs as he spoke. Daniel shivered at the vulnerable position he found himself in. His forearms rested on the arm of the couch and his knees, spread wide for the vampire's assault, were on the cushions.

"Y-yes," he somehow managed to say, despite the wavering in his voice.

"That's very good," Gabriel whispered in his ear. Reaching between Daniel's thighs, he stroked one finger over the tight pink rosebud, which quivered at his touch. Then his fingers trailed down to pet the downy sac between Daniel's legs and the hard shaft of his cock.

"Please!" The word burst out of him as he trembled under the vampire's touch. It was as though Gabriel had started a fire under his skin, and nothing but having the vampire inside him could quench it.

"Please, what, little one?" Gabriel purred behind him. He had shifted away for a moment, but now he was back, kneeling behind Daniel on the couch.

Daniel looked over his shoulder at the vampire looming over him in the firelight. Gabriel had something in his hands. He reached up to touch Daniel again, and there was some cool ointment on his fingertips. Slowly he massaged it into the tight rosebud, opening Daniel in a way he had never been opened before.

"Please," he moaned again, not even sure what he was begging for. A long, strong finger entered him then, stretching the entrance to his body.

"But what are you asking for, little one?" Gabriel asked again. "Tell me what it is you need." Another finger joined the first, scissoring to stretch the delicate tissues, preparing him to take Gabriel's cock to the hilt. The thought of

that and the intense sensations the vampire gave him made Daniel so weak, he could barely hold himself up.

"Master," he whispered as Gabriel opened him. "Please, Master, I need you to fuck me now."

Chapter Four

"Daniel," Gabriel groaned. "How can I deny such a request?"

Daniel felt a blunt, moist probe at the entrance to his body, and then, slowly, Gabriel pressed into him.

"God!" he gasped as the vampire braced him, holding him in place for the delicious invasion. He felt the thick cock spreading him, entering him inch by agonizing inch as Gabriel thrust forward, penetrating him to limit. It hurt, as the vampire had promised, but it was a good hurt, a stretching hurt, a feeling of being opened and owned by a powerful, gentle master who knew exactly what he was doing and exactly how to make this frightening first experience good.

At last, Gabriel was all the way in him. Daniel felt the vampire's hips pressing against his thighs and knew he could go no deeper. God, so deep! In me so deep! he thought, half-delirious with pain and pleasure. He bit his lip, trying to keep from moaning at the intensity of the sensations. He had never dreamed he could feel so full, so complete, so mastered and loved. Above him, Gabriel held still, not thrusting, just filling him, letting him get used to the sensation of being penetrated completely.

"Daniel," the vampire whispered, stroking his back with warm, soothing hands. "Little one, are you all right?"

"Y-yes," Daniel managed to moan, squeezing his eyes shut. "Feels good, just...so much. Almost too much."

"That's what sex is about, little one." Gabriel sounded amused and tender at the same time. "Opening yourself to the limit, taking more than you can stand, and asking for even more. Like this." He pulled back almost to the head and push forward again, a slow, smooth, powerful stroke that made Daniel cry out.

"God, Master," he begged. "Yes, yes."

"Can you feel me inside you, Daniel? Feel me filling you, spreading you, fucking you," Gabriel growled, thrusting again, harder this time. "Open yourself for me, little one, let me all the way into your sweet body. No one will ever take you again as I am taking you now. No one will own you body and soul the way I do." He thrust again, somehow managing to go deeper. "I can feel your heartbeat throbbing around me, feel you struggling to take me, all of me," he told Daniel, gripping his hips tightly as he pulled out and stroked in again. "You're so beautiful, laboring beneath me, so beautiful opening yourself up to be fucked."

The low, possessive voice seemed to fill his head even as Gabriel's thick cock filled his body. Daniel didn't know how he could bear the intense sensations that built in him once more. Then he felt a large masculine hand reach between his legs and grasp his cock, which leaked shamelessly with need. He gasped as Gabriel massaged him, pumping his shaft in rhythm with the motion of his own thick cock buried completely inside Daniel's body. Overcome by pleasure and need, Daniel braced himself on the arm of the couch, thrust back to meet the thick shaft penetrating him, and worked to meet Gabriel as he fucked into him.

"That's right, little one, work for it." Gabriel's voice was rough with emotion. "Work yourself on my cock—I want to feel you tight and hot all around me when I fill you with my cum." As he spoke, he stroked Daniel's cock harder and faster, pushing him closer and closer to the ragged edge of orgasm.

"God! Master... Gabriel, *yes*!" Daniel sobbed. He felt Gabriel inside him, pounding into his body, but somehow the vampire had shifted, subtly changing the angle of entry. Now with every lunge, the broad head of his cock rubbed something inside Daniel's body, some spot so sensitive that he felt an electric shock of pleasure every time it happened. He didn't know if Gabriel was doing it on purpose, but he knew that he couldn't hold out much longer. He was losing himself, drowning in the waves of ecstasy washing over his body.

"That's right. Let go. Let me feel you coming all around me as I fill you up." Gabriel's growling order was the final trigger that plunged Daniel into the abyss. With a sob, he felt himself coming hard into the big, warm hand that was stroking him so expertly. He dug his fingernails into the arm of the couch, arched his back, and spread himself as wide as he could for the thick cock penetrating him, thrusting so deep, he could feel it in his very soul.

With a roar, Gabriel came as well, holding Daniel tightly by the hips to pull him back against his cock. Daniel could feel the pulsing heat as the vampire filled him, spurting into his body, claiming him, marking him in an entirely different way.

"Master... Gabriel... Oh God." It felt so good to be claimed this way—to be so completely penetrated and owned. Daniel knew in that moment that he was lost. He had lost his heart to the vampire as surely as Gabriel had lost his soul when he became what he was. There was never going to be anyone else for Daniel, not as long as he lived and remembered this soul-shattering experience.

"Little one... Daniel, so sweet," Gabriel murmured to him, withdrawing gently from Daniel's body. "You're so beautiful when you come. So open. So perfect."

Daniel felt the overwhelming pleasure ebbing and, along with it, what felt like every bit of his energy. He collapsed against the arm of the couch, every muscle in his body feeling limp and used up. Now that Gabriel had withdrawn from him, he felt empty in a way he had never imagined possible, and yet his heart was free. For the first time in his life, he knew without question who he was and what he wanted.

And what he wanted was Gabriel.

"Come here." The vampire pulled him into an embrace. Daniel's cheek rested on the muscular chest. He cuddled close, reveling in the warm scent of Gabriel's skin and the wonderful feeling of completion. And yet, he was sad too. Gabriel had as much as told him that this would be their only time together—

that Daniel would have to leave the cozy basement apartment and forget what had happened between them. And he didn't feel ready to do that—didn't think he could make himself leave, and *knew* he couldn't make himself forget.

"Gabriel," he murmured against the golden-skinned chest. "I know what you said about this being our only time, but I can't just... I mean..." He raised his head to look into the warm hazel eyes that were sad now instead of blazing with passion.

"When can I see you again?" he blurted, feeling like a fool. Wasn't that the question you were supposed to ask a girl after the first date? And the large, dominant, masculine vampire was about as far from a girl as you could get. But Daniel couldn't help it—no one had ever taught him what to say to a male lover—to a man who had dominated and owned him, who had broken him in so beautifully and taught him what he needed to know about himself all at once.

"Little one." Gabriel's soft voice was filled with sorrow. "You know that we can't see each other again. You must leave this place and forget me. Have your own life."

"Can't I have my own life with you in it?" Daniel pleaded. "You've changed everything for me. I'm not the same person I was an hour ago, and you're the reason why. Please, I want to spend time with you, get to know you, *be* with you."

"I'm sorry, Daniel." Gabriel shook his head decisively and reached down to collect Daniel's clothing from the floor where it lay in a rumpled, discarded pile. "But that cannot be."

"Why not?" Daniel felt hot tears sting his lids, and he looked down quickly, not wanting the vampire to see him cry. "You tell me to have my own life—Do you have any idea what I have to go home to? My father is disgusted with me—calls me a faggot. And my mom, well, she can't deal with it either. She just stays out of the way and lets him do and say whatever he wants. As long as she's got her Valium, that's all that matters to her."

"I'm sorry, Daniel. More sorry than I can say. But we can't be together." He reached out and ran a hand through Daniel's hair. "Every time I'd see you, I'd want to make love to you, and that would lead to drinking from you. Sex and blood are inextricably linked to a vampire."

"Do you think I care?" Daniel stared at him incredulously. "I don't give a damn if you bite me every time. I just want to see you."

"But if I drank from you every time we met, you'd become addicted to the chemicals I inject when I bite," Gabriel explained patiently. "You'd become unable to leave me. You'd be permanently tied to me, and I can't allow that, Daniel. It's wrong to tie someone like you, someone so young and beautiful, down—to limit your choices. You have to be free to live your life and find your own destiny."

"Fuck destiny," Daniel said passionately. "Don't you understand? You're what I want, Gabriel, and that isn't going to change."

The big vampire sighed. "That's what you think now, Daniel, but so much can happen so quickly when you're young. Here"—he handed the limp bundle of clothes to Daniel, who took it with numb hands—"get dressed," he said and left the room.

Daniel dressed slowly, feeling as though every muscle in his body protested his actions. What his body really wanted to do was to go back to the couch and snuggle with Gabriel, to kiss him, hold him, soothe away the sadness he saw in those hazel eyes. He knew that Gabriel liked him, that he wanted to see Daniel as much as Daniel wanted to see the vampire again, but he wouldn't allow himself to give in to the impulse.

When he was decent again, he walked slowly toward the door, feeling like someone had tied bricks around his ankles. He would never forget this night, but he could never return to it either. When he placed his hand on the knob, Gabriel, also fully dressed, appeared as though by magic and put an arm around him.

"Come on, little one," he said. "Don't be so discouraged. I'll see you safely to the edge of the Crimson Quarter, and then we'll say good-bye." He laced his fingers with Daniel's and pulled him out the door into the dark, chill night. A gust of wind whipped around them, and Daniel shivered. Gabriel pulled him close and rubbed a comforting hand over his arm.

When they got to the corner of Sixth and Main, he let go with obvious reluctance and stepped back from the shivering boy. "Good-bye, Daniel," he said softly." I assume you can find your way home from here."

"Of course I can." Daniel looked down at the ground, scuffing his tennis shoe against the cracked pavement. Fingers lifted his chin so that he looked into Gabriel's eyes, probably for the last time.

"Don't ever be ashamed of who you are," the vampire told him quietly. "I know what you are going back to, but you must be true to yourself and remember what you learned tonight."

Daniel felt like his heart was being torn out. "Gabriel," he whispered, "I learned that I love you."

The vampire shook his head. "No more words, little one. It's best we part quickly." Gabriel drew him close and gave him a final lingering kiss. When he let go, there was a depth of sorrow in his golden eyes that Daniel thought would break his heart.

Daniel opened his mouth to say one last thing, to make one last plea, but with a sudden rush of wind, the vampire was gone.

Chapter Five

Eight Years Later...

Daniel James Becker, the hottest young star on the New York art scene, looked down into the oily depths of his martini and sighed. Around him, classical music tinkled and people wandered through the gallery studying his work. The show was a big success—finally his career was taking off. So why wasn't he happy?

"Hey, Daniel, why the long face?" Andrew McLaughlin, his new agent, put an arm around him and squeezed. "The show is *huge*—over half your work is already spoken for."

"That should keep me in paint for a while." Daniel realized he sounded snippy and tried to smile. "I'm sorry, Andrew—I owe all this to you. Thank you for getting me this showing."

"Not a problem." Andrew squeezed his shoulders again and let go. "So where's Steven tonight?"

Daniel shrugged. "We split up. You know I can never keep a boyfriend for very long."

Andrew frowned. "I noticed that about you. What happened this time? Did you two fight over who got to hold the remote control?"

Daniel smiled. "Nothing like that. He just...didn't measure up. None of them do."

"To who? Was there someone else? Someone in your past you can't get over?"

"You could say that. Not even a person, really. A dream." Daniel sighed and tried to smile at his agent. "Let's not talk about it now. Tell me which pieces have already sold."

"Well, *Torn* was snapped up right away." Andrew gestured to a large canvas near the front of the gallery. "And Senator Michaels and his wife are buying *Desperate* and *Never Too Far*. That's quite a coup, you know."

Daniel smiled. "I know. Anything else?"

"Well..." Andrew hesitated. "I know you said it's not for sale, but nearly every person here has asked me about that little one in the corner. The one called *The Lost*." He pointed to the shadowy recesses of a dimly lit corner at the far back of the gallery.

Daniel shook his head in firm negation. "I'm sorry, Andrew, but I can't part with that one—it's too special to me. I don't even know why I put it out. Just wishful thinking, I guess." He sighed and put the half-full martini glass on the tray of a passing waiter. He'd had enough to drink for one night.

Andrew frowned, but good-naturedly. "All right, but I thought you should know the interest is definitely there. Can you at least tell me who your model was? He's almost hot enough to make me want to jump the fence myself."

Daniel gave him a ghost of a smile. "Don't let your wife hear you say that."

His agent shrugged. "Yeah, well... Was he someone you met in the Village?"

"No." Daniel shook his head and raked a hand through his dark blond hair. "Just a dream I had once. One I never forgot."

"Let me know if you change your mind." Andrew took a fresh drink from a passing tray. "I think I see Lady D'Haveline waving at me. She's had her eye on *City of Damnation* all night." He hurried away to make nice with an older woman with gray hair, and Daniel wandered back into the crowd.

As though drawn by a magnet, he found himself standing in the tiny shadowy alcove in front of the small portrait he'd painted a few days before. It

showed a man with dark brown hair and warm hazel eyes staring at a fireplace where a warm blaze flickered. The firelight painted the man's bare muscular chest with gold and shadows, and there was an expression of quiet yearning on the handsome face. Sitting beside him on a dark red overstuffed couch was a pure white Persian cat, also staring sleepily into the fire. The painting was completely unlike Daniel's usual neo-modern style, but it was an arresting piece all the same.

This is why I'm unhappy. Daniel stared at the small painting and knew it was true. This was why every achievement in his life fell flat, why his entire existence felt incomplete. No matter what he did or where he went, the memory of that long-ago night in the Crimson Quarter haunted him. By now it had been so long ago that he sometimes wondered if it had only been a very vivid dream. But unlike other dreams, it hadn't faded in the slightest. He could still feel Gabriel's hands on his body, still taste his lips, still hear his deep voice murmuring—

"Hello, little one," a familiar voice whispered in his ear.

Daniel whirled around, unable to believe his ears. After all these years, could it really be...?

Gabriel stood behind him, looking exactly as he had on that long-ago night, except that he was dressed in a black Armani suit that clung lovingly to his muscular shoulders. Daniel felt numb at the sight of the vampire, unable to make himself move.

"Is..." He cleared his throat, trying to keep his voice steady. "Is it really you? After all these years?"

He couldn't believe his eyes. How many times had he thought he'd caught a glimpse of the vampire, a face in the crowd at his latest exhibition or a flash of hazel eyes in a dim side alley? But whenever he ran after the vision, it always disappeared. Could this really be Gabriel in the flesh? He wanted to touch the vampire to be sure his senses weren't deceiving him, but he didn't dare. What if he melted away again, as he had so many times before?

Gabriel smiled, showing just a hint of fang. "Yes, Daniel, it's really me." He held out a hand. "Touch me if you don't believe it."

Shaking, Daniel managed to raise one hand to cup the tall vampire's cheek. The firm, slightly cool skin was exactly as he remembered it, and he knew that if he leaned forward, just a little, he would be able to breathe in Gabriel's warm, musky fragrance. "It really *is* you," he breathed. "So many times I thought I saw you, but then you weren't there." He shook his head. "You came back."

Gabriel turned his head to plant a soft kiss in the center of Daniel's palm, sending a shiver of pure need down his spine. "I came back," he said. "Or to be honest, I never left."

"I don't understand." Daniel stepped closer, looking up into the warm golden hazel eyes.

"I've been watching you," Gabriel said softly. "Waiting for you to grow up. Waiting to be sure."

Daniel gave a laugh that was half sob. "Waiting for me to grow up? Gabriel, I'm twenty-seven years old. Hell, I was nineteen that night you rescued me. You didn't need to wait."

"Yes I did." The vampire looked serious. "I had to let you go your own way, find your own direction in life." He spread his hands, indicating the entire gallery. "I'd say you've done a fine job of it, Daniel. I'm proud of you."

Daniel felt a flush of pleasure creep across his cheeks. "You, uh, still look the same."

Gabriel shrugged. "Vampires are immune to the ravages of time. You look much the same yourself."

"Yeah, well, I guess I still have a baby face." He crossed his arms over his chest. "So it really was you I kept seeing here and there and everywhere for all those years."

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. I wanted to keep an eye on you, even if we never saw each other again. You see, I was convinced you would forget me and move on. So many before you have forgotten."

"I never forgot." Daniel's voice grew ragged, and he felt hot moisture prick behind his eyelids. "God, you don't know the agony I've gone through the last eight years. Missing you, catching glimpses of you in a crowd, only to find you'd disappeared, that maybe you'd never been there in the first place. For a while, I even tried to convince myself you were a dream—that it was *all* a dream. It was less painful that way."

"Daniel, I am so sorry. But I know the pain you endured, because I felt it too." Gabriel stepped forward and tried to hug him, but Daniel evaded his arms.

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "No, I don't believe it. How could you stay away if you felt like I did?"

"For your own good." The vampire's eyes were filled with an emotion Daniel was afraid to believe. "When I took the oath renouncing my former life and became a Guardian, I swore never to hurt another human, never to do permanent harm."

"Well, you've done plenty of harm." Daniel tried to make his voice harsh. "Look at me—all that I've accomplished, all that I've achieved—it's empty. All empty without you." He swiped angrily at his eyes. "So why are you here tonight, anyway? To tell me you're proud of me? To tell me to have a nice life? What were you going to do, come take a quick look at your portrait and disappear for the next eight years? The next eighty years?"

"It is true. I am here tonight because of this." Gabriel pointed to the small canvas that bore his likeness. "I watched you paint it, you know." His voice took on a yearning note. "It was then that I knew you had not forgotten and...I resolved to break my vow."

"I...I don't understand." Daniel looked up at him, almost afraid to hope. "Are you saying...?"

"That I still want you." Gabriel took a step forward and caressed his heated cheek with one long finger. "That night we spent together, those few precious hours, you marked me as much as I marked you. You put a mark on my heart, little one. One that I have not been able to forget."

"Gabriel," Daniel whispered. He stepped forward and allowed the vampire to draw him into a warm embrace. "For so many years, I waited and hoped. I don't care if I get addicted to you—I'm *already* addicted to you. These last eight years have been like the worst kind of withdrawal."

"For me too, little one." Gabriel kissed his forehead, then bent lower to take his lips in a soft but urgent kiss. "How I have missed you," he whispered roughly. "How I have longed for you. But I had to be sure."

"Are you sure now...Master?" Daniel looked up to see how the vampire would react to that word. Seeing the heat blazing in Gabriel's eyes, he felt an answering flame within himself. Leaning up, he stole a kiss from the sensual red mouth he'd spent so many years dreaming about.

"Daniel." Gabriel threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled him closer. "I have never been more certain of anything in my life. Will you give me a chance to make up for the years we spent apart?"

Daniel looked into Gabriel's hazel eyes and considered. He didn't fully understand his lover's reasons for staying away for so long, but the vampire had changed his life, had made him what he was in so many ways. It wasn't only the one night of passion they had spent but Gabriel's parting words to him that had changed him. "Don't ever be ashamed of what you are," he had told Daniel. "Always be true to yourself."

Remembering those words and the look in Gabriel's eyes had enabled him to come out to his family and to choose art as a career instead of going to law school as his father had wanted. And really, maybe he had needed those years of growth, years of pain and loneliness, to help him realize his dreams and find his own way. He had been able to achieve every dream except one—and now what he had needed for so many years was finally being offered to him.

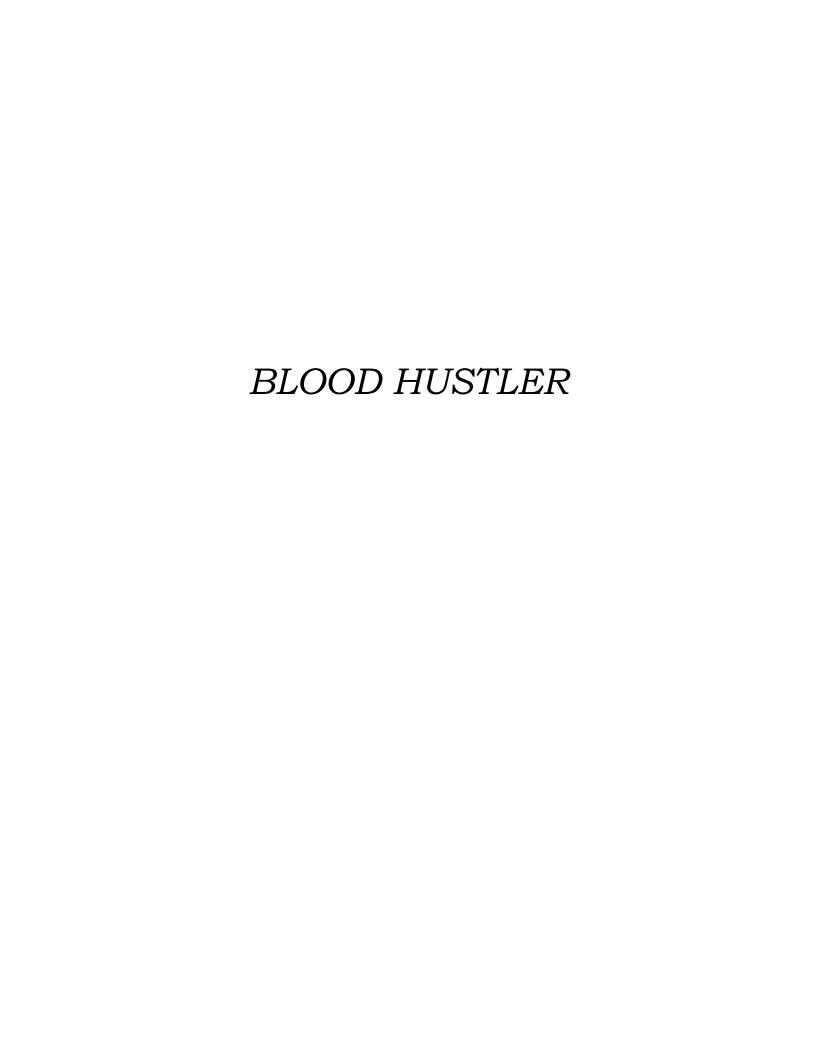
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No, he didn't fully understand, but he was willing to forgive, Daniel realized. Willing to give Gabriel a chance and let his dream become a reality.

"Little one?" Gabriel looked at him anxiously, and Daniel realized he still hadn't answered.

"Yes," he whispered, drawing his lover's head down for a fierce kiss. "Yes, Gabriel. Yes, Master. Yes."

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Chapter One

James didn't go out looking for blood. He didn't need to since he had passed his century mark many years before and the Thirst was easily held at bay. Besides, his memories of Charles were still too fresh, too painful to want to feed from another. He went out because it was easier than staying in with nothing but silence for company.

The lone streetlight painted the alley outside the Old Revival Theater a lurid orange, and shadows flocked like bats around the stinking green industrial-sized Dumpsters. James had been to see a midnight movie—something loud and fast and utterly forgettable with plenty of gratuitous violence. Something to make him forget the pain of loss. But the movie was finished and the long, lonely night was still only half over, leaving him with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

The late fall night was unseasonably cold, but James was too deep in thought to pay it any mind. If Charles were still alive, they would have been at home in front of a blazing fire, Charles with a glass of sherry, both of them discussing the film they'd just seen or simply relaxing in each other's company. Later, if James was feeling the Thirst, Charles might have offered his wrist or the inner crook of his elbow. If it was a special occasion, like the anniversary of their partnership, he might even offer his throat.

James closed his eyes, remembering the warm scent of Charles's neck, the sweet sexual rush as his fangs pierced his friend's skin, the heated release as both of them came so hard... Afterward, Charles would withdraw to be alone, which always made James rather sad, but it was a price he was willing to pay for those rare moments of ecstasy.

He heard the low scrape of shoes on the concrete behind him well before a human would have. If someone meant to attack him, the person was in for a very unpleasant surprise. He was in no mood to put up with foolishness tonight. Turning suddenly to confront his would-be assailant, he was instead greeted by a most surprising sight.

The boy was in his late teens, still in the flush of adolescence, James estimated with one glance at the compact body. Tousled curls that looked dark gold in the dim light tumbled over his high forehead, and clear blue eyes the color of the sky at midday peered out from under them. The boy was shivering, and no wonder since his only clothing appeared to consist of tight, faded blue jeans and a pair of dirty sneakers. The skin of his smooth, lightly muscled chest was dimpled with gooseflesh, and the flat pink disks of his nipples were hard little nubs.

