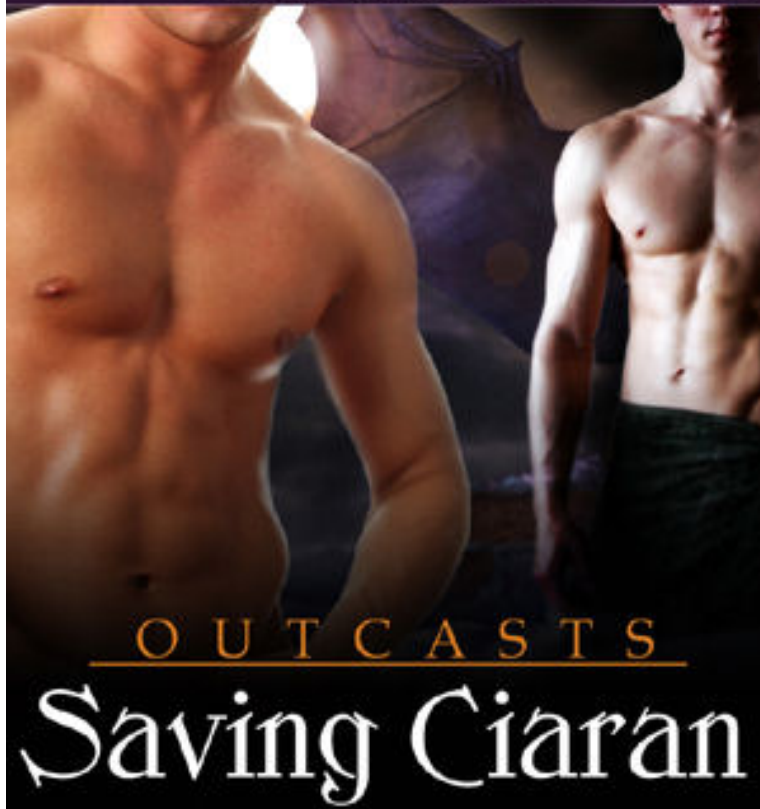


COBBLESTONE PRESS PRESENTS



SHIFTERS

Cassandra Gold



OUTCASTS

Saving Ciaran

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Saving Ciaran

By

Cassandra Gold

Saving Ciaran by Cassandra Gold

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Saving Ciaran

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad—thanks for reading to me every night!

Chapter One

Drew stretched as he pulled on his jeans and T-shirt, tired in the pleasant way he always experienced after a run. Bright moonlight streamed down into the clearing he stood in, filtered by the nearby trees. A cool, crisp breeze ruffled his hair. It was a perfect night.

He had really needed a break, both from his long trip and his own dark thoughts. As he sat down beside his motorcycle to put on his socks and boots, he decided that he'd let himself go too long without the release of his *change*. He may have left his pack behind, but leaving his wolf was not an option.

A distant crashing sound from the forest interrupted his thoughts. He tilted his head to listen. The noises were too loud to be from a rabbit or squirrel. Whatever approached was much larger than that. There were plenty of deer in the area. A bear or mountain lion was less likely, but not impossible. Drew finished dressing and stood, ready to defend himself if necessary.

Suddenly, something unbelievable rushed out into the clearing. Drew stared, shock and disbelief warring in his mind. The creature saw him and tried to back away. Instead, it stumbled over a tree root and fell backwards, where it cringed away from Drew as if terrified.

This couldn't possibly be real. He surreptitiously pinched himself, just to make sure he wasn't having some kind of bizarre dream, but the small pain convinced him otherwise. It had to be real. Whatever *it* was.

The creature before him appeared to be a slender human male,

with very pale skin, curly black hair, and wide, fearful, dark eyes. Obviously, it wasn't a human. Drew had never before seen a man with pointed ears and huge, black, bat wings. For a moment, he thought the ears and wings were a damn good Halloween costume, but it was too early, and no costume could be this realistic. Of course, as a shapeshifter himself, he knew better than to discount the possibility of any creature, no matter how bizarre.

"Holy shit." Drew couldn't seem to stop staring. On closer inspection, he noticed it wore a pair of loose-fitting, beige, drawstring pants and nothing else. He also noticed it—*he*—was scratched and bruised.

Drew moved a bit closer to the—he paused to wonder what he should call the creature. A demon? A fairy? That Bat-boy thing from the National Enquirer stories? He almost laughed at his own wild thoughts before dragging his mind back to the situation at hand. The *creature* scrabbled away until his back hit a tree trunk. He held his hands up, shielding his face, and Drew saw red, raw marks on his wrists, which looked an awful lot like rope burns.

Before Drew could think about what those marks might mean, his keen werewolf hearing picked up the faraway sounds of several large, unknown entities coming through the woods.

"I think he went this way," a distant voice shouted.

Drew looked again at those raw wrists, and the cowering, helpless creature before him. His first instinct was to protect, but he needed to be sure he understood before he got involved in something so weird. He crouched down to the creature's level and kept his voice gentle. "Hey. I'm not going to hurt you. I can hear people coming, though. They're after you, aren't they?"

Bat-boy, or whatever the hell he was, lowered his hands, revealing bruises and scrapes on his face. He gazed back at Drew without speaking, his dark, liquid eyes frightened.

"I guess you're not much of a talker." He frowned at the bruises and tried again. "You're pretty beat up. Did they hurt you?"

Bat-boy nodded, a movement so slight Drew would have missed it

if he hadn't been paying attention.

He chose to take the nod as progress. "Did you do anything to them to make them want to hurt you?"

Bat-boy shook his head, hard. For some reason, Drew believed him. He was well aware that humans often feared and hated anything they saw as different or threatening, and this guy definitely qualified as different. He didn't look very threatening at the moment, though. The strange, winged man had certainly had ample opportunity to try and hurt Drew if he'd wanted to, but he hadn't.

Coming to a decision, Drew stood. "All right, I'll help you. I can stay here and try to stall them while you run...or you can come with me."

Drew hadn't intended to make the second offer, but once the words were out, it felt right. Reaching down, he offered Bat-boy his hand. The creature eyed Drew nervously for a moment, but as the sounds of pursuit drew closer, he took the offered hand.

Drew pulled Bat-boy up and handed him his leather jacket. "Put this on. We've got to cover up those wings." As an afterthought, he thrust his helmet into the creature's hand. "And put this on too."

Bat-boy pulled the jacket on, covering most of his wings. The helmet hid his pointed ears nicely. Drew grabbed his bike and headed for the road. Minutes later, they reached the blacktop. Drew hopped onto the bike and started it up. The roar of the bike's engine startled Bat-boy, who flinched.

Drew motioned impatiently, knowing their pursuers probably weren't far away. "Get on behind me and hold on tight!"

Awkward and hesitant, Bat-boy clambered aboard the bike and wrapped his arms around Drew's waist. When Drew was sure his passenger was secure, he pulled onto the road.

They rode for several hours. Just in case they were being followed, Drew took a circuitous route, taking several detours on winding, county roads before he returned to the main highway.

About seventy miles after he turned onto the interstate, Drew's weariness caught up with him. He'd been traveling for most of the day, and taking the scenic route to escape any possible pursuers hadn't helped

him get closer to his destination. He'd have to stop for the night.

Relief filled him at the sight of an exit that advertised a lone gas station and a small motel. He turned off the interstate and headed toward the lighted sign. Pulling into the gas station, he shut off the bike and turned. "Wait here. Leave the helmet on in case somebody else shows up."

He climbed off the bike and went inside. Once in the store, he selected an assortment of first-aid supplies, two bottles of water, and snacks. He paid quickly and went back outside, hoping Bat-boy hadn't gotten into any trouble while he'd been inside. Luckily, his strange passenger still sat on the bike where he'd left him. Drew got on, started the bike, and drove the short distance to the motel.

The motel turned out to be one of those tacky little motor inns sporting a partially burnt-out neon sign and a dingy, faded exterior. Drew hoped the interior would be clean, even if the place clearly wasn't going to be fancy. After parking the bike where it wouldn't be visible from the road, he turned to Bat-boy. He didn't want to pressure or frighten his odd traveling companion, so he chose his words with care.

"Okay, Bat-boy, this is where I'm staying tonight. You're welcome to stay too, if you don't have somewhere else you need to go. I'm going to go to the office to rent a room. If you want to stay, be here when I get back. If not, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave my helmet." With that, Drew got off the bike and made his way to the office.

A few minutes later, room key in hand, Drew returned to his bike. Bat-boy had removed the helmet and was standing by the bike, expression uncertain. His black curls were tousled, and his skin gleamed silvery-pale in the dim neon lights of the parking lot.

Drew found himself smiling, although he wasn't quite sure why. "Decided to stay, huh? Let me grab my gear and we'll get inside."

Bat-boy trailed after Drew as he grabbed his motorcycle saddlebags and the bag from the gas station and headed for their room. They were in room 13, and Drew wondered whether that was going to be lucky or unlucky. He wasn't superstitious, but bringing an unknown creature to room 13 in October seemed like a recipe for bad luck. Rolling his eyes at his own thoughts, he opened the door.

The room was small and worn, but clean. There was a large window with an ugly orange curtain. A little square table flanked by two orange chairs sat in the corner by the door. A scuffed dresser with a small television on it took up another wall. To the left was a queen-sized bed covered with an orange, brown, and white striped comforter. The carpet was orange as well, making Drew think the place had last been redecorated in the 70's. He walked to the narrow door at the end of the room and peered into the bathroom, unsurprised to find the tiny room boasted a hideous orange shower curtain.

"Well, at least it's clean." He looked at his rumpled companion. "Would you like to clean up?"

Bat-boy nodded but didn't move. His gaze darted around the room as if he expected something to jump out at him from behind the bed or television.

Drew frowned. He didn't have much experience with anything supernatural, other than werewolves. Bat-boy could understand his words, apparently, but could he talk? And why had he been running around in the woods half-naked? Maybe he lived in the forest. If so, maybe he had never been in civilization. That might explain his silence, and his apparent confusion.

Several minutes of motionless silence later, Drew sighed. "Have you ever been in a place like this before?"

A quick head shake was the only answer he got.

"Do you need help?"

Nod.

"All right then, I'll show you how to work the shower." Waving the other man into the bathroom, Drew opened the shower curtain and demonstrated how to turn on the hot and cold water, as well as how to make the water spray out of the shower fixture. He unwrapped a bar of soap for the soap dish, and then showed Bat-boy the shampoo and towels.

"I'll try to find you something to wear and set it on the counter for you. I know my clothes will be huge on you, but maybe I can find something that won't fall off at least..." Drew trailed off as Bat-boy removed his leather jacket, revealing those amazing wings and a smooth,

pale chest.

Bat-boy was about five or six inches shorter than his own six-foot-two-inch height. At first glance, he appeared thin, even fragile, but although he was slim, he was mostly muscle. He turned to hand over the jacket, inadvertently giving Drew a chance to study his face.

He's beautiful. His own thoughts surprised him, yet the truth was undeniable. Drew had seen attractive men before, but there was something about this strange man... With high cheekbones, a wide, sensual mouth, and those big eyes, he looked just like a dark angel. In the bright light, his eyes were a violet so dark it was almost black.

Drew realized he was staring and reached out to take the jacket. When their hands brushed, he felt a shock of desire. Horrified, he jerked his hand away. Bat-boy recoiled as well, and then looked at him with eyes full of confusion.

Shit! He had to get out of here before he did something stupid. "Um, I'll bring you something to wear in just a minute," he muttered over his shoulder as he fled the bathroom.

Chapter Two

Damn, damn, damn! Furious at himself, Drew rummaged through his motorcycle saddlebags. He found a pair of flannel pajama pants with a drawstring he thought would work and carried them to the bathroom. The shower was still running, so he quickly opened the door, set the pants on the counter, and eased the door shut. Then he sank down onto the corner of the bed and put his head in his hands.

Bat-boy probably thought he'd gone insane in there, staring and then running away. Maybe he *was* insane. Drew didn't even know the guy's name, or what the hell species he was, yet he'd stood there slobbering over him. The poor guy had been beaten up and chased, and then he'd had the misfortune to be "rescued" by a horny, gay werewolf. By the time the night was over, Bat-boy would probably wish he'd taken his chances with whoever chased him.

