



JULIE LYNN HAYES

LEONARDO DiCAPRIO  
IS A VAMPIRE

# Leonardo di Caprio is a Vampire

Julie Lynn Hayes

## ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the South African Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated and is punishable by imprisonment and a fine."

Cover Artist: Reese Dante

Editor: Dawn Sievers

Leonardo DiCaprio is a Vampire © 2011 Julie Lynn Hayes

ISBN # 9781920484729

**Attention Readers:** This book uses US English. Thank you.

All rights reserved.

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED:** This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission. All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental. The Licensed Art Material is being used for illustrative purposes only; any person depicted in the Licensed Art Material, is a model.

## PUBLISHER

<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

## **Note from the Publisher**

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your purchase of this title. The authors and staff of Silver Publishing hope you enjoy this read and that we will have a long and happy association together.

Please remember that the only money authors make from writing comes from the sales of their books. If you like their work, spread the word and tell others about the books, but please refrain from sharing this book in any form. Authors depend on sales and sales only to support their families.

If you see "free shares" offered or cut-rate sales on pirate sites of this title, you can report the offending entry to [copyright@silverpublishing.info](mailto:copyright@silverpublishing.info)

Thank you for not pirating our titles.

Lodewyk Deysel  
Publisher  
Silver Publishing  
<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this story to Leonardo di Caprio, from whom I drew its inspiration

To Mags and Cate for their helpful critiques

To my fellow staffers at BishieCon:

Katrina, Mikhail, Sarah, Ramona, Larry, Erin, Kelly, Brittany, Jack, Megan, Harley, Alexx,  
Wendy, Jon, Eric, Chance, Sam,

## **Trademarks Acknowledgement**

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

*Band-Aid*: Johnson & Johnson Consumer Companies, Inc.

## Chapter One

"Did you know that Leonardo di Caprio is a vampire?"

Fisher Roberts stopped in mid-chew of a mouthful of high fiber cereal to cast a wary, disbelieving glance at his best friend and roommate Hunter Long on the other side of the table. Wary, because he wondered what in the world Hunter was going on about so early in the morning. Disbelieving, because he only had so much time for breakfast before he had to get going to work, and he had a bad feeling that Hunter was trying to eat into that time. Why he wanted to do that was beyond Fisher. Of course, a lot of things about his roommate were beyond Fisher, despite the fact that they'd been friends since they were—well, too young to actually remember how long they'd known each other. But for as long as Fisher could remember, he and Hunter had been best buddies. And he'd learned over the years that, with Hunter, longevity did not equate to knowledgeability, far from it.

Now, Fisher could react in one of two ways. He could ignore his roommate and keep eating. Pretend he'd heard nothing. But from past experience, that would only cause Hunter's performance to escalate. That would entail taking more time to decipher what he was saying, and in the process make Fisher even later to work. Or he could simply bow down to the inevitable and give in by asking him the question he was doubtless waiting to hear. Even if it brought about that smug smirk he was so fond of wearing.

Fisher finished chewing, swallowed, and managed not to roll his eyes as he reached for his juice to kill off what was left in the glass. Waste not, want not. "What do you mean?"

Hunter Long might be six foot two and possessed of a body that many a male model would kill for—at least that's what Fisher heard the girls who flocked around him say—with the palest of blue eyes that twinkled all the time, and a smile that could and did light up a room. But honestly, he had the capacity to be an overgrown child at times, and this was one of those times. Fisher chalked it up to it being *that* time of year.

"Well," Hunter replied, "look at him, going on forty, and he looks just like he did what, fifteen years ago? It only stands to reason he must be a vampire. They never age, you know. I mean take a look at us. We're almost his age, but over the years we'll grow up to be little old men and he'll still be playing sweet baby-faced guys even when he's collecting Social Security; know what I mean?"

"There are no such things as vampires," Fisher made his typical logical reply, "and just because it's Halloween tomorrow night, and you've got the house all decorated for it, doesn't mean you have to bring it to the table. Know what I mean?" He arched a no-nonsense brow at the

other man. This was not Fisher's favorite time of year. Neither was Christmas, come to think of it. Or any other holiday. Ironical that he should write articles for a living that meant he was forced to expound on such seasonal topics for Midwest Home and Fantasy, a regional online magazine with a growing fan-base, when he had no real interest in them himself, being a practical, no-nonsense kind of a guy.

"I'm a vampire." Hunter smiled, leaning across the table toward Fisher. "Want to see my fangs?"

"No thanks," Fisher promptly replied, shaking his head. "Let me guess. You bought a costume and you're going trick-or-treating tomorrow night. You know something? Vampires are so overdone. You should try something else, something even slightly more original. Honestly, if you've seen one bloodsucker, you've seen them all. They're all just stupid and boring. And non-existent. Or, and here's an original idea, grow up and stop dressing up. That's what children do and we aren't children any more. We're thirty-three, Hunter. Playtime's over."

"Never." Hunter chuckled, "I refuse to grow up and I refuse to let you grow up. Besides, it's for tonight, not tomorrow night. For the Halloween party you promised we'd go to. Remember? The one you said you'd get a costume for? You didn't forget, did you?"

Fisher groaned. He had completely forgotten. Or, to be more accurate, he had pushed the promise out of his mind right after he had made it. It had actually been made under duress, when Fisher had been tired and not thinking properly, after one of their all-night bullshit sessions. If he'd been in his right mind, he'd have never made such a stupid agreement, considering how much he hated the holiday. Hunter had taken definite advantage of him. As he generally did.

"I... I can't go," he mumbled, risking a quick glance at his wrist watch. Damn, he had to go. To work, that is. He swallowed most of what was left of the milk in his bowl, careful not to spill any on his jacket, and set it down on the floor for their cat, Lady Madeline, to drink. Her full name was Lady Madeline Usher, named after the Edgar Allan Poe character. His roommate's idea, of course. She was a stray Hunter had brought home one night, said he'd found her sleeping on the street, and how could he refuse her shelter? She'd been with them ever since, some six or seven months now. She was a fluffy white cat with mismatched eyes—one blue, one green—and a gentle disposition. She rubbed gratefully against Fisher's ankle before delicately lapping from the bowl.

"Besides," Fisher continued, even though Hunter hadn't said even one word in protest, "Why do you need me around? I'll just cramp your style. Your ladies complain that you don't pay them enough attention when I'm around. They'll be glad if I don't show up, so they can claim your

undivided attention. And besides, I don't have a costume." That part was true. He hadn't bothered to get one, seeing as he had completely forgotten about it. Nothing Freudian about that at all.

Fisher got up from the table, having dismissed the matter already, at least in his own mind. He carried his dishes to the sink once the Lady was finished with her milk; he rinsed them out and set them into the dishwasher for later. He was already thinking ahead to what lay in wait for him at the office. He wasn't being dismissive of Hunter's feelings; he just didn't have time to go into this at the moment. Like everything else in his life, he tucked it away for later. However, by the time that he reached the front door, laptop in hand, prepared to step outside, Hunter was already there, his long lanky body filling the space between Fisher and the outside world by leaning against the door.

"I have one."

"You're making me late," Fisher moaned, before asking, with a sigh, "You have what?"

"A costume. I also took the liberty of getting one for you. I knew you'd forget."

"Thanks," Fisher mumbled, half under his breath, squirming uncomfortably. "Now I'll just have pissed off groupies to contend with."

Hunter laughed, brushing one hand lightly over Fisher's arm, reassuringly. Fisher hated when he did that, not because he abhorred his friend's touch, far from it. He liked it too much for his own good. And because with just one touch, Hunter could get him to do damn near anything. He had once jokingly told him that he should become a masseuse, but Hunter's reply was that he didn't want to touch anyone else. Fisher knew better than to take that the way it sounded. It was just Hunter being Hunter.

"You know they come to see you, stud, not me." Hunter grinned. "They only use me to get to you."

"Yeah, right." Fisher was out of time, and anxious to get away from that intimidating touch, the one that talked him into things he should have more common sense than to go along with. It was time to be responsible in the real world. Part of that responsibility meant getting to work on time.

"What time?" he heard himself weakening. "Maybe just for a few minutes, okay? But no pressure. When I want to go, I'm going, all right?"

"Party starts about eight," Hunter replied, "and the nice thing is, we can wear our costumes again tomorrow night, when the trick-or-treaters come."

Yeah, right. Fisher didn't see that happening. Especially since he invariably managed to wriggle out of the Halloween night extravaganza that Hunter pulled off every year, the production he made out of the simple act of distributing candy to the children that came to the door



specifically to beg for it. It occurred to him he hadn't even asked what costume he'd committed to wearing. He sincerely hoped it wasn't something outlandish—like Mae West or Jabba the Hutt. Hunter had a weird sense of humor. One year he tried to talk Fisher into playing Ricky Ricardo to his Lucy, an idea that had been soundly vetoed. But he had no time to worry about the costume right now.

"Fine, whatever, I gotta go, move."

Hunter leaned over and ruffled Fisher's hair lightly, before vacating his position. "See you tonight," he said with a smile, as Fisher ducked out the door and ran to his car. He couldn't help but think that Hunter'd gotten his way—again. What else was new?

## Chapter Two

"Why do you put up with that stuff from him?"

Fisher sat at lunch with his co-worker and good friend, Holly Gale. She handled the local sports beat for MWH&F, and did a damn fine job of it. She was a natural brunette who liked to play with henna, and as a result her hair had a perpetual reddish tinge. She wore it shoulder-length and layered, and it stopped short of looking severe on her because of her naturally warm brown eyes. She was very fond of Fisher, and not shy about telling him how she felt about anything or anyone. Including Hunter Long, whom she felt was taking advantage of Fisher's innocent and generous nature. She thought Hunter was too good looking for his own good, and very conceited—although the latter was her own opinion, which Fisher did not share. He agreed that Hunter was damn good looking, though. Beautiful being the word that often sprang to mind with regard to his roommate, although he tended to quell the idea as soon as he thought it, locking it away in the recesses of his heart.

Fisher listlessly picked at his rice. Normally he was very fond of Chinese food, and tucked into it with a will, but today he seemed to have no real appetite, a fact that did not fail to escape the radar that Holly possessed where he was concerned.

"Hmmm? What do you mean?" He feigned innocence, pushing around the grains of rice until Holly felt compelled to take his spork away from him in exasperation.

"How old are you, twelve? And you know exactly what I mean. He tells you that you gotta go to this Halloween party and even though you know you hate it, you're gonna show up?"

"I promised." Fisher flailed in his own defense. He automatically played devil's advocate, although he agreed with her.

"Oh yeah?" She gave him one of her double squints, a particularly forceful look that meant that he was the sole object of her concentration at the moment and could not wriggle out of her grasp no matter what he did. "What if I said to you—'Fisher, I'm having a Halloween party, will you come'?"

He squirmed uncomfortably and glanced down at his takeout container. "You know I don't like that kind of thing," he protested.

"I do know it. And so does he. But when Hunter Long asks you to go, you not only jump for him, you ask how high."

Fisher's face flamed at her words, even as he attempted to deny them. Although his denials fell into the category of pretty damn lame. "I promised him. I can't get out of it, it's not like I want to go, or anything, as you very well know..."

"What I do know is that you like him more than you're willing to admit, and you don't have the balls to tell him." Her words might have been a little harsh, but her tone was sympathetic.

"Of course I like him, he's my best friend." He reached for the plastic utensil she still held within her grasp, reclaimed it and began to eat. Better to stuff his mouth with food, than to allow any traitorous words to escape and be heard. His thoughts were dangerously close to the surface. He felt as if they were about to suffocate him, so he held them in check and chewed.

"Stop." He felt her hand upon his wrist, and glanced up to find her full gaze directed at him. He swallowed quickly before he choked on something. Like his words. "I know you, Fisher. Better than you think. I went out with you for six months, remember?"

"Of course I remember, I'm not senile. At least not yet," he grumbled.

"I know he's your best friend, and I know how you've been friends with him since you were kids. And I know how he drives you crazy with the things he does, and the way he acts sometimes." Holly gave his hand a reassuring pat, even as he gave up any pretense at eating.

"If this is because you don't think I date enough," he began, but she cut him off before the words had barely crossed his lips.

"Enough? You don't date at all! When is the last time that you took a woman anywhere? And I don't count; we stopped dating a long time ago."

"I dunno," he stammered, embarrassed, "I don't keep track of that kind of thing."

"Well, I do, and it's been two years since the last one, unless you've neglected to mention one, which I doubt, since you tell me everything. Everything that is, except for your feelings about Hunter." She flashed him a knowing look as he tried to think back, wondering if maybe she was right. The last girl he remembered seeing was Evelyn something. And he hadn't seen her for... for at least two years, come to think of it. If not more.



"You know there hasn't been anyone," he admitted, "but that doesn't mean anything. Maybe I'm just picky about the women I see?"

"Or maybe you really don't want to see anyone who isn't Hunter?" Holly countered. "You can't lie to me, remember, I was one of them? You were the perfect gentleman with me, Fisher. You never made any advances, never tried to take advantage of me."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"No, but you also never did more than kiss me. Ever. I was the one that kissed you, come to think of it. Tell me something, Fisher, though I suspect I know the answer already. Have you ever slept with a woman? With anyone?"

If Fisher thought he was red before, that was nothing compared to how he felt now, his face growing so heated, he felt like he was having a hot flash.

"You don't have to answer," Holly said compassionately, "I can see it in your face, and in your eyes. You don't really like women, do you? I mean, not like that. Not sexually."

He spluttered in protest, a few sad sounding syllables that served no useful purpose. He couldn't answer her. There was nothing he was willing to admit to. And certainly not at this time or place. He was grateful that they had taken a late lunch; there was no one around to overhear this far too revealing conversation.

She turned his hand over, and drew random designs in the palm with one finger while she talked, perhaps to distract him so that he wouldn't feel so embarrassed. "You would like to kiss Hunter, wouldn't you? Don't deny it. I've seen the way you look at him when you think no one else is looking. Yes, I know he's your best friend, and yes, I know he's a guy. Duh. But I think you might be in love with him."

Fisher didn't bother to respond, retaliating with, "Hunter dates women. Women love him. Haven't you seen them hanging on him, everywhere he goes?"

"Uh huh, I've seen it. Sure, he's a damn good looking guy. But so are you, Fisher. So don't sell yourself short. And haven't you ever noticed that none of those women last very long? And he's never gotten serious with any of them? Think about this then. How many of them has he brought home?"

"How should I know?" Fisher frowned, rubbing his thumb across his fingers agitatedly. He was irritated. Not at her, but at her questions that delved into areas best left alone. Questions that demanded answers he wasn't ready to give.

"Have you ever seen him bring one woman to the house? Surely you would've seen at least one, like the next morning, don't you think? Have you ever found a stray item that didn't belong there, or any evidence of a woman having being there? Lipstick on a glass, a pair of girly

underwear in the laundry? In all the years you've lived together, has there been anyone who showed up unexpectedly at the breakfast table one morning? Or anyone come to the door, looking for Hunter?"

Fisher gave the matter serious consideration, but nothing came to mind. He really didn't have to think too hard. He knew for a fact that Hunter never brought women home. He'd have remembered that. He'd never done it himself, either. For his own reasons. And yes, whether he was willing to admit to it or not, he was a virgin. An embarrassing admission at his age.

"Who does he spend his real time with, Fisher? Who does he want to go to the Halloween party with? Think about it, I think you'll figure it out. He likes you, you like him, is that such a hard equation to balance?"

It was, and one that Fisher wasn't prepared to deal with at the moment. It was leading him into areas best avoided. Still he managed to open his mouth and insert his foot, his mind leaping to something that had been troubling him recently. "Holly, he's been acting funny lately," he blurted out. Skirting her issue, he chose to open another, in the process managing to release some of the tensions he had been operating under for the past several months. "It has to be a new girl..." Although it pained him to admit it.

"What do you mean, acting funny?" Holly frowned. "And what makes you think it's a girl?"

"I dunno. He comes and goes at odd hours sometimes. I woke up once in the middle of the night, and he wasn't home, at like three or four in the morning. He looks pale, like he's coming down with something. But if I ask him if he's sick, he denies it. And his appetite is definitely off. He never wants to eat any more, at least not at home. I think some girl is feeding him." Well, that was a definite weight off his chest, even though it also brought his latent anxieties to the fore. He realized he had not denied anything Holly had said regarding his feelings for Hunter. How could he? They were all true. And he wasn't a liar.

It took a few moments for him to realize that Holly wasn't saying anything; that silence had fallen between them. He glanced up to find her just looking at him, a self-satisfied smirk on her lips, and sympathetic eyes. What a strange combination.

"What?" he asked. But he knew. He really knew.

"You have it for him bad, Fisher. You *have* to say something to him. Soon. For both your sakes."