"Hey, Mister. You lookin' for some action?" The boy sidled up to James, his Cupid's bow mouth drawn into a trembling approximation of a sensual smile. Not too experienced, then, no matter what he wanted his customers to think, James decided. He must not have been on the streets long enough to toughen up. And he never would be if he wasn't more careful in choosing his clientele—offering himself as a sexual snack to one of the Lost was tantamount to offering a steak to a hungry dog and hoping it would only take one bite. The boy was lucky indeed that James wasn't thirsty.

James could have killed him as easily as swatting a fly, but he didn't believe in gratuitous violence—none that wasn't in the movies, anyway. So he simply shook his head.

"I'll make it real good for you." The boy was almost begging now. He took a step forward and put a hand on the sleeve of James's coat, worn more for appearances than to keep out the cold. Inclement weather was no problem for one of the Lost. "I'll suck your cock," the boy continued, his cold hand stroking over James's arm. "Suck you like you've never been sucked before and swallow every drop of your cum, I swear."

For a moment, James was tempted. He indulged in the lusts of the flesh even less frequently than he fed the Thirst, and it had been a long time since he'd had a warm, willing body in his bed. Charles had disapproved of bringing outsiders home, despite the fact that he went out himself on occasion to find a little female companionship. The boy was beautiful, fresh, and young with that tight, golden skin and the bloom of youth in his cheeks. James could smell the scent of his musk even over the stale popcorn and rancid grease in the reeking Dumpsters.

But no, it had only been a month since Charles had passed. He wasn't ready to move on—not even for a single night of passion. So he gently lifted the boy's hand from his sleeve.

"I'm sorry, young one," he murmured, shaking his head. "You are very beautiful, but I don't find myself in the mood for company tonight."

"You sure?" There was a pleading in the boy's voice that nearly undid him. "I...I'll let you fuck me. If you want to, I mean." The seductive demeanor was gone now, replaced by sheer desperation. James felt his heart clench in sympathy for the pain in the boy's voice, and a sudden urge to protect this street urchin overcame him. His own foolishness annoyed him. What was wrong with him tonight? It was time to send this little hustler on his way before he did something he regretted.

"I told you, *no*," he snarled, baring his teeth. He felt his fangs elongate and saw the look of dawning terror in the sky blue eyes. "You don't have anything I want, so leave me *alone*."

He turned away, feeling savagely unhappy. Surely there could have been a better way to handle that. Charles would have found a better way. A more civilized approach. James had, regrettably, lost many of his human mannerisms over the years, but his friend had always retained his humanity despite, or perhaps because of, his partnership with James.

He left the little hustler alone at the mouth of the alley and was hurrying away when a sharp smell assaulted his nose. Bright, metallic, with a coppery tang—the smell he was most attuned to in the world. The smell of fresh blood.

James turned slowly to see the boy standing still with his right arm extended. He held a small knife in his other hand, and a dark line of blood that looked black in the dim light dripped from the fresh wound.

"Maybe I do have something you want after all." He cocked a hip and waved his arm invitingly while smiling tauntingly at James.

In three quick strides, James was back at his side. He seized the boy's wrist in an iron grip, feeling the bones inside grind together as he did. The boy cried out and dropped the knife with a clatter. James tightened his grip, and the boy went to his knees, his blue eyes wide in the darkness of the alley.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous what you just did is?" James demanded. He could hear the rage pulsing in his voice, but he couldn't help it—the smell of blood and the offer of sex brought his dormant Thirst roaring to the surface. "Do you know what kinds of creatures inhabit the night? Do you know that your offer calls to them—to me? I could kill you, drain you in under a minute, and no one would be the wiser."

"Kill me, then," the boy flared, surprising James with his sudden anger.

"Kill me and send me to hell. At least it's warm there!"

James opened his mouth to reply when a smooth, oily voice interrupted him.

"Did I hear someone talk about getting warm?" A tall, thin figure detached itself from the shadows and drifted toward them. "Because it so happens that I have a nice, warm fire back at my cabin. It's not far from here—just on the outskirts of town." The newcomer smiled a chillingly white sepulchral grin as he looked down at the boy. "I think you'd like it."

James didn't know the cadaverous stranger, but he knew the type—a blood-daemon, also one of the Lost, but one whose humanity was completely gone, wiped out from years of preying on helpless innocents. A blood-daemon was the purest form of predator, and this one had been drawn to the young man's blood like a shark in the water or a tiger in the jungle. The little hustler

wouldn't survive the night if he left with him. Suddenly the protective instincts James had tried to suppress kicked into high gear.

"I'm certain he'd like your cabin—until you ripped out his throat," he growled, baring his fangs at the tall stranger.

The blood-daemon smiled more widely, showing his fangs. "You didn't appear interested, so I thought I'd take the lad up on his offer." He looked down at the boy, still crouching at James's feet on the filthy concrete. "Blood, for food and a warm place to stay for the night," he said, smiling.

The boy licked his lips, apparently considering the offer. "No sex?" he asked fearfully.

The blood-daemon laughed—a chilling sound like coins clinking together in an empty glass. "It's not fucking I'm interested in. Not at the moment anyway."

"He's right." James glared at the blood-daemon and refused to release the boy from his grip. "He won't bother with fucking you until he's drained you. He's more than half-dead himself, so necrophilia won't trouble him in the least."

"And what makes you so much better?" hissed the stranger through sharklike fangs. "You are one of the Lost, the same as I. You have the Thirst, the same as I."

"But I don't take unwilling blood. And I don't drain to the point of death." James pulled the boy up off the dirty concrete and drew him close. Keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the blood-daemon's red, glowing orbs, he licked a long line up the boy's forearm, sealing the knife wound. The rich, coppery taste of fresh blood exploded across his tongue, and he felt his cock rise in response. To his surprise, he felt the boy shiver with obvious pleasure as well. But he refused to be distracted from his purpose.

The burning red eyes of the blood-daemon narrowed. "Is there a point to your little display?" he demanded disdainfully.

"There is," James said. "I claim this boy for my own. Go hunt some other prey—this young one is mine." He put the hustler behind him and stood tall, ready to fight if necessary. He was large and broad, well over six feet and with proportionate breadth of chest and shoulders, but physical strength didn't always count in such altercations. The blood-daemon was old—an ancient evil shone from his red eyes, and James sensed he had strength that wasn't displayed in his skeletal body.

The blood-daemon drew himself up, appearing suddenly huge in the darkness. James snarled at him, letting his fangs lengthen to their farthest extent. He didn't know why he felt so protective of the boy, but he meant to stand by his claim no matter what the cost.

The blood-daemon grew until his corpselike shape blocked out the streetlight, and a horrible, low hissing sound escaped the gaping maw of his mouth, now ringed with jagged fangs. Still, James stood firm. Behind him, he could feel the boy trembling with fear. He reached back and put a hand on the boy's arm, both to comfort him and to make sure he didn't break and run for it. That was almost certainly what the blood-daemon wanted. If he could get the little hustler to leave the sheltering protection of James's side, he could swoop in and drain him in under a minute before James could pull him off.

"Stay close," James murmured to the boy as he watched his enemy grow in the night. "He's making a display of strength to try and frighten you away from me. If he succeeds, you're dead."

"I...I'm not going anywhere," the boy whispered. He pressed himself tightly against James's back and wound his arms around his waist. He still trembled like a frightened puppy, and James felt his protective and possessive instincts surge again. The boy was *his*—he would fight to the death if necessary to protect him.

Maybe his determination showed in his eyes, or maybe the blood-daemon simply didn't feel like fighting. It was a large city, after all, and there were plenty of street urchins to prey upon. None so pretty as the boy, perhaps, but easier to get to, for certain. For whatever reason, he gave up the fight. There was a sudden low hiss as a breath of foul-smelling air rushed past them, and then the blood-daemon was gone.

James stood still, straining all his senses to make certain it wasn't a ruse. But there was no sight or sound of the blood-daemon's return, and after a moment, he relaxed.

"What...what just happened?" James couldn't tell if the little hustler's teeth were chattering with fear or cold, but either way he felt a great wave of pity and protectiveness rise in him again. Gently disengaging the arms that were wrapped around his waist in a death grip, he turned to face the frightened boy.

"You just narrowly avoided becoming a late-night snack, young one," he murmured. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

"I don't have a home, not anymore." The boy looked like he might cry, but he took a deep breath and lifted his chin instead, looking James in the eyes. "Why do you think I was trying to sell you my ass? Think I'd do that if I had any place to go?"

James felt the pity move him once more. He recognized the folly of letting himself be drawn in by this street urchin's charm, but the boy felt so right in his arms. He hadn't yet let go of James's coat, and the top of his curly head was just the right level to fit under James's chin. Well, it's not as if he can hurt me, he reasoned to himself. And if I leave him here, he'll surely die of exposure—if that damned blood-daemon doesn't come back to get him.

Abruptly, he made a decision. "Come on," he said, taking off his coat and putting it around the boy's shivering shoulders.

"Where...where are we going?" the boy asked, but he seemed willing enough to follow where James led him.

"To my home." James eyed the boy for a moment, taking in the halfstarved look in his sky blue eyes. "By way of an all-night restaurant first, though. I believe you could use a good meal. By the way—what is your name?"

"Tad." The boy looked up at him with eyes that were much too trusting.
"I'm Tad. Who are you?"

"James. Come on, let's get you something to eat." James put his arm around the boy protectively and led him to his car.

* * * * *

Tad settled down in the plush leather upholstery of the Porsche Boxster and cast a sidelong glance at the tall, well-built man who was maneuvering the expensive car with ease. It was a sweet ride—much nicer than anything Tad had ever been in before, even though he'd been selling blowjobs and the occasional fuck for almost six months now, and most of his customers were rich. Most of them were rich, but none of them looked like James, he thought, unable to tear his eyes away.

The man beside him looked to be in his mid to late twenties, but he had a self-possession about him that was much older. He had thick, dark hair and the face of an angel, not that Tad usually noticed things like that. He was more of an ass and cock man, himself—when he wasn't hustling, that was. When he was working, he just more or less prayed that his customers would be under sixty and not total mutants. Well, James was anything but a mutant, he reflected. The big, muscular body that had sheltered him against that...that thing was hot. Tad could still feel the line of fire along his forearm where James had licked him to seal his cut, and he already wanted more.

That in and of itself was unusual. Tad enjoyed sex with other men—had fantasized about it since he was old enough to understand what sex was. But doing something for fun with someone you loved or at least liked and doing it for a living with strangers were two completely different things. He'd found that out the hard way in the past six months.

Tad couldn't remember the last time he'd had the hots for one of his tricks, but this James guy was something special. Tad knew he wasn't quite human—he'd seen the fangs sprouting from his upper teeth, after all, but at this point, he didn't care about any of that—he just wanted him. It wasn't just the incredible body or handsome face either. Or those dark eyes that looked so sad—Tad still wasn't sure what color they were. No, it was more in the way that he acted. The possessive way he'd claimed Tad when the dark thing had threatened him. Tad hadn't belonged anywhere or to anyone in a very long time. Not since his mom had let Roy move in. But he didn't want to think about that.

"Where do you live?" he asked James as the big man signaled and pulled into the drive-through of an all-night burger joint.

"In Westchase." James smiled at him and nodded at the brightly colored billboard displaying pictures of mouthwatering burgers and crispy fries. "Will this do? I would take you to a proper restaurant, but I don't think anything is open this time of night."

"Yeah—this is great." Tad could hardly speak his mouth was watering so much. It had been almost four days since he'd turned a trick, and two days since he'd eaten. Again, he thought that James was different. He'd never had any of his customers offer to buy him something to eat before. Mostly they just wanted to use his ass or his mouth and leave, go back to their wives and their straight lives, and forget their little visit down queer alley.

"What would you like?"

Tad dragged his eyes from the lighted board, realizing that James was looking at him expectantly. "Uh, what can I have?" he asked, unable to keep the hunger out of his voice. God, he was famished!

"Anything you like." James smiled at him in obvious amusement. By the light of the Boxter's dashboard, Tad could see that his teeth looked perfectly normal again. Well, if you called white enough to do a toothpaste commercial normal, anyway.

"Seriously? Anything?" Tad stared at him in wary amazement. "You might not want to make that offer, man. Because I am *starving*. No lie."

"And you can have as much as you want. No lie," James mocked lightly, still smiling. "Place your order, Tad." He looked thoughtful. "And you'd better get enough for breakfast as well. I don't know if there's anything worth eating in my house, since Charles isn't there to buy it anymore."

"Who's Charles?" Tad looked at him warily. Was going with this guy a mistake? Was he bringing Tad home for some kind of an orgy with another man or men? Tad had heard from some of the other guys who worked the streets that it happened sometimes. You went home with one trick and ended up servicing twenty. He really wasn't into that, but at the moment he supposed he didn't have any choice. "Taking on more than one guy is extra," he said, wanting to get that clear right from the start.

"What?" James looked at him, frowning. "Oh, no. Don't worry about that. Charles is...gone."

Either the guy left him or he's dead. There was such sadness in James's dark eyes that Tad had the sudden urge to comfort him. He usually wasn't very physically affectionate with customers—they didn't like it. Most of them made it clear they were only with Tad to get their rocks off, and they weren't interested in hugging or cuddling in the afterglow either. It amazed him sometimes that as much sex as he had, he still felt all alone, still longed for a human touch.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. Tentatively, he put a hand on James's arm. Under the expensive Egyptian cotton shirtsleeve, he could feel muscles that were as hard as steel and as cold as ice. But under his fingers, they suddenly changed—thawed, and he felt warmth radiating from the big man beside him.

"You're very kind." James looked surprised at his sudden touch but pleased as well. "But I believe the gentleman working the register would like your order now, Tad."

"Huh? Oh." Tad realized that he'd been staring at the man beside him, lost in studying the sadness in that angelic face and completely forgetting his rumbling stomach. What was wrong with him tonight anyway? He dragged his eyes back to the lighted board and wondered if James was for real about letting him order as much as he wanted. Well, there was only one way to find out. He drew in a breath and rattled off an order that was big enough for three hungry hustlers, keeping an eye on his companion as he spoke. James merely watched him quietly, not saying a thing but with a glint of amusement in his dark eyes.

The bored, staticky voice issuing from the board's speaker repeated his order and then asked, "That all?"

"No." James turned to the speaker. "Add two cups of hot chocolate to the order, if you please." He smiled at Tad. "I have no stomach for human food, but I do enjoy liquids."

"Oh, uh, good." Tad had a sudden memory of James and the dark, manshaped thing that had almost attacked him talking about "The Thirst" and "draining to the point of death" and shivered. James seemed nice enough, but what was he, really? Was Tad going home with him to die from blood loss?

Well, at least I'll die with a full stomach. He decided abruptly that he didn't care—James seemed like a nice guy, so he was going to take his chances and go with his instincts on this one. And if he was wrong, well, being dead was better than being out in the cold, unloved and miserable. Besides, there was something about James...something about the way Tad had felt when James had licked his arm, that made him want to risk anything to get that feeling again. He could feel his cock tenting his jeans and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"What are you thinking?" James asked as he pulled up to the first window and paid what seemed like an obscene amount of money to Tad.

Tad blushed. "Oh, uh, nothing," he lied. "Just...it's really nice of you to buy me all this."

"It's nothing." James smiled again, that white, belongs-in-a-toothpaste-ad smile. "I'm just glad to have some company."

Tad wondered exactly what being James's company meant and what he would have to do to pay for the food, but he didn't care. Because under the delicious aroma of burgers and fries assaulting his nostrils, he could smell a warm, rich musk emanating from the coat he still wore. James's coat. And he could still feel that place on his arm where James had licked. It occurred to him that for the first time since he'd been forced out onto the street six months ago, Tad had actually found a trick he wanted to turn.

Chapter Two

The boy ate like a starving animal, and James was glad he'd thought of going by the restaurant. True, it wasn't the best quality food, but Tad didn't seem to care. He had wolfed down three burgers on the ride home, and now he was finishing his meal at the elegant oak dining table Charles had picked out when they had furnished the house.

James let him eat in peace for some time, savoring small sips of the hot chocolate he held in one hand. The rich flavor rolled deliciously across his tongue, but mostly he liked the way he could feel the heat of the liquid through the thin cardboard cup. It reminded him of other heated liquids, warm, red, thick... He caught himself eyeing the blue tracery of veins beneath the little hustler's tan skin and made himself look away. He had brought the boy home out of the goodness of his heart, not in order to satisfy the Thirst or any lusts of the flesh he might have. He refused to let this small bit of charity turn into a tawdry physical encounter.

"Why were you out there tonight?" he asked the boy, seeing that he had nearly finished eating. "You're so young—too young to be doing such things."

"I just turned eighteen a week ago," Tad said a touch defensively. "Besides, I may be too young to be turning tricks, but I'm sure as hell not too young to get kicked out of the house."

"Who kicked you out?" Who abandoned you to the streets to starve and sell your body, young one? James watched as the boy sucked up the last of his strawberry milkshake and looked for something else to eat or drink. He pushed the second hot chocolate forward and waited.

"Thanks." The boy took the lid off the chocolate and blew on it before sipping gratefully. "Well, it was Roy, my mom's boyfriend, who actually made me leave. Of course, he couldn't've done it if she hadn't let him." Soft blue eyes

looked down at the table for a minute, and James felt the anger and sorrow radiating from him like a cloak of thorns. "He hated me," Tad whispered, still looking down. "Because of what I was. What I am. Because I'm gay."

James felt a sudden surge of anger at the hateful man who had pushed this boy out into the cold world for nothing more than following the inclinations of his heart. "Tad," he murmured. "Look at me." Gently, he put a hand under the boy's chin and raised it until their eyes locked.

"What?" Tad licked his lips, a distractingly sensual gesture made all the more alluring by the fact that he obviously didn't know how enticing he was.

"There is no shame in being a lover of other men," James told him, holding the sky blue gaze with his own. "Sucking cock or submitting to the pleasure of another man riding you, filling you... It doesn't make you wrong or disgusting or less of a man. Do you understand?"

"Yeah...yeah, sure." The boy's fair cheeks had flushed, and his lips looked full and lush. To his embarrassment, James found that he was tracing the line of the boy's jaw with one finger and that his cock was hard in his pants. What was wrong with him? He needed to keep a check on his emotions before things went too far. Abruptly, he took his hand away and went back to his chocolate.

"How did you know?" he asked, swirling the dark brown liquid in the white cup.

"How did I know what?" Tad's voice was a husky whisper.

"How did you know that blood would draw me?" James looked up, trying to meet the boy's eyes calmly.

"Oh, that." Tad shook himself like someone coming out of a dream and took another drink of chocolate himself. "I heard about...about people like you from some of the other guys who work the streets—they call themselves the Blood Hustlers. Jamie, the leader of the group, he came from a different town—one that had a whole block full of, uh, guys like you. He said they called it the Crimson Quarter."

James nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I have heard of it. An experiment by my kind to see if they can live in harmony with the humans. I've always preferred the relative safety of anonymity myself." He lifted an eyebrow at the boy. "So this friend of yours, this Jamie, did he tell you how to recognize my kind—one of the Lost?"

Tad nodded. "Uh-huh. He said look for the fangs—that you guys give a wild ride but you pay top dollar." He shrugged. "I figured, what the hell? I'd sell my blood at the blood bank if they'd take it. Might as well sell it to you."

James frowned. "Well, these Blood Hustlers are playing a very dangerous game, as I trust you learned tonight. Promise me you'll never try such a thing again."

Tad shivered. "Yeah, well after seeing that...that thing that wanted me to go with it or him or whatever he was, I guess I won't. What was he, anyway?"

"A blood-daemon. One of my kind who has caused so much pain and terror and shed so much innocent blood he has been permanently marked by his actions. If you saw him in the light, you would see the evil he has done mapped on his face. That is why they keep to the darkness—no sane person would go with them if they revealed themselves."

"Well, if doing all kinds of bad shit marks your kind, I guess you must be one of the good guys. I've never seem a face like yours." He lifted a hand as if to stroke James's cheek and then pulled back, obviously embarrassed at his own boldness.

James smiled. "It's very kind of you to say so, but I'm not as innocent as all that. Actually, I have done no evil because I had no need to." He hesitated and then decided to continue. "I had...a partner. A dear friend and companion who lived with me almost from the moment of my turning. Whenever the Thirst overcame me, I could always trust him to slake it."

"How long were you together?" Tad took another sip of chocolate and watched him with interested eyes.

James smiled. "Would you believe me if I told you one hundred and eighty years?"

"Wow." Tad stared at him in obvious surprise. "But you don't look... I mean, I would've sworn you weren't more than ten years older than me."

"My condition keeps me young. And my bite keeps anyone near to me young as well." James looked away, remembering the strong lines of Charles's profile, his stern gray eyes, and his jet-black hair. He had remained as young as he had been on the day James had first bitten him. Up until a month before his death, that was. "Does my advanced age bother you?" he asked Tad, scanning the unlined young face before him.

"Huh? Oh, no. I kinda like older men." Tad grinned briefly. "But about your, uh, friend. How... If you biting him kept him healthy and young, then why did he leave?"

"He didn't," James said quietly. "He died."

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's all right." James was surprised to find that it really was. "I think...I think I've been longing to speak about it to someone, but I have no one to talk to, no one close to my heart. Not anymore."

"Well, if you want to talk..." Tad made a gesture with one hand and drained the rest of the hot chocolate in one gulp.

"I do." James stood and gathered the remains of his young friend's dinner, the paper and Styrofoam filling his hands conveniently so he couldn't reach for the boy as he suddenly, badly wanted to do. Not to touch in a sexual way—just to hold. Just to touch and be touched, he told himself. "I do," he said again after he had thrown the trash away in the kitchen can. "But not here. Would you care to follow me?"

Chapter Three

Tad wondered if they were going to bed now, to pay for his dinner. Surprisingly, the idea didn't upset him at all. In fact, he was looking forward to it. He could still feel the heat from James's words, about how sucking cock and wanting to feel another man fuck you didn't make you any less of a man yourself. The way he'd looked into Tad's eyes when he said it had made his cock so hard, it felt like it was going to come bursting out of his jeans. He had wanted to ask if James was gay, but he didn't quite dare. So many of his customers denied it even as they fucked his face, as though saying one thing while you were doing the opposite canceled it out.

One guy had even told Tad he only went to male hustlers for blowjobs because guys were just better at it. "How can you work the equipment if ya don't have it yourself?" he'd said, his hands fisted in Tad's curls as he sawed back and forth between his lips. "My wife's awful at this shit. That's why I have to find one of you little twinks to take the edge off. Not that like I like guys or any shit like that—they're just better at giving head."

Tad didn't know who the trick thought he was fooling, but it certainly wasn't him. In his experience, if a guy wanted you to suck his cock, he had at least a little of the lavender about him. Even if he didn't want to admit it to you or himself.

"In here," James said, and Tad looked up, realizing he'd been lost in unhappy memories, following his host like a robot. The house—mansion was more like it, since it was bigger than any house Tad had ever been in—was huge and lavishly decorated. This new room Tad found himself in was no exception. It wasn't the bedroom he'd been expecting either, but a large living area. There was a sunken fireplace at one end with a sturdy but elegant brown leather couch in front of it. Oriental rugs in warm shades of red and gold

decorated the hardwood floors. James led him to the couch and sat down on one end, indicating that Tad should sit at the other.

But Tad didn't want to sit so far away. There was something about James that drew him—not just the angelic face or amazing body but something else. It was the aura of kindness about him, the feeling that despite the fact that James was a creature of the night, he wouldn't hurt or force Tad as he had been hurt and forced before. Especially by... Tad shook his head, trying to clear the painful memory. He didn't want to think about that right now. He just wanted to be close to James and hear his story.

Instead of sitting on the opposite end of the couch, he sat right beside his host on the leather couch. Leaning close, he breathed in the amazing spicy aroma of James's skin. He wished that he were daring enough to put his head on the broad, muscular shoulder covered so appealingly with the crisp white cotton shirt, but he wasn't...not quite. So he contented himself with letting his blue jean-clad thigh touch James's leg and leaning back against the incredibly comfortable couch cushion beside him.

James looked down at him, a bemused expression on his finely carved features. "Comfortable, young one?" he asked, a slight smile touching the corners of his full mouth.

"Mm-hmm." Tad hoped he wasn't pushing things too far. It was funny; he was acting the way he would with any trick in order to earn a little extra cash. But with James, it wasn't an act. He really wanted to get close. "Are you okay with this?" he asked, waving a hand to indicate their position on the couch. "I mean, if you want, I can move."

"No, this is fine." James smiled more fully and put an arm over the back of the couch, behind Tad's head. "I don't mind your proximity. I am simply not used to it. Whenever my companion..." He cleared his throat. "Whenever Charles and I were in this room together, he always took care to sit on the opposite end of the couch."

"Why, didn't he like to cuddle?" Tad scooted a little closer so that his right arm was pressed against James's left side and looked up at the older man appealingly.

"No." James's voice was dry, and a sad little smile played around the corners of his mouth. "He didn't. Charles was not 'gay,' as they call it now—although in our day, we had a different term for it. We called it 'the love that dare not speak its name.'"