"I can handle this." Drew ran his fingers through his hair. He would just pretend his temporary traveling companion wasn't the hottest thing he'd ever seen. He could do that. He'd managed to stay in the closet for twenty-eight years at home.

And look how that turned out for you, his inner voice sneered.

Before Drew could take that line of thought any further, he heard the shower shut off. He busied himself with getting out the first-aid supplies he'd bought, and a T-shirt and shorts to put on after his turn in the shower. After a few minutes, the door opened and Bat-boy came into the room wearing Drew's pants. They looked ridiculous on him. He'd

tightened the drawstring to keep them up on his slim waist, but the cuffs dragged on the ground. He looked like a kid playing dress up in his older brother's clothes. Drew had to smile at the sight.

He gestured at the corner of the bed. "Come sit down and let me look at those scratches."

Bat-boy obeyed, going to the bed and sitting down exactly where Drew had pointed.

"First, let's get these pant legs rolled up so you can walk." Drew knelt down and rolled the cuffs of the pants up a few times. "Geez, BB, you really tore up your feet." Grabbing the tube of antibiotic cream he'd bought, he smoothed some over the worst cuts and scratches. Band-Aids went on next, and he grinned when he noticed he had bought a box of Snoopy bandages instead of the regular kind.

"That takes care of your feet. Let's see what I can do about the rest of you." Drew stood and began examining the cuts, scratches, bruises and scrapes on Bat-boy's chest and arms. The worst injuries were the red, raw marks on his wrists. Thinking of him tied up and beaten made Drew sick. He shook the uncomfortable feelings off and went back to work, applying cream and bandages where the wounds were too big for the small adhesive strips.

He tried to focus on the injuries he tended rather than the body he touched, but keeping his touches quick and impersonal was difficult. His fingers wanted to linger over the smooth, soft skin. After what seemed an eternity, Drew finished his task and sat back.

He'd taken care of all the injuries he could see, with one major exception. There were several small tears in Bat-boy's wings. He leaned forward to look at a torn place on the nearest wing. When he reached out to touch the injury, Bat-boy shrank back, eyes full of suspicion.

"It's okay. I just want to help you." His soft explanation must have helped. Drew reached out again, and this time Bat-boy let him touch. "Wow." He had expected rough and leathery, but the wing was velvety and silky-soft. He ran his fingers along the surface, marveling at the incredible texture. Bat-boy shivered under his gentle exploration. Drew stilled, worried he might be causing more pain.

“Sorry, Bat-boy. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Your wings are *amazing*. Too bad they’re so big, though. It’s going to be hard to take you anywhere without someone noticing them.” Drew kept up a running commentary while he turned to rummage through his first-aid materials.

When he turned back, the wings were gone.

Chapter Three

The gauze and tape Drew had been holding dropped to the floor. "What the hell? Where'd your wings go?" He gaped in astonishment as Bat-boy twisted around to show his back.

Where there had been huge black wings, there was now only a delicate tracery of black markings that looked like a tattoo of bat wings, taking up the expanse of his back and disappearing into the waistband of the pajamas.

Drew couldn't help himself—he reached out and ran his fingers over the other man's back, trying to focus on the marks rather than the incredible softness of the skin there. "It's like a huge tattoo."

Bat-boy turned to face Drew again. "I can hide them."

Drew almost fell backward at the whispered words, he was so surprised. "Shit! You can talk." Somehow, that seemed even more astonishing than disappearing wings.

After a moment, he rolled his eyes at his own stupidity. "Well, of course, you can. Sorry. I'm being an idiot. And I just realized I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Andrew Moore. Everyone calls me Drew." He held his hand out to shake.

"I am Ciaran." Bat-boy—*no, Ciaran*—looked blankly at Drew's hand for a moment before holding out his own. Since Ciaran didn't seem to know what to do, Drew clasped his hand and shook.

"I'm sorry about calling you Bat-boy. I didn't know what else to call you."

"You have caused no offense." Ciaran's voice was quiet and sweet, with a bit of huskiness, as if he hadn't spoken in a long time.

Even his voice is sexy. Drew groaned to himself. He was in so much trouble. Keeping his thoughts to himself, he said, "We have a lot to talk about, but I'm really tired. Do you mind if I get my shower now? We can have this discussion tomorrow."

"That is acceptable."

"Great. I'll be out in a few minutes. There's bottled water and some snacks on the dresser if you're hungry or thirsty. You can have the bed. I'll take the extra pillow and the comforter and sleep on the floor."

Ciaran didn't seem to like the idea. He frowned. "You have already helped me so much. I cannot put you out of your bed. I will sleep on the floor."

"Look, Bat-boy. Sorry, I mean Ciaran. You'll really be feeling those bruises tomorrow if you sleep on the floor." Drew could tell Ciaran was going to argue some more, so he compromised. "If you don't mind, we can just share the bed. A queen-size should be big enough, if we both stay on our own sides. Will that work?"

He wanted to call the words back the second they left his lips. Sharing a bed with Ciaran all night without being able to touch him? Was he a complete idiot?

Ciaran nodded, looking relieved. "Yes."

He faked a smile. "Great. You go ahead and choose a side. I'll be back." Grabbing his clothes, he escaped.

Secluded inside the bathroom, Drew stared at himself in the mirror. His cheeks were flushed, green eyes wide. His ordinarily tidy sun-streaked brown hair was tousled from being combed with agitated fingers. Anyone looking at him would know something was up.

He had to get himself together, had to act as if everything were normal. Why the hell had he even thought of the stupid idea anyway? Well, he'd made his bed, so to speak. Now he'd just have to lie in it. With Ciaran.

Fuck.

Heaving a sigh, Drew stripped off his clothes and got into the

shower. He started the water, wondering if he should make this a cold shower. He grabbed the bar of soap and scrubbed, already half-hard just from thinking about sharing a bed with Ciaran. An image of the other man's slim, sleek body popped into his head, making his cock harden further. He had been alone a long time. Obviously too long, or he wouldn't be reacting like this. Maybe if he took the edge off now, the night ahead would be easier.

He closed his eyes. A scene popped into his head, and he went with it. In his mind, he heard the sound of the bathroom door opening. Then the shower curtain opened, and Ciaran stood there, wearing nothing more than a smile.

"I wish to thank you for helping me."

"You don't have to—" The words died in his throat as Ciaran stepped into the shower, picking up a bar of soap.

Ciaran washed him, those slim hands lingering over his chest before finally sliding down his belly to grasp his hard cock in a firm, slick grip. After a few minutes, the grip eased and water sluiced over him, rinsing the soap away. He whimpered, his erection throbbing with the need for release.

"I am not finished." Ciaran gave him a dark smile and knelt down before him, sexy mouth only inches from his cock.

Desperate, he resorted to begging. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Please suck me."

Finally, Ciaran leaned in and took Drew's dick into his mouth, lips and tongue working over his shaft. He thrust into that hot mouth, captivated by the big, violet eyes gazing up at him. Ciaran opened his throat, taking everything Drew gave and asking for more. A few thrusts later, he gasped and came in a rush of heat and agonizing pleasure.

Moments later, he came back to himself. The pleasure of his orgasm faded, leaving confusion and a little bit of shame in its wake. He looked around at the tiny cubicle and ugly orange shower curtain, wondering what the hell had just happened. Why was he working up detailed fantasies about a guy he'd met a few hours ago? He didn't even know

what kind of creature Ciaran was, for fuck's sake. He needed to get his mind out of the gutter and focus on figuring out what to do next. Irritated with himself, he washed his hair quickly, shutting the shower off just as the water grew ice-cold.

Drew thought about stalling, taking a long time to prepare for bed, but decided not to be a coward. Instead, he took only a few minutes to rub himself dry, pull on his T-shirt and shorts, and brush his teeth. He would have to go to bed sooner or later. Taking forever wouldn't make the bed be empty when he came out. Besides, his libido had to be tired after the little shower scene he'd just enacted. Taking a deep breath, he left the bathroom.

Ciaran had left the lamp on by the side of the bed nearest the bathroom. In the dim light, Drew could see Ciaran's still form huddled under the covers on the far side of the bed. He could also hear the man's soft, even breathing. It sounded as if he was already asleep. Good. He might get through this yet.

Ciaran shifted, mumbling as Drew climbed into the bed. "Drew?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Go back to sleep."

Ciaran sighed and turned over. Within moments, his breathing evened out again.

Drew released the breath he'd been holding and tried to get comfortable. The bed was rather hard, but at least the mattress wasn't lumpy. After a few minutes of careful wiggling around so as not to wake Ciaran, he found a relatively comfortable position.

* * * * *

Ciaran looked around, confused and disoriented. Moments ago, he had been in the study, reading in front of the fireplace. Now he stood outside, in an unfamiliar forest. Moonlight bathed the clearing, illuminating the faces of the four strange men surrounding him. They stared at him with avarice in their eyes.

One of them stepped closer to him. "We did it. We summoned a demon!"

He tried to back away, but he could not. He was trapped. Panicked, he looked down at his feet. They had summoned him into a circle. He could not leave the circle without their permission.

Another of the men approached, carrying a length of rope. He and one of the others stepped into the circle. Though he tried to fight, the two men overpowered him, tying his hands.

They scuffed the circle out and dragged him from the clearing. A few minutes later, they reached a campsite. One of the men shoved him down near the fire. He hit the rocky ground hard, crying out.

Then the men began to argue.

"It was my idea to summon him. I get to use him first."

"Fuck you! I set up this trip."

"Well I got the ingredients for the spell!"

Ciaran did not know what the men wanted from him, but he knew he had to escape before they finished their argument. He searched the ground for a sharp rock with which to cut through the ropes, but found nothing. His fingers scrabbled across the dirt. Finally, he found a stone and sawed at his bonds, ignoring the burn of the rough rope across his wrists.

To his horror, the sharp edge of the rock did not cut through the rope. No matter how much he hacked at them, there was no change. How could this be?

"You can't get away from us."

He looked up. The biggest of the four men leered down at him. He cringed when the man ran a finger over his cheek.

The man smirked at his reaction. "We drew straws. I get to go first." He unfastened his trousers.

Ciaran tried to strike out at his captor with the sharp stone, but it was gone. He was defenseless.

The man grabbed his bound arms, twisting them painfully. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"No! Let me go!" Despite the pain in his arms, Ciaran struggled, desperate. He had to escape.

"Ciaran! Wake up!"

His eyes flew open. For long moments, he fought against the hands

clasped on his wrists, still caught in the grip of his dream. Then he focused on a familiar face. His rescuer. He had escaped after all, and Drew had found him. The last part of his dream had never occurred. He let his muscles go lax, his relief nearly overpowering. "Drew..."

His expression concerned, Drew rubbed Ciaran's arms, chafing the cold away. "Are you okay? You were having one hell of a nightmare."

Trembling in the wake of his nightmare, all he wanted to do was curl up against the other man and be comforted. Such weakness was a luxury he did not have. He forced himself to smile. "I am fine. I did not mean to wake you."

"That's okay." Drew paused. "Do you want to talk about it?"

The last thing Ciaran wanted to do was discuss the dream. He never wanted to think of those events again. He shook his head. "No. I just wish to go back to sleep."

"Okay. Good night." Drew released Ciaran's arms. After a long look, he turned over. A few minutes later, the sound of his soft breathing told Ciaran he was asleep once more.

It was a long time before Ciaran was able to sleep.

Chapter Four

When Drew awoke, morning had come. Bright light streamed around the edges of the orange drapes, which looked even gaudier in the light of day. Ciaran was still sleeping, curled on his side facing Drew, with one hand under his pillow and the other tucked under his chin.

In sleep, he looked very young and very vulnerable. Drew marveled at the way Ciaran's long, black eyelashes swept down over his high cheekbones. His tousled black curls hung haphazardly over his brow, and Drew reached out to brush a lock of hair away from Ciaran's face.

It was soft.

Ciaran's lush lips parted on a sigh, as if he awaited a kiss. The temptation to kiss those lips was strong. Against his will, Drew found himself leaning toward those tempting lips. When he caught himself, he jerked back, almost falling off the bed.

Those big, violet eyes opened right then, blinking at Drew in confusion. "What is wrong?"

He scowled. "Nothing!" Embarrassed and angry with himself for his lack of control, Drew jumped out of bed. He knew he was being a dick when he saw a flash of hurt in Ciaran's eyes, but he didn't apologize. Instead, he yanked on a pair of jeans.