His stomach churned, and his head hurt. He had the feeling he was going to be ill if he stayed there any longer. "I... I gotta head back to work," he said, rising, beads of sweat breaking out on his brow. "I'll call you later. I promise." He gathered his things, tossing them into a trash receptacle on his way out of the staff lunchroom. But not to his desk. Not yet. He made a quick

detour to the men's room, and promptly threw up what little he'd actually eaten. Afterward, he rinsed out his mouth and chewed on a mint, then splashed water on his face, before taking a good hard look at himself in the mirror.

### Chapter Three

Nothing he hadn't seen a million times before. Just him, Fisher. Nothing special. An average looking guy, not overly tall. Five foot ten if he stretched a bit. Average build, no contender for Mr Universe certainly, but who actually needed so much muscle? Hair a light golden brown with blond highlights. It stuck up at strange angles if he didn't keep it under control with a bit of hairspray. Most of the time, though, it wasn't worth the trouble; he didn't care for the way it made his hair feel or smell. Eyes a strange blue-green hue. According to something he'd looked up once, it was called viridian. Fancy name for blue-green, but there you go. A nose a shade too big for his liking, and lips that were just lips.

Then he forced himself to think of Hunter, although it wasn't all that hard to do. Silky hair a rich brown so dark, it almost appeared to be black. It didn't obey any particular code of neatness, but on him, messy looked good. His pale blue eyes framed by the silkiest of lashes were always filled with good humor. And pretty pink lips, to die for, or to kiss. He had never admitted before, even to himself, that he wanted to kiss Hunter. But he did. Hunter was always smiling. Always happy. In other words, he was the perfect man. So why didn't Fisher want to admit to Holly that he did indeed carry a torch for Hunter Long and probably had for a very long time, and would like nothing more than to know what those perfect lips tasted like?

'Cause he was having a hard time admitting it to himself.

He didn't want to be different. He wanted to blend in, not to stand out. To do the things he was supposed to do. To be a good boy. Er, man. To make his mother proud of him. Didn't all sons want that? But it was getting harder and harder to lie to himself, even though he never lied to others. Self-delusion could be a very powerful thing. He supposed the catalyst to this new state of mind was Hunter's increasingly erratic behaviour. He knew what he was afraid of. Time to be honest with himself.

He was afraid that Hunter had found THE one. The girl of girls. Or woman of women. The holy grail of all romantic searches. The one and only, I-want-to-spend-the-rest-of-my-life-with female. That one. Which would explain so much. But would, when the time came for Hunter to

make his departure into the land of happily ever after, be very difficult to take. The thought went straight to his heart and caused it nothing but pain.

He realized there was also nothing he could do about it. What would be would be, and he had no power to affect the outcome one way or another. Despite Holly's amateur detective work, which claimed to validate her assertion that he should go after what he wanted, that was just nonsense. This was real life—that was fantasy, and that was not how real life worked.

Drying his hands with two paper towels, he tossed them away, while waiting for a few minutes before he returned to his desk. Slowly but surely his skin went from pink to pale, and his breathing began to return to some semblance of normality. He had articles to write, things to look up online, and no desire to explain anything to anyone. The Halloween issue of MWH&F was available, naturally. He had already turned in his Thanksgiving thoughts, time to begin on Christmas. Oh joy.

He was pulling out his chair when he saw it. What was this? A pink inter-office memo lay upon his desk, suspicious by its very conspicuousness. It hadn't been there before he left for lunch. He picked it up apprehensively. It was from the editor. THE editor. Requesting him to meet with him the following morning at 9am. Great. Happy Halloween, here's your hat, what's your hurry.

Fisher sat there numbly, trying to think, but it wasn't easy. At least not to think of the work-related things he should be thinking of. Other topics simply insisted on intruding. Just when he began to get the glimmerings of an idea he wanted to research, his cell phone went off in his pocket, which meant it had to be personal, not business. He kept it on vibrate when he was in the office. He expected it to be Hunter, reminding him of the party tonight. He was prepared to be annoyed, even though the thumping of his heart was not exactly a sign of anger, more like anticipation. But he was wrong, it was his mother. He held on to his annoyance, just in case. Beatrice Roberts was a very straightforward no-nonsense kind of woman, much like her son. She had raised him single-handedly since his father had left them when Fisher was ten, never to be seen or heard from again. Beatrice had encouraged him to do well academically, to rise to his potential. She had been there for every major event in his life. She encouraged him to get into journalism school, proudly watched him graduate. She had disapproved when he had chosen to buy a house with Hunter, and had been very vocal about it—she was no wallflower, she told him what she thought in no uncertain terms. It wasn't that she hadn't known Hunter for as long as Fisher had, she was good friends with Hunter's mother, Lisa. And it wasn't that she disliked him for any reason, or that she felt Hunter outshone her son in any way—although she conceded that he was good looking, she made it sound like he was very stuck on himself, and that his looks

were almost feminine, which Fisher vehemently denied. But she felt that having a roommate, even one he knew well, was no substitute for marriage, children, and making her a grandmother, which was the logical orderly progression of the way life worked. Even if it hadn't worked out exactly that way for her. But, at least she'd tried it, which was more than Fisher had, which was also why she had this annoying habit of bringing up girls she met whom he just might like to date. His own personal eHarmony.com. As if. Even if he were so inclined, which he wasn't, his mother was the last person he would ever think of calling on when seeking a love life. He hoped this wasn't going to be one of *those* calls.

They exchanged the usual pleasantries, before his mother got down to the real reason for the call. He knew it wasn't simply concern for his health—not that she wasn't concerned, of course she was—but she invariably combined everything on her agenda into one phone call.

"Are you busy tonight? I thought maybe you could come over and I'd make us some dinner," she began, and he knew, just knew, from the way she said it that there was something more than dinner involved, even if he were free—which of course he wasn't.

"Yes, I am busy, I'm sorry," he apologized, "maybe another time. Or maybe you can come over and I can cook for you." Even as he said the words, Fisher knew that was unlikely. He could count the number of times she had come to dinner at their place on the fingers of both hands. She preferred to be in control of every situation, which she couldn't be with Hunter around. At least not in her eyes, it seemed. Maybe that's what she disliked about Hunter. He didn't give in to her, didn't always agree with her, and she hated that Fisher always did. Hunter wasn't afraid of making waves when he thought it was necessary. Fisher was always afraid, so he tried to never cause trouble.

"Are you going somewhere with *him*?"

How could she manage to make that one word sound so nasty, so full of scorn and derision? He knew without asking whom she meant, naturally. It was a good thing that she kept this side of herself hidden from his friend, so that only Fisher had to endure it. He just knew this conversation was not going to end well.

"Yes, I promised I'd go with him to a Halloween party." He regretted those words the moment he said them. He should have left it at yes.

"But you don't even like Halloween," his mother pointed out, "and you're much too old for it. Both of you."

"I wasn't aware there was an age limit on parties, Mother." He tried to keep his tone light, but it was hard not to show that she had the ability to get to him. "It's not like I'm going trick-or-treating, is it? It's a party."

"And what about tomorrow night? Are you telling me he won't be pulling some crazy outrageous stunt for Halloween, to entertain the children? I think it's about time you both settle down, and find yourselves wives, while you're still young, set up households—separate households—of your own."

Fisher's headache worsened. He had an overwhelming desire to go home, to get away, away from his mother, away from everyone. His stomach was queasy. It was futile to stay here now; he was worthless as far as writing went, having completely lost his ability to focus. On top of everything else, now he was concerned about being fired. For what? He had no idea, but logic wasn't exactly his friend at the moment. If anyone objected, he would simply take it as personal time; the magazine was pretty lenient about stuff like that.

"He probably will, yeah, but he isn't hurting anyone, and it doesn't matter." He was trying to ignore the part about the wives and the separate houses, hoping she'd take the hint, but Beatrice didn't.

"I met a very lovely girl today; I think you'd like her. She's your age. She teaches at the elementary school. She loves to cook and sew, and she thinks you're cute."

"Mother!" His temple was positively throbbing; he could feel the pulsations there. "How could she possibly think that unless you're showing people my picture?"

"It's good advertising," came her unabashed response. That was the last straw.

"Thank you, if I ever decide that I need to sell myself, you'll be the first one that I call. I really have to go, Mom. I'm getting a major headache. Have a good evening. Bye." And he clicked off before she had a chance to say another word. When his phone vibrated moments later, he almost didn't look at it, suspecting it was his mother calling back, but it was Hunter. He almost didn't answer. Almost.

Considering all the thoughts that were swirling through his brain, most of them about the man on the other end of the line, he managed to sound pretty normal. Kudos to himself for that.

"Hey," he greeted his friend. "What's up?"

"I'm close to your workplace, and I was wondering if maybe you could get off a little early, and we could... uh... talk or something?"

"Talk?" Fisher asked, almost nervously.

"Yeah, talk. Before the party."

Fisher's first inclination was to say no and stay where he was. Hide there for the rest of the day, and maybe the night too. Fisher sighed; that was not only impractical, but unreasonable as well. It made no sense, as he'd been in the process of leaving anyway. So why not talk to Hunter? Maybe he had something to tell him, something important. Maybe the truth about why he'd been



acting so crazy these last few months. For a moment Fisher envisioned Hunter confessing to being terminally ill, but he pushed that crazy thought to the side. That was just asking for trouble.

Then the real reason that he didn't want to talk to Hunter at this moment hit him like a ton of bricks. This is it. He's going to tell me about *her*. That female sword of Damocles he'd felt hanging over his head for the past few months was finally going to be brought out of the shadows and into the open. He wouldn't have to live in fear and trepidation any more. That had to be a good thing, surely.

Or it could be the end of life as he knew it.

*'I can do this—I can do this—I can do this.'* He chanted to himself. It wasn't until he heard Hunter repeat his name several times that he realized he'd not responded to the question. "Um, sure. I was just about to go, anyway. Where are you?"

"The park across the street. Our usual spot. See you in a few." Click. Only dead air remained.

Fisher gathered all his things, packed his laptop into its carrying case, and slipped out of his cubicle without drawing attention. As luck would have it though, he ran into Holly, who was stepping out of the elevator just as he was about to enter it. He tried to smile and move past her without saying anything, but he knew better. She grabbed his arm, causing him to miss his car. Sighing, he pressed the button for another.

"Where you going?" she asked, looking pointedly at her watch.

"Out," he replied, knowing that response would not satisfy her.

A knowing grin spread across his friend's face. "You're going to see *him*, aren't you?" Why does everyone have to put such a strong emphasis on that word, he thought irritably. Why all the pretense? Why didn't they just say Hunter's name?

"Yes, I'm meeting Hunter. No big deal." He tried to move past her as the elevator doors dinged open, but she stepped swiftly to block him.

"Not yet, mister, hold your horses. I won't keep you from your appointed rounds if you promise me something."

"What's that?" he asked suspiciously, not willing to answer until he knew what he was getting himself into.

"Call me later and let me know what happens."

That seemed harmless enough. It wasn't as if anything was actually going to happen, not in any way she had in mind. "Fine," he agreed hastily, sliding her out of the way just in time to throw himself into the elevator before the doors began to close.

"Don't forget!" she yelled after him, her voice echoing all the way down.

## Chapter Four

The park across the street was an old one. It was a self-contained oasis in the midst of what was otherwise a business district. It had been around since they were kids. Their moms had brought them here to play together, back when all it contained were a few swings, a couple of seesaws, and a merry-go round. They still managed to come to the park on a regular basis. Here they had picnics, drank beer, and just talked. Here was familiar. Here was safe and comfortable. It was sheer serendipity that Fisher had gotten a job just across the street from the park.

Fisher did not feel quite so safe at the moment, though. He felt far from comfortable.

Their usual spot was a particular wooden picnic table that sat in a corner of the tree-filled park, away from the hustle and the bustle. Being farther from the action, it was seldom used, so they'd adopted it for their own. They relished its exclusivity and its privacy. It wasn't beautiful, but they called it theirs.

On the short walk out of the building and across the street, Fisher took time to school himself on the proper responses to make when Hunter told him the joyous news. He practiced his reply aloud, including several variations thereof, with the intention of sounding natural when actually required to say something.

"That's wonderful. I'm very happy for you. Congratulations." All trite responses. All of them perfect for the situation as well as for hiding his true feelings. The ones he was desperately attempting to lock inside of him, even as he walked to his imagined doom, unconsciously fingering the cell phone in his pocket like a security blanket. Keep it on just that level. Impersonal, yet friendly. Close, yet distant. Walk that fine line, dance that tightrope, and wear that happy goofy grin of perpetual friendship. Just keep on smiling, Fisher, and pretend like everything's okay. Then maybe it will be. Some day. He sighed, choking back his tears.

He found Hunter just where he'd said he'd be, his long frame stretched out on one side of the table, taking up an entire bench. His eyes were closed; his head rested on one hand, while with the other he was making strange gestures in the air. Almost as if he were talking to himself, punctuating his statements with the movements of his fingers.

Taking advantage of the fact that Hunter couldn't see him, Fisher took a moment to memorize that beautiful face, inch by lovely inch, as if he were taking mental snapshots that would have to last a lifetime. A lifetime without his friend. Why was that thought so painful? Just then, those clear blue eyes snapped open, and Hunter quickly rose from his prone position,

smiling at the sight of Fisher. Throwing his legs out of the way, he patted the bench, indicating that Fisher should sit there. He took a deep breath and did so.

"Hey, Hunter."

"Hey, Fisher."

There was a moment of silence between them, the air fairly crackling with electricity, as if a storm were brewing. Indeed the wind did seem to be picking up. Nothing unusual for this time of year. More often than not, Halloween was a rainy night. Whoever thought of sending kids out in costume on the last day of October obviously never had kids.

"Are you okay?"

Fisher was surprised at the question. That's what he'd come to find out about Hunter, he hadn't expected to hear the question being routed back to himself.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were already leaving work, when I called. That's not like you. I just wondered."

"Nothing serious. Lunch didn't agree with me, that's all."

Fisher could see now that Hunter appeared nervous. That was so unlike him. His friend was the epitome of laid-back cool. Hunter seemed to be debating something with himself. Fisher gave him his space, using the time to surreptitiously watch the other man while Hunter's attention was focused on his hands. The easy smile was not in evidence now, and the normally twinkling eyes appeared cloudy.

Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance. Even though he was wearing a suit, Fisher shivered. He transferred the case with the laptop in it to the top of the picnic table, wishing Hunter would say something— anything to relieve this unbearable tension. When at last his friend began to speak, Fisher was ready to sigh with relief.

"Fisher, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. I just wasn't quite sure how to do it. I mean, I didn't want to upset you or anything."

Fisher prided himself on not giving anything away, keeping his voice calm and steady, even as he said, "Just tell me whatever it is. I'm sure I'll be fine, as long as you tell me the truth." He gave Hunter a smile of encouragement. A smile that cost him a great deal of effort to achieve. They say that it takes fewer muscles to smile than it does to frown. Fisher guessed that only pertained to true smiles, not forced ones, 'cause this one hurt like hell.

There, that seemed to have worked a little bit, the clouds were lifting from Hunter's eyes, and the smile returning to his lips. Fisher's heart gave a great leap, but he hid it well.

"You remember when I told you this morning that I'm a vampire?"

"Yeah, I remember, and I told you how lame that was, everyone's doing vampires. Did you find another costume?" Somehow Fisher didn't think that was the case, but he felt compelled to ask.

Hunter turned so that he was sitting astride the bench, one leg on either side, scooting closer to Fisher as he did so. Without thinking, Fisher imitated his movements. They were now face to face, with only a few inches of space between them. The thunder rumbled again. A quick glance upward ascertained that clouds were indeed rolling in, and if they weren't careful, they might get caught in a downpour.

"I wasn't talking about costumes."

Fisher heard the words, but they didn't make any sense. He pursed his lips, thinking through the various meanings he could attribute to that simple sentence. None of them registered. "Does this mean you don't want to go tonight?" He wasn't sure if the idea made him happy or disappointed. He guessed it would depend on the reason.

"No, I want to go tonight. I have our costumes, remember?"

Now Fisher was more confused. "Okaaaaaaaaay," he said. He glanced up from his own hands, and straight into those gorgeously blue eyes. "You also told me that Leonardo di Caprio is a vampire. What is this, international declare you're a vampire day?" That was totally lame, but it was the best he could muster on short notice. It did earn him a small smile, though, so it was totally worth it.

"No, of course not. I was kidding about Leo."

Fisher waited, in vain, for the rest of that statement—the part that went 'and me'. But it never came. Hunter had yet to mention any woman, or being in love, or getting married, or any of the several dozen fears that populated Fisher's fertile imagination ever since Hunter had called. That must be a good sign, right? As for the rest—well, that was just Hunter being the warped individual he'd always been, having fun with Fisher on the night before Halloween. Though why he felt compelled to come down here and call him out of work early, when they were attending a party together tonight where they had all night to talk, was beyond Fisher. He relaxed a little, though, managed a small genuine smile of his own, going along with Hunter's game.