Tad frowned. "So you stayed with the guy for over a hundred and eighty years and he wasn't even queer? How did you manage? I mean, did you ever fuck? Or, sorry..." He fumbled for the right words. "Uh, did you ever make love?"

James didn't seem offended by his crude language. "Only once when I was first turned."

"Tell me." Tad looked up at him, genuinely interested. The firelight flickered over James's beautifully molded features, making him look like a marble statue that had come to life.

"Do you really want to know?" James looked at him uncertainly. "I was under the impression that your, ah, generation was only interested in the here and now. The latest fashion trends and the like."

"Do I look like I'm interested in 'the latest fashion trends'?" Tad indicated his ragged blue jeans and laughed. He was glad to see the older man's eyes light up with humor as well. God, he was hot! Definitely the hottest trick Tad had ever gone with. And so far, the nicest. "I mean, I try not to be as shallow as some of the guys I know," he went on, picking at a small hole in the knee of his jeans. "Right now I'm just tryin' to get by, but I was real good at history back in school, so yeah, I'd really like to hear where you came from. Or, I guess, when you came from."

"When is probably more correct." James nodded. "Very well, I will give you an abbreviated version, since you are no doubt tired from your, ah, hard day's work."

"Haven't worked in days," Tad admitted, letting his head fall back against James's arm. "I guess it's too cold out there for anyone to want to buy a piece of ass." He shivered. "Sure glad I'm in here with you instead of out on the street tonight."

"I'm glad too." James stroked his curls gently, which caused a delicious sensation of warmth to run down Tad's spine. "Very well, the short version, then. Charles and I were both soldiers—officers, to be exact—in His Majesty's royal army during the Napoleonic Wars. Are you familiar with them?" He cocked a questioning eyebrow at Tad.

"Sure." Tad nodded. "The French Revolution and all that shit. Marie Antoinette said, 'Let them eat cake,' so they chopped off her head, and Napoleon, who was this really short dude who always kept one hand inside his coat, took over and tried to, like, conquer the world." Hoping he had gotten it right, he smiled up at James. It had been a while since he'd had World History in the eleventh grade.

James smiled. "Close enough. At any rate, we were both officers. There was a very bloody conflict—one I am certain you wouldn't know about, but it was very important to us at that time—and I was wounded on the battlefield. Mortally wounded, as it happened. I would have died had not a beautiful young woman found me and rescued me." He looked at the fire, and there was a faraway look in his dark eyes that made Tad think of a phrase he had heard once in a movie—the mists of time. That was it; James was lost in the mists of time. He was from another time, another era.

Tad had an English teacher he really liked last semester, before he'd had to run away and start hustling. Mrs. Cuthbert was her name, and she was always saying how good his essays were and how he would go far if he would just apply himself. In her class, they had watched this long, drawn-out miniseries about people dating in the old days. It had men in it who wore those pants that only went down to their knees and women with long, soft dresses, and they all danced in these amazingly complex patterns and talked at the

same time. Most of the football jocks in the class had hated the series, but Tad had loved it. There was something about how the people talked to each other—even if they were angry, they were so polite because they had good manners.

Thinking of the series, which was called *Pride* and something else he couldn't remember, reminded him of the way James acted and talked. He wondered if his host was from then, when men wore funny pants and everyone danced and talked in circles and was always polite. It almost made Tad's head hurt just to think of it, but at the same time, he was fascinated. He wanted to hear more.

"So the woman who rescued you—she was...?" he prompted James.

"She was as I am now, one of the Lost. She found me dying and fell in love with the beauty of my face." James touched his own cheek reflectively, as though he was talking about someone else. "She made me what I am today, and in so doing, she took my mortal life and gave me an immortal existence instead."

"Did you stay with her?" Tad looked up at him, watching the firelight flicker in those dark eyes.

James shook his head. "She wanted me to, but I could not. I told her that I was a lover of other men and that I had a true love—my dearest friend, Charles. She was disappointed, of course. She had been looking for a companion when she saved me—a partner—someone to share her lonely, endless nights with."

Tad's heart began to pound. "Is that what you were out looking for tonight?" he asked, trying to keep the hope out of his voice. But to his disappointment, James only shook his head.

"No, Tad. I was simply trying to forget Charles's passing. It has only been a month, you know."

"I'm sorry." Tad didn't know what had gotten into him. He'd just met the guy a little over an hour ago. It wasn't like he knew James well enough to want

to spend the rest of his life with him. "So she let you go," he said, hoping to get back on track with the story. "And then what?"

James shifted beside him. He looked for a moment like he was going to say something, but then he simply shook his head and went on with the story. "And then I went to find my friend Charles. He had believed me dead and was very grieved at my passing. We had been boyhood chums and had gone to Oxford together, so our friendship was an old and valued one, even if he didn't feel for me what I felt for him."

"You were in love with him, but he was straight." Tad nodded, understanding completely. "I felt the same way about Kevin Jackson. He was the captain of the football team, but we were friends since kindergarten, ya know? I had the worst crush on him. He knew it too, 'cause I was stupid enough to tell him."

"Oh?" James raised an eyebrow at him. "And did he reciprocate your feelings?"

Tad shook his head. "Nah. He let me blow him a couple of times. But he always said he was straight. He was dating the head cheerleader and all that shit. You know."

James's full lips quirked into a smile. "Actually, I do know. It was the same with Charles and me. He was engaged to one of the most celebrated socialites of the London season. She was beautiful and rich, and he was poor and handsome. They would have made a marvelous match."

"Why didn't they?" Tad asked. He could almost see the long, flowing gowns of the women and the funny knee pants of the men as they danced in those ever-widening circles while James talked.

James shrugged, his broad shoulders straining the white cotton shirt. "The same thing that happened to me happened to Charles, not a month after my turn. He was wounded on the battlefield. A musket ball had entered his belly and shattered his organs. At that time, there was no cure for such things. A man would rot to death from his wounds, even if the field surgeon removed

the ball." He sighed. "I found him in the dirty, sweltering hospital tent, swarming with flies, waiting to die. He was in great pain, and I saw...I saw a chance to keep him with me always."

"Did you turn him into...into what you are?" Tad wasn't sure what the right word was, and he didn't want to risk saying the wrong thing. "Uh, a vampire?" he asked, hoping he wouldn't offend his host.

James acknowledged the word with a nod of his head and didn't seem offended. "Some call us that, although we simply call ourselves the Lost. But Charles didn't wish to be turned. Neither did he wish to die, even the merciful death I offered him. There was, however, another option."

"What—another way he could stay with you as your companion without becoming a vampire himself?" Tad was definitely intrigued. Talk about the best of both worlds! Never getting old *and* living with an amazingly hot vampire for the rest of your never-ending life. And for what price? Probably just a little blood now and then. Looking at James, Tad decided that he wouldn't mind feeling those sharp white fangs sinking into his flesh. Just the thought of lying there, helpless, naked, completely vulnerable while James pierced him and drank from him... It was damn erotic. He was surprised to find that he had a raging hard-on all of a sudden. Shifting on the couch, he hoped that James didn't notice.

"There is a way," James said, in answer to his earlier question. "But it does involve multiple bites and, at some point, sexual intercourse."

"Wow, and he was willing to go that way even though he was straight?" Tad was surprised. He knew tons of straight guys who would rather die than take it up the ass.

James shrugged. "He was desperate. I drugged him with laudanum to make things easier and made sure to be as fast as I could." The beautiful, dark eyes looked sad. "It was not the way I had envisioned our one and only time together, but I, too, was desperate and it was all I could have. So I took it."

"And you kept this guy, this Charles, with you for the next one hundred and eighty years and he only put out that once? And he had to be drugged to do it?" Tad shook his head. "Man, I've heard of falling for the wrong guy, but I think that's the worst-case scenario. Why didn't you...you know, force the issue a little? You guys are strong as hell, right? He couldn't have put up much of a fight."

James looked shocked. "I would no more force myself on someone sexually than I would take unwilling blood. I loved Charles. That isn't the way you treat one you love."

"Maybe *you* don't." Tad looked down at the ragged hole in the knee of his jeans again. "I mean, I'm sure you don't—you don't seem like that kinda guy. But some people..." He shook his head, realizing he had gone too far, revealed too much. No need to open that can of worms tonight—he was here for a trick, not a therapy session.

"Tad?" James put a finger under his chin and lifted his face so that they were eye to eye. "Are you telling me... Has someone hurt you? Taken you against your will?"

Tad jerked his chin away, not wanting to see the pity in those dark eyes. "I live on the street and sell my ass for money. What do you think?"

"That isn't exactly what I meant," James said and gave him such a penetrating look that Tad felt like the vampire could look right through him.

"How did he die?" he blurted out, desperate to change the subject. For a minute, he was afraid that James might be mad, but the other man simply sighed and looked into the fire. Finally, after Tad was sure he wasn't going to answer, he spoke.

"He committed suicide, in a way," he said, his deep voice filled with sorrow. "He...asked me to stop biting him. It was my venom that kept him healthy and alive for so many years, you see. Without it, he was bound to wither and finally expire. But he was tired of the world. Things had moved beyond him, he said. There was too much evil, too much ugliness. We had both

seen all the people we loved in our immediate families grow old and die, and we had no one left—no one but each other."

Tad couldn't believe it. "And he decided he wanted to die even if it meant leaving you all alone?"

Damn! Talk about selfish. He wouldn't say it out loud because he could see how much James had cared for his friend, but this Charles guy sounded like a first-class asshole to Tad. What the gorgeous man sitting beside him needed was someone who would care for him both emotionally and sexually, someone who would stay by his side no matter how far the world moved on. Someone like Tad. Fat chance, he told himself, looking at the beautiful features of his host, gilded by the firelight. James is all class all the way, and you're damaged goods. Why would he want a sad little twink like you hanging around for eternity? Then again, it couldn't hurt to try.

"I should leave you now," James said. "I regret that none of the guest rooms are made up, since we so rarely had anyone to stay the night who needed a bed. But—"

"What about your bed?" Tad smiled at him, using his best seductive manner. "I'm sure there's room for two there."

"My bed?" James looked surprised. "Well, it is adequately large, but to be honest, I don't spend most of my night sleeping, Tad."

"It wasn't sleeping I was talking about." Boldly, he leaned over, cupped the bulge in the older man's expensive dress pants, and began to stroke. God, James was huge—he could tell already, and the vampire's cock wasn't even at full mast yet. But it was getting there rapidly.

"Stop." James put a hand on his wrist. His grip wasn't painful, as it had been in the mouth of the alley, but it was completely unbreakable. Tad felt like he had just been handcuffed.

"Why?" He looked up appealingly. "You liked it. I could tell."

"Yes, but this"—James nodded down at his crotch, where Tad's hand still hovered—"isn't why I brought you here tonight. I don't want you to feel you have to perform sexually to pay me for feeding you or bringing you home with me."

"But it's not about that," Tad protested, and to his surprise, it was true. When they had first entered the living area, he had been wondering exactly when he would be expected to get on his knees or bend over. But after getting to know James and hearing what his life had been like, he really wanted to do this. Wanted to show the beautiful, kind man who had taken pity on him that there were people in the world who would appreciate him for what he was. Not to mention the fact that he'd been looking at that striking face and amazing body for the last hour and had fallen completely in lust.

"It doesn't matter." James put Tad's hand firmly back on his own knee. "There is no obligation. In fact, if anything, I am obligated to you for listening to me. For providing a little company during a long, lonely night."

"You make it sound like you owe me a favor instead of the other way around," Tad pointed out.

James nodded. "In a way." He smiled. "Why, did you have some sort of payment in mind?"

"Sure did." Before James could stop him, Tad slid to his knees in front of the couch and insinuated himself between the vampire's broad, muscular thighs. Looking up at James, he breathed, "Let me suck you."

"What?" James was looking at him intently, but at least he hadn't made any move to get Tad out from between his legs.

"Your cock," Tad murmured, looking deep into those dark eyes. "I want to suck your cock and swallow your cum, every last drop." Expertly, he flipped open the button and drew down the zipper of the expensive pants in one motion. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to claim his prize.

James stopped him again. "I told you, Tad, you don't have to do this," he said, placing a hand over Tad's to stop him from opening the pants. "There is no obligation between us."

"What if I want to?" Tad couldn't believe how stubborn he was being. "I'm gay, ya know. I like to suck cock. In fact, I *love* it."

"Is that so?" James's eyes widened, as if he was considering the idea.

"Mmm-hmm." Tad licked his lips, running his tongue over his lower lip in a way he knew was distractingly sensual. "You think just because your friend wasn't interested in you, no one could be?" he asked the stunned vampire. "Well, I have news for you, James. You're *hot*. Any one of the boys down on Fifth Avenue would do you for free. So when I say I want to do this, that I want to suck you, I'm not kidding."

The dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "How can I be sure you're telling the truth?"

"Jeez, I really have to prove it? All right, then." Standing fluidly, Tad grabbed the vampire's hand and placed it against the rock-hard bulge in his own jeans. "Does that feel like a lie to you?" he demanded, rubbing against the warm palm like a cat. Even through the worn denim of his jeans, James's big hand against his cock felt amazing. "Would I get this hard if I didn't want to suck you in the worst way?"

"I suppose not." James still looked somewhat dazed at the idea that Tad actually *wanted* to do this. For a hundred-and-eighty-year-old vampire, he was kind of naive, Tad thought, which in turn was very attractive. He was so tired of his usual trick—the bored, balding, overweight businessman type with coffee breath and a paunch so big Tad could barely find the dick under it. That kind of customer always acted like they were doing Tad a favor by letting him suck them off. When in reality, if he hadn't been starving and homeless, he wouldn't have gone within fifty feet of a single one of them. Trolls.

James was the exact opposite—interesting, hot, and completely unaware of just how appealing he was. He watched in obvious interest as Tad peeled

back his dark suit pants and at last revealed his cock. It was long and hard and uncut, a turn-on for Tad, since he hadn't been with that many guys who hadn't been circumcised. It was also a thick monster, as wide as Tad's wrist right behind the broad, plum-shaped head, where a pearly drop of precum already sat.

God, no wonder he had to drug his friend to fuck him, Tad thought, staring at what had to be the biggest cock he'd ever seen outside of a porn movie. I'm sure he tried to be gentle, but he probably ripped him apart. Guy must have woken up with a size 12 asshole. It was a good thing he had only asked to suck James and hadn't offered to fuck him, he decided. The thought of lying under the tall, muscular man and opening himself, trying to take all of that long, thick shaft inside him sent a shiver down his spine, even though he usually tried to avoid fucking his tricks. A blowjob was so much quicker and easier. And it didn't bring up such painful memories...

"Having second thoughts?" James asked quietly, breaking his train of thought. The look in his dark eyes was unreadable.

"No, just admiring the merchandise." Tad flashed him a quick grin and then grasped the thick shaft in one hand. Slowly, sensually, his eyes never leaving James's for an instant, he ducked his head, flicked out his tongue, and licked away the pearlescent drop of precum at its tip.

James drew in a quick, shaky breath and reached down to caress Tad's messy curls. "Go on, young one," he murmured, his eyes still fixed on what was happening between his thighs.

Tad knew exactly what the vampire wanted. James was the kind of guy who liked the show that went with having his cock sucked almost as much as the sensations of having his shaft shoved down somebody's throat. He wouldn't be interested in a quick blow; instead, he'd want to see everything that went into it. He'd want a performance. Tad was completely up to that—he kind of liked putting on a show. Maybe because he was an exhibitionist. Or maybe just because he wanted to please the man in front of him. *Good thing I know how to*

deep throat. He would need all his skill to take on that thick monster, but he was more than ready to try.

Starting at the base of James's shaft, he bathed the entire cock with long, slow licks of his tongue as though he was eating an especially tasty ice-cream cone. He made sure to include the balls, sucking each one carefully into his mouth and lapping slowly until James groaned and tightened his hand in Tad's hair. Tad knew what he needed, but he wanted to make this last. Teasingly, he laid a hot, openmouthed kiss on the broad head of James's cock, sucking gently to get more of the vampire's salty-sweet precum. The flavor rolled across his tongue, and James's warm, musky scent filled his senses. God, he loved to suck cock when it was right, and he couldn't deny that it had never felt more right than it did now, here, with James.

Chapter Four

James stared down in bemusement at the little hustler who was sucking his cock so lovingly. Either Tad was an excellent actor or he really did enjoy this act. James found a great deal of pleasure in it himself—both in sucking and being sucked—although it was usually accompanied by feelings of guilt and regret. Despite what he had told the boy about there being no shame in loving other men, it was hard to actually believe it himself. Charles had always treated that part of him with a slight contempt, as though James wasn't quite respectable because he liked others of his same sex. There was something incredibly freeing, James thought, in being with someone who not only respected that part of him but had the same feelings himself.

There could be no doubt that Tad had those feelings. Sky blue eyes looked into James's, teasing and sensual by turns as he let his tongue glide over the thick shaft. He drank the precum that flowed from the tip of James's cock like it was nectar and sucked eagerly for more. And when he finally took the head into his mouth, followed by most of the shaft, he did it as if he couldn't get enough.

James wound his long fingers in the boy's hair and watched as Tad suckled his shaft. God! He had never been with anyone who was able to take so much of him. On the several occasions when he had ventured outside his partnership with Charles, the men he had gone with into shadowy alleys and dark corners had barely been able to fit the head of his cock in their mouths, and none had consented to allow him to penetrate them. Not that James really wanted to—he had always preferred to keep that single sexual encounter with Charles sacred in his memory, unsullied by other experiences. Now, watching Tad take all of his cock into that talented mouth and practically beg for more, he wondered what he had been missing.

The incredibly erotic sight of the boy kneeling before him, sucking him so eagerly, made the Thirst rise in James as nothing had in a long time. He remembered the taste he'd had of Tad's blood and pushed the thought away hurriedly. Thinking led to doing. If he bit the boy once and sent him away, he would only mark him against the designs of other vampires. But if he decided he liked Tad and wanted to see more of him—and he was beginning to feel that way, despite how briefly they had known each other—a second bite would spell trouble. Because if he couldn't control himself and bit Tad again, the chemicals in his venom would addict the boy and bind him to James as Charles had been bound to him. Especially if he fucked him at the same time. Don't think of that, he ordered himself. That is completely out of the question and you know it. Still, the Thirst was strong in him, and it was hard to ignore.

The pleasure built in him, a pressure in his balls begging for release as the beautiful boy continued to suck and lick, swirling his tongue around the head of James's cock one moment and sucking the entire shaft down his throat the next. James didn't want the hot, wet sensations to ever end, but he hadn't been with another man in months, not since the ennui had taken hold in Charles and he began to ask James to stop biting him. He was going to come very soon, and he didn't want to hurt or startle the young one who was servicing him so beautifully. Gently but firmly, he pulled Tad's mouth away from his throbbing cock, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Hey, why'd...why'd you do that?" Tad's eyes were half-lidded with lust, and his full pink lips were swollen and almost bruised—irresistible.

Impulsively, James drew him close and gave him a long, hard kiss on that tempting mouth. Tad returned the kiss eagerly and with interest. It was so different from kissing Charles—the few times he had consented to kiss James, that was. He had always been so reticent and had kept his lips firmly sealed. Tad opened his mouth eagerly, pressed his hard young body against James, and searched for more as James explored his mouth thoroughly with his tongue. Finally, James broke away and looked into the soft blue eyes.

"I was about to lose control," he explained, brushing a golden curl away from Tad's flushed face. "I didn't want to—"

"Come in my mouth?" Tad looked at him in amazement. "But I want you to. Didn't I tell you that I wanted to swallow every drop of your cum?" He kissed James gently on the cheek and whispered in his ear, "Well, I meant it. Your cock is incredible—I've never had such a big one before. I can't wait to feel you coming down my throat."

James bit back the groan of desire that wanted to rise in his throat. What was it about this little hustler that made him so long to lose control? "You don't have to," he protested softly, stroking the soft golden curls. "What we are doing—what you are doing for me, it should really be performed only as an act of love between two who care for each other. I don't want to demean you by asking you to swallow my cum."

Tad laughed. "Demean me? I love the way you talk, James, but what the hell does that mean?"

"To demean is to lower or humiliate someone." James stroked his cheek. "I don't want to do that to you."

Tad grinned at him. "If swallowing cum is demeaning, then, hell, it's practically my job to be, uh, demeaned. I usually charge extra not to spit—ya know? But this...this is different."

"How so?" James looked into the sky blue eyes, wondering if the boy was telling the truth. He certainly seemed to be—but maybe he was a very good actor.

Tad blew out a breath impatiently. "Because this time I want to. I want to make you feel good because you've been so good to me. And hell, because you're hot. It's not often in my line of work that you get to sleep with someone who looks like you—mainly because anybody as hot and gorgeous as you doesn't have to pay for what I'm selling. Not that I'm selling now," he added hastily. "This is strictly on the house, so don't think I'm asking for any money."

"I didn't think that." James was touched. "Very well, if you truly wish to drink my cum, I won't try to stop you."

"Good." Tad was already stroking his shaft again, making sure it was still hard. "Because once I get you down my throat again, I don't want to stop until I feel you coming in my mouth."

The words seemed to start a fire under James's skin, and he could feel the Thirst growing inside him again as he watched Tad begin to suck his shaft once more. He had never seen anyone perform this particular service so eagerly, and he thought that only half the pleasure was in feeling his cock caressed by Tad's warm mouth. The other half was in watching the show the boy put on, swirling his tongue around the head of his shaft one minute and sucking eagerly the next. The sight was almost too much for him—was too much, in fact, because he could feel the orgasm rippling up from the base of his spine once more.

This time he let it happen, let the pleasure rise up and wash over him as Tad sucked his shaft. James felt the cum leave his cock in short, hard spurts and watched as the boy's throat moved convulsively, obviously working to swallow it all. He felt bad for a minute—realizing that he should have warned Tad that there was likely to be much to swallow, but the boy didn't seem to mind.

James moaned softly and buried both hands in the curly thatch of Tad's hair, not to hold him in place but to feel the contact between them as he came down the boy's throat. He thought that he had never in his life seen anything more beautiful than Tad on his knees before him, eagerly drinking all that James had to give. The sight, as much as the pleasure he felt, took his breath away and made him want to keep the boy close.

As if reacting to his wish, his fangs began to grow and elongate. James concentrated fiercely to force them back—what the hell was wrong with him? Hadn't he just decided that biting the boy was a bad idea? He tried to concentrate on Tad and what he was doing and push the Thirst aside, but he

had seen the sky blue eyes flick upward to his mouth, and he wondered what the boy would think.

If Tad was frightened by the sight of his fangs for the second time that night, he didn't show it. As the intense orgasm ebbed and James began to soften, Tad continued to suck, milking the last few drops of cum from James before finally releasing his spent shaft.

"That was beautiful, Tad," James murmured, stroking the tousled golden curls once more. "Thank you, I will never forget it."

"Me either." Tad sat on the sofa beside him again, and James couldn't resist pulling the boy in for another searching kiss. But the taste of himself on the soft pink lips and inside Tad's hot, wet mouth brought the Thirst out again. Before he could stop them, his fangs extended yet again.

Tad pulled back from the intense kiss, an unreadable look in his sky blue eyes. "You wanted to bite me just then, didn't you?" he murmured, looking up at James.

"I have wanted to almost from the moment I met you," James admitted, hoping he wasn't frightening the boy. "But I won't do it, Tad. I promise you that. Just because you tempt me as no one has in a long time doesn't mean I cannot control my desire and resist the temptation."

"Why should you resist?" The boy pressed his warm, smooth neck against James's mouth, so close that James could feel his pulse thrumming, the blood pumping through the big vein just under the skin. Suddenly, the Thirst rose in him so strongly, it blotted out everything else.

"Don't." James pushed the boy away more roughly than he'd intended and then felt bad when he saw the hurt look in Tad's eyes. "I'm sorry, young one," he said. "But you must not offer yourself that way—it's dangerous."

"Why?" Tad frowned at him, obviously not holding James's roughness against him.

"Because feeding and sex are linked for a vampire." James concentrated on forcing his fangs back again. "If I were so foolish as to drink from you, I would want to do more than just taste your blood. Do you see?"

"But you told me you were with that other guy, your friend Charles, for over a hundred years and only fucked him once," Tad protested.

James sighed. "This is true. I had...more control when it came to Charles. I could not have kept him with me otherwise. And still, every time I bit him, I became aroused. I usually satiated my lust for flesh later, after I was away from him. Either by myself or with some other, willing young man like yourself. But with you..." He shook his head. How could he describe how he felt around Tad? "With you, I feel so much, maybe because it has been a long time since I have been with another. I just...don't think it's safe for you to offer to let me taste your blood tonight, not when I have an appetite for so much more. It's like a young, beautiful virgin offering a rapist a kiss and expecting him to take no more than she offers."

The boy laughed, an unhappy sound that tore at James's heart. "I'm hardly a virgin, ya know, James. Are you saying that if I let you bite me, you'll want to fuck me too?"