Ciaran's eyes widened when Drew sat on the edge of the bed to put on his socks and boots. "You are leaving?"

Drew felt his anger softening at the worried look on Ciaran's face.

It wasn't Ciaran's fault Drew had the self-control of a teenager. "Just for a few minutes. I'm hungry, and you need some clothes of your own."

His words did not seem to reassure the other man. "You will return?"

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Stay here, and don't open the door to anyone. We don't have to worry about hiding your wings anymore, but the ears would be a bit hard to explain."

Drew grabbed his keys and wallet and left the room. He stepped out into a beautiful, bright, crisp, and cool October morning. He'd always loved fall weather. The air was cool without being cold, and wonderful scents filled the air: dry leaves, wood smoke, a hint of the upcoming winter. He found himself smiling as he started his bike and rode toward the nearest town.

* * * * *

Ciaran sat up in the bed, staring at the door. Drew had left him here, alone. Although Drew had promised to return, Ciaran could not help feeling abandoned. He knew very little about the world he had been thrust into. If Drew did not return, what would he do?

He shivered, wrapping his arms around his knees. So far, the human realm had been nothing like he had hoped. The books he had read held two visions of the human world. Some authors described Earth as a horrible place, full of violence, cruelty, and death. Others claimed it was beautiful, full of love and happiness. He had chosen to believe the latter, escaping to the Earth of his imagination when his own life became too lonely to bear. He had envisioned humans befriending him when none of his own kind would.

Being summoned, threatened, and hurt had shown him how wrong his vision of the human world had been. Humans could be just as cruel as his people. Their reasons might be different, driven by emotion rather than logic and tradition, but the result was the same—pain and humiliation. If Drew had not come along, he did not want to think about what would have happened. He knew he could not have stopped the

humans from recapturing him, hurting him further, although he would have tried.

Turning his thoughts away from the men who had summoned him, he considered his savior. Why had Drew helped him? Drew had not seemed at all afraid of him, even though he must have thought Ciaran looked like a monster.

After they escaped his pursuers, Drew could have told him to make his own way. Instead, the man had brought him here. He had allowed Ciaran to sleep in his bed. Last night, after the nightmare, Drew had comforted him. He was a good man; Ciaran was certain of it.

Drew would come back. He had promised.

Ciaran huddled against the headboard, waiting.

Chapter Five

Drew reached the small town of Greenberg a short time later. From what he could see, the entire town consisted of a gas station, a post office, a tiny diner, a drugstore, a church, and a few houses.

His first stop was the drugstore, which turned out to have a little bit of everything. He went to the small clothing section and grabbed a couple of pairs of jeans that looked to be about Ciaran's size. Next, he selected a package of black T-shirts and one of boxers. They didn't have any shoes except for a bin full of clearance sandals, so he picked out a pair of those as well. The last items he grabbed were a toothbrush, a comb, and deodorant. Hoping he had everything Ciaran would need, at least for a couple of days, he headed for the checkout counter.

The old man at the counter watched with interest as Drew approached with his armload of purchases. He rang everything up on the old-fashioned cash register and bagged it up. Drew half expected the man to say something about the obviously much-too-small-for-him clothes Drew bought. Although he looked curious, he didn't ask.

The old man smiled, revealing poorly fitted false teeth. "That'll be thirty-five dollars and ninety-two cents, young man."

* * * * *

About five minutes later, drugstore bag in hand, Drew entered Billie's Diner and sat down at the counter. A forty-something woman with

dyed red hair and a nametag that read *Billie*, approached him.

“Take your order, hon?”

“I’d like to order two breakfasts to go.”

She pulled out a notepad and pencil. “Sure thing, doll. What’cha need?”

Drew realized he had no idea what Ciaran would like to eat, or even if needed to eat at all. “Give me one with the works—scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns, all that. Extra meat.” He paused, thinking. “Do you have fruit?”

“Yep. We have a real nice fruit salad that’s great for breakfast. My place has just about everything.” Billie smiled with pride, and he realized that she was the Billie from the diner’s name.

“Good. For the other I’d like fruit salad and pancakes.”

“All right, sweetie. I’ll have that up for you in just a minute.”

True to her promise, Billie had Drew’s order boxed up and ready to go in a few minutes. Carrying all the stuff he’d bought on his bike proved to be awkward, but he managed it.

Back at the motel, he gathered his purchases and headed for room 13, stopping on the way at a vending machine to buy two bottles of water. He shoved them into the drugstore bag and went to unlock the room door.

Ciaran sat against the bed’s headboard with his head resting on his knees, legs drawn up, his arms encircling them. When he heard the door close, he looked up and smiled, his relief and pleasure at seeing Drew obvious.

Seeing that smile, Drew felt a sharp tug somewhere in the vicinity of his heart. He smiled back. To break the trance he’d fallen into, he set the breakfast bag down on the little table in the corner, fished the bottles of water out of the other bag, and put the drugstore bag on the dresser. They could go through everything else after breakfast.

He wondered if the clothes he’d bought would fit Ciaran, but that line of thought only made him imagine Ciaran stripping in order to try on the new clothes. When he began contemplating how far down the wing markings on Ciaran’s back went, he knew it was time to give himself

something else to think about.

Feeling the need to fill the silence, he said the first thing that came to mind. "I didn't know what you liked for breakfast, so I brought a lot of different things. What do you normally eat in the morning?"

"I most often break my fast with fruit or bread." Ciaran stood and stretched, the sleek muscles in his chest and arms flexing as he moved.

Drew forced himself to concentrate on setting out the boxes, utensils, and napkins he found in the bag.

"Well, I brought some fruit and pancakes. I also have eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns...you can try whatever you want."

Ciaran came over and sat in one of the orange chairs. Drew sat as well. He handed Ciaran a bottle of water and opened up the box before him to find exactly the kind of breakfast he loved—lots of meat with big piles of eggs and hash browns. If he'd been an ordinary man, the meal would be a heart attack on a plate, but his werewolf metabolism allowed him to eat pretty much anything he wanted as long as he stayed active.

Ciaran opened his box as well, eying the contents with interest. "What are these?"

"Pancakes. That little plastic tub is syrup."

"Pan cakes?" Ciaran paused for a moment, and then opened the syrup and peered at the thick liquid.

"The syrup is to pour on your pancakes." He watched as Ciaran poured a bit of syrup onto his pancakes and took a bite.

"These pan cakes are sweet!"

His expression of surprised delight made Drew grin. "I take it you like them."

"I like them very much." Ciaran smiled, pouring the rest of the syrup onto his pancakes. There was a lot of syrup, so they ended up pretty well soaked.

"Here." Drew put bites of sausage, bacon, egg, and hash brown on the open lid of Ciaran's box. "Try these and see what you think."

Ciaran obediently popped the bite of sausage in his mouth and chewed. His expression of distaste was almost comical. He turned to Drew, frowning. "What was that?"

"Sausage. Guess you don't like it, huh?" Drew snickered as Ciaran eyed the other bits of food in front of him. When he prodded at the bacon as if it might jump up and bite him, Drew burst out laughing. "That's bacon. It doesn't taste a thing like sausage. I promise."

Ciaran hesitated, but tasted the bacon. "I like bacon." After eating the other bites, he announced that he did not like the eggs but the hash browns were good. "The pan cakes are the best."

Drew suppressed a smile at the way Ciaran said *pan cakes* as if the word were actually two words. They finished in silence, Drew devouring his meat and eggs, while Ciaran ate the fruit salad. Breakfast with Ciaran was more comfortable than he expected. He was accustomed to eating alone, but having a companion who didn't try to fill the silence with empty chatter was nice.

It didn't hurt that Ciaran was great to look at. Even with bed-head and wearing ill-fitting pajama pants, Ciaran was sexy. Drew wished he had the right to reach over and thread his hand through those soft curls. From his brief touch earlier, he knew they felt like silk. He also knew he couldn't allow himself to start thinking about touching right now. He would be better off to find something else to do. Remembering the clothes he'd bought, he stood.

Drew gathered up the breakfast trash and threw it away, then went to the dresser and grabbed the drugstore bag. He pulled out the items inside and laid them out on the bed. "I bought you some clothes while I was out. Why don't you go to the bathroom and try them on?"

Chapter Six

Drew had brought him food, and now clothing. Ciaran gave Drew a grateful smile. "Thank you, for everything you have done."

Drew ducked his head, his face reddening. "You're welcome."

Ciaran had never seen such a reaction before. He stared at Drew's red cheeks for a moment, fascinated. Then, not wanting to make Drew uncomfortable with his stare, he stood and walked to the bed. He turned his attention to the garments spread out there. Two pairs of the odd trousers humans wore were laid out, as well as two shirts.

He picked up an item of clothing he did not recognize. "What is this?"

Drew's face was bright red now. "Those are boxer shorts. To wear under your jeans."

He studied them. "Oh. I see."

Before he could say anything else, Drew piled several pieces of clothing on his outstretched arms. "Go try them on."

In the bathroom, he examined the clothes. They were all easy to put on. In moments, he dressed himself in the boxer shorts, jeans, and shirt Drew had given him. The jeans felt strange. The trousers he wore at home were made out of silk and other soft, light fabrics, not the heavy material he now wore. At least the shirt and boxer shorts were made of a comfortable material.

He paused to peer at himself in the mirror. With the exception of his ears, he thought he looked almost human. He finger-combed his hair

to cover the tips of his ears. A stranger stared back at him when he finished. Would Drew think he looked odd?

Frowning, he left the bathroom. Drew stood near the bed, watching him. Ciaran shuffled his feet, anxious for approval. "Will I blend in? Do I look like a normal human?"

Drew examined him for a moment. "Sure. You look fine." He sat on the edge of the bed. "We really should talk."

"Yes." Ciaran came over to perch on the edge of the bed as well. This was the moment he had been dreading. Drew had been kind to him. The man even seemed to like him. If they talked about Ciaran's history, that might change. Nerves tightened his stomach, making him nauseous.

Drew leaned forward. "First, tell me how you got here."

Ciaran took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "I am not exactly sure what happened. One moment I was in my room reading, the next I heard a strange whooshing sound and everything went black. When the sound stopped and light returned, I was encircled by humans dressed in dark robes. They fell upon me, beat me when I struggled, and tied my hands. I was very frightened, especially when I overheard them speaking about calling forth a demon to be their slave." He shivered, reliving the terror of being captured.

"They summoned you?"

He nodded. "At first they seemed quite pleased with their success, but after a short time of celebrating, they began to argue about who would get to command me first. I knew that I must escape before they decided, so I scraped at the ropes with a sharp rock I found on the ground. While I was attempting to escape, one of them slipped away from the others and came to me, ordered me to..." He swallowed hard, not wanting to tell Drew what the man had asked him to do. He felt sick and humiliated even thinking about it. "I did not wish to do what he asked of me. My bonds gave way, and I hit him as hard as I could. I ran into the forest and, some time later, came upon you."

For a moment, Ciaran thought Drew would ask him more about his summoners. Instead, he changed the subject. "Where is your home?"

Back on safer territory, Ciaran relaxed. "I live in Faerie, in a house

belonging to my grandfather."

"You live in Faerie? That place really exists?"

He smiled at Drew's wide-eyed wonder. "Yes. My mother was of the Seelie Fae. Only the Seelie and other light races can dwell in Faerie. The dark races, such as the Unseelie and demons, must dwell elsewhere. I am only allowed because of my grandfather."

"Why wouldn't you be allowed to live with your family?"

Now he would see how tolerant Drew truly was. Lowering his head, he revealed his greatest shame. "My mother is a member of a noble house of the Fae, but my father was a demon."

"So?" Drew gave him a puzzled look.

Ciaran sighed. Perhaps the full tale of his birth would help Drew understand. "My mother was to marry a Fae nobleman, but before her wedding day she was kidnapped by a raiding party of Unseelie. Apparently, one of the Unseelie lords had decided to create the perfect race. To do so, he felt he must add the blood of other races to the Unseelie blood. He kidnapped members of many races: dark elves, wood elves, various kinds of demons...and my mother. His plan was to breed different combinations, and then breed the resulting children with Unseelie nobility. My mother was forced to breed with a demon but escaped before any children could be born and used in the experiment. She fled to her father's house in Faerie, where I was born. I have lived there ever since."