"So what you're saying is that you're a bloodsucking creature of the night, and you want to drink my blood?"

"Well, I wasn't going to ask," Hunter replied, "but if you're offering, that's a whole 'nother matter."

"Sure, any time," Fisher snorted. Hunter surely did have a strange sense of humor. "Don't we have a party to get ready for? I trust they're feeding us, right? We don't need to get dinner first, we can eat our fill at this shindig?"

"Fisher, I'm not kidding. *I am* a vampire."

"Okay, if you say so..."

Hunter interrupted him. "It happened about six months ago. Remember when I was supposed to meet you at the theatre? We were going to the midnight showing of *Rocky Horror*?"

Of course Fisher remembered. He was still steamed about it, deep down, 'cause Hunter'd never showed, when it was entirely his idea. He had given him some lame excuse the next day for why he hadn't. Fisher had chalked it up to good old *cherchez le femme*, no matter how much Hunter had protested that was not the case. "I believe you gave me a story about a flat tire and being stuck in a ditch or something, if I remember correctly."

"Look, Fisher, it wasn't a story. I would never stand you up, I hope you know that."

Hunter sounded so sincere that Fisher felt himself falling for him on the strength of his voice alone. But he managed to hold himself resolute. "It doesn't matter, that was months ago, what's done's done..."

"Except I didn't tell you the whole truth of that night," Hunter continued, running his hands through his hair as he spoke, in evident agitation. "I... I couldn't bring myself to say it yet. It was all too new, and I was still trying to adjust."

"Adjust to what, a flat tire?"

"No, to becoming a vampire."

Again with the vampire joke. It was definitely growing thin. Fisher made a move to get up, deciding that if he left, then Hunter would get the idea and follow, and they could be done with this nonsense. But that obviously wasn't meant to be. Hunter reached out, gripping his arm in his urgency, restraining him, and Fisher felt all the will to move drain out of him in one fell swoop.

"I did have a flat tire that night. Remember I went out to my mom's that day, for a little while?" Hunter's mother, Lisa, had retired to the country, and now lived a good two hour drive away. "I was on my way back when it happened. I must have hit something. I dunno, a rock or something, 'cause suddenly the tire almost exploded, and I'm almost run into a ditch. So here I am changing this stupid tire when a car appears out of nowhere and pulls over. And not just any old car, it's a stretch limo, a big black one. I know, in the middle of nowhere, what are the odds, right? Well, this strange man wearing like a uniform or something gets out of the car from the driver's side, comes up to me and asks me what the problem is, then goes to the back of the car for a minute before he comes back to me. Then he tells me that if I'd care to step inside the car with

the master, he'll be good enough to change my tire and send me on my way. Naturally I say sure. I mean, it's a big black stretch limo. How many chances in my life do you think I'll ever have to be inside one of those?"

Fisher had to admit that the likelihood of that happening was not great. He also felt a great warmth from where Hunter's hand still touched his arm.

"I get into the back of the limo and straight away, this guy, who's wearing a tuxedo and looks like he stepped off the cover of some magazine for hot millionaires, offers me a drink 'cause he has a wet bar in this thing. He introduces himself as Ramon and hands me this drink. Of course I drink it—"

At this point Fisher interrupted. "Was it alcohol?"

"What?"

"The drink he gave you, was it alcohol?"

"Yeah, that's the idea of a wet bar, Fisher, it's not meant for fruit juice, it's for the hard stuff."

"That wasn't very responsible of you, knowing you had to drive when the tire was fixed."

That produced a torrent of unexpected giggles from Hunter. He doubled over toward Fisher, laughing so hard that he ended up having to wipe his eyes, leaning on Fisher's shoulder. Fisher saw nothing funny about the situation, or Hunter's reaction to it. But Fisher's indignation was pushed away by another consideration. "What do you mean 'hot millionaire'? Are you saying you thought this guy was hot?"

Hunter straightened up as he calmed down, turning sober at Fisher's question, catching his breath. "Yeah, I mean he was pretty hot for an old guy. Know what I mean?"

"No, what do you mean?"

"Look, it doesn't matter. It's what happened next that I'm trying to get to."

"What, did you sleep with him?" Where were these questions coming from? Fisher found himself becoming unraveled for no good reason, and he didn't like it, fighting to take back control of himself. Why did he sound like such a jealous shrew, even to his own ears?

Hunter gave his roommate a confused glance. "Do you know nothing about vampires, and how they're made?" he asked. "Seriously?"

"I just meant..." Fisher's voice trailed away as he actually considered the question. "Of course I know, everyone knows that. You have to be bitten."

"Precisely. Bitten, Fisher. Bitten as in having someone's canines sink into your neck. The only place where having sex turns you into a vampire is in very bad pornos, or very bad books."



Fisher was struggling against so many things at this moment, while trying to make sense out of what his roommate was saying. Of course he didn't believe any of it. Any of it that pertained to the vampire portion of the story, that is. There were no such things. But as for the rest—he wanted to believe that Hunter didn't have sex with a complete stranger, a man at that, but there was a part of him that protested. It whispered what do you think he does with his women? Play Scrabble? There were too many women for him not to... surely... The question was, did he really want to know the truth?

"You don't believe me."

"Hunter," Fisher protested, "that's not a fair question."

"It's not a question, it's a statement. You, Fisher Roberts, my best friend in the whole world, the person I trust most in the world, don't believe me. That hurts."

Fisher winced at the words, wishing he could alleviate the other's obvious pain. But how? Pretend to believe in an idea that was so impossible it was patently absurd? Give in to Hunter's lame Halloween-fueled joke, laugh at it and then deal with the issue of the hot man in the stretch limo? Could he even do that without giving himself away? That was something he never intended to do. Ever.

And yet the very next moment the most incriminating words in the world had left his lips, albeit in a very small, very tight voice. "Did you have sex with him?"

He felt the movement before he saw it. Hunter's face was closer to his than ever, those light blue eyes boring into his own. Fisher could do nothing but look back, speechless, as Hunter seemed to dive into his very soul through his eyes. "Never," he replied softly, his voice a husky whisper, "I could never do that to you."

Fisher trembled, an expectant trembling, as if he were waiting for something to happen. He didn't have to wait long. Suddenly those beautiful lips were touching his, and then they were kissing, truly kissing. No, it wasn't Fisher's first kiss, but it was his first with a man. His only kiss with a man. And he was amazed at what a difference there was between this kiss and the others. Not because of gender, but because it was with Hunter. Because Hunter was someone special.

He felt himself giving in to those lips, melting into that touch, with a heat that penetrated his entire body, vibrating in its intensity. Now Hunter was nibbling at his lips, soft tender kisses that shook him to his very foundation. His head was reeling, and he was on the verge of losing all sense of self when he felt the first raindrops splash upon his upturned face.

What the hell. He pulled back at this sudden insertion of reality into a very unreal scene, his mouth forming a large "o" of amazement, his eyes going into saucer-plate mode. But even as he did, Hunter moved forward, sliding his hips until their knees were touching. From this position,

luckily, they couldn't get much closer, or Hunter would realize what else he had raised beside's Fisher's blood pressure.

He was going to do it again. Fisher just knew it, he could feel it, and oh god how badly he wanted it, as he felt a whimper rising in his throat, indicating a neediness he wasn't aware he even possessed. But the drops were turning thicker now, more of them, and they were brutally cold. A definite shock to the system. His brain was screaming to him to get out, get out now.

Even though this was what he wanted, exactly what he wanted. He was afraid of things that he couldn't even explain to himself.

He practically threw himself backward from the picnic table in his haste to get away, landing on the hard ground that would soon be turning to mud if this downpour kept up. A steady rain it was now, and lightning crackled angrily above their heads.

"Fisher?" Hunter rose hastily, reaching for him. So Fisher did the only logical thing he could do—he gained his feet and ran, as hard and as fast as he could. He hated himself with every step that he took—and he knew he had never loved Hunter Long more.

## Chapter Five

It struck Fisher within moments of his hasty departure how foolish he had been in running off into the pouring rain, but as he had already done it, it was the proverbial done deal. So what now? He also realized he had left his laptop behind, but his choices at this point were rather limited. He could tuck his tail between his legs and go back and retrieve it. He considered this option entirely out of the question, as it involved too much swallowing of his foolish pride. And perhaps an admission of something he wasn't ready to admit. Or he could trust to Hunter to take care of it for him. He chose door number two.

Blind running isn't all it's cracked up to be, he thought, as he plunged through the wet park in his panic. He was becoming more soaked with each step, coming out on the opposite side of the park. It was raining heavily now, and it seemed pointless to wander in the downpour aimlessly. Just on the other side of the intersection he spotted the Starbucks, and the thought of something warm and liquid seemed to fill a need in him, so he waited for the light to change, and crossed the intersection. When he entered the coffee shop others were shaking themselves as they milled about, glancing at the menu. Fisher waited his turn, ordered the medium caramel macchiato, with extra sugar, and found a table in the corner of the room in which he could sit and think.

Now that he could actually think without his erection attempting to do the thinking for him, he decided to analyze the situation. Cupping his hands about the cup, he warmed them as well as his shaky interior as he took sips of the sweet liquid, trying not to drink too quickly lest he upset his digestive system again.

So, what had actually happened, other than Hunter kissing him? The vampire story was just Hunter's annual Halloween madness. But the kiss, that was something different between them. Very different. Or was this another facet of that same Halloween prank? If he hadn't taken off like a bat out of hell, would Hunter's next move have been to clamp down on his neck, perhaps wearing a pair of fake fangs, chuckle Happy Halloween, and then move on to the next topic? He'd never know, would he, 'cause he hadn't waited for the punch line. He had assumed things that were not in evidence, drawn all the worst conclusions he possibly could, and fled the field.

So, to sum it up, this was probably nothing more than a joke on Hunter's part.

But what about on his end?

Fisher's thoughts were all over the spectrum, as he tried to corral his feelings into coherency, tried to forget the feel of Hunter's lips against his. Forget about the best kiss he'd ever had. Life wasn't about kisses and it wasn't about love. It was about doing the things that were expected of you, being the best person you could be. Not in flights of fantasy such as the ones Hunter Long regularly indulged in. Perhaps that made him a poor choice for a boon companion, at least for Fisher. But the thought of not having his friend in his life was too painful to contemplate. So Fisher effected what he felt was a sufficient compromise. In order to hold on to Hunter as a friend, he would simply push the other thoughts and feelings aside. He knew Hunter didn't mean anything by the kiss, so he'd pretend he hadn't either. Things would go back to the way they were, everything would return to normal. And once this fantasy-ridden holiday was over, it would be easier to do. And life would go on.

If the price of that friendship was hiding a piece of himself, then so be it. It wouldn't be the first time. Probably not the last.

The rain began to taper off. Fisher had ordered and drunk two more macchiatos while he waited for it to end, rationalizing the sugar intake could be offset by eating a healthy dinner. Until he remembered that he was supposed to be eating at the party tonight. The one he'd promised Hunter he'd attend with him. What about that?

He shivered, although not entirely because of his still damp clothes. He could do this, he knew he could. He glanced at his wristwatch. He still had time to go back for his car, go home and grab a very brief shower and dress for the party. He was surprised that Hunter hadn't phoned him yet. But maybe that was to be expected, considering the way Fisher had left. Hunter was

undoubtedly giving him time to come back to his senses, before he dropped the other shoe, told him he was kidding and finished the joke, so that Fisher could tell him good one! Fisher was determined to be his usual self with his friend, to show nothing strange, or untoward—or romantic. He would simply shelve those ideas where they could do no harm. And carry on like the good little soldier that he was.

The rain had become an intermittent drizzle as he walked back to the office parking lot, got into his car and drove home. On the way, he began to rehearse what he would say to Hunter.

"Sorry about that, I suddenly felt sick, and I didn't want to puke on you."

"I had you fooled, didn't I? I guess I can prank with the best of them, huh?"

Or even, "Gotcha!"

While the question that was closest to his heart would remain unasked—*Hunter, why did you kiss me?*

Just anything, no matter how inane, to get over this hump and back to normal. He thought of saying April Fools', but the timing wasn't quite right for that one. And coming from him, it wasn't quite believable, either.

They all sounded pretty lame, come to think of it. He hoped he would find some eloquence before he was called on to use it. As he pulled into their driveway, he saw no sign of Hunter's car, and only a minimum of lights on in the house. Usually he could determine whether Hunter was home or not by the number of lights he found burning, even in unoccupied rooms. That was a slight bone of contention between them that Hunter compensated for by paying extra toward the electric bill, smirking as he did so. Fisher pushed the thought of that sexy smirk firmly out of his mind.

The house was eerily silent as he walked through the front door, and for a moment Fisher wondered if Hunter had even bothered to come home. His first clue that his roommate had returned came when Lady Madeline approached him, meowing. He scooped her up into his arms, and carried her into the kitchen. His intention had been to feed her but he could tell at a glance that she had already been fed and watered, evidence that the other man had indeed been there. Duh. So he carried the purring feline down the hall, resisting the urge to peek into Hunter's room, continuing on to his own. There he and the cat parted company as he stripped off his still damp clothes and threw them into his hamper. He grabbed a towel from the linen closet, proceeded to the bathroom and took a quick but refreshing shower.

He returned to his room, a large towel affixed about his hips, another in his hand rubbing at his hair. He noticed what he had missed before—clothing had been laid out for him upon his bed, as well as an envelope, his name penned on it in Hunter's familiar scrawl. This must be his

costume, though for the life of him, looking at the suit, he didn't know what he was meant to be, but he supposed it could have been worse. He was obviously neither a superhero nor a damsel in distress. That had to be a good sign, right? He was more interested in the contents of the envelope though, and carefully opened it. Even though in his present state of mind he was tempted to just rip into it, he allowed his normal common sense to prevail, and carefully slit it open.

*Fisher,*

*I 'm sorry that my kiss upset you. I swear that's not what I intended. I'll be at the party. I hope you're still coming. Please come.*

*Hunter*

At the bottom of the page was a hand-drawn map, as well as the address of the party. That was something that Fisher had never even inquired about, assuming that they were going together. It had to be a good sign that Hunter still wanted him to go. And that he was concerned about him, cared enough to apologize. See? The kiss hadn't turned out the way Hunter intended—it had obviously been no more than a prank, and Fisher had overreacted. Anything was surmountable, as long as they both wanted it to be. Fisher wanted more than anything to put their friendship back the way it was. He couldn't imagine his life without Hunter in it, and he didn't even want to try. He would never try anything so foolish as kissing his friend again. Although it was Hunter who had initiated the kiss that Fisher had longed for just as much as he did. But he wasn't going to think about that. Not now. Not ever.

He removed the towel, tossed it into his hamper, and began to dress. You couldn't really call this a costume, it looked like normal clothing. All right, clothing of the evening variety, not everyday wear. But still. No tights, no chaps, no peacock feathers, nothing even vaguely ludicrous, nothing he had to worry about refusing to wear—just a three piece suit, a dark gray pinstripe, a long-sleeved white dress shirt, button-down, a pale green silk vest, with a matching tie...

And suddenly Fisher's head cleared and he recognized the clothes for what they actually were. A prom outfit. And not just any prom outfit, but the very ensemble that he himself had worn to his senior prom, some fifteen some years ago. What was the purpose behind this, he wondered, even as he finished buttoning the vest, leaving the jacket open, just as he had worn it then. As they had worn theirs then, to be more accurate. They had shopped for their suits together, and had chosen to wear the same one, the only difference being that Hunter had picked out a baby blue vest and tie, as they were more flattering to his eyes. So this is what he was going as, a high

school nerd? Was this a subtle reminder that he hadn't changed any over the years? He didn't have time to mull this thought over, or to argue with the selection—it was either this or no costume at all. The mask was a nice touch, though, one they certainly hadn't used for their prom. It was a full mask, silver, like the kind worn during Mardi Gras, with some sort of black headpiece attached, bordered in silver.

Fisher checked his reflection in the full-length mirror that hung on the back of his bedroom door to see that he appeared to be presentable. There was a duplicate of this mirror in Hunter's room. They'd come with the house. Fisher had always maintained that he hated his and threatened to take it down, but Hunter invariably talked him out of it, some line about maintaining the integrity of the house or something. He had such a silver tongue, and he knew how to use it. Especially when it came to Fisher.

## Chapter Six

Following Hunter's directions, Fisher drove for about half an hour to the spot on the map where the party was being held, somewhere on the far edge of civilization. It was in a private residence, one that was located in a fairly well-to-do area. The houses had nice price tags, and the architects had obviously had some fun with their design, not like the cookie-cutter suburbia that Fisher and Hunter had grown up in. Still lived in, actually, but it was what they could afford, and they never minded, because it was theirs.