"In all probability, yes," James said shortly. He tried not to imagine holding that warm, compact body in his arms, tried not to imagine Tad opening to take him, giving himself completely.

"Well, why don't you, then?" Tad's gaze was challenging as he lifted his chin to look James in the eye. His lips were still swollen from sucking James so long and lovingly, and his blond curls were in disarray from the way James had been holding his head while he fucked his mouth. "Didn't I tell you when you picked me up that I'd let you do that—let you fuck me?" He looked down to James's cock, which was beginning to get hard again, and swallowed, trying to hide the obvious fear in his eyes. "You're big, but I'm sure you'll be gentle."

The words were so enticing that James had to get away before he gave in. "No." He was up and off the couch so fast that he must have looked like a blur to Tad's human eyes. Eyes which were now filled with hurt.

"You...you don't want me?"

James sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I do want you—that's the problem. But if I give in tonight and bite you once, it will only lead to biting you again. And the second bite a vampire gives you ties you to him or her for life. Do you understand?"

There was an eager look in Tad's eyes now. "You mean if you bit me twice, I'd belong to you?"

James frowned at the little hustler's choice of words. "Well, I guess in a manner of speaking, yes."

Tad smiled. "Doesn't sound so bad to me. I haven't belonged anywhere or with anyone since my mom let Roy move in." A flicker of emotion passed over his face, too fast for James to read. "But maybe...maybe you don't want used goods like me underfoot all the time. I understand." He gave James a sad smile. "I'd probably feel the same way myself, if I was in your shoes."

"No, Tad, it's not that." James sat beside him again and stroked his soft cheek. "It's not that I don't want you or would be unwilling to tie you to me. It's just that...it's too soon for me. Too soon after Charles's death. I need time to adjust, time to be open to such a relationship again. Do you understand?"

"I guess so." Tad sighed and stood up. "Well, thanks for everything. I guess I'd probably better go now."

"Go where?" James demanded. "Back to the street?"

Tad shrugged. "Maybe. I dunno."

"No." James rose as well and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You'll stay here tonight. I couldn't rest if I knew you were out in the cold and dark. You can sleep in my bed and leave in the morning."

"That sounds great." Tad was smiling again. Then, suddenly, he seemed to turn shy. "Would you... Will you sleep with me? For just a little while? I...I've never shared a bed with someone I wanted to sleep with. I'd kinda like to know what it's like."

James considered the request and decided he could do it. The Thirst was bad, but he could put it off for one more night as long as they didn't have sex. "All right." He pulled Tad close for a hug and then turned them both in the direction of the bedroom. "I'd like to know what that's like myself."

* * * * *

The bed James said he never used was huge—what Katie, Tad's best friend in high school, would have called "ginormous." It was a California king with a royal blue spread and old-fashioned curtains around the outside of it to block out any outside light. It looked like heaven to Tad, who had been sleeping rough in back alleys and doorways so long that he'd almost forgotten what being warm and safe in a comfortable bed felt like.

"There's a necessary room through there, if you'd like to use it." James nodded at a doorway to one side of the huge bed. "I know you have human needs as Charles did, so it's fully stocked. Feel free to use whatever you need."

Tad frowned. "Uh...a necessary room?"

"Oh, forgive me. A bathroom." James smiled. "I know my speech is still somewhat antiquated. Charles and I were so insulated here, and we had no need to change the way we talked for each other." He sighed, looking sad. "I go to the movies and watch television, but unless I practice out loud, none of it stays with me. I guess I need someone to teach me how to speak correctly for this century."

It was on the tip of Tad's tongue to volunteer for the job. Hell, he'd love to stay with James in his mansion and teach the vampire twenty-first-century slang. But he kept the words behind his teeth. James had just lost his longtime companion, and even though Charles sounded like a first-class jerk, it was

obvious James was still getting over him. Tad had already offered himself once and been rejected—although very gently—and he didn't think it was a good idea to keep pushing the point. Instead, he just smiled at James.

"I love the way you talk. Reminds me of a movie my English teacher had us watch. Uh, do you mind if I take a bath while I'm in there?" He looked longingly at the open door to the bathroom where he could see a deep tub and a stack of fluffy white and blue towels sitting on a nearby shelf. "I try to keep clean on the street, and there's places you can get a shower, but I haven't had a good long soak in, like, six months."

"Of course you can have a bath." James nodded generously. "And if you like...you're not much smaller than Charles was, and I still have some of his casual clothing lying around. I'm sure you'd prefer to keep your own pants, but if I were to find a shirt that might fit you...?"

"Oh yeah. Yes, please." Tad smiled gratefully. "A shirt would be great. I lost mine the last time I slept in a shelter. Some guy snagged it while I was getting a quick wash."

"I'll see what I can find," James promised. "I'll leave it just inside the door, but I promise not to invade your privacy."

Tad wanted to laugh. Privacy! He hadn't had any use for privacy since he'd been thrown out on the street. It was a luxury he couldn't afford. But it was nice that James didn't automatically assume that because he was a hustler he wouldn't mind being seen naked. As a matter of fact, Tad didn't mind too much. He had a good body, and in the right situation, he enjoyed showing it off. This would definitely be the right situation, if James hadn't already made it clear that he wasn't up for sex tonight. So he thanked the vampire and made his way into the bathroom to start the tub.

The hot bubble bath was beyond wonderful, soothing his tired muscles even as it cleaned his skin. He washed his hair with some deliciously herbal-smelling shampoo and then just let himself soak. As the warm water cradled him like a comforting hand, the many cold, sleepless nights he'd been through

recently and his full belly abruptly caught up with him. Tad's eyelids suddenly seemed to have lead weights tied to them, and before he knew it, they were closing. He didn't wake up again until he felt someone lifting him out of the water.

"Huh?" He looked up blearily and saw that James was supporting him as though he weighed no more than a feather as he patted him dry.

"Forgive me," the vampire said softly. "I know I promised not to invade your privacy, but I grew worried when you didn't answer my call. And then when I finally came into the bathroom, I couldn't wake you."

"Sorry." Tad shook his head, trying to get rid of the cobwebs. "Guess I didn't...didn't realize how tired I was."

"It's all right." James finished drying him and pulled a white T-shirt over his head that felt beautifully warm and clean next to his skin.

It occurred to Tad that he was being dressed as easily as a parent dresses a baby, even though he was too tired and logy to be very helpful in the process. "Hey," he said, frowning sleepily. "You guys really are strong, huh?"

James smiled. "Extremely. We have to be very careful in dealing with humans. Very...gentle."

"You *are* gentle." Impulsively, Tad threw his arms around James's neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "The way you touch me... Nobody ever touched me like that before. It's nice," he added shyly.

James smiled at him. "It's easy to be kind to someone like you, young one. You have such an innocence about you. It's quite compelling."

Tad shook his head. "I'm anything but innocent, but I'm glad you like me." He looked at James anxiously. "How long was I asleep? Can you still lie with me a little while, or is it too near, uh, sunrise?"

James's smile widened. "We still have a few hours before dawn, and yes, I can lie with you if you like. But it's not like I have to retire to a coffin at the first light of the sun—it's only direct sunlight that I cannot stand."

"Okay." Tad nodded, his eyes feeling heavy again. "That's..." He yawned hugely. "That's nice."

James laughed, a soft rumble that seemed to vibrate Tad's whole body. "Can you walk to the bed or do you need me to carry you?"

"I can walk." Making an effort, Tad stood up straight and took a stumbling step forward. He didn't have time to fall, however, before two strong arms caught him.

"Come on, young one. Let's get you to bed," James murmured in his ear, lifting him as easily as a rag doll.

Tad was too tired to fight about it. With a contented sigh, he nestled his head against the broad chest and closed his eyes again. The next thing he knew, he was being settled between cool, clean sheets in a warm, dark room.

"Good night, Tad," a deep voice whispered.

"Mmm...night," he answered, or thought he answered. Possibly, the words were all in his head. The last thing he remembered was the delicious feeling of James's crisp linen shirt under his cheek and the soft press of blackness against his eyes.

Chapter Five

James hated to see the boy leave. But there was no help for it—Tad had his own life, and he had no right to interfere in it. Besides, he wasn't ready to enter into another long-term relationship so soon after Charles's death. So no matter how good it had felt to hold the warm, firm body in his arms and to feel Tad snuggle against his chest in the early hours of the morning, he still had to let him go.

"Will you please be careful of yourself?" he asked Tad as the little hustler was about to step out his front door. He wore some of Charles's old clothes and had a few more in a pack James had found for him. He was rested and clean, and James had pressed him to take some money for breakfast, although he refused to take very much. James had the idea that he didn't want to turn their night together into another transaction—a trick, as he called it. He respected the boy's wish to keep their time together above the tawdry necessity of money, but he still wished that Tad would have agreed to accept a little more.

"I'll be fine." Tad flashed him a grin and shouldered the pack easily. "And don't worry—I promise I'll take the bus back. I won't hitch."

"Good." James sighed in relief. Humans were so fragile—he hated to think of how vulnerable his young friend would be if he accepted a ride from just anyone. Of course, he takes much worse risks on a daily basis than just flagging down a ride with a stranger, his mind whispered, but he pushed the thought firmly away. He couldn't allow himself to dwell on the awful life Tad led, or he would never let him go. But really, was what he had to offer that much better? Charles had despised his very existence at the end—watching everyone he loved grow old and die, seeing the world change and being unable to change with it. He had longed for the reprieve that only death could grant.

James didn't wish to condemn another soul to the misery he'd observed in his old companion. No, better by far to let the boy go before he got too attached.

"Well, I guess I better get going," Tad said, as though reading his mind. "I just... I want to thank you, James. I haven't been this warm and safe and happy in a long time. I...I know it sounds corny, but I'll miss you." He looked down, blushing as he spoke in a way that tore at James's long-silent heart.

"Wait!" Impulsively, he seized the boy's hand just as Tad was turning the knob.

"Yeah?" Tad looked up with such hope in his eyes, James couldn't help himself.

"I wanted to say good-bye properly," he murmured, looking into those sky blue eyes for what he supposed was the last time. "Will you allow me to kiss you?"

"Will I allow you? What kind of a question is that?" Tad broke into a sunny smile and threw his arms around James's neck. "I'd love a good-bye kiss," he whispered huskily.

The warm breath against his neck and the feel of Tad's hard, young body pressed against his was almost too much. James took his mouth with a passion he hadn't felt in years. As he stroked Tad's tongue with his own and felt the boy's cock harden eagerly against his thigh, he wondered why Tad affected him so much. It was as though something he'd thought was dead inside him was alive again. Or maybe it had only been sleeping and the little hustler had woken it up. Whatever the reason, he could barely force himself to end the kiss and let Tad go. Only the fact that the Thirst was rising in him again made him finally pull away.

"Where will you go?" James asked him, willing his fangs to retract and trying to keep calm.

Tad was still breathing heavily from the passion of the kiss. "I...I don't know. Back to my usual place on Fifth and Broadway, I guess. That's kind of my territory—I share it with another guy named Aaron."

"So you'll just...go back to doing that? To that life?" James couldn't bring himself to say to selling yourself, but it was what he was thinking.

Tad shrugged. "What else can I do? I can't go back home while Roy's there. Got no place to live, and the shelters are on a first-come, first-served basis. Besides, most of my business is usually at night, and they don't let you in after dark lots of places."

"So you'll most likely be spending the night on the streets again? After...after you finish doing business?" James clenched his hands into fists at his sides. Just the thought of Tad giving himself to someone else, selling himself to some undeserving animal who might hurt or brutalize him... No—he had to stop thinking like this. And the rush of possessiveness he felt was ridiculous. He'd only known the boy for one night. It was insane to feel this emptiness in his chest just because they were parting ways and going back to their respective lives.

Tad, obviously unaware of James's inner turmoil, simply shrugged again. "It's a living. My ass is all I have—I got no choice but to sell it."

"But...will you at least try to be safe?" James frowned. "I know even back in my day there were diseases you could catch. Syphilis..."

The boy barked a short laugh. "Oh, there's a lot worse than that out there these days, James. But don't worry—I always try to be safe. I carry condoms on me whenever I can afford them."

When he can afford them! God! Reaching into his pocket, James pulled out his money clip. "Look, won't you at least let me give you a little more pocket money? Just in case—"

But Tad was already shaking his head stubbornly. "I told you, I don't want to make this about money. What we shared last night, that was...special." He smiled sadly. "Maybe the most special thing I've ever felt. I don't want to make it... I don't know, dirty, by taking your money."

"Then come back," James heard himself saying, even though he knew he shouldn't. "Come back tonight, if you want to, if you're cold and hungry and afraid. And I..." He swallowed hard. "I'll buy what you have to offer," he finished in a low voice. He wanted to offer Tad free shelter and food, but it was obvious the boy had a stubborn streak of pride that wouldn't allow him to accept it without some form of repayment. So if there was no other way to keep him safe than to offer shelter and food for sex, he would do it.

"You mean..." Tad's voice dropped, and he looked at James, his eyes large and uncertain. "You mean you want to fuck me?"

"Yes." James's cock was hard and throbbing in his pants, and his fangs were fully out now, refusing to retract as the Thirst urged him on. "Only..." He cleared his throat and cupped Tad's cheek gently, looking into his eyes to be sure the boy understood. "Only, if you do come back, I'll need blood as well as sex. I need you to understand that at the outset."

"You don't just want to fuck me. You want to bite me while you do it," Tad murmured softly.

"Exactly. Bite you and drink from you. As I make love to you." Somehow they had drawn closer together, and the warm, salty scent of the boy's skin was strong in his nose. God, how James wanted him! But he had to give him a chance at least to think things over. Reluctantly, he drew back. "I just wanted you to know what you'd be getting into if you came back."

"What's it like—being bitten?" Tad looked at him curiously, eyeing his fangs, which protruded well below his top lip.

James tongued the tip of his right fang and felt the razor-sharp point against the tender flesh. "I must admit that Charles never enjoyed it very much. But I am told that those who don't object to the sexual rush that accompanies the act do not find it unpleasant."

Tad laughed huskily. "Somehow I don't think I'd object too much."

"Think about it, then." James stroked his cheek, still searching those sky blue eyes. "And come to me if you want to, anytime after dusk. You'll be safe with me, Tad. I doubt any of your other patrons can promise as much."

He kissed the boy once more and watched as he walked out the door into the hazy sunlight where James couldn't follow. It was stupid of him to extend a second invitation. Stupid to get involved with someone like Tad who was too young to know his own mind or what he wanted from life, but he hadn't been able to help himself. Already he missed those soft lips, that warm skin—not to mention the boy's wry, self-deprecating sense of humor and sunny smile.

As he watched Tad wave once more and closed the door, a single phrase kept repeating in his head. *Come back to me. Be safe, be well, and come back to me tonight.*

* * * * *

"Wow, dude, you look like a million bucks and change. What happened to you last night—rich trick?" Aaron stared at his new clothes enviously, and Tad twirled once to let him get the full effect.

"You could say that," he said, smiling mysteriously. "Here." He tossed a paper sack with three still-warm Egg McMuffins in it at the other boy. "Eat up."

"Damn, you really must have scored!" Aaron ripped open the sack and dug into the hot breakfast sandwiches eagerly. "Where did you pick him up?"

"Not far from here—outside the Old Revival Theater. He, uh, sort of rescued me."

"Rescued you?" Aaron mumbled around a mouthful of McMuffin. "From who?"

"Well, from this other guy who wanted to take me home. But he was...he was a bad guy. You might never have seen me again if I'd ended up goin' with him." Tad didn't want to go into the whole story about how a vampire had rescued him from—what had James called it? Oh, yeah—a blood-daemon. For

one thing, he didn't think Aaron would believe him, and for another, the story was still too close to his heart. He wanted to cherish his memories of the kind, beautiful man who had taken him home and treated him so gently. So he decided just to tell his friend the highlights and leave it at that.

"So the first guy wanted to take you home, but the second guy stopped you?" Aaron was on his second McMuffin now, and he was still looking at Tad with interest in his large brown eyes.

"He made me see the other guy for what he was," Tad said shortly. "And then he bought me dinner and brought me back to his place—he lives in Westchase."

"Westchase? Damn!" Aaron gave a long, low whistle. "Your boy must have some serious green."

"Yeah. Drives a Porsche too. A real sweet ride." Tad grinned. "But that's not even the best part." He knew it sounded like he was bragging, but he was just so full of happiness, he had to share it somehow.

"What's the best part?" Aaron asked suspiciously. "Did he, like, just want you to watch while he did weird shit with his wife or something?"

"No, man, nothing like that." Tad shook his head. "The best part is that he was gorgeous. Fucking unbelievably hot. *And* he wants me to come back tonight."

"He does, huh?" Aaron finished off the last sandwich and gave him a skeptical look. "All right, so what's the catch?"

"No catch." Tad grinned. "He just likes me—a lot. And I, uh..." He felt suddenly shy admitting it to someone else. "I like him too," he said softly, looking down at the grungy sidewalk that ran through the alley where he and Aaron spent most of their time waiting for tricks.

"Please don't tell me you're falling for a trick." Aaron looked at him incredulously. "Rule number one, Tad: You can't trust a trick. None of 'em. So tell me true, what's the catch?"

"Well..." Tad scuffed the worn toe of his sneaker against the sidewalk. "He did say that if I came back tonight he'd want, uh, more."

"I knew it!" Aaron smacked one hand against the curb. "Let me guess, last night you only blew him, but if you go back tonight, he wants to fuck you. Probably bareback."

"Please, like you never take it bareback when the price is right," Tad scoffed. "And besides, it doesn't matter, because this guy is clean."

"That's what they all say," Aaron said darkly. "And besides—getting fucked doesn't bother me like it does you. Every single time you take it up the ass, you cry like a little girl. You *hate* it."

Tad scowled. "That's none of your business, man. I do what I have to do to get by—same as you. I'm sure you don't always love turning tricks either."

"Well, no, but it doesn't make me bawl like a baby either."

"I don't fuckin'—never mind." Tad shook his head. There was no point in getting into this with Aaron now. He was just glad he had never told the other boy the reason behind his tears.

Aaron shrugged. "Well, all I can say is, if you go, be careful. I was worried when I didn't see you last night after my last trick. Thought somethin' bad happened to you—true?"

"It almost did," Tad said seriously, glad to put the topic of his weakness behind them. "It would have if it weren't for James. God, Aaron, I wish you could see him. He's so incredibly hot and sweet and—"

"And you can't wait to give it up for him like the little bitch you are." Aaron shook his head wearily. "Man, I been on the street a lot longer than you have, and I can tell you how this ends. Mr. Moneybags will love you for a while—until he gets over your tight little ass and decides you don't go with his designer bedroom furniture anymore. And when that happens, you'll be right back on the street, selling yourself all over again, only by that time, you'll be all soft

from livin' in the lap of luxury, and it'll be twice as hard to blow some fat businessman for lunch money."

"It's not like that. You don't understand." Tad shook his head, wishing he could make his friend see. But there was no way to do that. Aaron had been on the streets too long—he was jaded and hardened by the rough life they both led. By now, all his optimism was gone and he lived from day to day, not looking any further ahead than the next meal or where he was going to spend the night.

I don't want to be that way, Tad thought, studying the other boy from the corner of his eye. I don't want to lose hope and spend my days waiting to die. If only James wanted another companion... He sighed, thinking of it. Not just of the beautiful house or the luxury of a full belly and a hot bath whenever he wanted it. No, what he mostly thought of when he imagined living with James was the talking...and the loving.

Not sex—it wouldn't just be sex or fucking, Tad told himself. James would hold me close—keep me safe, protect me. Love me. We could belong to each other and maybe...maybe with him it would be different. Maybe I wouldn't have those feelings, those memories, if it were him making love to me instead of some fat, greasy trick just looking to shoot his load. It would be beautiful with him. It would mean something.

"It's not like that, huh?" Aaron's words pulled him out of the pleasant fantasy and back to the real world. "Man, who do you think you are—that chick from *Pretty Woman?* You think Mr. Moneybags will love your ass so much he'll decide to keep you?"

As a matter of fact, it was exactly what Tad secretly hoped, and he didn't care to have his dreams punctured. "Who's a girl now? That *Pretty Woman* is a chick flick, man," he said, throwing Aaron a scornful look. "How do you even know what it's about?"

Aaron looked sullen. "It's my big sister's favorite. I used to watch it with her until she ran away and my mom got deep in the drugs." Tad sighed. "Yeah, my mom liked it too." He remembered better days, the days before Roy and his hurtful, grabbing hands, when he would sit beside his mom on the couch and eat microwave popcorn and watch whatever eighties movie happened to be on cable. He'd lean his head against her shoulder and sometimes fall asleep while she stroked his hair.

After he'd been kicked out of the house for being gay and...other things, he'd sometimes cried himself to sleep, wishing for that closeness, that feeling of safety and love that he never expected to feel again. But he had—last night, curled up against James, held close in his arms, he'd found the security and tenderness he'd been missing for so long.

He wanted to feel that again, Tad decided. Wanted to fall asleep in someone's arms and know that person loved him and wouldn't abandon him. James had said he wasn't ready for another relationship, but then he'd gotten so intense about Tad coming back to him. Was it possible that the vampire might change his mind and decide he wanted to keep Tad around for a while?

The thought was so appealing that he almost turned around and headed for the nearest bus stop right then. But even though Westchase took a while to get to, it was still hours before dusk. With a sigh, he decided he might as well spend the day killing time with Aaron. He just hoped the hours would pass fast. He wanted to be back in bed with James as soon as possible. And if the price of being with the vampire was blood and sex, even if it was painful, well, he was more than willing to pay. Even the bad memories were worth it to have that feeling of security, the feeling of being loved and cherished and held in strong arms that would never drop him.

And this time he wouldn't cry—he promised himself. Not a single tear, no matter what.

Chapter Six

James had been pacing by the front door for an hour and a half when a loud double knock finally sounded. *Thank God!* For most of the day, he'd been tossing and turning in his daylight resting place, thinking that he'd made a terrible mistake in letting the boy go. What if the blood-daemon decided it wanted him after all and came back for him? Or what if he went with the wrong trick and was seriously injured or even killed? What if...? What if...? What if...? The list of awful possibilities seemed endless, and he longed to go back and scour the area around the theater where he'd first encountered Tad to see if he could find the boy again. Unfortunately, the sun, that great bright jailor, trapped him inside as effectively as a set of iron bars. More effectively, in fact—iron bars he could have bent easily.

He'd watched anxiously through the specially tinted windows of his house as the sun got nearer and nearer to the horizon, hoping to see Tad's short, well-formed figure coming up the long drive that led to his front door at any moment. But first dusk and then full dark had fallen with no sign of the boy. James had vacillated between the need to go out and get him and the belief that Tad had changed his mind and didn't want what he had to offer. In the end, he'd been just about to get his keys and go out looking when he heard the knocking at the door.

James threw open the door, but the words of welcome died on his lips. Standing next to Tad, holding the boy by the scruff of the new shirt James had given him, was one of those annoying security personnel the Westchase Homeowners' Association employed.

"Mr. Spencer?" The security guard was balding, with an air of self-importance almost as big as his paunch.

"Yes?" James asked through his teeth. The sight of the other man's hand gripping Tad so casually, as though he had every right, sent a wave of possessive jealousy through him. The emotion was so strong, he was afraid he might lose control if he weren't careful, so he was holding on to his temper with both hands.

"Found this little bastard sneakin' around your property." The security guard popped the wad of gum he was chewing and shook Tad like a large dog shaking a small one. "We threw him out once and caught him tryin' to sneak back in. He keeps claimin' he knows you. Says you told him he could come stay with you." The look in his squinty brown eyes was challenging. As though he knew James could only want one thing with someone like Tad and he was sure James would never admit it.

James frowned and took a step toward the door. "Yes, that's correct. I've actually been waiting for him for the past hour and a half. Were you detaining him all that time, causing me undue worry?"

"Uh..." The guard looked surprised and uncomfortable. "Well, yeah, we figured he couldn't possibly be telling the truth, so..." He shrugged uncertainly.

James's self-control wasn't endless, and suddenly he could stand the way Tad was being treated no longer. "Get your hands off him!" He knew the words were more than half snarled, knew his eyes were probably glowing and his fangs had elongated enough for anyone to see, but he didn't care. All he knew was that he needed to get Tad safely into his house and away from the stupid guard *now*.

"Uh, sure. Sorry." The guard stumbled backward, falling down the front steps, his face a mask of terror. His pudgy fingers were still twisted in the fabric of Tad's shirt, and he might have taken the boy down with him if James hadn't reached out faster than the human eye could see and freed him from the guard's grip. He wasn't too gentle about it, and the man howled and clutched his hand as he landed on his back.

"Is there a problem?" James snarled, glaring at the chubby guard sprawled across his front walk.

"I think you broke my fingers." The guard held his hand tight to his chest, making it impossible to tell if he was right or not. Not that James cared.

"You're lucky I didn't break your neck," James growled.