"What happened to your mother?"

He shrugged, hoping a casual air would mask his true feelings. "I do not know. She lives, but I have never seen her."

Drew gaped at him. "What? Who took care of you?"

No one had cared for him in any real sense. He looked down at the striped covering on the bed, unable to meet Drew's eyes. "I had a nurse when I was young. She was forbidden to talk to me or touch me unless it was necessary. My grandfather taught me to speak and to read. No one else was needed. As I grew older, I mostly cared for myself."

"Why on earth would the nurse be forbidden to talk to you or touch you?"

He shrugged again. It was the way things were. "I am half demon. Grandfather would have been within his rights to kill me at birth or have me sent away. I am fortunate he allowed me to remain in his house."

"Why did he then, if your being part demon is so awful?" Drew's voice sounded angry.

Unsure why Drew was angry, Ciaran shifted nervously. "He does not believe in violence."

"So he just hid you away in his house?"

He met Drew's furious green gaze. Humans must have different methods of dealing with shameful things. Perhaps they killed the unwanted, or cast them out. "I am very fortunate that he did so. He is very powerful in the Fae court. The scandal of having a half-demon grandson would have destroyed that."

Drew scowled. "Did you ever get to leave the house, or have anyone visit?"

Who would visit him? No Fae of good family would be seen with a half-demon disgrace such as himself. "I stayed in the house or on the grounds. Who would visit?"

"Friends. Other family members, perhaps."

The comment almost made him laugh. He had never had a friend. His best friends had been books, and foolish, unrealistic dreams about meeting humans. His experiences thus far had shown him what a pathetic fool he was. "I have no other family, or friends." Ciaran stated the fact in the same calm, flat tone he had used to tell the rest of his story. If he pretended the admission did not pain him, maybe Drew would not pity him. He looked down at the floor.

Drew's gentle fingers on his chin made him look up. "If you'll let me, Ciaran, I'll be your friend."

Everything seemed to stop around him as he stared into Drew's earnest eyes. Afraid to hope, he whispered, "You...would be my friend?"

Drew smiled. "I would, if you want me to."

He had trouble speaking over the lump in his throat, but he managed. "Yes, please."

Chapter Seven

After practically forcing Ciaran to talk, Drew wondered why he hadn't revealed his own two big secrets—that he was a werewolf, and that he was gay. Both of those were pretty big, but the gay thing might prove to be the larger of the two issues.

It was doubtful that a half-demon, half-fairy guy would freak out about hanging out with a werewolf, but with a gay man... He didn't know what Ciaran would think about his orientation, but if the reaction was anything like his father and brothers', he didn't want to see it.

When he'd told his father, Clinton Moore had been enraged. He'd snarled, "No son of mine will be a fucking faggot!" Then he'd changed and attacked. Drew had been forced to change as well, to defend himself from his own father. Drew had gotten Clinton down and held him by his throat, but he had not killed him. Instead, he'd released his father, glared at him, and left the room.

The day after the fight, he'd packed up and left. His mother, Elaine, had cried and asked him to stay, but Drew knew he couldn't. Two of his older brothers still lived in town, and there was no way he would be able to stay without being forced to fight them as well. Luckily, his great-aunt Elizabeth had left him a cabin with some land. Since he ran his own business out of his home, he could work anywhere. He'd sold or given away many of his things, boxed up the rest, and sent everything ahead to the cabin.

Drew had felt unexpectedly good when he'd ridden out of his

hometown a few days ago. The move felt like a new start, like a beginning rather than an ending. Maybe he would be free to be himself at last, and live his life as he chose. And in a way, it had been a new beginning, since he'd met Ciaran.

His heart ached as he thought about Ciaran's terrible childhood. His own problems seemed small in comparison. So his father had tried to kill him? At least he had his mother who loved him and told him so. Ciaran had no one.

Until now.

He had promised to be Ciaran's friend. Remembering the look on Ciaran's face when he offered broke his heart. How sad Ciaran's life must have been, never having a friend.

From now on, Ciaran would have a friend, no matter what.

Drew was pulled out of his thoughts when Ciaran walked over to him holding the toothbrush Drew had bought him earlier. "What is this?"

Drew smiled. "It's a toothbrush. You put toothpaste on it and use it to clean your teeth."

"Where is this *toothpaste*?"

"In the bathroom. I'll show you." He stood and headed for the bathroom. He got out his own toothbrush, squeezed a strip of toothpaste onto it, and watched as Ciaran did the same. When he began to brush, Ciaran watched with interest and then mimicked his movements. He had a hard time not laughing at how seriously Ciaran was taking his tooth brushing.

When they finished, Ciaran bared his teeth and looked at them in the mirror. Then he turned to Drew. "We do not have toothbrushes in Faerie."

He held back his grin with effort. "I think that's pretty obvious. Do you all just go around with dirty teeth?"

"Of course not! There are herbs..." Ciaran began indignantly. He paused. "You are teasing me."

Drew laughed. "Yeah. Come on, let's get our stuff together. Gotta get going."

"Where are we going?"

"My great-aunt left me a cabin when she died. I was on my way there when I found you. I want you to know that you can stay with me as long as you need to." He gathered up their things from the bathroom and went back into the main room to pack them in his saddlebags.

Ciaran perched on the edge of the bed, watching him. "What if I am unable to find a way home? I know of nowhere else to go, but I cannot inconvenience you indefinitely. I must go home at once." He bit his lush lower lip, his eyes downcast.

There was something going on here other than unwillingness to cause Drew problems. Drew sat down next to the half-demon. "Look at me, Ciaran." He waited until Ciaran's violet eyes met his. "Do you want to go home?"

"I must go home."

He held their eye contact, determined to find out the truth. "But do you *want* to go home?"

There was a long silence. "No!" The single word seemed torn from Ciaran's soul.

"Then stay here." *With me.*

Ciaran looked like a child who was wishing with all his might for a treat but expected a punishment instead. "You would not mind? Truly?"

Drew reached over and squeezed Ciaran's hand. "I would love for you to stay."

Chapter Eight

The sign welcoming them to the small northern Missouri town of Trenton read, Population: 2,321. They'd spent a good forty-five minutes on an almost empty road since the last town they'd been through, but at least the last town had a population of over ten thousand. It would have been obvious even without the sign that this place was much smaller.

As they rode along the town's main street, Drew saw the usual small-town businesses: a post office, a small grocery store, and a hardware store. Rather than the stereotypical diner, however, there was a coffee shop. He and Ciaran could stop there for some lunch before they headed out to the cabin. He pulled over to the side of the street by the grocery store and shut off the bike.

"We need to order a couple of things from the grocery store before we head out to the cabin." Drew turned to Ciaran, who was removing his helmet.

The demon shook his head, causing his hair to fall over his ears. "Good. I am hungry."

Drew couldn't help laughing at that. "Me, too. Let's go to the coffee shop down the street and get some food first, then shop. I don't want to wait until we get to the cabin to eat, especially since I don't know how much longer it'll take to get there."

Ciaran nodded his agreement to the plan. He put the helmet on one of the bike's handlebars, and they headed down the street together. As they passed an antique shop, Ciaran paused to stare at the store window.

He did the same at the resale clothing shop they passed next. Drew had to slow down to accommodate Ciaran's slower progress.

Finally, they came to a complete stop in front of a pawnshop. The demon stared at the items in the window with rapt interest.

"We could come back into town in a few days and check out the shops." Drew wasn't sure why he'd made the offer, but the way Ciaran's eyes lit up told him he'd done the right thing.

"If it would be no trouble—"

"It would be fun. If we're going to be living here, we ought to check the place out." After he spoke, Drew realized how easily that little "we" had jumped to his lips. He was talking as if he and Ciaran were a couple or something. He shook his head, hard, and resumed walking. Ciaran followed, walking faster now, probably because he knew he'd be returning soon.

Inside the coffee shop, Drew headed for the counter and began to examine the menu. There were sandwiches, pastries, coffee and espresso drinks, teas, hot chocolate, sodas, and lemonade. Caffeine and werewolves didn't go well together, so he decided to have a strawberry lemonade.

"Can I help you?" The woman behind the counter wiped her hands on her apron and lifted her notepad, ready to take down their orders.

Drew ordered a roast beef sandwich and the lemonade, and then turned to Ciaran, who was looking bewildered by the choices. After a few minutes, Ciaran ordered a veggie sandwich on a croissant accompanied by a hot chocolate.

When their order was announced, Drew carried the tray to a booth in the back.

Ciaran grabbed his sandwich and hot chocolate off the tray. He stuck his finger into the whipped cream topping on his hot chocolate and tasted it. His face lit up all over again as he licked the whipped cream from his finger.

He smiled at Drew. "This is very good. Would you like some?"

Drew felt himself swell as he imagined sucking whipped cream from one of Ciaran's slim fingers. Since he was living in fantasyland for a moment, he let himself imagine Ciaran moaning in arousal and offering to

reciprocate by sucking whipped cream off Drew's cock. *Oh yeah.*

Suddenly, Drew recalled Ciaran had asked him a question he had never answered. In fact, he didn't even remember the question. It didn't help that he was sitting in a coffee shop with a hard-on that could probably cut glass.

Ciaran continued to eat as if nothing was wrong, so it must not be too obvious that Drew was losing his mind. He shook his head and started on his own food. He tried really hard not to watch Ciaran eat.

* * * * *

After lunch, which Ciaran had enjoyed very much, they walked back to the place Drew called the grocery store. The whoosh of the glass door opening made Ciaran jump. He hesitated for a moment, not certain how the door had opened.

Drew grinned at him. "It's just an automatic door. It opens anytime someone comes up to it."

He eyed the door with suspicion, but followed Drew into the store. Everywhere he looked, brightly colored boxes and cans lined the shelves. Drew had told him a grocery store was like a marketplace, where humans went to buy food. In Ciaran's realm, food was fruit, vegetables, meat, and bread, none of it covered in strange packaging. This was what humans ate? He reached for a bright red box bearing a picture of what appeared to be a leprechaun, wondering about the sort of food that could be inside such an odd container.

Drew took his arm and pulled him along, away from the box. "Come on. You can look at food at home."

He didn't have time to protest, because they met a man wearing a blue apron. Drew spoke to the man for a few minutes, arranging a grocery delivery. When that task was completed, Drew ushered Ciaran back outside.

Moments later, they were back on Drew's motorcycle, on their way out of the town. They rode for a short distance, and then Drew turned onto a gravel road. Ciaran peered over Drew's shoulder as they pulled up

to a small, neat cabin.

Home, Drew had called it.

If only it could be his home as well.

Chapter Nine

Drew had seen pictures of the cabin before, when Aunt Lizzie visited and when the lawyer had informed him of his inheritance, but seeing the place in person and realizing that it was really his was amazing.

The cabin was small but neat, with old-fashioned log construction and dark blue shutters. There were planters at each of the front windows. The yard and drive were in wonderful condition. Obviously, someone had been taking good care of the property while it had been empty. Drew couldn't wait to see the inside.

He hopped off his bike, grabbed the saddlebags, and beckoned Ciaran to follow him. Moments later, they entered the front door. The inside was even better than Drew had expected. As he'd been told, the cabin was furnished. The small, cozy living room featured a fireplace, comfortable-looking navy blue overstuffed furniture, and a small television. Drew continued into the bright, cheerful kitchen/dining room. The curtains were open, allowing the afternoon light to stream in and illuminate the soft yellow walls. The appliances were in good repair, and a quick check inside the refrigerator showed that it was clean and had been left on.

Ciaran had wandered back into the living room and was peering down the hallway.

Drew smiled at the demon's rapt expression. "Ready to check out the rest of the house?"

Ciaran nodded, and together they walked down the hallway. The

first bedroom was the larger of the two and had been Aunt Lizzie's. It was decorated in shades of blue and green. Drew tossed his saddlebags onto the queen-sized bed, and they went to check out the second bedroom. It was smaller and very plain. The walls were beige—the only color in the room was a rather bland, beige and blue comforter on the bed.

He looked at Ciaran, who appeared as interested in this boring room as he had been in everything else they'd seen. "This'll be your room."

Ciaran's eyes widened, and he fingered the edge of the comforter as if it were silk. "My room? Thank you."