The street was already fairly well blocked with vehicles, as he pulled up as close as he could get. The house itself sat at the end of an isolated cul-de-sac, which backed onto a large wooded area. Only then did he recognize it as belonging to one of Hunter's exes. He'd seen pictures of it before, but had never actually been there. The ex's name was Lana, and she and Hunter had fallen apart as had all of Hunter's relationships, but she had managed to stay in his good graces just enough to maintain a position on the periphery of his existence. Like an annoying flashback of a drug-induced trip that you never enjoyed, she came around often enough to make herself a nuisance, but not often enough for Hunter to tell her off. She possessed a fierce and abiding hatred for Fisher, one which she carefully concealed from her ex beneath a pseudo sweet exterior, but Fisher was well aware of it and the feeling was decidedly mutual. It was a situation that was further exacerbated by the fact that her father just happened to be the owner/editor of the magazine Fisher wrote for. It was one of several publications that he owned in



cities around the country. This meant that he had to play nice with the daughter to some degree. Why the hell hadn't Hunter apprised him of this earlier?

Already this did not bode well. But a promise was a promise. Especially one made to Hunter.

Fisher slid the mask over his face. He looked around, trying not to feel too obvious as he approached the house. Already he could hear the sounds of people having fun, and his first impulse was to turn around and go home. He saw no sign of Hunter's car, but that meant nothing. There were so many people here that he could have parked anywhere. Or he could be late. Fisher refused to entertain the notion that Hunter would be a no-show. That was simply not acceptable, and not in his friend's character.

From what he remembered of what Hunter had told him, this was Lana's playhouse, the place she went to get away from home and the watchful eyes of her parents. It had been provided by daddy dearest, of course, as Lana did nothing in the world that was useful, other than pretending to a sham interest in various charitable organizations. She played Lady Bountiful when the mood struck her, rode her thoroughbreds, which were stabled in quarters better than most people's homes, and entertained her friends in the style to which they wished to become accustomed. They were more hangers-on than friends.

Fisher remembered reading an article about this house in MWH&F when the house was first built; something about the architectural style of the house being a lake house design (although without the lake). It was a split-level, with lots of windows, and a number of politically correct green features, such as hydronic radiant-heated floors, energy efficient lighting and non-toxic materials. Being well-to-do made it easier to be green. Fisher noticed that the house was very well lit as he approached the steps leading up to the door, its inhabitants well displayed to the gaze of a casual passerby. The party seemed to stretch throughout the house, dancing guests in evidence on the lower level, gyrating to as yet unheard music, just on the other side of the sliding patio doors.

The front door was open; Fisher was grateful for small favors. Perhaps he could get through the evening without exchanging so much as a single word with the viper. Or was that viperess? Either way, that was Lana—fanged and poisonous.

The interior of the house was laid out in an open design, and the rooms flowed into one another, as did the guests—dancing, chattering, mingling, and posturing. Everywhere Fisher looked, he saw food and drinks. Catered, no doubt, as the kitchen showed little evidence of actual usage, certainly not by the chatelaine of the manor. Costumes of all varieties were on display in this colorful crowd, but Fisher paid them little heed. He was looking for one costume in

particular. Intuition told him that the one he sought would be the mate to his own, the only difference being that it would have a baby blue vest in place of his green. He didn't know why he thought that Hunter was wearing the match to this outfit, but he did, and 'til he saw otherwise, that's what he was going with.

A smiling Harley Quinn offered Fisher a glass of something, which he politely refused. He had no intention of drinking anything alcoholic. He couldn't afford to lose control tonight.

With the costumes and the masks, it was impossible to identify anyone, but he suspected that he didn't know too many of the other guests anyway. He wondered how many were Lana's cronies, how many were aspiring sycophants, and how many were clients or potential clients she wanted to dazzle with her generosity. Or rather, Daddy's generosity.

Speak of the devil, there she was. He had wandered into the entertainment area. A DJ was visible in one corner, playing selected tunes over an elaborate home stereo system. He'd seen smaller speakers in concert halls. Leave it to Lana to be ostentatious in any way she could.

She held court in the center of the room, standing in the middle of a kitschy sunken conversation pit. That was her favorite position—in the center of things, and the object of attention. Her braying laughter was unmistakable. It elicited answering laughs of the mandatory kind from her group of toadies. They filled the couches on all four sides, hanging onto every syllable which dripped from her carmine lips. Her costume did nothing to conceal her identity whatsoever. Why was he not surprised? She was playing the part of Cleopatra tonight, in a figure-hugging gold lamé shift with matching cape and sandals. The dress was slit up the side, the better to show off her waxed, toned and glittered legs. She wore a bejeweled collar and a matching belt, with an elaborate gold headdress, probably real gold. It looked rather heavy. He hoped it gave her a headache. Her dark tresses were twined into braids, also jeweled, and extensions had been added to give her hair a fuller appearance. But she wore no mask, unless one counted the tons of make-up on her face, which made her easy to identify. Of course that was the idea, wasn't it, as she was never one to hide her light under a bushel.

Fisher hovered on the periphery of the room. He hoped to stay beneath the queen's radar long enough to scan for Hunter's presence. That shouldn't be hard; she was too wrapped up in herself to pay attention to anyone else. Still no sign of Hunter. His promised few minutes were up—he'd guaranteed no more than that. Still, he had no intention of leaving without at least seeing his friend. He wanted Hunter to know that he had actually shown up just for him, as he'd said he would. It was important to him that Hunter know he'd been there.

He almost made it out of the room when one word caught his attention. Hunter's name. It stopped him in mid-stride.

He wasn't trying to listen in on Lana's conversation. He'd tuned out her voice until he heard Hunter's name casually bandied about. Then curiosity ensnared him. He sidled a little closer "Yes, tell us about you and Hunter," a female voice was urging. "You promised a major announcement tonight."

"I did, didn't I?" An unpleasant smirk crossed the pseudo Egyptian's face. "All in due time, all in due time. Be patient, loves, be patient."

"You can't choose one man over the rest of us," a male voice protested. This was coming from a guy in a Boba Fett outfit, the mask serving to muffle his words. "That isn't fair, Lana!"

"Life isn't fair," she fairly purred, her eyes glittering. "But don't worry. Just 'cause I'm taking myself out of circulation doesn't mean I'm dying!"

"Lana, you can't marry him," Boba Fett continued to protest. "Marry me. I can make you happier than he can. And I have more money than he does...."

What? Fisher's head felt like it was ready to explode. He backed away from the laughing chattering group, feeling the need for some fresh air. Now. He worked his way through some minglers meandering about, going nowhere in particular but managing to get in his way. Maybe he could find the bathroom. He turned down a hallway, but the first door he tried led him into a bedroom, occupied by a furiously necking couple. They never noticed when he hastily closed the door behind him, moving on.

The next door he tried led into a powder room, done up in frilly pinks and purples and matching plush animals, but he was grateful for what he could find. He pulled off his mask, setting it on the back of the toilet. Cupping his hands together, he splashed cool water upon his face, ignoring the silent stuffed audience arrayed around him. Hunter's words were assuming a more sinister significance, one he didn't care for in the slightest. Knowing he was with someone else would be hard enough, but to have that someone else be Lana was well nigh unbearable.

Who was he kidding? He stared at his too pale face in the oval mirror, a picture of unhappiness. He would be miserable no matter who Hunter chose to spend his life with, if it wasn't him. So why not tell him that he loved him? Tell Hunter that he was so much a part of himself, and his life, that he felt as if his heart would break without him; that if Hunter left there would be a hole inside of him where he fit so perfectly now? Why not tell him all this and more? Because he knew it wouldn't make any difference. And he couldn't bear the rejection that was sure to follow upon such a declaration. And maybe worse.

Real life didn't work like that. That was the movies. Fisher knew better.

He replaced the mask and slipped out of the powder room, almost colliding with a tall blonde girl with meatball-ponytails, gawky in a school uniform, a makeshift scepter in her hand.

"Oops!" she giggled as they danced around one another. "Sailor Moon drink too much!" She giggled again, pushed past him and disappeared from view, hastily slamming the door in her wake.

Continuing, Fisher found a door which led outside. He welcomed the rush of the chill night air. There was a terraced garden/patio on this side of the house, and a path that led to the woods. All of the furniture had been removed, leaving the stones bare, other than a pile of something in the middle. No one else was here, probably apprehensive over the threat of more rain and the potential ruination of their costumes. Fisher appreciated the temporary solitude.

Why did his life seem to be unraveling at this moment? Hadn't he done everything he should, taken the path that people thought he should take, chosen the right course of action? He had gone into journalism, just as his mom had told him he should, put away the novel he'd begun during his high school years—buried it so deeply that it only came to mind during times of great agitation, such as now. He'd gotten his degree, gotten a good job, bought his own house, paid his bills on time, and supported himself. He donated as much as he could spare to charitable causes. He visited his mother regularly. In fact he was the perfect son in all ways but one—he had never taken the big step with any of the girls that he dated, never made a commitment to any of them, and certainly never asked one of them the big question to end all questions.

On that subject, Fisher could not be budged.

He had told himself that he simply wasn't ready, he hadn't found the right girl, he wanted to be even more financially stable than he was, further ahead in his career. But those were all lies. Damnable lies. He just couldn't keep lying to himself any more, though, now when the truth was finding its own way out, tearing open his heart and rending it—painfully, agonizingly—into small pieces. Maybe he'd known it all along, and hadn't wanted to analyze the situation too closely, for then he would have to admit it to himself. Admit that he was indeed in love with his best friend. And afraid to lose him.

"There you are."

Fisher started at the familiar voice, having been unaware of his arrival, caught up as he was in his deep dark ruminations. In his defense, he did have his back to the house, so it was understandable that he hadn't seen him emerge, even if Hunter'd just startled him out of ten years of his life. He tried to still the wild beating of his heart, force his voice into some semblance of normality, before turning to face his friend. Having a mask was a godsend at that moment, as it hid all expression.

"I was afraid you weren't going to come."

As he'd suspected, Hunter was wearing the matching suit to Fisher's, with the pale blue vest and tie, although all blues were weak imitations of Hunter's eyes. The other difference between them lay in the masks each wore—Hunter's mask was a perfect copy of Leonardo di Caprio's face. Fisher arched his brows at the sight.

"Didn't I tell you Leonardo is a vampire?"

Fisher detected a smile in Hunter's voice, even through the cheesy mask. It was amazing how much he was drawn to someone who was so much his opposite in so many ways. Perhaps there was truth in the old adage that opposites attract. "Very funny," he managed to say in a voice which luckily did not crack or break. Good start.

Hunter reached up, removing the mask of the never-aging movie star, baring his own beautiful visage. He was not smiling. In fact he looked decidedly weary. Fisher couldn't help but be concerned, in spite of what he'd just heard. In spite of the fact that perhaps he shouldn't care so much, not if Hunter had chosen Lana over him. Had there ever been a contest between them, or was that just wishful thinking on Fisher's part?

"What's with you and vampires this year?" he asked, with a reasonable facsimile of a laugh. It sounded a little hollow to his ears.

Hunter was moving toward him now, his walk a silken stride, and although he would have welcomed the relief of removing his own mask, Fisher kept it on. He was afraid of what his face might reveal. He wasn't sure what he would do should Hunter try anything with him—such as kiss him. Kiss him back, perhaps? What sort of solution would that be? But then Hunter was standing just before him and all thoughts went flying out the window as his friend took his hand. At first Fisher had the irrational thought that he was going to kiss it. First Hunter took a nip of the edge, then he brushed his lips along that same edge, as if to make up for the nip. He turned the hand over, and gently kissed the palm. His eyes had never once left Fisher's face. "Can you feel them?" Hunter asked, dropping his voice almost to a low growl, one which made Fisher tingle. "They're real. I'm serious. My fangs are real, Fisher. I *am* a vampire. I wouldn't lie to you. Ever."

Mesmerized, Fisher stood without moving, as Hunter continued to kiss his palm, their eyes locked. And then he grazed his teeth across that tender flesh. Or rather, his canines. His preternaturally elongated canines. And still Fisher was confused.

"It's so weird," Hunter was saying, as if they were having the most normal conversation in the world, "at first I thought I'd never get used to them. Or the diet..."

"The diet?" Fisher echoed uncomprehendingly.

"Blood. You know. The stuff that runs through your veins." He traced one of those self-same veins across Fisher's wrist with one finger, halting where it disappeared into Fisher's sleeve. "That's an impediment," he murmured. "You should take that off."

"Take what off?"

"The jacket. Here, let me help you."

Fisher felt the hands as they seemed to come to life, swarming his body, pushing back the fabric until it fell from his arms. The chill air plucked at his sleeves, and he shivered. "Hunter, what are you doing?" he managed to ask, although he made no move to stop him.

"Fisher, I want to tell you something, something very important..."

"Didn't you just do that?"

"Yes. But no. Something else." Hunter stepped closer to him, the jacket dropping unnoticed to the ground behind him. Fisher was acutely aware of this one moment—it filled his entire being, consumed as he was by Hunter, his presence, and his words, both dreading and longing for the words he was about to say. At one and the same time he was frightened and elated. The results were dizzying.

Fisher found himself swaying toward Hunter, toward the mesmerizing sound of his voice. "Let me guess," he attempted to joke, "you want that blood now?"

"Maybe later." Hunter circled his waist with one arm, the other going to Fisher's cheek, cupping it. "What I do want right now is to tell you... just to tell you... how much I..."

The moment—and those provocative words—were suddenly and irrevocably broken by a harsh spotlight that cut across the yard, illuminating it garishly. The door to the house opened, and merrymakers spilled out, their voices an insistent hum which intruded upon the privacy that was no longer Fisher and Hunter's to enjoy. "Bonfire!" they screamed, as gleeful as a group of pyromaniac children as they trooped toward the pair.

Fisher took a step backward, then another, still attached to his friend. Hunter moved with him, refusing to allow his arm to be dislodged. "Wait, we have to talk. Please, Fisher. I need to talk to you."

Fisher wavered, his instincts telling him to run, his heart telling him to remain and at least hear Hunter out. He teetered on the brink, leaning on the side of staying and listening, when Lana, in full Cleopatra regalia, came striding up to them. Sliding a possessive arm about Hunter's waist, a malicious smile graced her lips as she pulled his arm away from Fisher, and the balance was tipped completely in the opposite direction.

Fisher turned from the unpleasant sight, heading for the house. He thought that he could hear Hunter's voice calling him, but that had to be the product of his own wishful imagination as

it was far too noisy now for one single voice to be heard. Even Hunter's. He pushed his way through the group that was streaming from the house, determined to get out of there. All that he wanted to do was to get to his car and drive as fast as he could—somewhere. He didn't know where. He didn't care where. Just somewhere that was not here.

By now most of the partiers were outside, ready to witness whatever was about to occur. Bonfire, fireworks, Bacchanalian orgy—whatever Lana had stashed up her sleeve. He didn't care what it was; he wanted no part of it. The few guests that remained inside seemed to be caught up in their own activities. He should be able to make a clean escape, no sweat. Suddenly Fisher was taken by surprise as he ran full tilt into a lone reveler, who appeared from out of nowhere in front of him. He bounced off the other person, the force of the impact slamming him sideways. He let out a cry of indignation as his head slammed against the doorjamb of one of the bedrooms. He must have hit it pretty hard because the next thing he knew he was seeing a multitude of colors, then complete blackness.

## Chapter Seven

Fisher opened his eyes slowly. His head was throbbing something fierce. Putting one hand up to his forehead, he thought he felt something warm and wet and sticky. Shit. Blood, no doubt. He must have done a real number on himself when he blundered into that other person. He wondered how he or she had fared in comparison. Blinking to clear his vision, he rolled over onto his knees. At first he thought he was in total darkness, but then he realized that the lighting was simply very dim. His eyes worked to adjust to it. Had he managed to knock out the light while he was at it? Great job. He also realized that his mask was not in place upon his face and he began to feel around for it. When he found it, he hung it around his neck backward so he could see.

He expected to find the wall before he crawled too far, thinking he was still in the hallway, and how wide could it be. But it wasn't there. And the thought that maybe he had fumbled his way into the bedroom was extinguished when he became aware there was grass beneath his fingertips, not carpet. He clutched at it uncomprehendingly before moving back onto his haunches in a squatting position.

"Hey, I don't have all night!" An impatient voice right beside his aching head made him fall backwards in surprise. A figure was sitting there. Through some trick of the moon—which was when he realized he was outdoors, because he could see a fingernail moon hanging above him,

and bare-branched trees all around him, as well as a house—he could have sworn the guy looked just like Leonardo di Caprio.