"But...but he was trespassing. I was just doing my job!" From the terror in the man's eyes and the look on his face, James knew he must still appear beyond frightening. But he couldn't help himself—the need to protect what was his was every bit as strong as it had been the night before when the blood-daemon had threatened Tad. No, it was stronger now because Tad was no longer an absolute stranger. Now he actually knew the boy, and they had formed the first tentative stages of a relationship. A relationship he wanted badly to flourish. And he didn't intend to let the likes of the fat security guard dictate the terms of his new love either.

He pointed a finger at the guard, who was scrambling as fast as he could to his feet while still holding his wounded hand to his chest. "I don't give a damn about your job. Never touch him again. Or you'll answer to me, and I promise it won't be a pretty scene."

"Uh, yes, Mr. Spencer. Sorry, Mr. Spencer," the guard babbled before turning tail and running across the well-manicured front lawn.

"Wow." Tad stared at him with awe as he shut the front door on the retreating guard. "You can be really scary when you want to."

"Forgive me if I frightened you." James passed a hand over his face, willing his fangs to retract. "It's only that you seem to arouse my protective instincts. When I saw his hand on you..." He shook his head, unable to finish.

"Sorry about that." Tad shrugged apologetically. "I, uh, didn't realize how hard it would be to get in here looking like I do. Which is basically like a guy who lives on the street and sells his ass, I guess."

"You look fine." Now that the threat was past and Tad was safely in his house, James felt the sudden, unreasonable rage passing as well. He took a deep breath. "No doubt it is I who must apologize for my appearance. Are you certain I was not too frightening?"

Tad grinned and shook his head. "Not to me, you weren't. Not any more than you were last night when you saved me from that blood-daemon thing, anyway. Of course, I'm pretty sure that fat-ass rent-a-cop is gonna be making Hershey squirts in his Jockeys for a week."

"If you mean that he'll soil himself in terror, I hope you're right." James smiled and put an arm around the young man's shoulders. "I was extremely worried about you."

"I was worried about me too, for a while." Tad grinned. "Hey, you got what I was saying about the Hershey squirts. Good call on the twenty-first-century slang, James."

"Thank you." James smiled back, feeling the warm glow of companionship he'd missed from the moment he had let Tad walk out of his door. "I'm...very glad to see you again," he admitted. "I was sorry I had let you go after you left."

"I'm glad to see you too. I missed you." Tad's grin fell away, and his youthful face grew serious. "I, uh, I gave a lot of thought to what you said. About what you'd want if I came back."

James felt his breath catch in his throat as need and desire fisted in his chest like a second heart. "I see. And?"

Tad didn't answer with words. Instead, he loosened the collar of his shirt and pulled the fabric away from the smooth column of his neck. Then he stepped up to James and lifted his chin, turning his head to one side. The gesture was as obvious as if he'd spoken aloud: *drink*.

"Yes." James heard the word hiss between his teeth, and suddenly, the Thirst was a lit blowtorch in his throat. But he needed to hear Tad speak the words, needed to see in his eyes that he wanted this as much as James did.

"Come." He urged the boy toward the bedroom, and Tad came with him, seemingly eager for what was in store. In fact, the moment they were inside the bedroom, he had his shirt off and was reaching for the fastening of his jeans.

"Wait." James stopped him, putting his hands on Tad's to stop the boy's feverish fumbling.

"What?" Tad looked up, disappointment already clouding his eyes. "You didn't change your mind, did you?"

"No. If anything, I want you more than ever." James took a deep breath, trying to control himself. "But I need to hear you say it, Tad. Tell me out loud."

"Out loud, hmm?" Tad's sky blue eyes were suddenly half-lidded with lust. Reaching up, he put his arms around James's neck and pulled him close. "I want you inside me, James," he murmured in a low, husky voice. "And not just your cock either. Your fangs too. Fuck me. Bite me. Love me."

The soft words inflamed him. He'd never felt the Thirst this urgently. Never had desire fill him like a living fire. His entire body ached with the need to penetrate, from his fangs to his shaft. But he wanted to be gentle with the boy. Cupping Tad's cheek, he looked deeply into his eyes. "Beautiful," he whispered.

"I think you're pretty fucking hot too." Tad gave him a teasing smile. "So what are we waiting for?" His hands dropped to the fastening of his jeans again, and again James stopped him.

"Slowly, Tad. I want to savor this. This first taste of you...the feel of your skin...the flavor of your blood. I want all of it burned into my heart forever."

Dropping to his knees before the boy, he finished unfastening Tad's jeans himself and slid them down the slim hips. Tad's cock was achingly hard, which made him glad. In the back of his mind, he'd been afraid that the little hustler was only here for food and shelter, not because he felt for James what James felt for him. But the obvious proof that Tad's desire was real laid his fears to rest. Leaning forward, he lapped carefully at the plum-shaped head, capturing a drop of precum on the end of his tongue.

Tad gasped. "Hey, uh, you don't have to do that," he protested as James licked him again. "I mean...I'm the one who ought to be sucking you off, not the other way around."

James looked up. "Does it truly make you uncomfortable for me to suck you? Are you afraid of my fangs?" It was true his fangs were out again, but there was no helping that. The lust he felt was nearly overpowering, and it was so entwined with the Thirst that the two were impossible to separate at this point.

"No, it's not that." Tad shook his head earnestly. "It's just... I mean, it's your house, and you're letting me stay, at least for tonight. I should be the one on my knees."

"Tad, let's have an understanding between us. I want to make love with you tonight—not just use you. So relax. Let me love you with my mouth as you loved me." James looked into his sky blue eyes until the boy nodded.

"All right," he murmured, putting one hand tentatively to James's cheek.
"It's not like I don't like getting blowjobs. I just wasn't sure how you felt."

James smiled and turned his head briefly to place a soft kiss in the center of Tad's palm. "Then let me show you."

He licked Tad's cock again, sucking the head deep into his mouth, being careful not to nick it with his fangs. Giving oral pleasure with both of them fully extended was a delicate operation, but one he enjoyed greatly.

From the soft groan that escaped Tad's full lips, he was enjoying it as well. "God, James..." He gasped as James sucked him even deeper, rolling his tongue along the pulsing shaft and swallowing the droplets of precum that leaked steadily from the head. "Feels...so good. So good!"

James didn't answer in words. Instead, he reached below the engorged shaft and cupped Tad's round, warm balls in one hand. The boy gasped again at his cool touch and then moaned softly when James began to stroke and fondle the tender weights. It had been a long time since he'd done this, but he

found that the skill wasn't one you forgot. Tad's shaft at the back of his throat felt every bit as good and right as his very first lover's—a stable boy who had introduced James to the love of another male back when he was still human. Thinking of that first love made him even hotter somehow. Maybe because Tad was so young, he reminded James of new beginnings, of that first taste of forbidden pleasure all over again.

Above him, Tad gasped, his hands fisted at his sides. "James... James, I...I can't help it. Gonna..."

Trying to tell me he's about to lose control, James thought, redoubling his efforts. Good, young one. That's what I want. Let yourself go as you made me let go last night. Come for me.

He gripped Tad's hips and pulled him closer, taking the boy's entire throbbing shaft down his throat. His own cock snarled for release as he felt the first warm, salty spurts of cum begin. Tad was as delicious as James had known he would be. And the soft, gasping moans he made while he gave himself up to the pleasure of being sucked to completion were doubly arousing.

The Thirst roared inside him, and James was tempted to sink his fangs deep in the boy's inner thigh and tap the femoral artery when he finished sucking Tad's cock. But that was a more intimate bite than he was willing to make, even though he wanted the boy badly. It was a claiming bite, which would leave a mark on Tad that any one of the Lost would recognize. As much as he wanted the boy, James didn't think such a gesture was appropriate unless he decided to tie Tad to him for life.

So instead, he rose smoothly to his feet and pulled Tad to him for a long, searching kiss. Tad answered his mouth eagerly, parting his lips and pressing his naked body against James's still-clothed one. Then he pulled back for a moment.

"James, there's something you should know." He looked down at his feet for a moment, as though ashamed about something. "I...I haven't always been safe. I mean, what you were asking earlier about catching something?" He looked up, searching James's eyes. "I mean, I *think* I'm clean, but I can't promise you for sure, you know?"

James was unexpectedly touched by the boy's admission. The fact that Tad was worried about his health was laughable but still incredibly sweet. "You don't have to worry about that," he said softly, cupping the boy's cheek in one hand and tracing Tad's full pink lips with his thumb. "I am unable to catch human diseases. And you don't need to worry about the reverse either—I have nothing in me that would harm you."

Tad's face broke into a relieved smile. "Excellent! In that case..." He lifted his chin, his eyes half-lidded in an obvious invitation. "I guess there's no need for a condom."

"Meaning?" James asked softly.

"That..." Tad's voice faltered for an instant, but his gaze remained steady.

"That you can...can fuck me bareback. If you want."

"That is exactly what I want. Nothing between us."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

James felt his control slipping as the boy pressed himself wantonly against him. Before he knew it, one of his fangs had grazed Tad's lower lip, drawing blood. James tasted the familiar metallic sweetness and forced himself to pull away before the Thirst could overcome him.

"Why...why did you stop?" Tad looked up, his eyes half-glazed with desire, blood welling from the small cut on his lower lip.

"I bit you." James tried not to look at the crimson drop of blood welling on the boy's full lip. God, how he wanted to lick it off...and then follow with a strike to Tad's neck. While he was pumping deep inside him, of course. Take things slowly, he reminded himself. Slowly and gently. Don't hurt or frighten him. But it was getting harder and harder to take his own advice. And then Tad did something completely unexpected. He licked the tiny wound and then kissed James, thrust his tongue boldly between James's lips, and fed him the blood he craved so desperately.

James heard a low growl coming from his own throat as, with speed and strength no human could match, he twisted the boy and pinned Tad facedown to the bed.

All thoughts of being slow and gentle were gone now. There was nothing but an overwhelming desire and the Thirst, raging out of control. He reached blindly between the boy's thighs, fondling the tight, puckered opening almost roughly in his need. To his surprise, Tad was already slick there—obviously prepared for him.

"I hope you don't mind." Tad's voice was muffled and soft. "I, uh, knew how big you are, so I kinda got myself ready ahead of time."

Far from minding, James was glad. The need inside him was too great for him to want to take time with more foreplay. If the boy was ready for him, so much the better. It was the work of a moment to unfasten his pants and bare his cock—he was too far gone to undress completely.

Grasping his shaft, he fit the head of his cock against the entrance to Tad's body and began to press forward. At the same time, he took a handful of Tad's soft blond curls and pulled the boy's head to one side, baring his neck. The rich blue vein pulsing under the tan surface of Tad's skin called to him. As soon as he was all the way into that tight, hot sheath he was going to strike.

He could still taste Tad's blood, salty-sweet and delicious, on the back of his tongue. But he wanted more of it. Wanted to suck greedily at the boy's neck as he pounded into the ripe, willing body lying so open and ready for him.

He pressed harder, feeling his shaft slide deeper and deeper into Tad's heat. God, it felt glorious! His single foray into penetration had been so long ago and completely impersonal, since Charles had been drugged to immobility at the time. James could well remember how his friend had just lain there, a glassy look in his eyes as he tried to make the transition as quick as possible.

Not like Tad, who was so warm and alive, trembling under him... Wait a minute—trembling?

James forced himself to stop, even though he was only a fraction of an inch from sinking his shaft to the hilt in the boy's beautiful body. He held himself perfectly still, in a way no human could, and observed with focused detachment.

On the surface, everything seemed well. Tad lay facedown on the bed with his legs spread wide, apparently willing to give James what he wanted...what he needed. He wasn't struggling or trying to get away, but tension coursed through him just under his smooth, tan skin like an electric current. A trembling that a human male in the heat of passion would probably never have noticed. But James, his vampiric senses finely attuned to the boy beneath him, could not fail to miss it.

For the first time, he saw that Tad hid his head in his arms, his face turned away as though to hide some guilty secret. And then he heard the soft, muffled sob that Tad was so clearly trying to hold back.

Oh God, I've hurt him!

"Tad?" His hand was still fisted in the soft blond curls, pulling the boy's head to one side, though Tad's face remained hidden. James straightened his fingers and stroked gently, pushing the soft waves away from Tad's flushed cheek. "Tad, are you all right?"

His only answer was another muffled sob, this one so quiet, he wouldn't have heard it if he'd been human.

James was suddenly disgusted by himself. Look at what I've become—an animal. I tell him I want to make love to him, and then instead I push him facedown on the bed and ride him without even asking if he's enjoying himself. Without asking if I'm hurting him as I shove myself inside, not caring for anything but my own lustful desires. He looked down at himself. I couldn't even be bothered to undress, I was so hot to take him. So eager to have what I wanted without thinking to count the cost.

He felt his desire dwindle to nothing despite the fact that he was still buried in Tad's warm, willing flesh. His lust turned to ashes, and his shaft was suddenly barely even half-hard. Even the Thirst, which had ridden him like a demon until just a moment before, dissipated until it was gone.

Slowly, trying to be gentle, James slid from the boy's tight sheath.

Tad shivered visibly at the withdrawal as though awaking from some self-induced trance. "Are you done already?" he asked softly. James still couldn't see his eyes, but the broken sound of his voice squeezed his heart.

He had never wanted this. The realization felt like the truth, and James understood that he'd fooled himself into thinking otherwise because he wanted the boy so badly. Thinking back, it seemed that Tad had been just a little too eager to get to the physical act of love. To get to it? Or to get through with it? James asked himself. Doubtless, it was the latter. Even the fact that the boy had prepared himself for the inevitable penetration pointed to that conclusion.

Tad had come here tonight with the intent to seduce, but he hadn't been happy about it. No doubt he had come expecting rough treatment. Well, I certainly fulfilled that expectation for him spectacularly, James thought, with a surge of self-loathing. He hated the idea that he'd done something against Tad's will, that he'd hurt the boy he was beginning to care about so much.

But then why had Tad been so eager to give himself if he so detested it? Was it just a trade to him—penetration and blood for food and shelter? Or was there something more to it? Remembering the desperate look in his eyes the night before when he'd offered to let James fuck him the first time, James thought there was a reason behind the boy's reaction. And he intended to get to the bottom of it, even if it took all night.

"James?" Tad asked again, his voice soft and uncertain. "Uh, you done?" "Yes," he murmured, stroking the boy's cheek. "Yes, Tad, I'm done."

"But..." Tad turned over and gave him what was obviously a forced smile. His eyes were dry but suspiciously red. "You didn't, uh... Did you come? And you didn't bite me. I thought you really wanted to do that."

"I did." James looked at him sadly. "But I don't want to hurt you any more than I already have."

"What are you talking about?" Tad's voice was a little too light, his smile a little too bright and false. "I mean, you're big and all, but that's why I got myself ready ahead of time."

"You got yourself ready in more ways than one, didn't you, young one?"
James searched the sky blue eyes, which were just a little too innocent-looking.
"You had to screw your courage to the sticking point to come to me tonight."

"What, because you're a vampire?" Tad scoffed, as though having sex with paranormal creatures that could kill him as easily as pulling the wings off a fly was an everyday occurrence. "Please, that doesn't scare me."

"I don't think it was my fangs you were afraid of tonight. That wasn't the penetration you feared." James put a hand under Tad's chin, lifting it so the boy couldn't look away, couldn't lie with his eyes. "Tell me the truth, Tad. Why did you ask me to take you if you didn't want to be taken?"

Chapter Seven

He knows. Oh, God, he knows! Tad stared into the vampire's dark eyes, wondering what he could say or do to save the situation. He couldn't understand how James had figured him out so easily. With other tricks, it was easy—lay it on thick in the beginning, and then the guy got so hot, he just went ahead and did what he wanted without expecting any kind of feedback. When it was over, they paid, and Tad left and went back to the alley he shared with Aaron to have his cry—end of story until next time.

But James was different—he actually cared. The way he'd dropped to his knees and sucked Tad's cock—and swallowed too—had been amazing. For a few minutes, Tad had actually believed he could enjoy this. That he could open himself to the vampire and learn to love the feeling of being filled. That he could forget the bad memories and endure the act of sex without the shame and pain that always overwhelmed him the moment he was penetrated.

Yes, everything had been going well...until after the blowjob was over. The minute he came and realized that James was really going to fuck him, Tad had felt the same panic welling up in him, the bad memories crowding into his head like a mob shouting for attention no matter how hard he tried to ignore them. The desire to be finished already, to have this over and done with suddenly swamped him, and he knew he couldn't stand a long, drawn-out scene. So he did the only thing he could think of—he pushed the button that made James react. He used his own blood as a trigger to send the vampire over the edge, to get him hot enough to just do the deed and get it over with.

And James had done just that. The blood had made him crazy—almost rough. But Tad had been prepared for that, prepared to take whatever the vampire dished out. What he hadn't counted on were the memories flooding him so strongly. The way James had twisted him around and shoved him

facedown on the bed was just too much, too close to that horrible first time. Closing his eyes tightly, Tad had tried without success to block out the scene.

"Faggot. Queer boy. You want this. You love it. All you fags love to take it up the ass," whispered the voice in his head.

"No, please! I don't... I've never done this." His own voice, weak and ineffectual.

"Liar. I saw you and your little queer buddy suckin' each other off. You can't tell me you didn't let him fuck you too."

"I swear I didn't! I never!" But his protests had fallen on deaf ears. Nothing he could say or do would stop the pain, the shame, the horror...

Tad had been so lost in his own private hell that the feel of James leaving his body was his first clue that things weren't going according to plan. And now here he sat, naked on James's bed, and wondered what lie he could tell that the vampire would believe.

"Tell me the truth, Tad," James murmured, as though reading his mind. "No more lies and excuses. I hurt you just now, and for that, I apologize. But it hurts me as well to know that you didn't really come here wanting me the way I wanted you tonight. To know that you lied about your desire for me."

"I didn't lie," Tad protested. "Honest, James. I want you—you're hot. It's just..." He shook his head. It was hard to go on, but he forced himself. "Just that whenever I...I let someone, you know, fuck me, it's hard not to think about the first time I ever, uh, got fucked."

James looked concerned. "And was it a bad experience?"

Tad laughed bitterly. "Uh, you could say that. It was Roy, my mom's boyfriend—the one I told you threw me out for being gay?"

James nodded, and Tad sighed.

"Well, he didn't exactly throw me out—it was more like I ran away. 'Cause I knew if I stayed, he would do it again, and once was enough for me. I decided

I'd rather make it myself on the streets. At least there you get paid for it, you know?"

"I suppose." James's deep, velvety voice was neutral, but his dark eyes were sharp. "So what this Roy did to you—was it consensual?"

Tad swallowed hard. "You mean did I want him to do it? Uh..." He looked down at his hands and wished James hadn't asked that particular question.

"The truth, Tad." The vampire's voice was barely above a whisper, but the command in his tone was unmistakable.

"No, okay?" Tad looked up, lifting his chin defiantly. "He caught me and my friend Randy blowing each other when my mom was at work. Randy ran away after Roy threatened him, and Roy said he'd tell my mom if I didn't let him...didn't let him fuck me. I tried to tell him I never did that before. But he...he wouldn't listen. He just pushed me down onto the bed and...and..." He couldn't go on. There was no way. No way to say how much it had hurt, how much he'd hated himself when it was over. How sick he felt inside that Roy had started something that seemed never ending in his life. A single black domino knocking over a line of others over and over and over...

"I'll kill him." James's dark eyes blazed, and his deep voice was low and dangerous. Tad didn't doubt that he meant it, but it amazed him that the vampire cared enough to want to do violence on his behalf.

"No, James, don't." He tried to make his voice strong, but it cracked anyway. "I... He... My mom doesn't know, okay? And she... For the first time since my dad left us, she's happy. Roy makes her happy."

James frowned severely. "And how long do you think she'd be happy if she knew what her lover did to you, her son?"

"Why do you think I ran away? I didn't want her to know. I was so ashamed. And now look at me." Tad gestured to himself as though to indicate his whole life. "I mean, how can I complain about what Roy did to me now that I sell what he took for free?"

"Tad..." James's dark eyes cooled, and his voice was suddenly gentle. "Nothing you've had to do to survive excuses what that man did to you. It's not your fault."

"It is...it is my fault. All of it. The way I live, the way I sell myself. The way I hate it, but I keep doing it, because what else can I do?" Tad shivered, his voice breaking over and over with self-loathing.

"Tad...young one..." James's voice was soft, soothing, and his arms were gentle as he gathered Tad to him.

"I'm sorry," Tad whispered against the vampire's broad chest, his voice choked with sobs. "I *wanted* to want you in me, James. I almost thought I could for a while, but it's just...every single time I can't help remembering. And then I spoil it by crying or shaking or... I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for." James stroked his hair away from his face, his fingers cool on Tad's hot forehead. "Nothing except not telling me this before I added to your misery."

"I couldn't—don't you see?" Tad pulled away, looking up at the vampire through wet lashes. Shit, why couldn't he stop crying? "You wanted me. And I wanted you too. Wanted to be with you, to feel you holding me like you did last night. And...and I was willing to do anything to have that feeling again. The feeling of being safe, being loved. Even if it was a lie."

"It's not a lie." James brushed away a stray curl and kissed his forehead. "I feel much for you, Tad. Much more than I can explain, considering our short acquaintance."

"I feel for you too," Tad admitted, searching the dark eyes. "I...I swear I'm not just saying that, James. You... When you held me last night, it reminded me of back before Roy, when my mom and I would sit on the couch and watch old movies and sometimes I fell asleep with my head on her shoulder, and I knew she loved me more than anything or anyone else... Shit." He sighed and shook his head. "I'm saying this all wrong. It's not like I want you to be my mom or I think of you like that. I mean, I want you—more than anybody I've

ever been with. It's just... I've never been with anyone where I had those two feelings combined." He looked up at James hopefully. "Does that make any sense at all?"

James looked thoughtful. "Strangely enough, it does. I understand your feelings because I used to wish the same thing for myself." He sighed. "All those years of loving Charles with all my heart, wanting him, and only getting a fraction of what I gave back...it hurt. He was content to be my friend and companion only, and I...I wanted so much more."

"Love and sex together." Tad ran a hand through his hair. "Seems like it's impossible to get them all in one package, doesn't it?"

"Not impossible. Just rare." James leaned down to kiss his cheek, but Tad turned his head so their lips met instead. His heart started to pound at the intimate contact, but then James disengaged and pushed him gently but firmly away. "No, Tad. I don't think this is wise," he said softly.

"Why not?" Tad looked up at him, feeling like his heart was lodged somewhere in his throat. "I...I still want you. Please, James, I'm not lying this time. I want...want to get past this. I swear I can, if you'll just give me another chance."

"By hurting you again? Forcing you like that animal who drove you away from your home?" James scowled. "No, Tad, I won't do that. I can't."

"But...but..." Tad felt the panic welling up in him again. He was losing James. Losing him and any chance he'd ever had that the vampire might want to keep him permanently.

"What is it, young one?" James asked softly. "Why are you suddenly so upset? Surely you can't want me to hurt you."

"Will you at least bite me?" Tad blurted, knowing it was probably the wrong thing to say but saying it anyway. "I'm sorry I'm such a fuck-up when it comes to, uh, well, to getting fucked. But you at least wanted to do that, right? You wanted my blood—you said you did."

"I wanted *you*," James murmured, stroking his cheek. "But I don't think it's wise that I bite you when we're not going to make love. In the past it's been easy for me to separate the two activities, but with you..." He shook his head, frowning. "The lust for flesh and the thirst for blood seem very strongly entwined."

"But you said you wanted my blood." Tad felt like crying all over again. "You wanted to bite me. Your fangs were all sharp and long and..." He trailed off, feeling stupid. James's fangs were completely retracted now—looking like nothing more than extrasharp canine teeth beneath his elegantly molded upper lip. Tad hadn't known him for long, but he was pretty sure that meant the same thing that a limp cock did—the vampire wasn't interested anymore. And probably wouldn't ever be again. In fact, he was probably trying to think of a nice, polite way to get Tad to leave right now. The next words out of his mouth would be a distant thank-you and an offer of cab fare.

I blew it, Tad told himself. Blew it completely. Why am I such a fuck-up? I can't get anything right. I'm a hustler who can't even hustle.

But James surprised him, as he so often had in the short time they had known one another. Instead of ordering him a cab and asking him to wait on the front steps, the vampire tilted Tad's chin up and searched his eyes carefully.

"Tell me," he said. "Why is it so important to you that I bite you tonight? The truth, please, Tad."

Looking into those deep, dark eyes, Tad found that he couldn't lie. "Because," he whispered brokenly. "Without the first bite, there can't be a second. And it's the second bite that counts—right? That's the one that makes me yours." He dropped his gaze. "I know that's stupid. You already told me you're not ready for another relationship, and even if you were, you wouldn't want to be with somebody like me who can't even get fucked without crying about it, but...but I couldn't help hoping."

Now he'll throw me out, he thought dully. Sure he will—now that he knows I want to make my fucked-up self a permanent addition to his perfect life, he'll get rid of me as fast as he can. I'll be out on the curb like last week's garbage before you can say—

"It's never wrong to hope."

"What?" Tad looked up, startled. "What did you say?"