Those big violet eyes met Drew's, full of gratitude, and Drew nearly melted on the spot. He turned away, determined to keep his mind on business.

Leaving the bedroom, he glanced into the bathroom and the small office. The office was perfect for his needs. He would be able to set up his computer equipment without too much trouble. He'd been a little worried about being able to find a place to work in the cabin.

Just as they finished touring the house, the doorbell rang. Drew answered the door and was surprised to find the movers had arrived early. They brought in the computer, fax machine, and other office supplies he'd packed, as well as a few boxes of clothing and personal items. They worked with quick efficiency, and half an hour later, they finished and left.

The next couple of hours flew by as Drew set up his office and explained his job to Ciaran. Ciaran had never seen a computer before, so explaining that he was a Web and software designer took some doing. When the computer was set up and Drew turned it on, Ciaran was amazed. Drew showed him some of the Web sites and software he'd designed, which Ciaran proclaimed to be "most impressive." Drew wasn't quite as flattered as he might have been, considering the demon seemed to find just about everything fascinating.

Ciaran was even more impressed later that evening as Drew showed him how to work the stove, the microwave, and the dishwasher. Lunch had been hours ago, so he helped Ciaran pop a bag of microwave

popcorn, which Ciaran presented to Drew with pride the second the microwave beeped. Drew put the popcorn into a large bowl, grabbed a couple of sodas, and headed for the living room to show Ciaran how to work the television.

They settled onto opposite ends of the overstuffed couch with the bowl of popcorn between them. Drew turned the TV on and found an educational program about animals of the rain forest.

Ciaran watched the animals in silence for a while. Even the popcorn was forgotten for several minutes. Finally, he spoke again. "These animals are found here?"

"No, they live in the rain forest. That's a long way from here." Drew reached for some popcorn. Obviously, Ciaran had the same idea, because their hands brushed together in the bowl. A thrill went up Drew's arm at the contact. He grabbed a handful of popcorn and moved his hand away as casually as he could.

He had a hard time keeping his attention on the TV. Every time Ciaran turned to share his amazement at the animals, Drew thought about how nice it was sitting in front of the TV with someone, hanging out.

He also found himself thinking a lot of other things he shouldn't be. Like how nice it would be if this were more than just a temporary situation. Or how much he'd like to kiss the sexy lower lip Ciaran kept biting in concentration.

* * * * *

Television was fascinating. There was nothing like it in Faerie. Ciaran had learned everything he knew from books.

While he loved books, there was something to be said for visual learning as well. Animals which had been incomprehensible from printed descriptions made perfect sense when he saw them on the television screen.

The human world was full of wondrous things. He would have never imagined such things as coffee shops, grocery stores, stoves, microwaves, and dishwashers if he had not been summoned here. He still

would not know of them if he had not met Drew. Ciaran sneaked a glance at his new friend, whose gaze was on the television.

He had a friend. The thought still awed him. Despite the terror of being summoned, Ciaran was happy to be in the human realm. If those cruel humans had not summoned him, he would never have met Drew. The thought of returning to the cold silence of his grandfather's house, even after only two days with Drew, chilled him.

He would stay here as long as he could.

Chapter Ten

After that first, strange day and night, things settled into a routine at the cabin. Drew went for a run each morning, often shifting to wolf form when he got away from the house, while Ciaran got up and made breakfast. They ate together, before Drew spent the rest of the morning working in his office.

Drew had a couple of Web pages to work on, as well as a new program he had been working on for a while, so he had plenty to keep him busy. While Drew worked, Ciaran read, watched television, or did work around the cabin. Ciaran actually seemed to enjoy cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. They ate lunch separately, but at dinnertime, they fixed a meal together.

Dinnertime and the time after dinner soon became Drew's favorite part of the day. He enjoyed working side by side with Ciaran to make a meal, talking as they worked. On most days, the demon didn't have much to say, but he was a wonderful listener and seemed endlessly fascinated by Drew's work.

After years of living with his father and older brothers, who had barely tolerated him and thought his work was boring and not manly enough, having someone who cared what he had to say was great. Drew had never been able to have a real relationship because of his desire to hide his sexuality from his family, but having Ciaran live with him was beginning to feel like a relationship.

It wasn't a relationship, though. Drew reminded himself of that

almost daily. Ciaran was staying with him because he had nowhere else to go. Drew couldn't take advantage of the situation. Sometime soon, Ciaran would want to leave. If Drew was smart, he wouldn't get too attached.

A week after they moved to the cabin, Drew was watching Ciaran attempt to eat spaghetti, when his mind wandered once more to things he shouldn't be thinking about. In desperation, he seized on the first distraction he could think of. "It's Friday, so the shops should still be open in town. Want to go check them out?"

Ciaran stopped scowling at the spaghetti he was trying to twirl around his fork and gave Drew a blinding smile. "I would like that very much."

"We'll go right after we finish eating, then."

Less than an hour later, Drew found himself in a pawnshop, purchasing an acoustic guitar. Ciaran had seen a musician playing one on TV and had expressed an interest in learning to play. Drew could play a bit himself, so he figured he could teach Ciaran the basics.

He went outside to where Ciaran stood in front of another shop window, and handed him the case.

"Here." An unexpected awkwardness came over him as he handed the case over.

Ciaran looked at the case, his eyebrows drawing together. Then he lifted the lid. A smile lit his face, and he turned happy eyes toward Drew. "A guitar!"

In the face of such joy, his awkwardness melted away. Determined to play it cool, he kept his voice casual. "I can play a bit. If you want, I can teach you."

"I do not want to take up your work time."

He shrugged. "It's not a problem. I need a break every now and then anyway."

Ciaran's excited expression was the only answer Drew needed.

Chapter Eleven

Drew had bought him a gift. Ciaran turned the thought over in his head the whole ride home, the guitar case resting against his back. Never in his life had anyone given him a gift. His grandfather made him feel as if his very existence was a burden. He had come to believe being allowed to live in his grandfather's secluded estate was a gift in itself.

Here, with Drew, everything was different. Drew never made him feel as if he were an unwanted burden. Drew did not seem to care that he was half demon and unworthy. He did not understand why Drew was willing to accept him, but he was grateful.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the cabin. Drew parked the motorcycle in the detached garage and shut off the engine.

Ciaran let go of Drew and got off the motorcycle, stumbling a little due to the unaccustomed weight of the guitar case on his back. Drew caught his arms, steadying him. He stilled, the warmth of Drew's large hands seeping through the sleeves of his shirt.

Before Drew, he could not remember the last time someone had touched him. He held his breath, amazed when Drew did not pull away from him, the way his grandfather always had when he was a child in need of comfort. He had a strange urge to move closer. Instead, he stepped back. "Thank you."

Drew smiled but said nothing. He turned and walked toward the cabin.

Ciaran followed, waiting while Drew unlocked the door. Inside, he

carried his new guitar to the sofa and sat, placing the case on his lap. He opened the case and ran his fingers over the well-worn wood.

Drew sat beside him. "You want to start learning now?"

He nodded.

The guitar lessons soon became Ciaran's favorite part of the day. He learned quickly, but even when he had trouble with something, Drew was patient and encouraging. Drew showed him how to hold his hands on the instrument, how to hold and use a pick, and how to play chords. Not once did Drew flinch away from touching him, a fact which filled him with a warm glow.

Between lessons, when he was not practicing, he continued his normal activities of cooking, cleaning, and watching television. One afternoon he came across a listing for a television program called a soap opera. Puzzled, he tried to imagine why humans would wish to watch others sing about soap.

Finally, he turned the television to the program to discover the answer. After watching for several minutes, he had not seen soap, or opera. Instead, several characters argued over whether or not to allow someone named Blair's wedding to continue, knowing her dead former love was not actually dead.

He scowled at the television, wondering what sort of people would hide such important information from a friend. Before he could contemplate the issue further, the story switched to two young men dressed in formal clothing. They kept looking at each other strangely while having a conversation that seemed to have more than one meaning. Ciaran was confused. He felt almost as if they were speaking in a language he did not know.

Then one of the young men leaned forward and pressed his lips to the other man's.

Ciaran knew what a kiss was. He had read about the act, although he had never seen it done. Seeing a kiss, even on television, was different from reading about one. Very different. He had never considered that two men could kiss. He had not thought much about the subject at all. Why should he? No one had wanted to kiss him, or would want to.

The characters on the screen broke apart and stared at each other for a long moment. Then the one who had been kissed grabbed the back of the other man's head, and they kissed again.

A strange, nervous flutter in his stomach made him shift in his seat, uncomfortable. His face felt hot. Not sure what was happening to him, he turned off the television and fled the room.

Cleaning the garage made for a good distraction. Years of dust, trash, and interesting objects lined the edges of the small building. Ciaran was excited when he found an old bicycle along one of the walls. He had seen humans riding the contraptions on television and thought it would be enjoyable, much like riding on Drew's motorcycle, only slower. He was certain Drew would let him fix the bicycle.

Despite the work and his exciting find, Ciaran found his thoughts returning to what he had seen on the soap opera earlier. What would it feel like to be kissed?

He sighed, pushing the thought out of his head once more. He needed to go inside and clean up before he was late for his guitar lesson.

Chapter Twelve

Giving Ciaran guitar lessons turned out to be an exquisite torture for Drew. He set aside time before dinner each day for the lessons. At first, he'd had to show Ciaran how to position his hands correctly, how to hold and use a pick, and tune the instrument, and then how to play the chords. It seemed as if he had to touch Ciaran constantly, and each time he did, he wished he could *really* touch him.

Lucky for him, Ciaran learned quickly. Soon, the demon was playing songs without Drew's help. He proved to be a lot more talented at the guitar than Drew had ever been. Within a couple of weeks, Ciaran was creating simple songs of his own. After dinner, he often amused Drew with short songs about silly things like the time he'd put way too much detergent in the dishwasher, or a story he had seen on a soap opera. Explaining what a soap opera was had been an interesting conversation. Drew had to get online and look up the history of the shows, because he hadn't known why they were called soap operas either.

Drew loved listening to Ciaran play, but listening to him sing was even better. His singing voice was sweet but husky. Drew would sit there, his eyes closed to listen better, imagining that voice urging him on in bed. No matter how often he told himself not to think about such things, he couldn't help succumbing.

Drew often found himself thinking inappropriate thoughts about Ciaran. Nearly every night he dreamed of the two of them together in his bed. In his dreams, he'd strip off Ciaran's shirt to explore the wings

hidden beneath. He'd kiss his way down that marble-pale chest and take Ciaran into his eager mouth. In one particularly memorable dream, he'd bent Ciaran over the kitchen table, stripped off his jeans, and thrust into him while Ciaran cried out encouragement in his so-sexy voice.

Even when Drew was awake, he couldn't keep his thoughts in line. Many times, he imagined reaching over to take Ciaran's hand while they watched television, or kissing him when they stood at the sink to wash the dishes that couldn't go in the dishwasher.

He realized he had never been happier than he was now, with Ciaran here, which was terrifying. Eventually, his temporary roommate would want to get his own place, or even worse, find someone he wanted to date and bring her home to meet Drew. That would be unbearable. Drew considered trying to find someone to date himself to take his mind off Ciaran, but he knew he couldn't. Ciaran was the only one he wanted.

The worst part of the situation was how oblivious Ciaran seemed. Drew spent half his time in an agony of uncertainty and desire. Ciaran, on the other hand, went about his routine as if everything was normal.

Lately, Ciaran had been out in the garage for hours each day. He had found an old bicycle in the shed behind the cabin and asked if he could fix it up. Of course, Drew had agreed. He had a hard time saying no to anything Ciaran asked. He was fortunate Ciaran didn't ask him for much.

When they cooked dinner together that evening, the demon asked a question Drew had been expecting for a while. "I have finished repairing the bicycle. Would it be all right if I rode down the road a short way? I will not go too far or let anyone see me."

Even though he'd been prepared for the question, he still felt sad for two big reasons. He hated the way Ciaran had been treated as a child that made him believe he should be hidden away. He also hated the way he wanted to hide Ciaran away, to keep him for himself. He covered his inner turmoil with a smile. "You can ride as far as you want to. You fixed the bike, so it's yours. Just be careful. You need to watch out for cars."

"But if someone sees me..." Ciaran trailed off, frowning.