Duh. Of course. Hunter's mask. How he'd managed to run into Hunter when he'd left him behind with Lana, he couldn't fathom, and he didn't try to figure it out, not right now. "Hunter, are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"You, sir, are delusional." The Hunter figure pointed an accusatory finger at him, arm outstretched. Fisher began to take in more of his costume, realizing his mistake with a guilty blush. This fellow was garbed in a white shirt, maybe even a blouse, which had long sleeves which seemed to billow loosely, open at the throat. Not Hunter at all. Not even a mask. And yet he still managed to look like Leonardo di Caprio. How odd.

Fisher squinted around him, into the darkness. There was something oddly familiar about this place. Like he'd been here before. But more importantly, it wasn't Lana's house; he could tell that much, at least. Which was a decided plus, even if a bit confusing. So where was he and how had he gotten here? Surely this young man wasn't a kidnapper? He had nothing anyone would want, anyway, so he didn't think that was it.

"C'mon, up with you." The strange young man was tugging at his arm, urging him to rise, and Fisher found himself doing so, in spite of himself. "We don't have all night, and you're not the only one. Here." He shoved a white square at Fisher, which he discovered was a handkerchief. Who carried those anymore? Gratefully, he pressed it against his bleeding temple.

"What do you mean? Who are you?" he asked, even as the stranger was dragging him toward the house. "Where are we?"

"You ask a lot of fucking questions," the boy frowned, "My name is immaterial. Call me Arthur, if you like. Or you can call me the ghost of Halloween past. Whatever pleases you."

Fisher was sure he hadn't heard the other correctly. Must be a direct result of conking his noggin. But suddenly it dawned on him why the house before them seemed so familiar, as his eyes adjusted to the lack of light. It was the one he'd grown up in, the one where his mother still lived. This wasn't possible. He must be hallucinating.

Arthur, or whatever his name was, continued to drag Fisher toward the house. Fisher could see two cars in the wide driveway. Older cars. One looked like an automobile his mother had once had, one which she'd traded in years ago. The other one he didn't recognize. Neither one looked their age, though. In fact they seemed in pretty good shape for as old as they must be.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Fisher protested, "This is my mom's house. Do you know my mother?" Arthur didn't seem as though a simple matter of a door was going to stop him, and Fisher was afraid he'd simply walk into the house and startle his mother. The outside lights



were off, naturally. She kept them off on Halloween, a sign to the trick-or-treaters to stay away, that she had nothing to give. She didn't celebrate Halloween in any way shape or form. No decorations, no costumes, and certainly no candy to be divvied up among the costumed children. She didn't believe in it, never had, and it was how she had raised her son. In his confusion, his rattled brain didn't register that it wasn't Halloween yet.

They were heading up the walk now, and Fisher was close enough to see that the unfamiliar car was filled to overflowing, clothes and books in untidy piles on the back seat, and half of the front. As if someone were either moving in or out. He saw what looked like a telescope on top of the clothes. He half-remembered that his father had a telescope, but the memory was blurry, uneven, and far too indistinct to recall. He didn't get time to ponder the mystery, as suddenly he was literally yanked into the house—without benefit of opening the door. One moment they were outside, the next they were inside.

"How... what did you do?" Fisher demanded of his guide. Arthur shot him a look filled with pity, shaking his head.

"You're a bit slow about this whole ghost thing, aren't you? We walk right through walls, doors, windows, whatever the job takes."

"But I'm not a ghost," Fisher protested.

"Tonight you are."

Before Fisher could protest that sentiment, he heard voices approaching. Down the stairs came two people, in the midst of an argument. With a start he recognized the man as his father, just the way he remembered him from the last time he'd seen him, way back when he was ten. He'd seemed father-old to him then, but now he realized he was only in his thirties, probably mid to early thirties.

"Go on, leave then, leave if that's what you want to do." That was his mother's voice, cold, controlled, and emotionless. "He doesn't need you and I certainly don't either."

They had reached the base of the stairs. His father held a suitcase in one hand, an album in the other. Could it be a photo album? But why? His mother had always said that his father had wanted to leave, but she would never elaborate on the reason that he did. He felt like he was eavesdropping on a private conversation, and yet he couldn't keep himself from listening. Without thinking he pressed back into the shadows. Arthur, or whatever his name was, laughed.

"They can't see us. Trust me. Watch." He walked up right beside Fisher's mother and leaned impudently against her with one elbow, while staring straight at his father. Neither of them paid him any attention. Fisher relaxed slightly, but he still felt creepy about the whole situation.

"I can't stand seeing what you're doing to him. You're raising him to be just like you. No feelings, no heart... You're killing his imagination. What kind of parent doesn't let their child believe in fairy tales or trick-or-treating on Halloween?"

"Nonsense, I treat Fisher like an adult, and I don't fill his head with nonsense. No son of mine is going to grow up wasting his time on fantasies. This is the real world, Robert, and it's time you joined it!"

Fisher flinched at her words, on behalf of his father, who shook his head and sighed. She had always led him to believe that his father didn't care, but that's not what it sounded like to him. Of course, he didn't really know. Appearances could be deceiving—he tried to make excuses for his mother. She was the one who'd always been there for him, raised him, taken care of him, after his father left. Loved him. But somehow he got the impression that his father loved him too.

"He's just a boy, Beatrice, please. Let him believe and let him dream. And don't make fun of his stories."

His mother's face hardened into a mask, even more than he thought humanly possible. "No, if he wants to write, he can be a journalist. Real writing. Not imaginary stuff. Not my son."

"He's my son too."

"Not anymore." Harshly. "Don't bother to call us, I've had the number changed, and you won't be able to get it. And I'll get a restraining order if you so much as set foot in this neighborhood again. Just go away and leave us alone, so that we can live."

"If I thought that you would, I'd be happy to," he sighed, hefting the album higher into his grasp. "Your idea of living is not living, Beatrice. Why did you have to change? Why?"

Fisher's mother said nothing, maintaining a stony silence.

"Can I please just say good-bye to him, please, Beatrice?" Fisher held his breath, waiting for the answer, even though he knew what it must be. Must have been.

"No. Just go." When his father looked as if he were going to make a move toward the rest of the house, she narrowed her eyes. "Don't make me call the police."

Without another word, he left the house. Fisher stared after him, even after the anticlimactic closing of the front door kept him from view. Even after he heard the engine start up, and then die away. His father seemed to care about him, he really did. Stories? What stories? Those silly things he wrote when he was just a child? He barely recalled those. She'd taken them away from him. And he hadn't written anything else fiction-wise unless you counted his novel. And see how that had turned out. She'd been right, of course. Journalism was real; fiction was just a lot of pipe dreams and hallucinations. And yet he couldn't help but remember that Hunter had always liked his writing.

Fisher's mother passed right through them, moving into the house. When he started to follow, Arthur caught his sleeve and yanked him back.

"No, we don't have time," he answered Fisher's unspoken question. "Gotta go. I told you before, we don't have all night." He tightened his hold on Fisher, dragging him through the front door and out of the house once more. "Don't you know that life is the farce which everyone has to perform? This one has to go on without us, we have other places to be."

Fisher opened his mouth to protest but hadn't gotten even one syllable out when they were suddenly in another place completely. His head reeled in the same way as when he was a child, and he had spun himself about in circles until he had fallen to the floor laughing. He and Hunter, actually. They'd laughed themselves silly over nothing in particular other than the giddiness brought on by their spinning antics. Deep hard belly laughs which multiplied as laughter often does when shared. He'd forgotten all about that until now. Those days were such a very long time ago. Those immature days of youthful follies. Carelessness and irresponsibility. But in the back of his mind, he seemed to remember that they'd had fun.

Once his eyes stopped bouncing around in his skull, Fisher took stock of his new surroundings. The first things he noticed were rows and rows of bookshelves, stretching from floor to ceiling. Books of all colors and sizes, as far as the eye could see. They were arranged in rows, traversed by aisles. Arthur pulled him down first one aisle, then another, zigzagging him about as Fisher came to the slow realization where he was—his high school library. There was a good reason that it should be familiar to him—he'd spent a lot of time here during the four years he had attended the school. It had been a source of great pleasure to him, as well as a refuge.

So why was he here and what exactly was going on? He had stopped questioning the how, as no sensible answers seemed to be forthcoming from this Arthur fellow. He was just trying to make some sort of sense of this, figure out why they seemed to be re-visiting scenes from his past. And why was this guy who looked just like Leonardo di Caprio quoting Rimbaud? Nothing made any sense to Fisher.

They'd arrived at a table set apart from the others. It was big enough for four, but only two figures sat there. It was on the tip of Fisher's tongue to apologize to them, but the first thing he realized was that it would do him no good, as he was invisible to them. Secondly, he recognized them for who they were—himself and Hunter. Young men, teenagers obviously. Back in their high school days, hanging out together at the library.

Fisher sat on one side of the table. He wore black jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt—one Hunter had gotten for him. He would put it on at school and take it off before he went home, in order to evade his mother's notice. He was poring over a notebook, ballpoint pen racing across the

page. Hunter, he noticed, was sprawled across the two chairs on the other side, reading. He wore a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. It was a tight fit which only served to accentuate his build, and a pair of tight jeans which almost seemed painted on. Fisher was so enraptured at the sight of his friend that he completely forgot the presence of his guide.

Arthur, probably bored with Fisher's obsession, was peeking over the shoulder of the studious younger Fisher as he wrote, reading silently along with his writing. "Hunh." A noncommittal grunt. "Guess I've read worse."

Fisher found himself shaken from his self-imposed reverie at the left-handed compliment. Only then did he realize what it was they were doing there. What he was doing, actually. Hunter was just being Hunter, keeping him company, while he was working on his novel. That piece of tripe. How embarrassing. Even if his friend did insist on reading every bit of it as he wrote it. He tried to shield the newborn words as they spilled from his pen, to prevent the Leo di Caprio lookalike from reading it. That did no good as Arthur seemed to be able to look right through him. Just then the Hunter from the past spoke.

"Fisher, almost done with the next chapter?"

"I said, why didn't you—" the ghost began again, but Fisher wasn't listening.

"Hush, I can't hear Hunter," he shushed him, straining to hear the conversation between the two. Even though he'd lived through it once, already.

Hunter leaned across the table. He reached for the notebook, and tried to turn it in his direction. The startled Fisher managed to keep his grip on it, mostly by dint of sheer luck. "What? It's not ready."

"Fisher, you're amazing." Hunter never moved his hand, which now lay atop Fisher's own. The younger Fisher could feel, as well as see himself blush, but whether it was at Hunter's words or his touch—well, he wasn't ready to admit to himself, much less anyone else. "You're going to be a famous writer someday, and I'll be able to say I knew you when."

"Yeah, sure," Fisher managed to mumble, torn between glancing down at the words on the page, or into the handsome face of his friend.

Fisher watched the tableau with some fascination. Had Hunter always looked at him that way, and he'd never noticed before? Or did his own recent burst of intuition cause him to look at the past in a different way? Knowing that he could neither be seen nor felt, he dared to reach across to the dream Hunter, his intention being to caress his cheek, but his entire hand went through him, no more substantial than a mist. Naturally. He sighed, even as Arthur chuckled.

"You are so smitten with him, you're worse than Verlaine, and he had it pretty bad for me. C'mon, we don't have time to waste here, I think you've seen enough."

Before Fisher could protest, Arthur grabbed his sleeve, and the library, and the two boys at the table, were gone.

This method of transportation did not improve with repetition, the nauseous Fisher decided. Once the world had stopped spinning around him, and he found himself able to resist the urge to retch, he rose from the position he found himself in—upon his knees in the grass—to take stock of the situation. To see if he could figure out where he was. And when. He was catching on real quick that time was an obvious variable in this changing scenario, and it wasn't just a matter of his physical location, but temporal too.

His eyes were met with a familiar sight. Which made the where quite obvious. This was home. Their home, his and Hunter's. Now to discover when.

Without waiting for Arthur, Fisher strode up to the front door and through it—he was getting the hang of this ghost thing—into a virtually bare house. For a heartbreaking moment he wondered if he was seeing into the future. A future in which Hunter had moved out.

He wandered through the hall and into the living room. A rather shabby couch with delusions of grandeur held court in the middle of the room. Before it sat a small television set on a cheap stand that looked like something you might pick up at a garage sale or a flea market. And there were he and Hunter, sitting on the couch together, drinking cheap wine from a bottle.

Oh yes, he knew now what was what, and the thought produced a smile. They had just moved into their house, this was them eight years ago. They didn't own very much yet, just starting out and all, both of them having just moved out of their parents' houses. Most of their money had gone into the down payment, and a few repairs that had to be made before they could move in. But they didn't care. They celebrated their first night in the house with a \$2 bottle of cheap white wine, laughing and making plans for the future, and how they wanted to fix the place up. That sofa was long gone now, replaced by something a bit sturdier. But while they had had it, they had spent a lot of hours in its floral embrace, watching television, listening to music on a stereo which wasn't there yet, and talking.

Always talking. It was amazing how they never ran out of things to talk about. Never.

Except now. Now, when Fisher couldn't even tell Hunter what was on his mind and in his heart, for fear of losing him.

Fisher became aware of Arthur's presence when the other leaned against him, rather heavily, placing his chin on Fisher's shoulder as he took in the rather domestic scene before them.

"You two make a lovely couple." He sighed in an overly dramatic fashion.

Fisher tried to push him backwards, but the annoying spirit seemed to have the ability to make himself substantial when he chose, and he never budged. "We aren't a couple," Fisher replied sharply.

"Oh yeah, you are, you just don't know it. I could see it at the library. The way you look at him. The way he looks at you. Why don't you admit it? And be grateful you were born into a time that doesn't demand that two men hide their affections for one another, as I was."

"As you were?" Fisher tried to deflect him from his first words, no use thinking that way. This Arthur had no idea what he was talking about. He didn't know Fisher, and he certainly didn't know Hunter. His comments were pure speculation, and nonsensical speculation at that. "Who were you?" Although he had a feeling that he should know.

"Arthur Rimbaud, of course. Thought you would have guessed by now. You're as slow at that as you are in discerning your own heart." The spirit snorted. "No wonder you're having to do this. Have you learned nothing from what I've shown you? Is there no awareness in that pea brain of yours at all?"

Rimbaud. Right. Sure. The only reason he even knew about Rimbaud was from Hunter. He remembered that Hunter had found *Season in Hell* in a bookstore and read part of it aloud to him. He hadn't gotten it, and he couldn't exactly say that the poetry appealed to him. But Hunter obviously liked it, so to please his friend, he had listened. Hunter had a beautiful reading voice. He could make anything sound sexy.

Fisher pushed the thought aside as irrelevant. He just needed to wake up, right? He'd find out that he'd been in bed the whole time, that this was just a dream. Although how he'd gotten home from the party, he didn't quite remember, but he must have, that's the only thing that made sense. He tried to pinch his hand, but his fingers only misted right through it. Damn.

"Well, happily for me, my time with you is done." Arthur yawned, pushing one hand through his hair, adjusting his shirt, which hung slightly awry on his slender frame. "Before I depart, though, I'll be nice and tell you something you should already know, so listen well, little man." He put an arm about Fisher's shoulders, leaning in to him confidentially. "To thine own self be true."

Before Fisher could find the breath to tell him that those weren't his words, they were Shakespeare's, Arthur was gone. Wow. This was some dream. Why couldn't he wake from it? And just what did that annoying asshole mean?

Fisher's head ached. He rubbed at one temple in a circular motion in an attempt to assuage the pain. Closing his eyes, he wondered what next. Was there any rhyme or reason to all of this? If so, what did it mean?

He didn't have long to wonder.

The flip-flopping of his stomach suggested to him that he'd moved again. Been moved. However this worked. Tentatively, he opened his eyes. He lay alone on the bedroom floor. Not his bedroom, it must be one of Lana's. So he was back where he'd begun. Figured. He must have blacked out when he hit his head on that doorjamb. Passed out and had one hell of a hallucination. That had to be the most vivid dream he'd ever experienced. Maybe he should go to the emergency room and get his head looked at, to be on the safe side.

His attention was drawn to a figure leaning against the doorframe in a slinky slut kind of pose. Fisher squinted up at her for a moment before he recognized who it was. Great, just what he needed. The bitch herself. He peered up at her, wondering if Hunter was with her. There was no sign of him, though.

"Enjoying the party, Fisher, dear?"

Her saccharine concern made him ill. Why was she pretending to be interested in his welfare?

Lana advanced into the room, hand outstretched toward him. He ignored her offer of assistance, managing to stumble onto his knees and then regain his feet.

"Daddy has big plans for you." She held a martini glass in one hand, sipping from it, regarding him with a pleased smirk. "Mmmm, appletini. Delicious. Want a taste?" She held it toward him, and it took all of his self-control not to send it rushing back at her, but he refrained.