James smiled gently. "I said it's never wrong to hope, young one." He leaned down and kissed the corner of Tad's mouth softly, sending a warm tingle through him. "I can't promise to give you the second bite and tie you to me for eternity," he whispered in Tad's ear. "That is a very serious step which must not be taken lightly by either of us, so it requires a lot of thought beforehand. However..." He kissed the other corner of Tad's mouth, lingering just long enough to make Tad's cock rise to attention.

"However what?" Tad heard the breathless tone of his own voice and couldn't seem to help it. The vampire was just so *hot*.

"However," James continued, looking into his eyes. "I think that there *is* a way I can give you the first bite at least, tonight."

"Really?" Tad's heart stuttered. "But...but I thought you couldn't bite me without fucking me. But that's okay, though," he amended hurriedly. "I can take it. I promise I'll make it good for you this time, James. So good—"

"Shh." James put a finger to Tad's lips, silencing him for a moment. "I think you misunderstand me, young one. It's true that my lust for you and my thirst for your blood are inseparable—at least for tonight. But there is no need to put you through the pain of being penetrated just because I wish to bite you while we are one."

Utterly confused, Tad shook his head. "But then how...how can we, uh, be one while you bite me if you don't fuck me?"

"I would think it would be obvious." James smiled at him, a slow, hot smile that seemed to melt everything below Tad's waist. "We can still be joined while I drink from you, but there is no need for me to penetrate you...as long as you are penetrating me."

Tad's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?" he demanded, staring at the vampire incredulously. "You mean *I* could fuck *you*?"

James raised one elegant eyebrow. "Is the idea off-putting or repugnant to you in some way?"

"No...hell no." Tad scanned the vampire's big, muscular body, and his mouth went dry with lust. "I mean, I have to be honest, I've never done it that way very much. I'm, uh, usually on the receiving end, but..." He shook his head. "You'd really let me do that to you?"

"Why not?" James smiled and kissed him, this time full on the lips. It was a hot, lingering kiss that left Tad panting when he pulled back. "It's not as if you can hurt me," he murmured. "And though I confess I haven't often been on the receiving end, as you call it, I enjoy it from time to time. I think I'd enjoy it a great deal with you."

Tad felt his heart skip a beat. "And...and you'd bite me when...while I was inside you?"

"Oh, yes." James's voice was low and filled with obvious lust as he eyed the side of Tad's neck. "Bite you and drink my fill as you filled me." He smiled and raised one eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"I think..." Tad was beginning to smile himself, and his cock was already rock hard at the idea of making love to James while the vampire sank those pearly white fangs into his neck. "I think you have way too many clothes on."

Chapter Eight

James couldn't help smiling at the boy's eagerness. To tell the truth, he was eager as well. He hadn't wanted to end their night together on a bad note, but he wasn't willing to attempt penetration again. It was clear that the physical act of love, at least when Tad was on the receiving end, caused the boy terrible anguish, and James could certainly understand why. He still wanted to seek out the monster who had hurt Tad and taken him against his will and see that justice was done. Only he wasn't sure he could stop before the man, Roy, was dead, and Tad had asked that James leave him alone for his mother's sake.

Just thinking of what Tad must have suffered was enough to make his silent heart clench with sorrow. To be raped and forced out onto the street to sell himself to strangers... It was too terrible. It was a wonder Tad had survived it without becoming bitter and ruined. Parts of him were broken, and he badly needed love and a safe place to heal, but his sunny smile and sweet attitude had somehow survived intact.

For the first time, James admitted to himself that he wanted to be the one to help in that healing. Holding the boy in his arms as Tad had poured out the whole, miserable story of his young life, James had felt such a surge of compassion and caring that it nearly swamped him. And he felt something else too—possessiveness. The emotion had nearly overcome him when Tad told of his abuse. And the anger James felt while he listened was much more than self-righteous disgust at the human monster who could harm a helpless boy so remorselessly. No, it was rage—the fury a lover feels when his beloved is harmed, which was ridiculous, considering that they had not even truly become lovers yet.

But that's about to change, James thought, permitting himself a small smile as Tad yanked eagerly at his clothing. It was as though James was a present he was unwrapping, and he couldn't wait to get all the wrapping paper off and examine his gift. Only when James's clothing lay in a messy pile at the foot of the bed did he stop for a moment.

"Wow." Tad's eyes were wide as they traveled over James's naked body, filled with a sensual appreciation that still took the vampire by surprise.

"You like what you see, young one?" he had to ask, watching the wondering look in Tad's sky blue eyes. Charles had never looked at him like this—as though he were a starving man and James was a delicious banquet.

"Like what I see? Damn, James. Doing you is gonna be like being with an Abercrombie model." The hunger in Tad's gaze and the way his cock was completely and achingly hard made it abundantly clear that he was being totally candid.

James smiled. "I'm not sure what an Abercrombie model is, but I suppose I'll take that as a compliment."

"Yeah." Tad nodded, his eyes still drinking in the sight of James's smooth marble beauty laid bare. "Definitely. God, I just want to lick you everywhere."

"What's stopping you?" James arched an eyebrow and lay back on the bed. He could feel the Thirst coming on him again, but it wasn't as urgent as before. Now that he understood Tad's past, he found it easier to control himself and wait.

Tad climbed astride him eagerly and straddled his hips so that their cocks brushed together, which made James moan and Tad gasp. The boy laughed a little at both their reactions as he scooted up James's body, the head of his shaft making a warm, wet trail of precum over the rock-hard muscles of the vampire's abdomen. At last, he was high enough to kiss James, and their mouths met, hot and needy and *right*.

"God, you're beautiful," Tad whispered while trailing kisses down James's jaw. He stopped and nibbled the side of James's neck, bringing a low moan from the vampire's throat. Then he moved lower, lapping the flat copper disks of James's nipples, which sent his nerve endings crazy.

Feels so good... James had to force himself to lie still under the tender assault. He wanted badly to flip the boy under him and take up where he'd left off earlier, but he wouldn't do it. He understood instinctively that after all he'd been through, Tad needed to feel in control right now. And besides, it wasn't as though he didn't find Tad's attentions enjoyable—excruciatingly so. The boy's mouth was hot, and he seemed to know exactly what to do to make him crazy.

"Mmm, delicious," he moaned, dragging his soft pink tongue over the ridges of muscle in the vampire's abdomen.

James stiffened and then sighed as Tad reached for his shaft. "You're very good at that, you know," he murmured when Tad started stroking him, a long, slow caress that made him thrust up into the boy's hand helplessly.

"It's easy to be good at something you like." Tad grinned at him and then leaned down to lick gently at the plum-shaped head. "I wasn't lying about that, you know. I do love to suck cock—when it's the right cock."

"I'm glad to hear it." James watched with pleasure as Tad sucked him as he had the night before. He stroked the tousled blond curls as the boy bobbed up and down, taking his thick shaft deeper and deeper. Truly, he was beautiful to watch, and James knew that if they had even been restricted to only giving and receiving oral pleasure, he would still count this time with Tad as one of the most erotic of his life. But the idea that they would soon be doing much more, that he would feel Tad's shaft deep in his body as he penetrated the boy's neck with his fangs, made him even hotter than watching Tad suck him.

"Come, young one," he said softly, pulling Tad away from his shaft at last. He felt hot enough to explode, but he wanted to come at the moment he sank his fangs into the boy's neck and not a moment sooner.

Tad looked up reluctantly. "But...don't you want me to finish you?"

James shook his head. "I want to feel you inside me now." He spread his legs invitingly and pulled the boy up onto his chest so that their hard shafts stroked together, and they both moaned. Tad kissed him hungrily for a long moment and then turned away.

"Wait, I want you too, but we should use some lube." He sprawled over the edge of the bed to dig in the pocket of his jeans, giving James a very tempting view of his high, round ass. Then he was back with a small tube in one hand. He showed it to James shyly. "Do you, uh, want me to get you ready?"

James smiled at the uncertainty in the boy's eyes. "You really cannot hurt me, Tad, but if it would make you feel better, then yes, you can get me ready as you put it."

"Good." Tad flashed him a smile, and James understood that he really wanted to do this. The realization made him even hotter as he spread his legs again and watched the boy get into position between his thighs.

"Now it might be a little cool at first," Tad warned and then something slippery and wet was being stroked over James's tight opening.

"That *is* a little chilly. I—" He gasped in surprised pleasure as Tad penetrated him, first with one finger and then two, and scissored gently back and forth, stretching him just as though he was human and vulnerable.

"How's that? Does it feel okay?" Tad asked anxiously, searching his eyes for signs of pain. It touched James deeply that the boy cared so much if he was comfortable and ready for the intimate experience. This is the way he wants someone to treat him, he suddenly realized and knew it was true. Who knew how many sexual encounters of this kind Tad had gone through, but had any of his partners bothered to open him gently and get him ready first? James very much doubted it.

He wondered if he'd been a little gentler and slower himself if Tad might have reacted with less fear and pain to his earlier penetration. Probably so—at least, it couldn't have hurt to try. He promised himself that if Tad ever felt ready to be taken again, he would take things much more slowly and gently.

Although that would no doubt be years in the future. His own thought surprised him. Years? Really? But he's too young to think of tying him to me—isn't he?

All thought was driven from his head when Tad leaned over him and kissed him, long and slow, while he worked his fingers deeper and deeper into James's tight opening. James groaned aloud—God, the boy was incredible! Despite his youth, Tad was a very skillful lover—possibly the most skillful one James had ever had. Not that he'd had that many—all the years he'd been with Charles, repressing his urges, wishing for what he couldn't have. How often had he fantasized about his companion doing just what Tad was doing now? How many times had he wished to feel Charles's weight on top of him, to feel his long, elegant cock thrusting deep, claiming James as his own? But his old friend would never have agreed to such a thing. Indeed, the very idea would have been repugnant to him.

Tad, on the other hand, was obviously eager for the feel of their bodies merging. He kissed James harder, almost frantically, and murmured in his ear, "God, you're so tight and hot, James. Just tell me when you feel ready."

"Now." James couldn't wait any longer. His voice was a low growl as he pulled the boy up and onto him once more and rubbed his aching shaft against the soft skin of Tad's belly. Taking a long, slow taste of the boy's neck that made Tad shudder helplessly against him, he murmured in his ear, "Now, Tad. Take me. Fuck me. Make us one."

"God!" Tad was nearly gasping for breath, and he shook with need as he fit the tip of his cock into James's tight entrance. He pushed in slowly, still trembling with the obvious effort to take things slowly. They both moaned when the head of his cock pierced the tight ring of muscle and slipped inside, and Tad looked at him anxiously. "Okay?" he asked in a husky voice.

James smiled and kissed him softly. "More than okay." Although earlier that evening he'd been eager to drive his cock deep into Tad's warm, tight sheath, he found that he was enjoying this just as much. Lying on his back

with the boy mounting him was an exquisitely erotic experience. Tad's warm skin, his soft pink lips, and the feel of his cock piercing where no one had been for far too long were deliciously intimate. "You can go on now," James told him, leaning up to steal another kiss.

"I'm...trying to go slow," Tad half whispered, his brows lowered in concentration as he slid another inch of his shaft into James's body. "Don't wanna..."

"Hurt me?" James raised an eyebrow at him. "I told you, Tad, you can't hurt me." He wrapped his arms around Tad's shoulders and pulled him closer. "More," he murmured in the boy's ear. "All of it. Put your whole self inside me, Tad. Your whole cock."

"God!" Tad trembled in his arms and then, with one long thrust, entered completely.

James held the boy to him tightly, reveling in the feeling of being so filled, so intimately joined to another man. No, not just another man, he told himself as he kissed him passionately. Tad. My Tad. The words felt right. The boy was his, and suddenly James felt an undeniable urge to mark him for his own. He felt his fangs elongate in his mouth and pulled back from the kiss so as not to hurt the boy.

"You need to bite me now, don't you?" Tad stared at him wide-eyed. Though he was buried to the hilt in James's body, he held perfectly still.

"Yes." James's cock throbbed against the boy's belly, and he was completely filled with Tad's cock. But though it was Tad doing the penetrating, James was still in control of the situation. In control of himself too, although he might not be for much longer. The Thirst was on him, riding him harder than ever before, making his mouth feel like a barren desert so dry, he felt he would die without the salty-sweet liquid he lived on. And Tad smelled so good—so rich and warm and human. Delicious. Enticing. Intoxicating. James *had* to have him.

Tad seemed to understand his need. Turning his head, he arched his neck and offered James the tender, vulnerable side of his throat, where a thick blue vein pulsed just under the surface of his smooth, tan skin. "Go on," he murmured, his voice thick with lust. "Do it, James. I want it. I want you."

James wanted him desperately; the Thirst burned his throat like a branding iron. But he couldn't forget their earlier experience, the way Tad had seemed ready to receive him and yet wasn't. "Are...are you sure?" The need was so intense, his voice was little more than a growl, but he forced himself to ask.

Tad looked at him, his sky blue eyes heavy-lidded with lust. "Completely sure, James. This...this is the one way you can penetrate me that doesn't bring back bad memories. This...in a way it's like you can fuck me. Pierce me. I want that..." He licked his lips in an unconsciously erotic gesture. "I want you. Please...do it. Bite me."

James needed no further invitation. With a low roar, he pulled the boy down to him and struck, piercing the tender skin of Tad's throat with his fangs and sucking greedily at the life-giving blood the boy gave up so easily.

"God!" Tad gasped and stiffened against him as the rush of sexual pleasure washed over him. James felt the boy's hips buck as he drew out of James's tight sheath and thrust in again almost involuntarily.

James wrapped his legs around the slim hips and, holding them together, helped Tad find the rhythm that worked for them both as he sucked the boy's neck. The friction of Tad's warm skin against his own ragingly hard cock was beginning to be too much. The feel of being joined so closely together was doing him in. James had envisioned a long, slow, drawn-out lovemaking session when he'd suggested to Tad that they switch roles, but he hadn't realized how strong the pleasure would be, what extreme emotions he would feel.

Mine, he thought as he drank from the warm, red fount. Mine forever. Mine.

He felt Tad stiffen against him as he sucked the blood into his mouth in rhythmic pulls. Apparently it was too much for the boy as well, because the steady pace they'd established together began to break down into wild, uncontrolled bucking.

The extra friction was more than James could bear. With a muffled groan, he felt himself release, his cock pulsing warm and sticky all over the boy's belly. At the same time, Tad cried out and pressed hard against him as though trying to bury himself completely in James and join them together permanently.

"God, James. Can't help it," he gasped, and the hot, wet pulses began filling James's body as surely as Tad's blood filled his mouth.

Mine! He crushed the boy to him, tasting the sweetness of his blood, feeling the warm firmness of Tad pressed against him, and knowing that the beginnings of a bond had started between them, even though this was only the first bite.

Chapter Nine

Making love with James was the most intensely erotic experience Tad had ever had in his entire life, and that was saying something, considering how much sex of one kind or another he'd had in the past six months. Even after he slipped his cock from James's body and James withdrew his fangs from Tad's throat, the vampire held him close.

James stroked his hair and lapped gently at the place where he'd bitten Tad. His warm tongue sent shivers down Tad's spine, and the feel of the vampire's arms wrapped around him made him feel safe and secure. The afterglow was beautiful, and he wished it could last forever.

Tad fell asleep for a while, and when he woke, it was to find James watching him, studying his face with an expression of tenderness that made his stomach clench with hope. Could it be that James felt the same way he did? That for some inexplicable reason they were meant to be together? He didn't dare say it out loud. Instead, they talked. James told him more about his past, and Tad listened, fascinated by the living history lesson.

He told the vampire about his life before the streets, how he'd enjoyed school, the friends he'd had, the things he'd hoped to do when he graduated. There hadn't been any money for college, but as long as he could live at home, Tad had decided he could get a part-time job and at least take a few classes. He didn't know what he wanted to be yet—maybe a teacher or a librarian. Of course, those dreams had gone out the window after Roy had forced him out of the house, but Tad hadn't given up hope that he might still find a way out, a way off the streets and back to a normal life.

James nodded and stroked his hair, listening—really *listening* to what Tad had to say. It seemed amazing that anyone could actually care what he thought

and how he felt, but that was the feeling he got from the vampire. That James cared. That he really wanted to know Tad's hopes and dreams.

At last, he fell asleep again, still cradled in his new lover's arms. When he woke again near dawn, it nearly broke his heart to leave the warm feeling of safety and security he felt with James. But it was a new day, and the vampire had only invited him to stay the night. Tad didn't want to wear out his welcome.

But when he got up and began to get dressed, James looked at him and said a single word.

"Stay."

"What?" Tad's heart began beating a frantic rhythm of hope, but he realized it was important not to read too much into this.

"Stay," James said again, smiling at him.

"Um, for how long?" Tad made himself ask. "I mean, just for the day? Or—"

"As long as you want." James beckoned him to get back in bed, and Tad complied.

"Does this mean you want...want to keep me?" he asked in a low voice, looking down at his hands. "Or are you just offering me a place to crash because you feel sorry for me or something?"

James gave him a serious look. "Tad, please believe me when I say I'm not asking you to stay out of pity. Having you here with me these past couple nights has made me realize how alone I am, and...and I find I am coming to care for you more and more," he finished softly.

Tad felt his heart jump in his chest. "So you do want to keep me." He leaned over and gave James a warm, spontaneous kiss. "You want me to belong to you."

James held up a hand to stop him, but he was smiling. "I want us to take things slowly at first. You can live with me for as long as you like, and we'll get to know each other a little more and decide if we're compatible for the long term."

The long term—he means forever! Tad thought. He kissed James again and murmured in the vampire's ear, "So when are you going to give me the second bite?"

James frowned. "Not for a long time, if at all. I need you to understand something, Tad." He cupped Tad's cheek and looked seriously into his eyes. "In order to bind you to me with the second bite, I need to be inside you, penetrating you with my cock as well as my fangs. And I don't think you're quite ready for that yet."

"Oh." Tad felt his face fall. "I, uh, didn't know." Although he should have, considering that James had told him about the way he'd made his friend Charles his longtime companion. Just the thought of that, the thought of being fucked, put a damper on his joy. It wasn't that he didn't want James inside him...but he knew when they got down to it, the memories of Roy would wash over him again, and then he would cry and ruin everything.

"See? You're not ready." James had been watching him carefully, obviously seeing the emotions flying over his face.

"I guess not." Tad looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry, James. It's not that I don't want you to. It's just..."

"I know." James stroked his cheek and kissed him gently. "Listen, young one, don't worry about it. Just because you're not ready now doesn't mean you never will be. We can take as much time as you want getting to know each other, living together, making love in every other way..."

Tad felt a shiver of desire run along his spine. "You mean...you'd let me do you again? The way we did last night?"

James smiled. "Why not? My thirst is more than satiated after last night's activities. So it should be safe for us to indulge in physical love for a while before I grow thirsty again."

Tad smiled back. "But I like it when you bite me. It feels *amazing*." He couldn't help remembering the rush of sexual pleasure that had engulfed him like a warm wave when the sharp white fangs pierced his skin and he felt James claiming him, drinking from him. The feeling of nourishing his lover, of being penetrated even as he was penetrating, was hotter than anything he'd ever experienced before, and he was eager to repeat it.

The vampire stroked one long finger along the line of Tad's jaw. "It feels amazing for me too, young one. But until we're sure of each other, certain we want to spend eternity together, I cannot bite you again. All right?"

"All right." Tad smiled and snuggled close to the vampire's broad, muscular chest. "I'll try to be patient. And in the meantime, there're lots of other things we can do."

"Do tell." James kissed him hungrily on the lips. "Or should I say, show?"

"I'll be more than happy to," Tad whispered in his ear. They wound up spending the morning in bed so that he could show James exactly what he meant, over and over again.

* * * * *

The next month was the best in Tad's entire life. He loved living with James. The vampire was an endless source of fascination and entertainment, not to mention sensual and sexual pleasure.

Their days fell into a kind of routine. In the mornings, James would retire to his daytime resting place for a few hours, and Tad was free to go out if he wanted or just stay in and putter around the house. He tended to eat his largest meal of the day at this time, fueling up for the rest of the day since James didn't have to eat, although the vampire was more than happy to sit across from him and talk if Tad wanted a snack later.

In the afternoons after James was up, they watched old movies or the History Channel together. James would point out inaccuracies in the programs and tell Tad how things had really happened. It was endlessly fascinating, a chance any historian would have jumped at, and Tad loved it.

In the evenings after the sun went down, they went out. Sometimes shopping, because James said he couldn't have a companion who looked like he dressed in leavings from the rag heap, and other times, just to a movie or a play or a club, if they felt like it. James proved to have a good sense of rhythm, and Tad was teaching him to dance club-style. At home, James sometimes demonstrated his own style of dancing, the kind Tad had seen on that long-ago movie his English teacher had made him watch. Sometimes they got all dressed up, and James took him out for a night on the town, a fancy restaurant, a Broadway show—the works, which Tad loved.

But the best nights were the ones when they went someplace quiet—like the beach. Tad learned to love the sound of his new lover's voice interspersed with the murmuring of the tide coming in and the soft sea wind blowing. It was too cold to stay out long, but James had promised him that when summer came they would make love in the dunes and watch the moon rise. Tad couldn't wait.

Every day seemed perfect—a gift he would always treasure. It was wonderful not to have to sell himself to survive, to have a soft, warm bed to sleep in and a loving companion to hold him tight. And every night they loved each other, a sensual feast that never ended. After all the sex he'd had, Tad might have supposed he would get sick of it, but with James, it seemed different and fresh every time. The vampire was a delicious mixture of dominance and innocence. Despite his great age, he hadn't had nearly as much sexual experience as Tad, but he was eager to expand his repertoire. He could spend hours worshipping Tad's cock with his mouth or licking him everywhere. And sometimes he would stare into Tad's eyes while he thrust his long, thick shaft between Tad's inner thighs, never quite penetrating but rubbing gently against Tad's sensitive balls until they both moaned and came from the incredibly hot friction.

Tad was beginning to feel like maybe he would be ready for the second bite sooner than James thought he would. Because the vampire was doing what he had once thought was impossible—he was replacing all Tad's bad, sad, scary sexual memories with beautiful ones. No longer did he think of fat businessmen in crumpled suits when he thought about blowjobs—he thought of wonderful hours sucking James's cock while the vampire stroked his hair and whispered how beautiful he was. He was hoping that eventually he could put the memory of Roy's attack to the back of his mind too and replace it with something wonderful—a memory of sex with James. It was like he was living in a fairy tale and had finally found his happily-ever-after.

But the fairy tale fractured into a million pieces one evening when Tad answered a knock on the solid wood front door.

He and James had been getting ready to go out clubbing, and he wore ripped jeans and a sexy little half shirt, while James was in tight black leather pants and nothing else. Tad loved to watch the other twinks eat up his man with their eyes, staring at James's rock-hard pecs and washboard abs jealously when it became clear that James had no interest in anyone but him. They were hitting a new gay hot spot tonight—The Meat Market—and Tad couldn't wait to get going. So he was annoyed when their departure for the club was delayed by the doorbell.

"I'll get it," he called to James, who was still in the bedroom. "Probably the UPS guy with my latest from Amazon." He'd taken to ordering a lot of movies online lately, since he and James watched so many of them, but he was a little surprised that they were getting such a late delivery.

But when he opened the door, the familiar dark brown uniform of the UPS guy was nowhere in sight. Instead, he saw a white face and wide sky blue eyes exactly like his own.

It was his mother.

"Mom?" For a minute Tad thought he was seeing things. "What...? Why are you here?" he stammered at last. He hadn't seen her for over half a year,

and to find her waiting out on James's front step now seemed weird and somehow wrong.

"Why am I here? How can you ask me that, Theodore?" She pulled him into her arms and gave him a tight hug. "I'm here for you, honey," she whispered, and despite himself, Tad felt tears pricking against his eyelids. But he forced himself to pull away from her embrace.

"Why now?" he demanded, trying to keep his voice steady. "Why after all this time?"

His mom's eyes overflowed suddenly, and tears ran down her cheeks. "Because now is when I finally found you. I've been looking for such a long time. I didn't know what happened to you until Roy told me."

Tad felt like someone had dropped an ice cube down the groove of his spine. "Oh? What did he tell you?" he asked, and his voice sounded strangely flat in his own ears.

"That you're... You know. That you like other boys." His mom's face went even whiter, and she couldn't quite keep the disapproval out of her voice. "He told me what he caught you and Randy doing—said that was why he kicked you out. But I"—she drew herself up and lifted her chin—"I told him you were my son, and no matter what he found you doing, he had no right to force you out of the only home you'd ever known."

Tad felt a measure of relief. So his mom knew he was gay—he could live with that. What he couldn't live with was her knowing that her boyfriend had raped him. He smiled. "Thanks for taking my side, Mom. But, uh, how did you find me?"

"Your, uh, friend, Aaron—he told me you were staying with someone in Westchase. And the security office had information on where you were staying and with who." She lowered her voice and looked over Tad's shoulder into the rest of the house. "Tad, is it true you're staying with some older man and paying him with...with sex?"