In his head, Drew cursed Ciaran's grandfather for making him feel

so badly about himself. "If someone sees you, they won't think anything of it. And if they figure out you're my roommate, so what? I'm not ashamed of you."

The awed, grateful look Ciaran gave him made him want to take the smaller man into his arms and hold him. Instead, he kept chopping ingredients for their salad. Hiding his emotions was becoming a way of life.

Chapter Thirteen

A week after Ciaran asked Drew for permission to ride his bicycle, he finally gathered enough courage to ride into town. On the previous days, he had ridden along the gravel road leading to the cabin and a short way up the blacktop road to town, but he had turned back each time he got anywhere near the town.

When he rode to town the first time, he did not stop. He went up Main Street and back down again. The few people he saw on the street watched him with interest, but none looked accusing or angry at his appearance in their town. At the end of his trip up and down Main Street, he returned home, exhilarated yet afraid.

That night, Ciaran prepared dinner alone while Drew worked. Drew came into the kitchen as he was putting their plates on the table. The irritated expression on Drew's face lightened when he caught sight of the large, rare steak on his plate.

"You made steak? Awesome." They sat in their usual chairs. Drew cut a bite of steak and chewed. "This is delicious. Just the way I like it."

Drew's praise warmed him. No one had ever expressed any pleasure in anything he had done, until Drew. He ducked his head, still not accustomed to kind words, despite being complimented on his guitar playing, fixing the bicycle, and learning to do ordinary human tasks. "I hoped you would be happy."

"After the day I've had, a steak and some TV sounds like heaven."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Drew spoke again. "I

don't want to think about my day anymore. Tell me what you did today."

Ciaran shifted in his seat, nervous. Drew had said he could go into the town. Now Ciaran would find out if he had meant what he said. "I rode my bicycle."

"Oh? Did you see anything interesting?"

He took a deep breath. "I went into town." In a rush, he added, "I did not talk to anyone, or stop. I only rode up Main Street and back."

Drew put down his fork, frowning. Ciaran cringed at his dark expression. Drew's face grew unhappier, and he sighed. "When I said you could ride into town, I meant it. You don't have to stay here."

Had he made Drew so angry he no longer wanted Ciaran to stay? His chest tightened at the terrifying thought. He put a hand out, beseeching. "I am sorry—"

"Shh. Stop." Drew reached across the table and caught his hand. "I'm not mad at you. I'm glad you rode to town. I'm upset because you felt you couldn't stop or be seen by anyone."

Ciaran clung to Drew's large hand, needing reassurance. "You would not be upset if humans saw me?"

"Of course not. You don't have to hide anymore, or be afraid. Not with me." Drew squeezed his hand. "But if you do decide to talk to anyone, don't tell them you're a demon. Not because I'm ashamed or because you should be, but because humans have a tendency to freak out about things they don't understand. Or they'll think you're crazy, or lying. You're better off not saying much at all, at least until we can work on a cover story for you."

Ciaran considered Drew's words. He was not sure what "cover story" meant, but he understood why Drew did not want him to talk about his true nature. "I do not wish to upset anyone. I will be careful."

"Good." Drew smiled at him and released his hand.

Relief filled him. Drew was not angry. At the same time, Ciaran was confused. A large part of him wished Drew was still holding his hand.

* * * * *

Several days passed before Ciaran decided to ride into town again. There were no chores to do, and Drew was working. After attempting to watch television and finding nothing of interest, he went outside. The weather was pleasant, mild, almost warm. It would be a good day to ride his bicycle.

He went back inside and got his guitar. He slung the strap over his shoulder so that the case rested against his back and hurried outside. Then he climbed onto the bicycle and headed for town.

Once again, he rode along Main Street. This time, he stopped at a tiny park across from the coffee shop. He rested the bicycle against a bench and sat. He slid the case from around his neck and took the guitar out.

When he had the instrument tuned to his satisfaction, Ciaran played a short instrumental he had written a few days ago. Pleased with the sound, he played another song, one he had heard on MTV and taught himself to play. He sang softly to himself, eyes closed to better focus on the music.

The sound of a throat being cleared startled him into looking up. A human woman stood before him. "I couldn't help overhearing your music."

He had not wanted to attract attention. Now that he had, he was not sure what to do. "Have I disturbed you? I am sorry."

She smiled, shaking her head. Her brown hair, fastened back by some sort of band, swished against her shoulders. "No, you weren't disturbing me at all. Your playing is lovely."

Surprised and pleased, he smiled in return. "Thank you. I have been practicing."

Her smile widened. "I can tell." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Janie. What's your name?"

Remembering the gesture from television, and from his first meeting with Drew, Ciaran took her hand and pumped up and down, releasing it quickly. "I am Ciaran."

"You're not from around here, are you?"

For a moment, he was worried. "No. I am not."

Janie's smile did not waver. "That's even better for what I have in mind. The people in this town are always interested in checking out new faces." Before he could ask what she meant, she continued. "I own the coffee shop across the street, and I'm planning to start having live music on Friday and Saturday nights. Would you be interested in playing for about forty-five minutes or so? I'd pay you fifty dollars."

Ciaran gaped at her, astonished. She thought he was skilled enough to play in her shop for money? He could not believe it. "You wish to pay me to play?"

She laughed. "Is that so hard to believe? You're good. I think my customers would love you."

The excitement that filled him had him nearly bouncing in his seat, but he could not agree to this without talking to Drew first. "Could I consider your offer and give you my answer tomorrow?"

"Sure." Janie reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, white rectangle of paper. "Here's my card. The store number's there. Call me when you've decided."

He took the card and tucked it into his guitar case. "Thank you."

She nodded. "I'll talk to you soon."

The moment she left, Ciaran packed up his guitar and jumped on his bicycle, heading for home. He could not wait to tell Drew what had happened.

Chapter Fourteen

Drew was in the middle of another tedious update for his most demanding client when Ciaran burst into the room. He stopped what he was doing and turned his office chair toward the door, surprised. Ciaran never interrupted him when he was working.

Ciaran's face was flushed, his black curls tousled. He rushed into speech without even a hello. "Drew! I was at the park in town, playing my guitar, and a woman asked if I would play at her coffee shop this weekend. She offered to pay me fifty dollars! Do you think I could do it?"

Drew sat for a moment, stunned. He had known Ciaran would probably want to get a job and make his own money someday, but he hadn't expected it to happen so soon. Once Ciaran got a taste of the world out there, he would leave to start his own life.

The thought hit him hard. He'd been telling himself all along not to get too attached because Ciaran would leave him one day, but he hadn't followed his own advice. He was attached. Being with Ciaran made him happy in so many ways. Every day he couldn't wait to see what Ciaran would do or say next. He looked forward to cooking meals together, talking, watching television, even the guitar lessons. Ciaran had brought the joy back to his life. How could he let go of all that?

Drew knew what he had to do. He had to tell Ciaran he was gay. And he had to tell him how he felt. He couldn't keep his emotions inside anymore. At least when Ciaran left, he would know Drew had cared for him.

He opened his mouth to tell Ciaran how he felt, but what came out was, "I'm a werewolf."

"What?" Ciaran gaped at him, obviously not expecting such a revelation.

I can't tell him.

His own father hadn't been able to accept his sexuality. How would a man he'd only known for a few weeks react? He couldn't bear the thought of Ciaran being disgusted with him, or hating him. He closed his eyes for a moment, ashamed of his own cowardice. "Sorry to just blurt it out like that. I should have told you this earlier, but there just never seemed to be a good time. I'm a werewolf."

Ciaran tilted his head, thinking. "I have read about werewolves. You can change into a wolf. Do you change every full moon, as the books claim?"

He forced himself to focus on the subject at hand. "No. I can change whenever I want or need to. Most of the things the books say about werewolves are wrong. The only things they get right are that we have an allergy to silver, we have a good sense of smell, and we're strong."

Ciaran gave him a hesitant smile. "Could I see you sometime...as a wolf?"

"Sure. You can see me right now, if you want."

"I would like that."

Drew stood, shuffling his feet. "I have to take off my clothes." Ciaran must have noticed Drew's nervousness, because he turned around. Drew stripped off his clothes as quickly as he could.

"Okay, I'm going to change now. I won't be able to talk afterward, but you can talk to me. I'll understand you."

Drew felt the usual pain and twisting as he changed, and the next instant, he was a wolf. He sniffed the air, unused to shifting indoors. The familiar smells of home were magnified in this form. He walked forward and nudged Ciaran's hand with his nose, taking in the intoxicating scent of sweat and the outdoors mixed with Ciaran's own unique essence. Ciaran turned and knelt next to him, eyes wide and awed.

"You are beautiful. May I touch you?"

Yes, please. Drew nodded his head. Ciaran laughed, the sound bright and happy. He reached out to touch Drew's head, all caution and hesitation at first. When Drew didn't move, he stroked the soft fur of Drew's head, and soon he was running his hands over Drew's ears, neck, and shoulders.

It felt so good to be touched. Drew leaned into Ciaran's caressing hands, whining encouragement.

"This is amazing, Drew. Thank you for showing yourself to me." Ciaran gave Drew a final stroke and stood. He turned away again, and Drew changed back. He quickly pulled on his boxers and pants.

Aroused by Ciaran's innocent touches, and annoyed with himself for chickening out, Drew sighed. "Well, that was totally off the subject. You were talking about playing at a coffee shop. I'm sorry I messed up your announcement. That's really great news. You're talented. I think you should do it."

"Thank you. And do not apologize for sharing with me. I am honored."

Drew's face heated. He might have felt a little better about Ciaran being "honored" had he not been using that sharing to hide another huge secret. As it was, he felt like a fraud. He needed to change the subject. "I should have told you a long time ago. Now tell me, when's your gig?"

Ciaran tilted his head again. "Gig?"

God, he was adorable. Drew grinned, charmed. "When are you playing?"

"Friday night. Will you come?" His expression was so hopeful Drew couldn't have denied him if he'd wanted to.

"I wouldn't miss it." He wouldn't miss anything Ciaran did. Even if it was Ciaran's first step toward leaving him.

Chapter Fifteen

Ciaran spent the next few days alternating between excitement and terror. So much had happened he had trouble processing everything. He had been invited to play a *gig*, as Drew called it, and he had learned Drew was a werewolf. In retrospect, Drew being a werewolf made sense. He had wondered why Drew never seemed concerned about him being a demon. Now he understood. As a werewolf, Drew would be familiar with hiding what he was from humans, and werewolves were often made out to be evil, just as demons were.

He could not let himself be too distracted by Drew's revelation. He had to focus on preparing for Friday night. He called Janie on Monday to tell her he would play. She sounded pleased on the phone, and told him to be at the coffee shop by eight o'clock.

He spent much of Monday practicing as many songs as he could. He planned to play covers of popular human songs, with one or two of his own songs if the show went well. He had become quite skilled at reproducing songs he heard after hearing them only once or twice, so he was not very concerned about the cover part of the show. He was more nervous about playing his own songs. What if the audience did not like them?

He kept his fears to himself, for the most part. As the week progressed, Drew seemed to grow increasingly unhappy. Ciaran did not understand why. All he knew was Drew spent more and more time outside running, or in his office working. In past weeks, Drew had smiled

and laughed often. Now when Drew smiled, the expression did not reach his eyes. His eyes appeared...sad somehow. No matter what Ciaran did to cheer him, he remained quiet and distant.

Worry about Drew added to the confusing and unfamiliar mix of feelings Ciaran experienced. In Faerie, at his grandfather's home, he had often been bored, lonely, or even resentful, but he had not felt many other emotions. Since he had been summoned to Earth, he had felt a wide array of emotions. He had felt fear, anger, hurt, and confusion. After Drew rescued him, he had felt hope, curiosity, excitement, joy, anticipation, worry, friendship...

Drew was the only friend he had ever had. He knew Drew cared for him. He could see that in the way Drew encouraged him to learn new things, and praised him when he succeeded.

What was not clear to Ciaran was how he felt toward Drew. He was grateful for Drew's friendship, and enjoyed his company. When they were not together during the day, he anticipated the evening. If he learned something new, or had a question, his first instinct was to go to Drew.

Lately, other, confusing emotions had come to the surface when he and Drew were together. At first, he had found himself wanting to reach across the table to touch Drew's hand during dinner. A few days later, Ciaran had imagined Drew putting his arms around him. Humans embraced all the time on television, although men did not seem to do so as often as women. What would a *hug* feel like?