"What do you mean?" He was giving her all of two minutes to say something worthwhile, and then he would leave. He just wanted to go home, to get away from here. He certainly wasn't in the mood to listen to her gloat. She had what she wanted. She had Hunter. Why keep torturing him?

"I know he's going to talk to you about it tomorrow, and I probably shouldn't say anything..." She paused for effect, waiting for him to beg her to go on. Fisher stayed silent. She shrugged. His compliance was obviously not necessary. "I'll tell you this much. The managing editor position in San Diego is up for grabs."

"And I care why?"

"You're Daddy's choice, that's why."

San Diego? Managing editor? Why him? Yeah, he'd heard rumors that it was going to happen, but he'd paid no attention. He didn't consider himself good enough to even rate consideration. There had to be people higher up the ladder more qualified, surely? Granted, that is what he went to school for, what his degree was in. But this wasn't anything he had expected to happen, certainly not so soon. And San Diego, of all places. Why, that would mean...

The light bulb went on at last. "You're trying to get rid of me."

"Why, Fisher, whatever do you mean? Why would I want to do that?"

Her voice reeked of insincerity. Other people might buy this act, but Fisher wasn't one of them. Now he understood. She must have put the suggestion into daddy dearest's head. Why San Diego? Because it was far away from here, and from Hunter. But he had to wonder why she would even care about that now, now that she had obviously ensnared him and was going to marry him. What difference did it make where Fisher lived? His head ached too much to give proper consideration to the matter.

Besides, her two minutes were done.

"I don't know, Lana, you tell me." He started to push past her, but she continued to block the doorway.

She tossed the empty glass onto the carpet with a careless gesture. It didn't break, rolling clumsily to a stop. She curled her hand about Fisher's chin, her eyes fixed on his. "To save you pain, darling," she cooed, "to keep you from seeing what I have and what you can't have and never will Surely you don't want to see us together? Wouldn't that be rather painful for you? Now be a good boy, and act surprised tomorrow when Daddy tells you. Take the job, and go to San Diego. It's really easy, if you try." Her smile was venomous, her words slashing across Fisher's heart like a scalpel.

Something inside Fisher snapped at that moment. He was tired of her, and tired of her spoiled rich girl attitude, her waste of a life, and her lack of a personality. He was tired of her trying to goad him into doing something he really didn't want to do, just to suit her own purposes. And he was tired of playing nice with her just because he worked for her father. He was tired of people trying to mold him into what they wanted him to be. All he had ever wanted to do was write. And be with Hunter. He'd given up his dreams of writing his book because his mother had made them sound worthless and hopeless. He'd thrown it away, hidden all of his desires and stopped dreaming, allowed himself to be turned into a journalist, allowed his life to be shaped for him. His mother had tried to separate him from Hunter, too, but he'd always managed to hang on to him. The rest of his life had been forced onto him. Maybe forced was too strong a word. Strongly suggested wasn't quite right either. He had no one to blame for that, though, but himself. He'd never stood up for himself in his whole life. He was no better than his father, letting himself be railroaded out of his only son's life. Why hadn't his father fought for him harder? Why? Did he just not care? Was that it? Or was the father as weak as the son? That whole acorn and tree thing, being played out in the pages of his life.



Hunter had always cared, though. Hunter was always there for him, with his cheesy jokes, his pleasure in playing pranks, his enthusiasm for life, his beautiful smile, and his unwavering friendship. Hunter was what mattered and always had. Certainly not this clownish excuse of a human being who was given everything and did nothing with it; a waste of space and a useless addition to the human race.

He stuck his forefinger directly in her face. "Lana, listen to me and listen to me closely, see if you can follow what I'm about to say. Keep your nose out of my business; it has nothing to do with you. I'm not going to San Diego. Not now, not ever. You can't get rid of me that easily. I'm staying here, and I'm staying in Hunter's life. And I'm going to fight you for him. With every last breath in my body I'm going to fight, because he deserves someone better than you, you overpriced painted sad little Daddy's girl. And I'm going to try to be that someone, 'cause yeah, I love him. Now get the hell out of my way." He pushed past her, although he did take a moment to pause and observe her expression, her painted lips frozen in an "o" of amazement, shocked into speechlessness. Just the way he liked her.

The party was still going on, apparently. Music poured through the house, as well as the sound of people laughing. The bonfire must either be done, or had lost its value as a pastime. No telling how long he'd been... been what? Asleep? Unconscious? Hallucinating? What was that all about, anyway? Somehow dream didn't quite cut it, 'cause he'd seen things that he'd never seen before. Things that made him wonder if they were true. Like that scene with his dad, although the rest of it was true enough, he'd lived it once already; those were obviously memories. Of course, he could have just imagined that part. No reason to think it was real, or that it had ever happened. But why did he dream about Arthur Rimbaud, of all people? And why did Rimbaud look like Leonardo Di Caprio?

As for his father, though, there was one way he knew of to find out.

He walked down the hallway, skirting a couple of partygoers whose unconscious forms littered the passageway, apparently having passed out at some point. He was careful not to tread on them. Reaching the same door he'd gone out before, he opened it, and stepped outside. The evening air was refreshing. A cool breeze caressed his cheek. The threat of rain seemed to be a thing of the past. The moon alone greeted his return. The horde of partying pyromaniacs was gone, no doubt dispersed about the house, engaged in other wacky hijinks. The bonfire was forgotten for other games. Ignored, it was burning itself out.

He was here for a purpose, though, which did not include playing Smokey the Bear. He pulled out his phone, punched in the familiar number. He hoped she was home, and alone. That would make things much easier. She answered quickly.

"Hello, sweetheart, I didn't expect to hear from you tonight. Did you come to your senses and decide not to go to that dreadful party?"

"No, Mom, I didn't. I'm here." For a moment he quailed at her tone. How would he do this? Ask her about things he'd never questioned before? Wouldn't it be easier to just say he'd wanted to say hello, nothing more?

A vision of Hunter appeared before him. God, he was so beautiful. Fisher wanted to cry in frustration. He clenched his free hand into a fist, the nails digging into his skin. A technique he'd used before to focus himself. No, he wasn't going to cry. He was stronger than this, if he'd only try. He knew he was. He knew he could do this. He was entitled to the truth, wasn't he? To know if what he saw was real, or just a strange dream?

"With him?" Why did she have to do that?

"Hunter's here somewhere, yeah. Mom, that's not why I called. I don't want to talk about Hunter right now. I want to talk about Dad."

His words were met with an abrupt silence. Well, what did he expect? He'd never talked about his father before, never even asked about him, not that he remembered. He'd been an obedient child, and accepted what she had told him without question. She must be shocked at this unexpected turn of events, and rightly so. He gave her a moment to respond, and when she didn't, he continued.

"Why did Dad leave us?"

"Fisher, why are you asking me this now?"

"Mom, please humor me. I need to know now, that's all."

"Fisher, be reasonable, you can't expect me to rehash everything. And certainly not over the phone."

"I don't want a rehash of all your arguments," he persisted. "I just need to know why. And why he never came back for me. When he left, did he... did he say anything about me, about wanting to tell me good-bye or anything?" He almost held his breath, forcing himself to breathe. Don't back down, not now. He had a right to know, didn't he, about his own father? Of course, she could lie about it, even if it was true, but he didn't think she would. She was like him, honest to a fault. Her sin was a sin of omission, not one of deception.

There was another long moment of silence. He began to think he'd lost the connection. He shifted the phone to his other hand as he began to walk the perimeter of the patio. He found his jacket where he had dropped it earlier, or rather where Hunter had dropped it. Picking it up, he shook off the leaves that covered it and shrugged it on. "Mom, you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here, Fisher."

"You didn't say anything, I wasn't sure."

"Fisher, everything I've ever done has been for your own good, and because I love you." She sounded flustered. He wasn't used to hearing that in her. Suddenly he knew it was true.

"He did, didn't he? And you told him no. And you told him never to come back, or you'd call the police on him. That's why he stayed away, isn't it? It had nothing to do with me..."

"With you? Why would it have to do to... Fisher, what's gotten into you? Why are you making these accusations?" He could hear the pain in her voice, and he winced. That hadn't been his intention.

Why indeed? How could he explain his sudden need to verify the truth? He couldn't very well say because he'd seen it with his own eyes, and that Arthur Rimbaud had seen it too. She'd have him locked up for sure, and he honestly couldn't blame her. He had been there and yet he found it hard to believe, himself.

On the other hand, her refusal to answer could be seen as an admission. Of what? Guilt? Duplicity? Being a mother? He sighed, attempting to order his thoughts. Even now, he found he couldn't be really angry with her. She was his mom. He decided to try a different tack.

"Was my writing really that bad, Mom?"

"What do you mean? You know I think you're a wonderful writer!" she said indignantly.

"No, you don't. You think I'm a good journalist. Admit it, you hated my writing. You told me I needed to quit wasting my time writing about things that aren't true, and to stick to the facts."

"I did, and see how well you've done. Fiction is a waste of time."

"I liked writing my stories. And my book."

"You wrote a book? What is it about? Did you ever try to publish it?"

"Not that kind of book. A novel, Mom. A piece of fiction. A waste of time."

More silence. This didn't seem to be going well, not at all. And was there really a point to it now, anyway?

"Hunter loved it. He read every bit of it, and he told me to keep writing it. He said it was good. I threw it away because of you, but he believed in it."

He heard what he thought might be a snort of contempt. He hoped not.

"Mom, why do you get that way when I mention him? Why don't you like Hunter, what's he ever done to make you not like him?"

"Why? Because I hate to see you make a fool of yourself over someone who doesn't deserve your love!" she snapped.

That shocked him. A great deal. Even his mother knew how he felt about Hunter? "Mom," he began, slowly, surprised at how calm and rational he was being, especially after the venom he had just spewed at Lana, "Hunter is a better man than you've ever given him credit for. You don't know him the way you think you do. You've never really given him a chance, ever since we were kids, and we used to get in trouble together. Hunter believes in me. Without hesitation or reservation. And no matter what you say, I won't give up on him, or stop being his friend, and I certainly have no intention of cutting him out of my life. If I love him, then that's my business, and I'll deal with it. But if I do, it would be nice if you respected that." He took a deep breath, finding strength in his own words. "No, erase that. I do love him. And I love you too. Live with it. Please. I have to go." And he hung up abruptly.

Fisher felt drained. He was sure that at any minute now his legs were going to fold under him and he would collapse. Probably residual trauma from his earlier head injury. Or the unaccustomed outpouring of emotion. He slid his phone into his pocket. Maybe if he sat down for a minute and let the world stop spinning, he'd feel better. But as all the furniture had been moved in preparation for the bonfire, there was nowhere to go except down. He felt himself beginning to crumple, prepared for the feel of cold stone against his ass.

Instead, a pair of strong familiar arms wound about him, and he became aware of a warm chest that cushioned him as he leaned back into it. He didn't have to look to know who this was. Hunter to the rescue. His knight in shining armor. Or was that vampire now? And if Hunter was a vampire, did that make him, Fisher, a vampire hunter?

Until he turned his head and looked into those gorgeous blue eyes. "Hunter," he managed to get out before those soft lips made conversation optional.

Turning completely within the radius of Hunter's embrace so that they were face to face, Fisher wound his own arms about him and melted into that kiss, returning it with his entire heart and soul. He felt at peace, he felt so very right, and he didn't want that to end, nor reality to sink in. Not yet. He just wanted to hang on to this moment for as long as he could.

When they both decided to breathe, Fisher realized that as quickly as they had begun, they would never end. Although it only seemed quickly, for he had really loved Hunter as long as he had known him. It had just taken him this long to come to terms with it.

Except they didn't have a relationship, did they? Hunter was going to marry Lana, and despite all of the bravado that he had displayed on Hunter's behalf with his mother, reality was about to set in with all its ugliness. Reality in the form of marriage, duty and responsibility, two things of which he had always been a stout proponent. Now, he wasn't quite as sure. Not in the face of losing this new happiness.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," he apologized, afraid to look into Hunter's eyes. He felt that familiar hand lifting his head, and he couldn't help but gaze into those beautiful pools, albeit hesitantly.

"Of course you should," Hunter reassured him. "It was my idea as much as yours."

"I don't think Lana would see it that way." Her very name was abhorrent to his tongue. "On second thought, screw her. I don't care what she thinks. Or that she is your fiancée. Or anything else." And he pressed his lips against Hunter's once more, slid his hands through those silken locks, and kissed him again.

This time when they came up for air, Hunter spoke. "What are you talking about, Fisher? Fiancée? What?"

"Lana. She said... I heard her say... you and her... getting married," Fisher babbled.

Hunter chuckled, peppering Fisher's face with tender kisses. "Not in this lifetime, or any other. I've been trying to tell you that I love you, you jerk, but you kept running away from me. You were starting to make me a little paranoid."

"Y-you... you... you love... me?" Fisher stammered.

"Yes, I love you," Hunter repeated, cupping one hand against Fisher's cheek. "I always have. And for the record, I heard what you told your mother." Fisher thought he had never seen his friend wear a bigger shit-eating grin.

"You're so full of yourself," he managed a small chuckle before his lips became otherwise occupied.

They kissed again, more softly, a sweeter kiss, one filled with hope. Why hadn't it occurred to him that Lana might be lying, trying to manipulate him, the same way that she must be doing with the job offer in San Diego? Which might also be a boldfaced lie. And if it wasn't, he would simply turn it down. That was easy enough.

"Then all this stuff about being a vampire, what was that about?"

"Oh, that was the truth, I am." He took Fisher's hand and brought it up to his mouth, took his finger and rubbed it against his canines, both of them. "I suspected that you might just love me too when you got so upset when I told you the truth about what happened to me. You weren't upset at the part about my being a vampire, only when you thought that I had sex with another man. At least that's what I hoped you were jealous of. And I'll say it again, so please believe me, that didn't happen, I swear it."

"You're right, I was jealous of that," Fisher admitted, grateful that the night hid his warm blush. "I didn't want to think of you with anyone but me. I believe you, Hunter, I do."

"So why didn't you tell me?"

A fair question. One that deserved an honest answer. "Because I was afraid."

"Afraid? But why? We've known each other forever, we've been best friends since we were little kids. Why would you be afraid of me now?"

Fisher closed his eyes, in an attempt to gain the courage to say the words, not have to look into Hunter's eyes, to see what he might see. "I didn't think I deserved you. I mean, you're so beautiful and smart and wonderful and I'm... just me."

"Just you?" Hunter repeated indignantly. "Open your eyes and look at me, Fisher Anthony Roberts!"

Fisher's eyes flew open as Hunter invoked the power of his full name. Something he did so seldom that Fisher could count the times on the fingers of one hand, and have at least one finger to spare.

"I happen to think that you are incredibly beautiful and sexy and far smarter than I am, not to mention a helluva talented writer, and the best friend a guy could ever ask for."

Hunter's words went straight through Fisher, and he warmed himself upon them. Love was not a matter of who possessed what body parts, or about how they fit or didn't fit, or about procreation, or being a particular gender. Love was about trust, and respect, and shared laughter, and comfortable silences. Joking together, and being able to laugh together at the stupid things in life. About wanting to be with someone for all of their life and yours, to be there for them in times of trouble, and to celebrate with them the times of joy. Love was, in a nutshell, Hunter Long.

"I think we should go home," Hunter said, his fingers tenderly caressing Fisher's temple. Fisher tried not to wince, but the wound was still sore.

"We should?"

"We should." Hunter nodded. "I think I should take care of your head. You got quite a bump there, in case you didn't know. You can tell me how you got it. And there are still some things I need to tell you, but not here. Besides, I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned this party is over."

Fisher heartily agreed with him. About all of it. He didn't mind if they left. After all, he'd been the one that hadn't even wanted to come. "Things?" When Hunter flashed him a toothy grin, he remembered. "Oh right. Those things. Okay. Um, let me think. We both have our cars, should we meet there or what?"

"Not on your life, I'll drive, we'll get your car later." Hunter swept him back into his embrace, and Fisher gave in to the kiss without argument.

They listened to an oldies station on the drive back to the house. Fisher couldn't say he remembered a single song, it all blended together into one glorious mishmash of sound. How

could he think about music when Hunter was so very close to him? When Fisher had gotten in on the passenger side, Hunter had patted the bench seat beside him, giving him one of those looks of his which made goo of Fisher's insides, and Fisher had slid over as far as he could, until their legs met, sending a frisson of unexpected pleasure coursing through his system. Occasionally he wondered if he were dreaming, but decided that he didn't really want to know. It didn't matter if he was, he would just never wake up, he decided.

"Why the prom suits?" Fisher asked, once they'd returned home and were seated together on the couch in the living room, a Van Morrison CD playing in the background, surrounded by the Halloween pretties with which Hunter had decorated the house. That was more relaxing than the sounds of Halloween which was ready for the following night. Hunter insisted on fussing over his forehead, and he relaxed into his friend's tender ministrations.