"Our arrangement is more one of companionship than commerce, madam." James's sudden arrival startled Tad almost as much as his mother, and he realized that the vampire must have heard every word they'd said.

"Mom, this is James, my lover." He made a motion toward James, who was already bowing gallantly over his mom's hand.

"Is that right?" Tad's mother snatched her hand away, frowning. "So you're the grown man who brainwashed my boy into thinking that living like this is all right."

James frowned. "I assure you that Tad's orientation was well established before he came to stay with me."

"But you're keeping him here, letting him live for free as long as he gives you what you want every night." The bitter accusation in his mom's tone was undeniable.

"Mom, please." Tad put a hand on her arm. "It's not like that-I love James. And he loves me."

His mother's mouth was a thin white line. "If he really loved you, he'd send you home."

"What, home with Roy?" Tad yelled. "No-fucking-thank-you, Mom! I had enough of that asshole to last a lifetime."

"Watch your language, young man!" She took a deep breath and let it out before continuing in a calmer tone. "Anyway, Roy's gone. I told him I couldn't live with someone who treated my only son the way he did."

"Roy's gone? Really?" Tad could scarcely believe it.

"It's true." His mom smiled—a little tightly, but a smile nonetheless. "And I talked to your teachers, Theodore. They said you could take the second half of the semester over again. It's not too late-you can still graduate and make something of yourself. And you know you're welcome to live at home as long as you want to if you decide to take some classes at the community college. Oh, please, honey..." The tears were back in her eyes, trickling down her thin cheeks in rivulets. "I know you're old enough now that I can't force you, but please come back home. I've missed you so much, looked for you for so long. *Please*."

"I'm sorry, Mom—" Tad began, but James cut him off smoothly.

"Maybe you should consider your mother's offer, Tad."

"What?" Tad turned on the vampire, a feeling of dread growing in his chest like a black inkblot. "But...but why? Don't you want me anymore?"

"We've had a lovely month together," James said softly, sidestepping the question. "It was one I will never forget. But it sounds like your mother has plans for your life—plans you shouldn't ignore. Schooling in particular is important."

"School? What do I care about school?" Tad said wildly. He could feel the panic overtaking him. James didn't want him. James was tired of him. The happily-ever-after ending hadn't been an ending at all—it had just been a short prelude of delirious joy that came before the worst part yet—losing James.

"Maybe you *should* care about school," James said sternly. "Growing up, getting an education—these things help you know your own mind. They help you make important decisions about what you want to do with the rest of your life."

"But I know what I want to do with my life—I want to spend it with you." Tad flung himself at the vampire and wrapped his arms around James's neck. He kissed his lover on the mouth hard, not caring that his mother was watching. "Please, James, I thought you felt the same way."

For a moment, he thought the vampire's dark eyes softened, but then James shook his head. Gently but firmly, he peeled Tad's arms from around his neck and nudged him toward his waiting mother. "I think you should go with your mother, Tad," he said in a cool, smooth voice that reminded Tad of the first night they had met—the night James had turned him down. "Family ties are important. You should make the most of them while you can."

"But...but I..." Tad couldn't believe this was happening—couldn't believe all his hopes and dreams were going up in smoke.

"It's for the best." James cupped his cheek and looked into his eyes intently. "Do you understand me? I have to let you go back to where you belong."

"Where I belong is with you. Only with you." The tears flowed freely now, and Tad couldn't seem to stop them. He knew he was bawling like a little girl with a skinned knee, but he couldn't help it—James was pushing him away. The love he'd hoped would last for an eternity had lasted barely a month, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. "I'll come back," he vowed wildly, hardly knowing what he was saying. "You'll change your mind. You'll miss me and want me back—I know you will."

"Yes, you're probably right about that," James murmured, as though talking more to himself than Tad. He sighed and stroked Tad's face. Then he whispered in a voice so low Tad could barely hear it, "Forget."

"What? What are you saying?" Tad demanded. But suddenly his mind felt fuzzy, as though he'd just woken up after a long night of drinking. What had he been so upset about again? And why did the tall man beside him suddenly look like someone was ripping his heart out? "Hey, man, are you okay?" he asked, feeling a hazy sort of concern. He cared about this guy a lot—he didn't exactly remember why at the moment, but he knew he didn't want him to be unhappy.

"I will be all right." The man stepped away from him, pain still filling his dark eyes. "I think you'd better go now, Tad. Your mother is waiting for you."

"Really? Mom's here?" Tad looked around dazedly and was both surprised and pleased to see that the man was telling the truth. "Mom! I haven't seen you in so long!" He gave her a big bear hug and pulled back to see a look of confusion in her eyes.

"Well, I...I'm glad I found you," she said, looking from him to the man and back again. "But your, uh, friend is right. It's time we were getting home."

"Home?" Tad frowned, a dark memory trying to emerge from the soupy ocean of his consciousness. "Is Roy there? I don't like him—he's an asshole."

"No, honey, Roy's gone." His mother gave him another puzzled look but took him firmly by the arm. "So now we need to get home. You're going to start school again soon so you can finish your senior year. You won't get to graduate with your friends, but if you do summer school, you can still be ready for college in the fall if you want."

"School?" Tad brightened. "Hey, I like school. Especially English and history." He gave the tall man with the sad eyes a puzzled look. *English? Something about English class? Some movie we had to watch about people dancing and talking?* Why did he think of this man when he remembered the movie? He was dressed in tight black leather pants—no one in the movie the teacher had shown them dressed like that. They all wore lace ruffles at their throats and those pants that only went down to the knee and—

"Let's go now." His mom tugged on his arm, pulling him away from the tall, sad man with the handsome face and dark eyes. Eyes that filled Tad with some kind of longing, even though he didn't know why.

"Go with your mother, Tad. Take care of yourself," the tall man said quietly.

"All right." Reluctantly, Tad allowed himself to be pulled out the big front door and down the steps. The last thing he saw before his mom put him in her small blue Mazda was those sad, dark eyes.

For some reason, he felt like crying, even though he didn't know why.

Chapter Ten

It was the hardest thing James had ever done. Harder even than withholding the bite that could have saved Charles's life when his old friend had begged to die. To watch the knowledge of their love fade and die from Tad's beautiful face, to see those sky blue eyes cloud over as the haze of forgetfulness covered them—it was almost more than James could bear.

But he bore it because he loved Tad. And because Tad's mother was right—he had his whole life ahead of him. What right did James have to take that, to take one as young as Tad, who didn't really know his own mind, and bind the boy to himself irrevocably?

None—no right at all, he told himself as he watched Tad walk away. Maybe in ten years or so, when Tad had been given time to grow and finish school, to taste life a little and find out what he really wanted, James could introduce himself again. Maybe Tad would feel the same way he had before James had submerged his memories of the past seven months...or maybe he won't want to have anything to do with me.

The thought tormented him almost as much as the sight of his young lover leaving. What if Tad changed, what if he no longer cared when James tried to reenter his life? And even if he didn't, how could James bear the next ten years alone, companionless and aching for a love he couldn't have? A love he should never have allowed to grow in his heart in the first place.

My first instincts were right, he thought tiredly as the blue car disappeared into the distance. I should never have brought him home, never allowed myself to care for him, to love him.

The only good thing he had done, he reflected, was lay the gentle forgetfulness over Tad's memory. James had not only covered his own presence in Tad's life with the thin blanket of nonmemory, he had also buried the past seven months of the boy's life, including the terrible rape he had suffered at the hands of his mother's now ex-boyfriend. To his way of thinking, it all balanced out. Tad wouldn't remember the pleasure he and James had shared, but neither would he remember the horror of violation or the degradation of his life on the streets before James had rescued him. Essentially, unless some part of his old life came back to haunt him, those memories, both good and bad, would remain buried, like the ground under a thin layer of snow.

That was why James couldn't allow himself to visit the boy, even casually. If Tad saw him again, or anyone connected with his past, it might melt the cool, soothing snow of forgetfulness and bring back everything he'd suffered and felt in the last seven months. James couldn't risk that, and he wouldn't. He would stay away from the boy, he promised himself. Even though it felt like his heart had been ripped from his chest, he would bear the pain. He would give Tad room and time to grow and discover what he wanted from life before he introduced himself to the boy again.

It was an easier decision to make than to keep. Every evening when he woke, his first thought was of Tad, and every dawn when he returned to his daytime resting place, his last memory was of trusting sky blue eyes and golden curls. James had never been one to give his heart lightly, but once given, it was given irrevocably. The same steadfast love that had allowed him to endure one hundred and eighty years of near celibacy with Charles was now focused on Tad, and there it stayed, no matter how James tried to distract himself.

He began going to his resting place earlier and earlier, seeking the relief of the deathlike sleep that claimed him every day as a refuge from his loss. But even in sleep, Tad was with him. For the first time since he had become one of the Lost, he dreamed, and all his dreams were of the boy.

In his dreams, Tad was in terrible trouble, running from a monster intent on harming him. But he was also running into the arms of another monster, one who would doubtless kill him if given the chance. And all James could do was watch, because even with his preternatural strength and speed, he was slow, too clumsy to stop the inevitable from happening. He was always too late.

He would wake up with his silent heart clenched in his chest like a fist, and his thoughts were always the same: If only I had kept him with me, I could have kept him safe. I should never have sent him away. Never, never should have sent him away.

Slowly but surely, the loss was driving him mad.

At last, he thought of something he could do. Though he couldn't risk going near the boy for fear of Tad seeing him, maybe he could at least visit the place where they had first met. The alley behind the theater where he'd rescued his little hustler from the evil blood-daemon.

It might not help. In fact, James was almost certain that it would make the pain of loss worse. But at least it was something to do. Something other than sitting around watching the movies Tad had ordered but never gotten to watch with him. Something other than trying to sleep the nights and days away only to be plagued by the endless dreams.

He had to do something or lose his mind. So at last, he decided to go out. Even a memory of Tad and the inevitable pain it was sure to cause was better than the emptiness that filled him now.

* * * * *

School was all right. Somehow he had missed the first two-thirds of his senior year, so he wouldn't be able to graduate with his friends—that was kind of a bummer. But it was still nice to see the familiar faces of classmates and teachers he liked. Sometimes one of them would ask him where he'd been, and Tad would tell them what his Mom always said—that he'd been sick for a long time. Some really bad strain of mono or something. That didn't seem quite right, but he got a headache if he tried to think about it too much, so mostly he left it alone.

He had a lot of makeup work to do, so there wasn't much time to think about the past and what had or had not actually happened. Mostly, he came straight home from school with a big stack of books and got right to the studying. Then, after his mom came home, they would eat supper and maybe watch a late-night movie before hitting the hay. It was nice, a good way to live, a good life, but sometimes Tad felt a vague sense of dissatisfaction. He liked going to school and loved his mom, but sometimes he felt like he was seeing everything in shades of gray. And he couldn't help feeling like his life used to be full of color—a vividness that had somehow slipped away, leaving only the monochromatic world of sameness he now lived in.

Everything was just all right or okay—nothing really made him *feel*. In fact, the only time he really felt anything strongly—the only time he saw in color—was in his dreams.

Once in a while he dreamed of Roy, his mom's ex. Those were nightmares. Roy wanted something from him, something Tad didn't want to give, but in the dreams, he couldn't get away. Sometimes Roy wore a different face—one made of twisted shadows and red eyes in a darkened alley. That dream was frightening, though in a different way. Tad woke up shaking and sweating after the Roy dreams, scared and miserable, though he couldn't remember why.

But every so often the dream changed. Just as the monster with red eyes was about to get him, a tall, dark-haired man charged into the alley. He kept the monster at bay and took Tad with him. Mostly Tad noticed his gentle touch and kind eyes. In some dreams the man dressed in old-fashioned clothes, with lace at his throat and trousers that only went down to his knees, and in others he wore tight black leather pants that made Tad's mouth water. But always there was a look of love in the dark eyes, love coupled with pain and loss that made Tad's heart ache for the man.

I love him, he would think, on waking from one of those dreams. And right after that, who is he?

He could never remember, no matter how hard he tried. It occurred to him after a while that maybe the dreams had some kind of hidden meaning. Could they have something to do with the six or seven months that had somehow gone missing from his life? The more he thought about it, the more it bothered him. But what could he do? Dreams were only dreams—right? Right, except the alley in his dreams where Roy turned into a terrifying monster of the night—that alley looked somehow familiar. As if he'd been there before, maybe even spent a lot of time there or near there. It was by the Old Revival Theater, wasn't it? Would it hurt to go down there and just take a look? Just to see if maybe he could jog loose the memories that seemed to be somehow buried just beneath the surface of his mind?

For a long time he put it off. Not just because of the headaches or the fact that the first half of the dreams were nightmares. He put it off because he had a feeling that some of what was buried might be dangerous. Might be something he would rather leave forgotten. But in the end, the dream of the dark-eyed man overcame his fear. He needed to know who the man was, needed to know why he looked at Tad with such longing and love and pain in his eyes. And the nightmares of Roy and the dark creature he turned into—a blood-daemon, whispered a ghost of a thought in his mind—while frightening, weren't so terrible that he wouldn't risk them to find the man he somehow knew he loved.

The alley behind the Old Revival Theater was the only clue he had, and all the dreams happened at night. He waited until his mom was working a late shift one Friday night, and then he put on his warmest jacket and went.

The truth was out there somewhere—he had to find it. Had to find the dark-eyed man, no matter what it cost or how much it hurt.

Chapter Eleven

"Hey, man, what are you doing here? I thought you quit the life—true?"

The boy standing on the street corner looked familiar, but for some reason, Tad couldn't place him. Still, why would a complete stranger talk to him? Even though he was only a block or so from the alley behind the theater, he stopped and faced the semifamiliar face. "Uh, hi," he said tentatively. "Do I know you?"

"Do I know you? Man, what kind of shit is that? *Do I know you*?" The boy gave him a look of total disgust. "It's me—Aaron. Only been out of the life for a month or two and already you're too good to talk to the guy who showed you the ropes, huh? It figures."

"No, really." Tad took a step closer, still staring at the boy who called himself Aaron. The name sounded familiar. He was starting to get something; a memory rose like a sharp rock under a thin blanket of snow, and seeing the boy's face was melting that snow. But he still didn't have it yet. "Hey," he said, trying on a smile. "I'm sorry, man, uh, Aaron. It's just that I was sick for a long time, and sometimes my memory isn't so good. So seriously, how do we know each other?"

"Oh, man!" Aaron shook his head, his dark hair whipping around his lean face. "Been sick, huh? Or did somebody get you shock treatments to make you forget all the bad shit you did?"

"Me? I did bad shit? Uh, stuff?"

"Hell yeah." The boy smiled nastily. "You and me, we tricked together for like, six months, true? You know—sucking cock, selling ass. You were nothin' when I found you, but I taught you how."

The memory was coming into focus now, the snow melting rapidly, but it was hard for Tad to believe. Fat businessmen in crumpled suits. Endless nights spent on the street corner, waiting to get a call through an open car window.

"Hey, buddy, how much?"

"Suck your dick for twenty, man. Twenty-five to swallow."

"Yeah? How much to fuck?"

Except he hadn't liked to fuck, had he? He'd only sold his ass when he was starving, broke, going down for the last time. Why was that? And how could he have possibly done that—done any of it?

Aaron was watching him closely, apparently seeing the recognition flash over Tad's face. "Got it now, man?" he asked, grinning. "You and me, we tore it up. Hustled all up and down this street from here to the Old Revival Theater."

Tad's head snapped up. "The theater—that's where I'm going."

Aaron frowned. "Why—you hoping to meet your Mr. Moneybags there again?"

"Who?" Tad furrowed his brow. More snow was melting, more memories coming clear... The whistles and catcalls that made him feel so cheap. That time he and Aaron had run from gay bashers. Avoiding undercover cops—it wasn't hard; none of them looked or acted remotely gay, even when supposedly trying to buy a fuck. Nights spent out in the cold, hoping to give enough blowjobs to be able to pay for a cheap room in a flophouse instead of spending the night on the streets. But why was I on the street? Why wasn't I home with Mom?

"You know, Mr. Moneybags—your rich trick. The one you were bragging on last time I saw you. Before you up and disappeared."

"I...disappeared?" Tad frowned, trying hard to remember. Rich trick—could that be the man in his dreams? The one with sad, dark eyes?

"Sure. Man, you really *are* out of it." Aaron shook his head. "You know, it's kinda funny you showing up like this tonight, 'cause there was this guy here not too long ago asking about you."

"There was?" Tad's heart started beating double-time in his chest. *It must* be the man in my dream. It has to be! "What did he want?"

"He said he heard you tricked around here, wanted to know if you still came around."

"Yeah? And what did you tell him?" Tad tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

Aaron shrugged. "Told him I hadn't seen you lately. But that you used to work the blocks between here and the theater. He seemed real interested in that, and he said he might come back later. I kinda thought he might go lookin' for you—true?"

"Really?" Tad couldn't wait any longer. It was the man, and now details were beginning to come back to him. James, his name was James. He said he cared about me—wanted me. "Uh, thanks a lot, Aaron," he said, nodding at the other boy. "But I gotta run, okay?"

"Sure, whatever."

Aaron nodded, but Tad was already almost running down the sidewalk, headed for the alley behind the theater. *That's where he'll be waiting for me. And when I see him, I'll remember everything!*

He was so sure that he would see the tall, dark-eyed man named James the moment he stepped into the alley that he was actually disappointed to see it was deserted. Except for the stinking green Dumpsters and the slimy concrete, there was nothing and no one to see but shadows.

Tad stood rooted to the spot, peering into the blackness. *But I was so sure.*So sure he'd be here. Where is he? Where—

His thought was cut off abruptly when a large hand grabbed the collar of his T-shirt and dragged him into the alley.

"Hey, you little shit," said a hoarse and horribly familiar voice. "I knew you'd show up if I waited long enough."

Tad's eyes were accustomed to the dimness now, but he would have known this voice even if he were blind. "Roy?" he said, hoping his voice didn't shake too much.

"In the flesh, kid." His mother's beefy ex-boyfriend laughed, breathing a harsh cloud of alcohol fumes into Tad's face.

Tad tried not to wince. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeing a movie." Roy's hoarse voice dripped sarcasm.

"A...a movie?" Tad wanted to run, but he was frozen to the spot. There was something—a very big something connected with this man that he didn't want to remember. But it was going to come out soon anyway. He could feel the forgetfulness around it melting like ice on a boulder during the spring thaw. The dreaded knowledge was coming, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"I'm not seein' no movie, you little asshole," Roy snarled, shaking him by the scruff of his shirt. "I've been waiting for you. That other little faggot you hustle with told me this was your territory."

"Not...not anymore." Tad tried to keep the mounting terror from his voice. "What do you want?"

"How 'bout a piece of ass?" Roy gave him an ugly, leering grin. "See, I don't get it regular no more since your mom threw me out, and I kinda miss it. I went to see her the other week when you were in school and tried to make it up to her, but you know what she said?"

"Uh, no," Tad almost whispered.

"She said that 'cause of me chasin' you away, you wound up sellin' your ass to get by. Said she'd never have nothin' to do with a man who had 'forced her boy out on the street.'" He laughed, an ugly, drunken sound that made Tad sick to his stomach. "Guess she still doesn't know there wasn't no forcin' about

any of it. You loved every minute—admit it. Otherwise, why would you come up here and make a goddamn fuckin' business out of it?"

"I...I..." Tad squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, not wanting to see Roy's ugly face, his bloodshot eyes. *I don't want to know. I don't want to remember!* But there was nothing he could do about it now—the ice had melted, and the memory was almost free. It was like some prehistoric monster preserved forever in a glacier had come back to life, twice as ravenous and evil as it had been before the freeze.

"So whattaya say, kid? How 'bout a fuck on the house?" Roy pushed his face into Tad's, the alcoholic fumes of his breath making Tad gag.

He was drunk then, too. Drunk when he did it to me, he thought, and suddenly the whole ugly mess came flooding back. Roy pushing him down on the mattress, holding him down despite the way he cried and struggled, penetrating him, hurting him...

"Let me go!" Tad pushed away from the older man, panic giving him strength. It wasn't just the rape that had come back to him now. The months selling himself, his first encounter with James, the sweet, short time he had spent with the vampire before... before he decided he didn't want me anymore!

The thought nearly paralyzed him with fresh pain, but somehow he kept moving, deeper into the alley. Roy was drunk, which would make him slow, but he was also determined, which meant he would keep on coming. It was obvious that he blamed Tad for the way Tad's mom had broken things off with him, and he was pissed. Tad had to get away, had to get somewhere he could process all the confusing, painful memories that were flooding his head.

And the most painful memory of all—even worse than what Roy had done to him—was of James laying a hand on his head and murmuring, "Forget." James had sent him away and somehow wiped his memory to be sure Tad wouldn't bother him anymore.

Didn't want me. He didn't want me, Tad thought, even as he dodged around Dumpsters a few inches away from Roy's greasy, grasping fingers. Never cared about me—he said he did, but it was a lie. A lie!

He was almost to the mouth of the alley, which came out on the other side of the theater. If he could just get through to a bigger street, he knew he could lose Roy easily. Already he could hear the heavier man panting and blowing behind him. Roy always had been a lard ass—relying on his superior weight and strength to get him what he wanted. A classic bully. So if Tad could just—

"Oof!" The exclamation was forced out of him when he ran straight into someone's narrow, bony chest.

"Well, hello there," a hollow, sepulchral voice said in his ear, and long, horribly thin fingers curled cruelly around his upper arms.

Tad looked up, unable to help himself, and stared into the burning red eyes of his nightmare.

The blood-daemon. Oh God, it's the blood-daemon! The panicked thoughts ran through his head, but instead of terror, he was filled with a sudden sense of rightness—of inevitability. Wasn't this where he was supposed to be? Wasn't being taken by the blood-daemon his fate? His destiny? James had rescued him from this creature the first time by claiming him. But then he'd decided he didn't want anything else to do with Tad, and he'd gotten rid of him—It was just like Aaron had warned him—you can never trust a trick.

"Hey, what the hell?" Roy had caught up with them now, and he stared at the blood-daemon uneasily. The daemon ignored him.

"I never thought to see you here again," it said, giving Tad a smile as white and cold as moonlight on a tombstone. "Weren't you claimed by my kinsman? The one who pretends to be so much better than the rest of us because of his refined tastes?"

Tad nodded, unable to speak.

"And where is he now, this noble purist?" the blood-daemon demanded.
"Why isn't he protecting his precious property?"

"He decided he didn't want me anymore." As he said the words aloud, Tad's heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces. All the pain he'd felt when James asked him to leave was suddenly as fresh and new as if it had happened a minute ago instead of a month ago. God, he thought despairingly as the agony of lost love washed over him. Wish I were dead!

"The more fool he, then." The blood-daemon stared at him hungrily, its red eyes flaming. "I would never have let a tasty morsel like you get away."

"Bite me, then." Tad suddenly felt reckless. "You think I give a shit? He didn't want me—he even erased my memory so I couldn't come around and bother him. So go on—bite me."

The blood-daemon grew very still. "Are you offering your vein to me freely?" it demanded.

"Sure, why not?" Tad tilted his head, offering the side of his throat. "Have some—hell, have it all. James seemed to like it. At least I *thought* he did, until he got rid of me."

"As you wish." The blood-daemon grinned—an expression of pure evil that exposed a mouthful of jagged fangs. And then it struck.

Tad felt a sharp pain, like a sharp barb digging into his neck. The feeling was the polar opposite of the warm wash of sexual pleasure he'd felt when James had bitten him—a stinging agony so intense it was hard to describe and it took his breath away. The only thing he could compare it to was the one and only time his mom had taken him to the beach on vacation, back when he was a little kid, and he'd stepped on a jellyfish. The throbbing pain had lasted for hours, and Tad had cried until he didn't have any tears left. This pain felt like that, but it was a thousand times worse and located in the sensitive skin of his neck.

The paralyzing agony was too intense for tears. But surely, he thought, it would be over in a moment. He could feel the blood-daemon sucking hard, pulling out his blood in a steady rush. And he remembered James saying something about draining in under a minute. Despite the twin spikes digging into the vulnerable flesh of his throat, Tad was glad. Soon this would all be over. The pain of his memories—the rape, his months of tricking, and most of all, James's betrayal—would be gone. Already his vision was going gray and wavy around the edges. Soon darkness would eat the world, and he would never have to feel again. Never have to—

"Stop! Let him go!" The deep voice reverberated in the narrow alley, filled with supernatural authority that seemed impossible to disobey. It was also painfully familiar. Tad knew who it was before he dragged his eyes up to focus on the tall figure he could barely see over the blood-daemon's bony shoulder.

James stood in the alley, one hand twisted in a bug-eyed Roy's collar. With the other, he pointed sternly at the blood-daemon who had actually stopped drinking from Tad's throat and turned to face him.

"Let. Him. Go," he said again, only it was more like a growl. There was a golden light in his dark eyes that made Tad think of an avenging angel.

Came to get me! he thought, and then everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

"The boy is mine. Give him to me." James stretched out a hand and easily held the struggling fat man he was sure was Roy in the other. He'd caught the bastard sneaking away from Tad and the blood-daemon, the memory of what he'd done and what he'd wanted to do to Tad still fresh in his memory. James wasn't unusually gifted when it came to reading others, but some humans projected loudly, and this fat drunk was one of them.