His most recent—and distracting—thoughts were about kissing. He remembered the two men on the soap opera kissing. They had appeared to enjoy the contact. Subsequent television viewing showed him that while a kiss between two men was accepted by some, others found it abhorrent. He was not sure why humans would disapprove of other humans caring for each other, but clearly they did.

Sometimes, when he was not practicing or working around the house, his mind would wander to Drew's lips. Even with his limited experience of men's appearances, Ciaran knew Drew was handsome. Ciaran found his light, clear green eyes, blond-streaked brown hair, and wide, smiling mouth beautiful.

He wanted to press his lips to that mouth.

The desire grew, but he did not dare to act on the feeling. Fear held him back. Drew was his only friend. He treasured their friendship above all things. He did not know how Drew would react if he knew what Ciaran was thinking. If Drew reacted with anger, or cast him out, Ciaran would be devastated. The best course of action would be to continue as if nothing were different.

Hiding his emotions was frustrating. Drew's distant unhappiness made him feel even worse. All he wanted was for Drew to be happy again, and for his own feelings to go back to normal. Neither of those things appeared to be possible.

On Thursday morning, an idea for a song came to him. He took his guitar outside and found a place to be alone. Then he began to play. Everything in his heart seemed to pour out into the song. For most of the day, he sat outside and worked on the lyrics and melody, until he was certain the song was perfect.

As he made his way back inside to help make dinner, he wondered if he would have the courage to play it.

Chapter Sixteen

The night of Ciaran's gig finally arrived. Drew quit working early to cook dinner. Ciaran kept getting in his way, the demon's nervous energy driving Drew insane until Drew sent him to the living room to practice some more.

Once dinner was on the table, they both picked at their food. At first, Drew was preoccupied, his thoughts focused on his own depression. When he saw how Ciaran pushed his chicken and mashed potatoes around his plate, he knew he needed to stop moping and focus on reassuring his anxious roommate.

He smiled across the table. "You're going to do great. You know that, right?"

Ciaran shrugged, his gaze on the food he was destroying. "I want to do well. What if they do not like me?"

As if. "That's not going to happen. You're really talented, and they're going to love you."

Ciaran finally looked up. "Thank you for saying so. You are a good friend."

Friend. Yeah. His smile wavered, but he managed to keep the expression for appearance's sake.

After dinner, Drew helped Ciaran pick out a long-sleeved black shirt, worn jeans, and black boots to wear for his gig.

Dressed in the clothing Drew had helped him pick, Ciaran peered at his reflection in the full-length mirror in his room. "Do I look like a

musician?"

Drew laughed. "I'm not sure exactly what kind of musician you want to look like, but you look great." He reached out and arranged Ciaran's hair to cover the pointed tips of his ears, forcing himself not to linger any longer than necessary. "Now you're ready."

Ciaran's cheeks reddened. "Thank you."

Drew would have asked him if something was wrong, but there wasn't time. They had to leave if they wanted to be at the coffee shop on time. At seven forty, they both put on their jackets. Ciaran grabbed his guitar, slung the case onto his back, and they headed for town. It was starting to get very cool at night. A chilly breeze stirred the air. Above them, the stars sparkled with a brightness he had rarely seen, and the moon was nearly full. The night was so beautiful Drew regretted the short length of the drive. He savored the wind on his face and the calm of the road all the way into town.

Drew turned onto Main Street and found a parking spot across from the coffee shop, Stomping Grounds. Because Halloween was tomorrow, jack-o-lanterns, black cats, spiders, and other Halloween-themed items decorated the store's window. When Drew and Ciaran walked in the door, a thirty-ish brunette came to greet them. Ciaran introduced Janie, the owner, to Drew. Janie directed Ciaran to a stage in the corner of the shop.

Quite a few people sat at the tables, sipping coffee or spiced cider. Many of them were eating the pumpkin pie, pumpkin spice cake, and pumpkin cookies Janie had added to the menu in honor of Halloween.

While Ciaran took out his guitar and prepared for his show, Janie directed Drew to a table by the stage. She left for a couple of minutes and returned with two spiced ciders and some pumpkin cookies. She placed one of the drinks in front of Drew and sat down across from him.

"I remembered that you don't drink coffee."

He had only been to the coffee shop a couple of times. Janie must be popular with her customers if she could remember little details about people that well. He smiled. "You have a good memory. Thank you." He took a sip of the cider. It was hot and delicious, and he could taste

cinnamon and nutmeg.

Janie nodded, her gaze on the small stage. "Ciaran's really talented. I heard him playing in the park, and I knew he'd be just perfect to start my new Friday night music shows."

Drew watched Ciaran as well, admiring how good he looked on stage. "He's very good."

"He told me you taught him to play."

He had to laugh at that. His own pitiful skills were nothing compared to Ciaran's. "I taught him the basics. The student has definitely exceeded the teacher in this case."

Janie grinned in response. "Is that so? Well, I'll talk to you later." She stood. "I have to go introduce Ciaran."

Janie went up to the stage and turned on the microphone. "Hey everyone, welcome to Stomping Grounds' new Friday Music Night. Tonight's performer is Ciaran. He's new in town, so you don't know him yet, but after you hear him play, I guarantee you'll want to! Everyone, please welcome Ciaran."

Janie left the stage and rejoined Drew as the audience applauded politely. Ciaran leaned forward to thank her, already beginning to play his first song.

The audience was hooked.

Ciaran played covers of both older and newer songs, pleasing all ages. His skill with the guitar was obvious, and Drew thought he'd never sounded better. His voice held so much emotion, as if he'd lived everything he sang about. Every person Drew saw seemed to be entranced.

After a few songs, Ciaran asked if anyone had a request. A woman in the back called out the name of a song by Keith Urban. As Ciaran began to play the rather sad country song, so much emotion welled up, Drew thought he would burst.

He was in love with Ciaran.

He knew that, accepted it even, but also knew tonight was an ending of sorts. Ciaran's gig was really going well. Janie would probably want to hire him to play again, and other people would want to as well.

Drew could see the young women in the room—and even some of the older ones—admiring him.

After tonight, Ciaran could probably have his pick of girls to date. He would be shy at first, especially after his loveless upbringing, but someday soon, he'd meet someone special.

As Ciaran sang about finally crying over a lost love, Drew felt like crying himself. Ciaran wasn't lost to him, because Drew had never had him in the first place. In a way, that seemed worse. What was the saying? 'Tis better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all? Watching Ciaran, Drew decided whoever had thought of the saying was an idiot.

Please let this be over soon.

Ciaran played a few more requests, thankfully all more upbeat songs. Drew sat in agony, wanting more than anything to get away from Ciaran's sexy voice and all the adoring women staring at him as he played. Finally, what seemed an eternity later, Ciaran announced that he was going to play his last song for the night.

"For my last song, I want to play a song I wrote about friends." He looked straight at Drew. Their eyes met. He began to play a soft ballad Drew had never heard before.

Then he sang, and Drew forgot to breathe. The lyrics were about a man in love with a friend. A love never revealed. As the man listened to his friend's relationship problems, he silently wished for the courage to tell of his own growing love.

Every chorus ended with a reference to the two being just friends. Throughout the song, Ciaran's eyes kept returning to Drew's. Drew couldn't look away.

Foolish hope built as he listened to the lyrics, but it was just a song. Drew reminded himself how stupid he would be to read too much into it. Ciaran couldn't possibly be singing about him. He shook his head and tried to focus.

"Will I get heaven or hell when I say how I feel?"

"Tonight is the night this all ends."

"Whether I win or I lose, I cannot take any more."

"I am dying a little each night,

"As just friends..."

As Ciaran played the last chords of the song, there was dead silence. No one moved or even breathed, it seemed.

Then the applause began. The audience, which had clapped politely when he began playing, now applauded energetically. There were even a few whistles and shouts. As Drew had expected, Ciaran was a hit.

Janie went back up to the microphone to talk to the audience again, and several people approached Ciaran to congratulate him on his great show. His eyes met Drew's again, and Drew smiled at him. "Great show," he mouthed. Ciaran smiled back, but his attention was quickly taken by the young woman next to him.

Drew's chest tightened at the sight of Ciaran smiling and talking with the pretty redhead. Ciaran hadn't meant anything by the lyrics of his final song. It was just a song, and nothing more.

His skin itched with the same trapped, miserable feeling he got when he hadn't changed in too long. This time, the cause was different. He could admit to himself that he didn't want to watch all those women fawn over the man he wanted, even if he wouldn't admit it to anyone else. Even though he wanted to get up and run, he waited until Janie returned to the table. He couldn't leave without making sure Ciaran could get home okay.

Janie's face was all smiles when she finally came over. "Wasn't that great? The audience loved it. And that last song! I didn't know he wrote songs too."

There was no arguing with her assessment of the evening. "It was a wonderful show." He paused for a moment. "Can you do me a favor, Janie?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"Can you give Ciaran a ride later? I need to go now, but I don't want to drag him out of here. He seems to be having so much fun..." God, he was such a coward.

"No problem. I want to talk to him about playing for me again." Janie turned and headed back toward the stage.

“Thanks.” He stood and made his way through the crowd as quickly as he could. At last, he was outside. Taking deep breaths of the cool air helped a little. Getting on his bike and driving out of town helped even more. As soon as he reached the cabin, he went out to the woods and stripped down.

Running through the woods in wolf form, Drew chastised himself for his stupidity. He should never have let himself fall for Ciaran. Why hadn’t he followed his own advice and kept the demon at a distance?

He ran and ran, trying to tire himself out so he wouldn’t have to think anymore. Hours later, exhausted but no less heartbroken, he changed back, dressed, and returned to the house. His watch said 2:30. He came in quietly through the back door, hoping Ciaran was either not there or already asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

He had done it.

He had played his *gig*, and the audience liked him.

Ciaran sat on the stool Janie had placed on the stage for him, letting his gaze roam the cheering audience. Every face he saw was smiling. He smiled too, filled with excitement and pleasure over how well his first show had gone.

Janie came up to the stage. "You were fabulous!"

A wide grin spread across his face. "Thank you."

While Janie spoke to the audience, Ciaran sought out Drew. Their eyes met. Drew was smiling, and he mouthed something that might have been, "Great show."

More than anything, Ciaran wanted to jump up and run to Drew, to share his triumph, and to discover what Drew had thought of his final song. He had decided to play the tune at the last minute. He had been terrified, but now he was glad he had chosen to play it. He had managed to meet Drew's eyes several times during the song, and he thought perhaps Drew's green gaze might have held the same longing he felt. He hoped. Maybe Drew's expression had been nothing more than sympathy for the man in the song.

Before he could go to Drew, a young woman approached him. Her fiery red hair caught his attention, as did her low-cut sweater—because she stood close enough for her breasts to brush his arm. Uncomfortable, he offered her a nervous smile. "Hello."

When she spoke, her voice was high and breathy. "The last song you sang was gorgeous. And so sad. Did you have a girl back home you liked, before you came here?"

Her enthusiasm was gratifying, although he was not certain why she would wish to inquire if he had a girl back home. "No, there was no girl."

His answer seemed to please her. She moved even closer. "You poor man. You must be lonely."

He frowned. "I am not lonely. I live with my friend."

The young woman's expression changed. She looked at him as if he were a puzzle she wanted to figure out. "You have a roommate?"

"Yes. His name is Drew." He smiled again, proud to claim Drew as a friend and roommate, and happy Drew wished him to do so.

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, another woman caught Ciaran's attention. The second woman, who was older and had her arm linked with that of the man next to her, complimented his music. The couple was followed by a group of young women, a couple with four children, and several other people. They all seemed pleased to meet him. His heart warmed at the kind reception. For his entire life, he had lived in isolation, believing himself to be worthless. Now he realized not everyone would see him the way his grandfather had. He could have a life, a true life, with work and friends.

He would never have realized he could be happy if not for Drew. Drew, who had cared for him and wanted him to stay even when he appeared to be nothing more than a ragged, frightened monster. Drew, who trusted him enough to share his secret.

Ciaran had spent a great deal of time trying to understand human behavior and emotions over the past few weeks. Yesterday morning when he had written his song, he finally understood one of them. What he felt for Drew was more than friendship or gratitude. It was love.