"I wanted to remind you of that night," Hunter admitted, pausing as he dabbed hydrogen peroxide over the cut, having bathed it with warm water already. "We went to the prom together, remember?"

"Yeah, well, not exactly together," Fisher, the eternal nitpicker, corrected him, "we went stag, which isn't the same thing. Going together would be like we were dating, and we weren't, and..."

"Not yet," Hunter interrupted, with a knowing smirk that caused Fisher's cheeks to flame.

"Besides, if you'll recall, you talked me into it, even though I told you I didn't want to go."

Hunter pressed his lips against Fisher's forehead tenderly, before applying a Band-Aid. "So, what's the real reason you didn't want to go?"

"What do you think?"

"I dunno, tell me," Hunter teased. Finished playing Florence Nightingale, he sat on the sofa, so close to Fisher that if he were any closer, he'd be in his lap.

Fisher took a deep breath, decided why not, this was a night for complete honesty, and for revelations, and he blurted out, "Because I didn't want to see you with a girl. Any girl. It... it bothered me, more than I wanted to admit." He knew he was probably feeding Hunter's ego with that admission, but it was the truth, and one he could no longer deny. He'd had fifteen years of doing just that, if not more. "You were supposed to be taking a date," Fisher reminded him. "I didn't want to have to watch you dancing with all the girls who always swarm you, and watch while they hung all over you. That was always a catfight waiting to happen." He looked down at his hands, set sedately in his lap, the fingers twitching nervously. "But you managed to get into a fight with your date just before prom and we ended up going together, and having a great time."

"We did." Hunter agreed. "A great time."

Fisher's mind went back to that night. It wasn't the prom he remembered so much as the time spent together afterward. Sure, the prom itself was fine. The event was held in the elegant ballroom of some swanky hotel, and everything looked beautiful. They'd hung out with some other guys who'd gone stag, talked to their friends, ate cake, and drank punch. Fisher had caught someone trying to spike the large punchbowl, and he'd reported him, naturally. Which had gotten him into a bit of Dutch with their friends, who accused him of being a wet blanket. Hunter had stood up for him, though, when some of the other guys had gotten mad about it. They got over it. Everyone listened when Hunter spoke, he had a natural charisma.

After the prom, they had driven around, the pack gradually thinning out until it was just him and Hunter. They ended up hanging out at an all-night diner for hours, sharing orders of French fries. Hot, thick and greasy, and smeared with rich red catsup. They washed them down with cherry Cokes, as they debated everything under the sun. About 3 am, they were thrown out for getting into a food fight. Hunter had started it, naturally. There was not much open at that hour so, as they were unwilling to go home yet, they discovered other forms of entertainment. They ended up throwing toilet paper all over the trees in the prom queen's front yard. And then those of some of the members of the football team. And Hunter's cancelled prom date, which was Fisher's idea. They almost got caught there when she came back in the wee hours of the morning in the company of another guy. Fisher and Hunter had managed to hide long enough to watch them necking in the front seat of the boy's car, giggling at how fickle women could be before they beat feet and split the scene. Naturally, Hunter was the instigator in all of this, Fisher his unwilling accomplice. At least he claimed to be unwilling. He couldn't very well let his best friend get caught, now could he? He had to lend him his common sense approach to vandalism, or risk losing him. A roundabout way of saying that wherever Hunter Long led, Fisher Roberts would follow.

"Fisher, that fight was no accident," Hunter confessed, a boyish grin playing across his pretty lips. "I never did want to go with... I don't even remember her name any more."

"Elaine." Fisher quickly supplied the missing information. Hunter arched a surprised brow.

"You remember?"

"I remember all of your girls, Hunter." He blushed at his own words, returning to the subject at hand hastily. "Anyway, that was a fun night. You looked incredible. Still do." He hoped that didn't sound as sappy as he thought it did, he was just being honest. He was relieved to see Hunter's smile.

"That was a very fun night," he agreed. "Don't laugh, but I wanted to kiss you that night, Fisher. Very badly. You have no idea how close I came to doing it, too."



"You did? Seriously?" Fisher was amazed.

"I did. Seriously."

"Then, why didn't you?" he asked, although the answer was pretty obvious.

"You weren't ready, and I knew it. I didn't know if you'd ever be ready, but I certainly didn't want to take a chance on freaking you out and driving you away from me."

"Probably a smooth move," Fisher had to admit, thinking about his younger uptight self. As opposed to his older uptight self. "So what now?"

"What now?"

"Where do we go from here?"

"Well, the way I see it," Hunter began. He took Fisher's hand into his, twined their fingers together as he spoke. Lifting their joined hands, he kissed the back of Fisher's softly. "I think we need to deal with my vampire issue, 'cause if you can't accept that, then I think there is nowhere for us *to* go. You know?"

Yesterday Fisher would have laughed it off as a practical joke. A pre-Halloween prank intended to knock him for a loop and for Hunter to have a little fun at his expense. After what he had gone through tonight, though, he found it hard not to give some credence to Hunter's story.

"Wait a minute." He tried to offer one last moment of resistance to the belief that Hunter was a vampire. "What about that sunlight thing? And sleeping in a coffin, all that stuff? Isn't it written into the vampire bylaws? Thou shalt not be under the sun, or something?" He had read vampire stories, once upon a time, and he still remembered the strict rules under which the afflicted members of that particular society operated.

"Maybe you should check my room for a hidden coffin," Hunter suggested, with more than a hint of a leer, which produced an answering blush in Fisher.

"Those stories are just not true." Hunter shrugged. "They're just urban legends. Myths and fairy tales. They were probably meant to lend a level of creepiness to the original story. What can I say?"

Well, that shot that down, quite neatly, didn't it? What else could he remember about vampires and their habits?

"Are you... have you been...?" Was there a delicate way to put what Fisher was thinking?

"Feasting on human blood? Yes and no," Hunter replied enigmatically. "I've been getting some from a blood bank, but I can't keep on doing that. It's not very practical." He turned Fisher's hand over, his lips caressing his wrist. Fisher moaned softly at his touch.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll figure something out, don't worry."

"Try and stop me from worrying, I think you know me better than that." Fisher's stubborn streak was coming to the fore. He gazed almost defiantly at his friend. "Tell me what happens when you bite someone and drink their blood. I mean, will it make me into a vampire too or what?" He sounded braver than he felt, asking that question. Contrary to popular belief, he did have an imagination. And it seemed to be running a bit wild.

"Fisher, I'm not going to bite you, and even if I did, which I won't, it won't turn you. There has to be a mutual blood exchange. Then you have to die with my blood still in you. But that doesn't matter, since... "

"Shush." Fisher laid his finger across Hunter's lips. "If it's what you need, I'll do it, no argument, Mister Long."

Hunter kissed the lone finger, chuckled softly. "C'mere you," he said, pulling Fisher onto his lap, so that he straddled him and they were face to face. He wound his arms about Fisher's waist, holding him securely there. "Is this the same guy who doesn't like to give blood because he can't stand the sight of it?" he teased.

"I resent that." Fisher said. He was trying to maintain some semblance of dignity, but when you have your ass planted on someone's lap, dignity is already lost. "I give blood on a regular basis, want to check my record?"

"Nope, since we go together, that would be silly."

"Indeed." Fisher sounded somewhat pacified at the admission.

"And I'm also the one who is there with you when you get your blood taken, and I watch you not watch the proceedings. Every time. Isn't that also true?"

That was a little harder to deny, as it happened to be the truth. Blood made him queasy, especially his own. So in order to cope, he refused to watch the Red Cross workers do their job, from the moment they swabbed the area with a sterile cotton ball and cold alcohol and inserted the incredibly long needle into his arm until they removed it and replace it with a large cotton ball. The giggling techs who'd come to know him and Hunter from their regular visits, usually pasted a cartoon character Band-Aid on Fisher's forearm, and offered him a sucker, as if he were a child, while they flirted outrageously with Hunter. Typical behavior of any female that came within Hunter's immediate vicinity. But still Fisher continued to donate blood every couple of months, like clockwork, queasy or not.

"I'm still going to do it, so don't argue with me." Fisher set his mouth into a firm line, one which brooked no argument. Hunter managed to tease it open, using his tongue, licking the outside of his lips, before he slid his tongue inside of Fisher's mouth. It was hard to argue with

such an enticement, and Fisher found himself responding, accepting Hunter's tongue and allowing it entrance.

Fisher found himself incredibly turned on by that kiss. He'd never been so aroused in all his life. The few kisses he had shared with the women he'd dated had been nothing like this, which had a great deal to do with why he had never progressed beyond that stage with any of them. Now he found himself wanting more, even if he didn't really know exactly what that more entailed. He wanted to find out, assuming of course, that Hunter wanted to, or even could. Fisher wasn't sure what limitations vampires might have regarding sexual relations, if any. It wasn't exactly a question which had ever come up before in his studies.

As they kissed, he could feel Hunter's hands busily working at ridding him of his tie. Before he could reach for it, to set it on the couch, Hunter had tossed it onto the floor. Then came the jacket, which he slid off of Fisher's shoulders and arms, and it followed the same fate as the tie. It was difficult to argue about tidiness when Hunter's tongue was so very much in Fisher's mouth. Fisher could feel his buttons being undone, starting at the top; then the fabric was pushed back and Hunter's fingers were skating across his skin and he felt a distinct tingle coursing through his body.

Hunter disengaged his mouth from Fisher's, bending his head over his bared chest, his tongue licking at Fisher's soft skin, trailing over one of his nipples. Fisher's eyes went wide at the unaccustomed touch. He gasped. A sound which quickly became a moan as Hunter took the nipple between his lips softly, then released it and repeated the action with the other one. Fisher was finding logical thought difficult to maintain, but he found the presence of mind to ask the question which was bothering him. Or at least try to.

"Hunter... "

"Hmmm?"

"Can you... I mean, is there any reason that you can't...?" The question wasn't coming out quite the way he intended. He was trying to be delicate, for crying out loud.

Hunter raised his head, and Fisher could see the light of mischief in his eyes. "You want to know if being a vampire keeps me from getting it up?"

"That's a crude version of my question, but yes." Hunter had a way of seeing through everything he said or did, he always had.

Hunter took Fisher's hand, and guided it to his bulging crotch. "Does that answer your question?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Fisher tried to sound casual, although his voice managed to jump a complete octave, in spite of his best efforts to contain it. The feel of Hunter's hardness, the immediacy of having it beneath his palm, was having a definite effect on him.

"Don't worry, darling," Hunter whispered in a husky contralto that was meant to be amusing but was only serving to raise Fisher's blood pressure, "I won't get you pregnant."

Just like old times. But with a difference. A difference reflected in the tent in Fisher's own pants. They sniggered together, but the momentary release only served to put a new edge on their hunger. Hunter swatted Fisher's ass lightly. "Get up for a minute."

"Why? Is something wrong?" Fisher had the sinking feeling he'd ruined something, and his anxiety meter rose accordingly.

Hunter gave him a reassuring kiss. "Not a thing. I just think we should go into the bedroom," he murmured suggestively, "there's more room there."

Fisher made a half-hearted attempt to retrieve his discarded clothing, but a few heated kisses and suggestive touches from Hunter made that effort obsolete. They decided on Fisher's bedroom as being the better choice—his bed was a full-sized one, with a pillow top mattress, and the room wasn't littered with anything they might step on.

They groped and kissed their way down the hall. Along the way, Hunter removed Fisher's shirt and vest, tossing both articles of clothing somewhere in the hallway, before busying himself with Fisher's belt. Their kisses became more feverish now as they approached the bed, half sitting, half-reclining on the edge. Hunter slid the belt through its loops, before giving it a place on the floor. Fisher, for his part, had managed to divest Hunter of his prom jacket and his blue vest, and was working on his shirt, but he found himself distracted by what Hunter was doing. Too many sensations—all good—were bombarding him all at once. A sensory overload of the most pleasant kind.

"Shoes," Hunter whispered.

"What?"

"Take off your shoes," he instructed Fisher, "or the pants won't go."

Of course. It was just so hard to think of everything at once, when his cock was so hard and distracting him so much, and as every piece of clothing that he removed from Hunter was revealing more and more of that lovely pale flesh. Fisher Roberts was most decidedly coming undone. But how very sweet it was.

His helpful friend and major exhibitionist took matters into his own hands. Making a show of it, he pulled his own arms out of his shirt sleeves, taking a moment to deliberately trail his hands across his chest in the most sensual motion Fisher had ever seen. Fisher almost swallowed

his tongue. Hunter removed his shirt entirely, and it too became lost to view. Falling backward onto the bed, he pulled up one leg at a time, untied his black dress shoes and chucked them, followed by the black silk socks he was wearing. Fisher found himself mesmerized as Hunter unbuttoned his fly, pulling the zipper down carefully. If Fisher had taken a bet with himself on whether Hunter was wearing boxers or briefs, he would have lost. The answer was none of the above, he was going completely commando. Which meant that his engorged beast had now been released. Fisher swallowed.

It wasn't like he hadn't seen Hunter naked before, because he had. That was inevitable over the course of four years of high school Phys Ed, not to mention eight years of living together. But this—this was completely different. This was up close and personal, not hot and sweaty in a locker room. Maybe that was not the right analogy to bring to mind, as it only served to remind him that he'd actually been watching Hunter back then, whether he admitted it to himself or not—and Fisher also realized that he had never wanted to touch anyone as badly as he wanted to touch Hunter Long right here and now.

Hunter's inquiry of "Pants?" made him remember he wasn't done. But Hunter saved him the necessity of doing anything as he flipped Fisher onto his back and shimmied his trousers down his legs, followed quickly by his underwear. Boxers. Pale blue ones—a rather surprising choice for the conservative Fisher—which were soon communing with the carpet as well.

At Hunter's request, Fisher scooted up until he lay in the center of the bed, feeling rather exposed. He resisted the fleeting urge to cover himself. It was a bit late for that, and he found that he could resist the desire to do so, if he tried. He wanted Hunter to look at him, and he, in turn, was drinking in the sight of the naked Hunter. And thoroughly enjoying it.

He bent his legs, also at Hunter's request, and the brunet took up a position between them. There was a light in Hunter's eyes which Fisher had never seen there before, one that seemed to be directed at him. Hunter kissed his left knee, his fingers caressing the flesh of Fisher's calf, eliciting another moan.

"Hunter, what are we going to do?" Fisher asked. He hoped that his friend had some ideas in that arena, as Fisher was woefully ignorant of the mechanics of gay sex. Sure, he could figure out for himself what part went where. It wasn't his knowledge of anatomy that was lacking, even if his interest in the female form was virtually non-existent. When they were going through Sex Ed back in health class, there had been absolutely no information being offered concerning the how-to's and the wherefore's of gay sex. And he had questions, lots of questions. For example, he wasn't sure how it was determined who was supposed to do what to whom, although he suspected

from their relative positions that he was going to be on the receiving end of it. Assuming that was what they were doing. And Fisher wasn't one to make assumptions if he could help it.

"What do you want to do?"

"Be with you."

"You have me, baby." Hunter smiled, and Fisher puddled, his heart swelling, his body flush with heat.

"I want to learn how to please you," Fisher said. His lower lip was trembling. He tried to still it, afraid he was on the verge of nervous tears. That wouldn't do, no, not at all.

Hunter kissed his knee again, then turned his leg slightly outward and began to kiss Fisher's thigh, slowly, deliberately, marking a path along his soft flesh. "Just relax," he encouraged him, "I'll teach you anything you wish to learn, but right now, I want to please you. I've been waiting for this moment for a very long time, Fisher."

"You have?"

"I have." Those lips, such things they were doing to him. He had never had such an intense hard-on in his entire life, it felt so good it was almost painful.

"Hunter?"

"Mmmmmm?"

"Have you ever been with anyone before?"

Hunter gave him a careful look, glancing up from where he was kissing his way along Fisher's other thigh. "Please don't be upset if I tell you?" he asked cautiously.

"I won't," Fisher promised.

"I have. It was a long time ago, when I was in college. Only two guys, and one woman. No, not at the same time," he forestalled what he could feel was Fisher's next question, running his tongue along that very sweet flesh. He stroked his other leg, attempting to still his trembling. "Does that bother you?"

Fisher exhaled in relief, relaxing a bit. "No, I was hoping one of us knew what he was doing."

That brought a large smile to Hunter's lips, which only served to intensify the effect he was having on Fisher. "My sweet, sweet, practical Fisher," he murmured, his fingers caressing the sensitive flesh where his thigh met his groin, inducing another moan. He leaned down and swept his tongue along that crease, feeling Fisher vibrate at his touch.

"Tell me if something bothers you," he murmured, "I don't want to do anything to upset or hurt you."