Just wanted a piece of ass. Kid's a good fuck—hell of a lot better than his cunt of a mother, he'd been thinking as he blundered down the alley. And then this other fucker comes along. What the hell, man—what was it? A monster?

That was when James knew he had more to deal with than a drunken cur who saw no problem with taking what wasn't offered just because he wanted it. He could smell the cold stench the blood-daemon gave off and hear its dismal voice raised in some kind of question. But there was no way he was going to allow Tad's rapist to escape. By the rules and traditions of the Lost, Roy owed him a blood debt for grievously injuring one he loved and claimed as his own. It didn't matter that the harm had occurred in the past, before he'd even met Tad. Vampires had a long memory and a brutal sense of justice. Roy had hurt the boy he loved, and so he was going to pay. Just as soon as James finished dealing with the blood-daemon, that was.

"Hey, what the hell?" Roy had demanded as James dragged him down the dark and filthy alley.

James spared a split second to stare into Roy's muddy brown eyes. "Calm," he snapped, and Roy stopped protesting at once. His eyes went wide and blank, and he simply nodded and followed where James was dragging.

James was well aware that he might have used too much force with the command and damaged the man's fragile human brain, but he didn't give a

damn. He was too busy watching the horrific scene in front of him. Because he had gotten to Tad too late—the blood-daemon's fangs were already buried in the boy's neck. In another few moments, Tad would be gone, drained beyond saving. James had done the only thing he could—drawing on his love for Tad and the bond that had begun to form between them, he used a voice of power, hoping to stop the blood-daemon from finishing its intended prey.

And wonder of wonders, it worked! The daemon stopped feeding and turned to face him, Tad still standing dazed in his skeletal grip. But he didn't release the boy, only stood there regarding James with a hostile curiosity.

"What do you want? By what authority do you stop me?" he demanded, using the ancient form of speech common to all the Lost.

James's entire body was filled with tension. Tad was slumped in the daemon's grasp, his chin resting on his chest. James ached to gather him into his arms, but he couldn't—not unless the blood-daemon relinquished his hold on him. If he tried to snatch Tad away, the daemon would finish what he had started in the blink of an eye. Not even James could move fast enough to prevent the boy's death in that case. The blood-daemon had to give him up of his own free will. But that was like expecting a hungry, ferocious dog to give up a particularly juicy steak. James wasn't sure the strength of his bond with Tad would be enough to compel the daemon, but he knew he had to try.

"I stop you by the authority of the love between myself and the boy and the bond that grows between us," he answered formally.

The blood-daemon gave him a nasty grin that exposed a mouthful of fangs like splinters of bone. "The boy said you cast him aside—that you went so far as to tamper with his memory so that he couldn't find you."

James felt horribly frustrated and sad—was that what Tad had believed when he regained his memories? How awful for him to think something like that. How terrible for him to believe that James didn't love him.

"He may believe that now, but it is untrue," he said, trying to keep his voice calm and level. "Egregiously untrue, and I ask you now to release him to me or risk giving serious offense."

"He offered his vein freely." The blood-daemon's red eyes glowed possessively. "I believe he sought an end to the pain you caused him. Unintentional or not, it tore at him until he wished never to face it again."

"That...can't be true." But James was all too afraid it was. Had the terrible rush of returning memories rendered Tad suicidal? Would he really be willing to lay down his life just to stop the hurt of thinking James didn't love him?

"Ask him for yourself." The daemon patted Tad on the cheek with one long, skeletal hand. "Wake," he muttered in Tad's ear. "It seems your tiresome rescuer is here to claim you—if he can."

"What?" Tad's eyes fluttered open and focused on James. "What are you...doing here?" he murmured, sounding confused.

"I'm here for you, Tad. To take you back home." James longed to stroke his cheek, hold him close, kiss those soft lips—touch him in any way at all. But he couldn't—not with the blood-daemon still gripping Tad's shoulders possessively.

Tad shook his head. "Don't wanna...go back home. School, teachers, friends, none of it means...anything. Not without you."

James felt like his silent heart was breaking. "I meant to my home, Tad. Our home, if you'll stay with me."

Tad frowned. "But...you didn't want me. Even...erased my memory to get rid of me. That's why...I told daemon to bite me. Because without you...what's the point?"

"Oh, Tad." James felt his throat close with grief. So the blood-daemon was telling the truth—the boy really had offered his vein freely. Now, by the law of the Lost, Tad was his property to kill or keep as he chose. And James knew what choice the ancient evil one would make.

"Are you satisfied now?" the daemon snarled. "The boy is mine."

"He didn't know what he was doing," James protested desperately. "He was out of his mind, half-mad with grief because he thought I didn't want him. When in reality, nothing could be further from the truth."

The blood-daemon made a dismissive gesture. "You've wasted enough of my time. The boy's blood is sweet, and I intend to finish him. Why don't you take your own prey and do the same?"

"My own...?" The daemon's words made him realize that he was still holding on to the stunned Roy, who stared blankly at the scene that was taking place. Suddenly he had an idea. "Wait!" He held up a hand to stop the blood-daemon from diving back down to Tad's throat.

"What is it now? You are beginning to annoy me." The daemon glowered menacingly, but James barely noticed.

"I propose a trade," he said, praying that the daemon would take his offer. "This large man, who surely has more than enough blood to satisfy your cravings, for the boy." He shook Roy as he spoke, and the man blundered forward, his still-blank eyes staring up at the gaping horror of the blood-daemon's face.

The daemon frowned. "And by what right do you offer the trade? Surely you don't claim the man as your beloved too?"

"Certainly not." James shook his head in disgust. "But he owes me a blood-debt for hurting the boy. I was going to kill him myself, but this seems a better way. I only ask that you not treat him gently—he was not gentle with my love." He looked longingly at Tad, who stared back with confusion in his soft blue eyes.

"Well..." Clearly, the blood-daemon was considering. "The boy's blood is sweet, but there isn't much left. And the man, as you say, does appear to have an ample supply. It will be somewhat like eating dessert first and the main

meal last, but..." He nodded. "All right. Pass me the man as I pass you the boy."

James felt a relief so great he could barely breathe. Roughly, he shook Roy and snapped his fingers in front of the man's stupefied muddy brown eyes. "Wake and face your fate, rapist," he growled.

"Huh? Wha—" Roy blinked and focused on the blood-daemon looming over him. His eyes grew wide with fright as the daemon gave him the full force of his sharp grin. "What... Where am I? What is that thing?" he gasped, all in one breath.

"That is your death, you dog." James shook him again, wishing he could break his fat neck. "Go and meet it." He shoved Roy roughly from him, into the waiting arms of the blood-daemon and, in the same movement, caught Tad gently as the daemon pushed the boy forward.

"What the fuck? No! Get away from me!" Roy's protests were abruptly muffled as the blood-daemon wrapped long, horribly strong arms around him and buried its face in his throat. A geyser of blood that looked black in the moonlight suddenly erupted, and the blood-daemon lifted its head to screech in triumph before diving back toward the gaping wound he had made.

"James?" Tad's voice sounded frightened, and he was clearly too weak to stand, let alone walk.

"Come." Knowing he had to get Tad somewhere safe, James swung him into his arms. If he didn't get rid of the toxic venom the blood-daemon had injected when it fed from Tad, he could yet be too late to save his young lover.

"But..." Tad stared fearfully at the sight of Roy being butchered. As James had asked, the daemon was not being gentle. "Where are we going?" he asked at last.

"Home." As he ran with his precious burden down the dark and twisted alley, James kissed the warm blond curls he'd missed so much. "We're going home, Tad. Our home."

He drove like a maniac, glad the Porsche was built for speed, and had them back to his house in short order. Yet as fast as he was, he was still afraid he was too late when he saw how gray and tired Tad looked. He picked him up and took him rapidly to the bedroom, trying to think as he laid the limp form on the bed. He had to rid the boy's system of the toxic venom quickly, but before he could, there was a choice to be made.

In order to suck the venom out, he would have to give the second bite, but the way he gave it mattered. If he simply bit and sucked with no other physical contact, he and Tad would form a bond, but it would be weak and tenuous and wouldn't tie Tad to him for life. In addition, it might not save him. An incomplete bonding could be dangerous for the human and fatal for the vampire if the bond turned against them and drained the life force it was meant to preserve. But his own safety wasn't what was uppermost in James's mind—he was worried about Tad.

In order to give the second bite correctly, he needed to be inside Tad, penetrating him with his cock as he pierced him with his fangs. But how could he do that to the boy he loved, knowing how Tad feared being penetrated? How could he put Tad through the agony of sex when the memory of his rape had just resurfaced and was doubtless as fresh as the day it had happened?

"Hey..." The soft voice distracted James from his frantic thoughts. He looked down to see that Tad's eyelids had fluttered open once more. There were dark hollows now around the sky blue eyes, and Tad looked ill and tired, but the boy had never seemed more beautiful to James.

"Hello, young one," he murmured, stroking Tad's cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Weak." Tad tried to sit up and couldn't until James helped him. "It... The daemon did something to me, didn't it? Besides just taking blood, I mean."

James nodded gravely. "He injected you with his venom—the better to mark you for his own. Blood-daemons are very possessive of their prey. Of

course, he really didn't need to mark you, since you offered your vein to him freely."

"Uh, yeah. Sorry about that." Tad looked away. "I'm, uh, not normally suicidal. It was just too much. Remembering everything that had happened, remembering that you didn't want me..."

"But I do want you." James tilted the boy's chin up until their eyes met.
"You have no idea how much I want you, Tad," he said softly.

"Then why did you send me away? Why did you erase my memory so I couldn't even remember you?" Tad's words were angry, but his sky blue eyes were suspiciously bright.

James sighed. "For your own good, young one. When your mother came looking for you, I realized how selfish I was being. You had a whole life to go back to—school, a parent who loves you—and you're young, too young to make a decision that will affect the rest of your life."

Tad frowned. "I may be only eighteen, James, but in terms of experience, I believe I'm older than you. I've seen things, done things that made me grow up fast. Probably too fast, I don't know, but that's the way it is. I'm more than qualified to make decisions about my life."

"I suppose you're right." James stroked the boy's cheek and looked at him thoughtfully. "And now I'm afraid there is another decision before you. I need to get the blood-daemon's venom out of your system before it kills you, and there are two ways I can do it." Briefly, he told Tad his two choices, trying to keep his voice steady and reassuring as he spoke. "I know this is much sooner than you would have wished to take this step," he said, seeing the fear and uncertainty pass over Tad's finely molded features. "But I am afraid you must. And I will abide by whatever you choose. Whichever path you choose to take, I am here to guide you on it, but the choice must be made soon. Before it is too late."

Chapter Thirteen

The choice was no choice at all to Tad. He knew what he wanted—the question was did James want the same thing? Sure, the vampire had given some good reasons for what he'd done, but did he really want Tad with him for life? For eternity? Because that was what this amounted to. Tad's whole heart was committed to James, and he knew he wouldn't get tired of living in a century or so and ask the vampire to stop biting him. He was in it for the long haul—but only if James felt the same way.

He looked up into the dark eyes as James waited quietly for his decision. "James..." He reached up to touch the vampire's cheek, then pulled his hand back, afraid of presuming too much. But James seemed to know how he felt.

"Yes, young one?" he murmured, taking Tad's hand and pressing it to his cheek. "Do you wish to ask me something?"

"I do." Tad swallowed and then forced himself to say the words. "I guess...I guess I just need to know if you really want me. The way I want you, I mean. And it's not just...not just all this, your big house and hot car." He gestured with his other hand to encompass all of James's wealth. "I mean, I have a warm, safe place to stay now. I could probably live with my mom until I was eighty-five and she wouldn't care. But I don't want to. As much as I love her, I'm past that now, you know? I want you. But not unless you want me too."

"Oh, Tad." James pulled him close and wrapped long, strong arms around him. "You have no idea how hard it was for me to let you go, how much I regretted it, how much I missed you. I went out tonight because I couldn't stop thinking and dreaming of you. I wanted to see the place where we first met, wanted to remember you even if I couldn't actually see you."

Tad felt tears pricking behind his lids. "I dreamed about you too," he whispered, hugging James back. "I didn't know who you were, but I knew I

loved you. I...I went out tonight looking for you too, hoping I'd find you and remember what you were to me."

James pulled back and tenderly brushed away the tears that trickled down Tad's cheeks. "And what is that, young one? What am I to you?"

"The man I want to spend the rest of my life with," Tad whispered. "If...if you really feel the same way about me."

James shook his head reproachfully. "You know I do. But in order to bind you to me properly..."

"You have to fuck me. I know." Tad nodded, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. The memories of Roy were fresh all over again. And even though he knew the bastard was dead and gone by now, they still hurt.

"Make love to you, not necessarily fuck you," James said softly. "We can do this as slowly and as gently as you want, Tad."

"Really?" Tad looked up at him hopefully. His heart, which had knotted in his chest with fear, began to loosen.

"Really." James tilted his chin and kissed him softly on the mouth. "There is nothing I want more than to show you how much I love you. Just tell me how you need this to be, and I'll do everything in my power not to hurt you."

Tad found the vampire's soft words incredibly reassuring. The idea of being taken, of being fucked, was still frightening to him, but not nearly as much as it had been. And if it was the only way to be with James forever, then he would do it with no hesitation.

"All right," he murmured, kissing the vampire back and feeling the sharp little pricking of James's fangs behind his soft lips. "Let's get undressed."

Tad wanted to take off his own clothes and then take off James's, the same way he had the first time they'd made love. But he was still too weak from the blood-daemon's venom. He tried to be patient as James helped him off with his jeans and T-shirt and then took off his own impeccable clothes, but

the mixture of dread and anticipation was too strong for him to hold back for long.

"Kiss me," he whispered, pulling the vampire close the minute James had shed the last bit of his clothing. "Show me you want me."

"Gladly." James's dark eyes were half-lidded with lust, but Tad could still see flashes of worry in them from time to time. He understood that the vampire really did want him—he was just trying to be careful so he didn't hurt him. Knowing that made it that much sweeter when James's mouth descended on his, and he gave Tad a long, hot kiss that seemed to go on forever.

Despite his weakened condition and the bad memories playing tag in his brain, Tad felt his cock beginning to rise. James's hard, naked body pressed against his own probably had something to do with that. But the tenderness he felt when the vampire touched him helped too. James really would do everything he could to make sure this was a good experience.

Tad moaned softly as the vampire laid him back on the bed and began kissing lower. First, he bathed the unhurt side of Tad's throat with his tongue, and then he moved carefully to the place where the blood-daemon had struck. Tad cried out weakly as James latched onto him there, sucking hard without actually biting. The spot on his neck throbbed and ached, but somehow he understood that James was doing what was necessary. And when the vampire's large, warm hand encircled his semihard cock and began to stroke, he began to find it pleasurable as well—in a deep, intense way he could hardly describe, even to himself.

At last, James pulled back from his neck and looked at him. "That's as much as I can suck out without biting you, Tad, and there's still a lot more venom in you than I'd like. Are you ready?"

Tad knew what he was asking—was he ready to be penetrated. To be fucked. And suddenly, he was. Suddenly he wanted nothing more than to have James inside him, claiming him, owning him, making Tad his for the rest of their lives.

"Yes," he whispered, arching his back and spreading his legs. "Yes, James, I want you. Just...take it slow—all right?"

James smiled softly. "As slowly as you want, young one. Wait here." He disappeared for a moment and was back so quickly Tad barely saw him move. Then he parted Tad's thighs and murmured, "Let me get you ready first."

Tad gasped when he felt something cool and slick being applied to his tight entrance. James rubbed and teased, stroking gently all around his rosebud and then just barely entering him with one fingertip before withdrawing, until Tad felt like he was going to go crazy.

"James...please," he moaned, and the vampire seemed to know what he needed. Lying down beside Tad on the bed, he cradled him in one arm while he continued to tease and stroke.

"Is this all right?" he asked softly, and then Tad felt two long, strong fingers entering him, stretching him as gently as possible. "Are you ready for this?" James murmured into his ear.

"Yes... God, yes!" Tad closed his eyes and moaned softly as James continued his tender exploration. This had always been a fantasy of his, to have a lover who cared enough to get him ready for sex. Every other man he'd ever been with had just shoved it in, not caring if Tad wanted it or not. To have James touch him this way, stroking in and out of his hot, tight entrance so gently with his fingers, was almost too much. Tad's cock felt like it was going to burst.

"You're so beautiful when you open for me," James whispered in his ear. "You have no idea how much I long to be inside you, Tad. I want to make you mine forever, want to erase every other mark on you and brand you as my own. But I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," Tad panted and kissed him hard on the mouth. "I want you in me now, James—need you in me. Just ease in slow and keep talking to me, okay?"

"With pleasure." James kissed him back and then climbed between his thighs. "Is this position all right?"

Tad knew what he was asking. When Roy had raped him, he'd shoved Tad face-first down onto the mattress and held him there with his bulk. James wanted to be sure he wasn't bringing back those bad memories in any way.

"This is good," Tad assured him, reaching up to stroke the vampire's sculpted cheek. "I can see your face this way and know that...that it's really you inside me."

"Good." James smiled at him and leaned down to kiss him again. Then he withdrew his long fingers, and Tad felt the blunt, moist head of his cock press lightly against his entrance. "Ready?" the vampire breathed.

"R-ready," Tad stuttered, hoping it was the truth. He could feel the bad memories hovering just under the edges of his mind, but he was fighting not to let them come to the surface. This is James, he reminded himself fiercely. James, not Roy. And James loves me. He would never hurt me.

James seemed to understand his inner struggle, because he kissed Tad again and looked into his eyes. "Watch me, young one," he murmured as he began to press the head of his cock slowly into Tad's body. "Keep your eyes on mine as you take me inside you and know how much I love you."

"God!" Tad moaned softly as he felt first the head and then the rest of James's thick cock begin to slide inside him. He fought the urge to clench down and try to stop the invader. God, James was huge! He'd forgotten how big the vampire was, and it had been a long time since he'd last sold his ass. A long time since Roy had... No, don't think of that! Not now! he told himself fiercely.

"Are you all right?" James stopped his slow, careful movements and looked at Tad anxiously.

"Yes." Tad nodded, wanting it to be true. "Yes, I will be if you just...just talk to me while you...while you do this. While you fuck me."

"All right." James smiled and kissed him. "What shall I talk about? How tight and hot you feel around my shaft? How much I love feeling you around me? Or maybe I should tell you how beautiful you are when you spread your legs and submit to me." As he spoke in that deep, velvet voice, Tad could feel the thick cock sinking deeper and deeper into his tight, slippery entrance. He wasn't thinking of Roy now, or of any of the tricks he'd turned. His only thought was of how good it felt to have the man he loved inside him, to feel James taking him all the way, owning his body as completely as he owned Tad's heart.

"God, James!" he moaned softly as the long shaft sank deeper into his body. It felt like he was being torn apart, but in a good way. The stretching discomfort had given way to something else—a pleasure so deep it was almost pain.

"Do you feel me inside you?" the vampire murmured, his dark eyes searching Tad's face. There was a look of pure desire on his perfect face, need mixed with lust mixed with love as he reached between them to capture Tad's cock in his large hand. "Do you feel me taking you, Tad? Making you mine?" As he spoke, Tad felt the vampire's trim, muscular hips connect with his ass and knew James was all the way inside him—finally filling him completely. The knowledge was almost too much for Tad, and a sudden wave of need overcame him.

"Yes, please take me! Make me yours!" he half whispered, half moaned, still looking into those dark eyes. "Fuck me, James. Bite me—I don't care. Just make me yours forever!"

"That is exactly what I intend to do," James murmured. And then he struck, his fangs sinking deep exactly where the blood-daemon had bitten Tad earlier. But this time, instead of pain, there was pleasure, a deep, brilliant spike of lust and desire that seemed to go straight to Tad's cock, still held prisoner in the vampire's big hand.

"God, yes!" he gasped as the vampire finally began to move inside him. He could feel the tension in James; the big body pinning his to the bed was almost trembling with it. But though James had to be aching to thrust hard and deep, he was still obviously in perfect control of his motions.

With one long, slow move, he slid his thick cock almost all the way out of Tad's tight entrance. And then, just as slowly and deliberately, he thrust in again, burying himself to the hilt. Then he did it again and again until Tad thought he would go crazy. At the same time, James stroked Tad's cock to the rhythm of his thrusts while he continued to suck on Tad's neck.

The intense sensations were overwhelming—almost too much. Tad felt like his body was on overload as James fucked him and stroked him and sucked him all at once. Every nerve in his body was tense, begging to come, but the firm hand on his shaft let him know that wasn't going to happen until James was good and ready to let him.

"James," he gasped, bucking up to meet the hand that was caressing him so sweetly. "God, please! Please, I need to come!"

With a last final pull from his neck, James withdrew his fangs and kissed the side of Tad's face. Then he whispered in his ear, "Come, then, Tad. Come for me while I come inside you and make us one." He thrust once more, hard and deep into Tad's tight entrance, and at the same time he loosened his hold on the base of Tad's cock, allowing him to reach the peak he was so desperate to get to.

With a low moan, Tad felt himself fall over the edge. He could feel James pulsing inside him even as his own cock spurted in the vampire's big, warm hand. And as the orgasm raced through both of them, he felt something else—some indefinable bond as light as a cobweb but as strong as a steel cable had somehow grown between them. We're together now, he realized even as the pleasure threatened to consume him. Together, and nothing and no one can ever tear us apart again.

It was a wonderful thought—a wonderful feeling, being part of something larger than himself, being two instead of one. And Tad knew James felt it too, because the vampire looked deeply into his eyes, kissed him gently on the mouth, and murmured, "Mine," in a possessive tone that made Tad's heart do flip-flops in his chest.

"And you're mine too," he told James breathlessly. "We belong to each other now. Forever, right?"

"Forever," James promised and kissed him again. "Forever and a day. And I'm never letting you go again."

"Good." Tad snuggled happily against the smooth, marble chest. "Because I don't want you to."

Epilogue

James watched with amusement as Tad got ready for his first day of college. The boy had recently gotten his GED and had handily passed the entrance exams to the local state university. Going back to school was one of the ways Tad had gotten his mother to understand and accept his relationship with James. He hoped to prove to her that the "older man" in his life was a positive, not a negative, influence on him. She still wasn't very happy about the arrangement, but she was coming around. James could be very charming and persuasive when he wanted to.

"You look fine," he told Tad, who was trying on yet another shirt.

"I don't know." Tad frowned. "I'm afraid I won't fit in. I mean—think of all the things I've done that the other students haven't. I bet none of the rest of them ever sold themselves on the street or gave blowjobs for lunch money."

"Are you still worried about that?" James rose from the bed, where he'd been lounging while watching Tad dress, and swept the boy into his arms. "You did what you had to do, love," he murmured into the blond curls. "You're a survivor—be proud of that."

Tad sighed. "I guess you're right. And besides"—he smiled and wound his arms around James's neck—"none of the other students seduced a big, bad vampire either."

James growled playfully and pulled him even closer. "Stop teasing me or you're not going anywhere, first day of class or not. And if you really want to make them sit up and take notice, just wear what you wore the first time I saw you."

Tad raised one eyebrow. "What—ripped jeans and no shirt?"

"You looked like an angel—a dirty angel, but one I couldn't resist," James told him. "I remember how I told myself I only wanted to talk to you when I first brought you home. And then when you begged to suck my cock..."

"You couldn't say no." Tad grinned at him and gave him a hot, lingering kiss on the mouth. "Which reminds me, I think there's time for a quick blowjob before I go to class."

As he kissed his way down the length of James's body to his already hard cock, James stroked the soft blond curls and thought how glad he was that he'd gone to see that midnight movie so many months ago. If he hadn't, Tad never would have tried to hustle him, and they never would have found each other.

For the first time in his afterlife, he was finally in a relationship where he was loved as much as he was in love, and it felt wonderful. He'd finally found the one he wanted to spend eternity with. Some might think Tad was an unusual choice for a lover and companion, but James knew differently. There was nothing he wanted more than to spend the rest of his time on earth making Tad happy.

"Oh, Tad," he murmured as the boy sucked the head of his cock deep into his mouth.

Sometimes love came in unusual packages. James was just glad he'd been able to recognize it when it came to him in the form of a hungry little blood hustler behind the Old Revival Theater.



Other Loose Id® Titles by Evangeline Anderson

Dangerous Cravings
Eyes Like A Wolf
Hunger Moon Rising
Marked
Outcast
Picture Perfect
Slave Boy
Sweet Dreams
The Assignment
The Last Bite
The Punishment of Nicollet

Marked
Co-written with Jay Douglas

INTERLUDES

The Switch (featuring characters from Dangerous Cravings)

Fireworks
I'll Be Hot for Christmas
(featuring characters from The Assignment)

Evangeline Anderson

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And yes, she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that reads "I'd rather be writing." Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and Sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Check out her website at http://www.evangelineanderson.com.