Keeping the words in had been difficult, when he wanted to shout them in the streets. He hoped Drew had heard the message in his song. More than anything, he hoped Drew shared his feelings. He could not bear to lose their friendship now.

Tired, throat scratchy from singing and talking so long, Ciaran searched the room for Drew. He wanted to go home.

Although much of the crowd had left the coffee shop, scanning the room still took a few minutes. The table Drew had occupied earlier was empty. He told himself Drew had gone to the restroom, or to get a drink, but when his friend did not reappear, he had to admit the truth. Drew was gone. Desolate, he sat on the stool unmoving. Why would Drew have left him here? Had the song angered him? Was he tired of having Ciaran around?

Janie called a goodbye to the last few customers and approached the stage. "Great job tonight."

"Where is Drew?" His voice came out soft and brittle.

Janie paused in the middle of taking off her apron. "I don't know. He said he had to go. Didn't he tell you he asked me to take you home?"

Drew had not bothered to speak to him at all before leaving. His heart aching, he shook his head. "No. I suppose he did not want to interrupt."

Janie grinned and tossed her apron over the counter. "Yeah, all your adoring fans would have been upset if he had. Grab your stuff, hon, and I'll run you home."

If Janie noticed Ciaran barely spoke a word on the ride to the cabin, she said nothing. He sat in the passenger seat of her tiny car, fighting back tears. In the years he had spent locked away in his grandfather's home, he had never felt such a deep, aching loneliness.

Chapter Eighteen

"You left me without even telling me you were going."

Drew jerked in surprise as Ciaran's quiet voice broke the silence of the dark kitchen. He turned on the light and saw Ciaran sitting at the kitchen table, face expressionless. Drew wasn't sure what to say, so he said nothing.

"Did you not like my song? Or maybe you are tired of having me here. If that is the case, just tell me." When Drew still didn't reply, Ciaran stood. "Fine. I will gather my things and be gone by morning."

No! Drew's heart cried as Ciaran turned to leave the room. He wanted to beg Ciaran not to go, but he couldn't get the words out. The only thing that came out was, "The last song you sang..."

Ciaran stopped without turning, his shoulders rigid. "What of it?"

He had to ask. "Did you mean it?" *Was it about me?*

This time Ciaran turned, and his violet eyes met Drew's. Tears glittered against his dark lashes. "I meant every single word."

For a moment, Drew remained motionless, unable to believe what he'd heard. The look in Ciaran's eyes—like nothing was more important than this—convinced him. Suddenly he and Ciaran were standing in the center of the room, and his hand was reaching up to stroke Ciaran's cheek.

Ciaran leaned into the caress and closed his eyes, sighing. When Drew tipped Ciaran's face up, Ciaran allowed it without hesitation.

Drew leaned down to kiss him, and the rest of the world disappeared. Ciaran's lips were soft. For a long moment he didn't move,

just letting their lips touch. Then he traced Ciaran's lips with his tongue. Ciaran opened to him right away. At first, he seemed unsure as Drew's tongue stroked inside his mouth, but soon his tongue was caressing Drew's in return.

As their kiss grew increasingly passionate, Drew reached under Ciaran's shirt to caress the smooth skin of his back. Ciaran moaned into Drew's mouth and reciprocated. Drew couldn't believe how good it felt to be touched this way, after so long. The fact that Ciaran did the touching only increased his pleasure.

He broke away to trail a string of kisses along Ciaran's jaw and down his neck. Ciaran whimpered and arched his neck to give Drew better access. Before Drew could think about his actions, he pushed Ciaran's shirt up and slid the thin garment over his head. The T-shirt dropped from his fingers and fell to the floor with a soft thud. The whisper of sound brought Drew out of his lustful haze. Ciaran had never done this before. He had probably never even been kissed before.

Drew tried to step back. "Shit, I'm sorry. I'm getting carried away."

"Please, do not stop." Ciaran gazed up at him, all big eyes and sweet mouth, clinging to Drew and rubbing against him.

He sighed. "It's hard to do the right thing when you do that."

"This is right, Drew. I know it is."

Drew searched Ciaran's gaze, finding nothing but certainty. He gave up trying to resist. "Let's go somewhere more comfortable."

He took Ciaran's hand, and without speaking, he led the way to his room. Once there, Ciaran surprised him. The demon grabbed the hem of Drew's shirt and pulled it over his head. His eager hands roamed over Drew's chest and stomach, leaving chills in their wake. Drew fell backward onto the bed, pulling Ciaran with him.

Drew was almost breathless with desire. "I want to touch you. I've been wondering how far down your wings go."

"Would you like to find out?" Ciaran gave him a smile, shy yet seductive.

"Maybe I will." Drew advanced, mock-threatening. Ciaran laughed and tried to squirm away, but Drew had the advantage and easily pinned

him down. He unfastened Ciaran's jeans and slid them down over his long, slim legs. When he got them down most of the way, he realized Ciaran's boots were still on. He laughed.

"I ought to leave you stuck like this." Contrary to his threat, he removed the boots, socks, and jeans, leaving Ciaran clad only in boxer shorts. When he was finished, he turned Ciaran onto his stomach and stared at his back. He traced his hands over the delicate markings that were Ciaran's hidden wings.

You're so beautiful.

When Ciaran turned his head and looked at him, eyes wide, Drew realized he'd said the words aloud.

He repeated the words again, louder. "You are beautiful. I can't believe these are real. Or that you can hide them like this." Drew leaned down to kiss the marks, and Ciaran shivered.

"Drew."

When Drew ran his tongue over a shoulder blade, Ciaran groaned.

Ciaran's wings were sensitive. Drew wondered if they were even more sensitive when he wasn't hiding them. He filed that thought away to test later.

Ciaran wriggled out of Drew's grip and turned over. "You must be getting warm. You are wearing so many clothes."

Drew laughed again at the cheesy line. Ignoring his laughter, Ciaran worked on the button of Drew's jeans. Drew toed off his shoes and socks and let Ciaran remove his jeans, then pulled Ciaran in for another kiss.

The kiss quickly turned passionate, and Ciaran again rubbed against Drew. When Ciaran's cock nudged against his own, Drew thought he might embarrass himself by coming in his boxers like a teenager.

"I want you so bad," he muttered against Ciaran's lips.

Ciaran pulled back and stared at him. "Then take me."

His desire ratcheted up another few notches at the quiet words. "Are you sure?"

"I have never been more certain of anything."

Drew's heart swelled. This wouldn't be just a quick fuck to take

care of physical needs. This would be making love, and he realized that was just what he needed.

I love you. He didn't say the words aloud, but he hoped Ciaran could see some of what he felt in his face. He reached down and slipped Ciaran's boxers off, then did the same with his own.

Ciaran looked uncertain. "What should I do?"

"Whatever you want. Touch me, touch yourself."

"I want to make you feel good."

Drew smiled. "You already have, just by being here."

After that, they didn't talk much. Drew reached out, took Ciaran's cock in his hand, and stroked it slowly. Ciaran moaned and thrust into his hand, unable to keep still.

Drew only stroked a few more times before Ciaran pulled away and began to kiss his way down Drew's body. He started at Drew's jaw, trailed kisses down his neck, his chest, and his stomach. Finally, he kissed his way down to Drew's thighs, avoiding his aching cock.

Drew whimpered and tried to shift his cock closer to Ciaran's mouth, but Ciaran only moved to the other thigh and teased it with kisses.

Just when Drew thought he would go crazy, Ciaran looked up into Drew's eyes and took Drew's cock into his mouth. For about two seconds before his brain shorted out, he wondered what kind of TV Ciaran had been watching.

It was ecstasy. Ciaran's mouth was warm, wet, and silky-soft, and he looked up into Drew's eyes just like in Drew's fantasies. The reality was even better. He wanted to close his eyes, but he kept them open and focused on Ciaran's.

Ciaran tightened his mouth around Drew's cock and began to suck in earnest. Drew nearly came, watching that angel's mouth bobbing up and down on his cock.

When he knew he couldn't take much more, Drew lifted Ciaran's mouth off him. "I don't know where you learned that, but Christ, it was good."

He rolled Ciaran over onto his back and reached into the drawer of his bedside table for the lube. He poured out a generous amount and,

without any teasing or buildup, slid a slick finger into Ciaran's hole.

Ciaran's eyes widened in surprise. At first, he didn't seem sure he liked the sensation, but when Drew crooked his finger and rubbed it over a certain spot, Ciaran panted and squirmed.

"Ready for another?"

Ciaran nodded, so Drew carefully added another finger, twisting them.

Soon, Ciaran was whimpering and thrusting his hips up to meet Drew's fingers. "Drew, please."

Drew grabbed the lube again, slicked his cock, and positioned himself at Ciaran's entrance. He watched Ciaran's face as he pushed into his lover's tight hole. He moved a short way in then drew back. Drew tried to keep his thrusts shallow to let Ciaran get used to being stretched, but Ciaran bucked toward him impatiently, and he slid all the way inside.

He stilled. "Are you all right?"

"I am fine. Do not stop," Ciaran ordered.

Drew laughed and thrust, slowly at first and then faster. Ciaran pushed up, meeting him stroke for stroke. Drew had never felt anything like the smooth, hot tightness of Ciaran's ass. He could feel his orgasm building, so he reached down and gripped Ciaran's cock. He pumped it in time with his thrusts. Ciaran writhed and cried out in a language Drew didn't understand.

Then Ciaran was coming, semen coating Drew's hand. "Drew!" He closed his eyes and threw his head back. His body clamped down onto Drew's cock like a vise.

Watching Ciaran come put Drew over the edge. In seconds, he was coming too, a wordless cry escaping. He collapsed onto Ciaran's chest, exhausted and happy.

For several minutes, they laid there, panting.

Finally, Drew rolled over to his back. "I'm crushing you."

Ciaran smiled. "I did not mind."

Drew got that over-full feeling in his chest again. He didn't know what to say, so he got up and went to the bathroom. He returned with a warm, wet cloth and cleaned the smeared semen and lube from Ciaran's

stomach and thighs. Ciaran closed his eyes and let him work. When he finished, Drew tossed the cloth in the hamper.

A yawn surprised him, reminding him how tired he was. "It's late. We should sleep."

Ciaran sat up, his eyes downcast. "You are right. I should return to my room."

Ciaran clearly thought he was being dismissed. Drew sat beside Ciaran and rubbed his tense back. "Sleep here, with me."

"I would like that very much." Ciaran met Drew's eyes again, his face lighting as he smiled.

Drew smiled back. It was impossible not to. Ciaran shifted to his side, so Drew moved behind him, spoon-fashion, and put an arm around him. "Comfortable?"

Ciaran snuggled against him. "Very." Within a few minutes, he was asleep.

Drew remained awake for a while, enjoying the feel of Ciaran in his arms and listening to him breathe. He fell asleep happy.

* * * * *

The next morning, Drew awoke to Ciaran's sleeping face. Ciaran had moved during the night and now lay facing Drew with his hand beneath his cheek. Drew remembered their first night together at the motel, when he had awakened and wanted to kiss Ciaran. Now, at last, he could. He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to Ciaran's lips.

Ciaran awoke and smiled at him.

Drew had never seen such a beautiful sight. "Good morning."

"Good morning to you." Ciaran leaned forward for another kiss. When it ended, he traced Drew's jaw with a fingertip. "Happy Halloween."

There had been so much going on, Drew had almost forgotten about the holiday. "Happy Halloween." Staring into his lover's eyes, he felt so much love for Ciaran that he just couldn't hold it in anymore. "I love you."

Ciaran's eyes widened, and his lower lip trembled slightly. "You do?"

"I really do." Worry overtook the happiness he felt at saying the words. Ciaran looked like he was going to cry. Drew wondered if he should have kept his big fat mouth shut.

Ciaran's voice dropped to a whisper. "No one has ever loved me before. I have never felt worthy of love. And I have never loved anyone before, either. But I love you. I can hardly believe you love me too."

Ciaran loved him. Drew grinned, happier than he could ever remember being. "Of course, I love you. Who could be a better match than Bat-boy and the Wolfman?"

The End

Author Bio

By day, Cassandra is a (relatively) mild-mannered middle school teacher. At night, she lets the characters in her head out to play as she writes erotic romance. Unfortunately for her husband, neither of Cassandra's personas enjoys doing housework.

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