"I will," Fisher promised softly. He reached his hand toward Hunter, caressing his soft dark brown hair. He found it hard to believe that they were really here together like this. It seemed like a dream on a par with the one he'd had this evening, that odd little manifestation of his psyche, almost like a cross between *It's a Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Carol*. But this was no dream, this was reality.

He'd held his secret love for Hunter inside of him even before he knew it for what it was. Societal conditioning had caused him to suppress how he felt, afraid to be perceived as something less than the other people around him, simply because he was different. But his heart had refused to allow him to succumb to such stupidity. Prejudice was prejudice no matter what form it took. And love was still love. He realized now that Hunter was the *one* and always had been, and there was nowhere else on earth that he would rather be than right here with this man who he loved so very much.

Continuing to caress his thighs gently, Hunter turned his attention to Fisher's erection. His cock was maybe seven inches long, pink and circumcised, and it had a good girth to it, which Hunter discovered as he circumnavigated it with his fingers, wrapping them about his length. "You feel so good," he murmured, "you have no idea how long I've dreamt of this, of you..." He leaned in and softly kissed the tip of Fisher's cock.

Fisher thought he was about to explode. His sexual experience thus far was limited to some awkward attempts at masturbation, but he hadn't really gotten into it. And sleeping in the room next to his mother's as a teen didn't help. Once he and Hunter bought their house he had the opportunity, but he was always afraid that Hunter would overhear him and Fisher would be embarrassed. Especially if Hunter discovered that Fisher, on the rare occasions when he actually completed the act, did so with Hunter's image in his mind's eye. As a result, he had entirely no self-control, and he was unabashedly leaking fluid from the head of his cock.

Hunter took advantage of this natural lubrication as he stroked Fisher's hardness, continuing to lap hungrily at the head, slipping his tongue into the slit. "You taste delicious," he murmured into Fisher's flesh.

Fisher thought he had never felt anything as wonderful as Hunter's light, careful stroking of his erection. He didn't want to embarrass himself by orgasming too soon. And he also wanted to please Hunter, if he only knew how.

"Are you ready..." he began, tentatively, "to, you know... I mean, do you want to... you know... me?" He wasn't sure what was the proper term to use, under the circumstances, so settled at last for, "Do you want to make love to me?" as better than its more vulgar counterpart.

"Not tonight," Hunter responded.

Fisher's heart fell. Had he done something wrong? Was he not responsive enough? Was there something he should be doing that he wasn't?

Hunter reassured him, hastening to kiss him softly. "Shhh, shhh, don't look like that. It's too much for you all in one night. Later, when I have a chance to properly loosen you, so it won't hurt. When I have better lube. Or any. I haven't bought any lube in years, I have to confess. I was so not prepared to have you here like this, I mean I always hoped, and dreamed..."

Fisher was touched at the raw emotion he heard in his lover's voice, it went straight to his heart. "We can wait," he reassured him, "but don't you want... something... I mean..."

"Don't worry, sweet love, we're not done, far from it. I'm going to show you how good it feels to be inside of someone."

"Who?" Fisher asked, without thinking, immediately blushing.

"Me, silly," Hunter chuckled, continuing to lube Fisher's cock, with slick strokes. "Now listen, I'm going to take this slowly, for both our sakes. It's been a very long time for me, and it'll take me a minute for my body to adjust. But I promise you that you are so going to like this. All right?"

"All right," Fisher breathed, his body tensing in anticipation.

"Sweetheart, relax, please," Hunter begged him, using his free hand to caress Fisher with love and patience. "This will be good, I swear. Would I lie to you?"

Fisher shook his head. He trusted Hunter implicitly. But he had another concern that he needed to address first.

"Hunter?"

"Hmmmmmm?" Hunter's lips encompassed the head of Fisher's cock, sucking at it lightly, causing him to lose his train of thought momentarily.

"While we're... doing this... will you bite me? Isn't that how it works? During sex?"

He watched Hunter's face anxiously. If this was real—and by now he believed that it was—then he knew that Hunter needed him in that particular way, and he wanted to give him what he needed.

Hunter lifted his face, arching his eyebrows, giving Fisher an appraising look. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course, I'm serious. Hunter, I'd do anything for you. And I'm selfish too, I don't want to lose you. Not now, not ever. You're too much a part of my life." Fisher's forehead puckered as he tried not to panic at the idea of losing Hunter. This was too important to both of them, and not something to be lightly tossed off, as Hunter was so accustomed to doing with most serious



subjects. He watched Hunter's face carefully, certain that he was debating the matter internally. Surely common sense—and hunger—would win out.

"Sure," Hunter agreed, and Fisher released his pent-up breath, gratefully.

Now they could move on to other matters.

"I promise I'll show you more next time, baby," Hunter whispered, punctuating every other word with a kiss to Fisher's cock, "but for right now we'll take it slow. Relatively speaking." His blue eyes were twinkling, which only served to make Fisher's cock twitch in anticipation.

"Are you comfortable the way you are?"

"Yeah, fine."

Hunter laid a last tender kiss, running his hand along Fisher's length. "I think you're wet enough to do it," he gauged. "If I get too heavy, or if you don't like the way it feels, just tell me, okay?"

Fisher nodded, although he didn't have the least idea what Hunter was talking about, or what he intended to do.

Hunter caressed Fisher's legs until they were relaxed, pressed flat against the bed, kissing each knee before he did. He straddled Fisher's slender form, positioning his long lean frame above him, while Fisher watched every move he made with complete and utter fascination. He reached beneath him for Fisher's cock, held it lightly with one hand, as he guided it toward his own entrance.

"Let me do all the work," he cautioned Fisher, lowering himself slowly on his hardness. "Just relax and keep breathing..."

Fisher was stunned. He had certainly not expected this, not in a million years. He felt as if Hunter had just offered him the most precious gift ever, in the form of his own body. As Hunter eased himself down onto Fisher's cock, he felt the tight muscles which ringed his lover's hole as they clung to him, almost resistant to what it was that he and Hunter were trying to do. He heard Hunter gasp.

"What's wrong?" Fisher gazed up at him in alarm. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, no... hang on."

Fisher could hear Hunter release his breath in painfully short pants, like he was trying to breathe above his pain. He couldn't help but feel that something was wrong. He tried not to tense up, waiting as patiently as he could manage, his eyes never leaving Hunter's face. If he thought the pain was getting worse, he'd push him off if it came to that, rather than see him suffer.

Hunter stilled all movement, one hand lightly grasping Fisher's cock, the other balancing himself. "Need to adjust, that's all, it's all good." Gradually, his breathing evened out, becoming less labored, and he began to move slowly, but surely, impaling himself on Fisher's hard cock.

Fisher watched in amazement as he was slowly swallowed up inside Hunter's body. He felt as if they were merging, the two of them, into one being. Inside Hunter was warm, moist, soft and tight, a delicious mix of sensations that left Fisher gasping in amazement. He felt Hunter's tight muscles gripping him. It was a pleasant tightness. As if they were built with one another in mind, the perfect fit. That was it. They fit together like an intricate lock and key. The analogy made him smile.

"Aaaaaaaaah," he moaned in ecstasy. He slid his hands down Hunter's back, where they found purchase on his perfect ass.

"Go ahead, baby, touch all you want," Hunter encouraged him. He hadn't changed his position, and remained firmly entrenched upon Fisher's cock. Fisher's hands busied themselves in rubbing, stroking and kneading that firm flesh, a beatific smile reaching his lips.

"Oh god, Hunter," he managed at last, "you feel incredible." He gazed up into those fabulously blue eyes in complete adoration, an emotion mirrored in Hunter's eyes.

"Yeah, you do too," Hunter echoed earnestly, "very, very incredible. Baby, put your legs up a little more, so I can... oh yeah, that's good." He leaned partially back against Fisher's thighs, using them for support, maneuvering himself so that he could slide with greater ease up and down that thick cock.

"Sure that doesn't hurt, Fisher?"

"Oh God no."

Fisher was forced to move his hands with the slight change in their positions. He placed them on Hunter's gyrating hips instead, feeling them undulate as Hunter moved. God, but that was sexy. His eyes were fastened upon the beautiful sight. Yet he wanted to do more than just receive. He wanted to give something back to Hunter as well. As Hunter impaled himself, rising and falling in a smooth rhythm, grinding himself against Fisher's groin, Fisher noticed his very swollen, very unattended cock. He glanced at Hunter, whose head had rolled back slightly. His eyes were closed, his lips lightly parted, and Fisher was enchanted by what he saw.

Impulsively he reached for that weeping cock, daring to be bold for once in his life and take something that he wanted—that something being Hunter Long. He wrapped one hand about that long lean shaft. God, that was so sweet, having Hunter's flesh pulsating in the palm of his hand.

"Oh, yeah." Hunter gave his approval as Fisher tightened his grip, exploring the head of Hunter's prick with his thumb, grazing it across his slit, fascinated by everything having to do

with him. He knew Hunter so well, and yet at the same time, he barely knew him at all. And he wanted to get to know him, inside and out. Which meant also dealing with this vampire thing, making it his own.

Fisher was stroking him in earnest now, wishing to bring Hunter to a climax. He had a feeling his own was all too close. What was the proper protocol for this? Was he supposed to give a warning of some sort—orgasm ahoy? Here I come? Or maybe the ever popular, timber! He didn't have time to decide. He felt the most glorious sensation inside of him. It began as a tightening in the center of his balls, gradually radiating outward, flowing along every nerve ending he possessed until it reached his cock, at which point he simply exploded, filling his partner with his hot seed. Fisher inadvertently squeezed his hand tighter about Hunter's cock as he orgasmed, coming in hot gasping spurts, Hunter's name falling from his lips.

Hunter arched into his orgasm, tightening his muscles even more about him, milking him hungrily. Fisher continued to stroke him, mindlessly, caught up in what he was doing, as Hunter bucked into his hand.

"Oh God, Fisher, yes, keep it up," Hunter moaned.

Fisher felt the power of the flesh inside his grasp as it quivered and throbbed. This felt so very right, how could anyone say otherwise? He loved Hunter, and he intended to spend the rest of his life proving it to him.

Starting with this moment.

"Bite me," he commanded.

"What?"

"I said bite me, Hunter. Now." He continued to pump Hunter's quivering cock. He could actually feel the other's need in him, now that he was looking for it, and he steeled himself for it, turning his head to allow his lover better access. He didn't want to watch, but he didn't think that would be necessary.

He felt the shift in Hunter's weight, felt Hunter's mouth, warm upon his neck, even as he felt Hunter erupt in his hand, releasing an exultant howl, the twin sensations fusing into one overwhelmingly sensual excitation. Hunter's lips were sending shivers down his spine. Fisher grabbed his head, digging his fingers into those soft locks, his body vibrating intensely.

Hunter raised his head, took a breath. Fisher could see ribbons of scarlet which fell from his lips, and he was fascinated by the deep hue of the drops. Too late he realized what it was. Surprisingly, the sight did not make him nauseous. Maybe because he knew it was for Hunter's benefit, so it was okay.

Hunter ran his tongue around his lips, taking every last drop, before falling onto Fisher. They wound their arms about one another, their lips meeting, meshing, melding. Fisher didn't even care that he could taste blood or that it was his own blood. Life was too good to care about something like that.

They lay together for several minutes without speaking, until Fisher broke the silence.

"Hunter?"

"HMMMMM?"

"We really need a shower. Seriously."

Hunter began to chuckle. He buried his nose carefully against Fisher's neck, his tongue laving the area where two tiny wounds could just be seen, already puckering, sealed against further bleeding.

"Want to take one together?" Hunter asked.

"Only if I get to wash first."

"How about I wash you?"

Fisher still possessed the ability to blush. The things that man could do to him. He couldn't wait to see what else they could do together. "Sounds like a plan to me," he agreed. They raced each other to the shower, laughing all the way.

### **Epilogue—Halloween Night**

"Are the candy bowls filled?"

"Yes, dear."

"What about the outside light, is it on?"

"It's on."

"Good. Did you use all the candy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Think we should get some more?"

"No, dear."

Fisher stuck his head out the door of his room. "You dressed yet?"

Hunter stood there, leaning against the wall, grin affixed upon his lovely face, watching his fussy lover nitpick about the Halloween preparations. The ones he had never wanted to participate in before. Not until this year. Hunter couldn't stop smiling.

"What does it look like?" he asked, smirking.

Fisher blushed, taking in the sight of his beautiful lover who was, indeed, quite dressed. And dazzlingly so. No pun intended. He was garbed as a vampire, but not one of the popular ones that were currently making the rounds, either in film or television. No, Hunter Long was, and always would be, his own man. A true original.

He looked like he stepped out of a period film about the French Revolution. Lace and frills and gold threaded suit, powdered wig. Even a beauty mark beside his lips. Fisher couldn't help but whistle in open admiration.

Fisher stepped out of his room. Their room now, technically. Every room was theirs, of course, but they had decided they would share this one, since it was slightly bigger, and the bed was definitely bigger. And the bigger the bed, the more... Yes, definitely they were going to share this room.

Hunter had tried to talk him into going as Marie Antoinette, but he had given Hunter a no-nonsense look and refused. And yes, on the actual day of Halloween, for those who procrastinated until the last minute, all they were likely to find at the costume outlets and rental stores were slim pickings. But Hunter had connections, and so Fisher was not left having to choose between going as SpongeBob SquarePants (he didn't even know who that was, not being a cartoon aficionado) or a French maid in a frilly apron (Hunter even vetoed that one). Instead he ended up dressed as a Confederate soldier in a light grey uniform, with gold buttons, and a red sash, complete with rifle and bayonet. He had spent some time admiring himself in his mirror, impressed with the overall effect. He liked the way it looked. Now he wanted to know what Hunter thought about it.

"The uniform fits nicely," Hunter noticed, straightening up from the wall, as he leaned in for a kiss.

"It does," Fisher admitted. "I like it."

"You look good in it," Hunter complimented him.

It had been an unusual day for them both. Fisher had considered calling in sick when the alarm went off, rather than having to deal with what he knew awaited him at the office. Or what Lana said awaited him. He wouldn't know if was true until he went. It was Hunter who convinced him to go, actually.

At breakfast, Fisher was too keyed up to eat, after the events of the previous night. Hunter made him some toast and didn't press him into eating anything else. Toast was better than nothing.

"Why don't you go to work, see what the old man wants?" he suggested. "Listening doesn't cost anything, you know."

"Why? I already know I don't want to transfer to San Diego, or anywhere else. I want to stay right here. With you."

Hunter drew the obstinate Fisher into his arms, and held him close, as they swayed together lightly. "Why? I'll tell you why. Because it never hurts to find out what you're worth in someone else's eyes, that's why. Then you know how much to ask for if you decide to go with someone else."

Mister Long was certainly being logical today. Kudos to him for that.

"I guess that makes sense." Fisher frowned, creasing his forehead.

"It does." Hunter's breath was so warm on his ear. Damn, he was making it hard to get going. As usual. But at least now it was nothing Fisher had to suffer through alone, it was out in the open. Finally. "We can talk more about that after you talk to him."

"Why? What about?" But Hunter refused to say.

They compromised on a half day of work each, meeting at home for lunch and costume shopping for Fisher.

At the office of MWH&F, he knocked on the editor's door promptly at 9 o'clock, and was admitted into the presence of the man himself, Mr Sheldrake, Lana's father, although he tried to forget that, and focus on the fact that this was his boss. The meeting was cordial, and didn't take very long. Due to economic pressure and nothing personal, he told Fisher, he was downsizing this office, but he had openings in some of his others. Including the San Diego branch. And he would like to give Fisher the opportunity to transfer to one of them. He didn't specifically mention the managing editor position which Lana had spoken of. Fisher took that as a definite sign that she was, and always would be, a liar.

The decision was a no-brainer. He thanked his now former employer, shook his hand, and then went to his desk and gathered up his stuff, almost in a state of shock. Not only because he was unemployed, but because he'd actually found the nerve to say no to someone. He had considered what he wanted, for a change, and because of it, he was out of a job. He hadn't been unemployed since he was a teenager; he'd always worked at something. He ran into Holly on his way to the elevator. "Come by the house tonight," he told her when she clamored for details and she promised that she would.

Once he had met Hunter back at the house, and told him of the morning's events, he felt himself folded into those strong arms. Hunter didn't seem unduly upset, despite the fact that their income was cut in half, and they had bills to pay. Fisher didn't understand that attitude, but there was no time to discuss it. They had things to do, places to go. No time to discuss a bleak and/or uncertain future. Besides, they were together, right? That had to count for something.

Hunter'd already bought his costume, some time ago. He reminded Fisher of this, as they zigzagged about town, searching for Fisher's costume until they got a lucky break, "If you weren't so damn stubborn, I could have got one for you too."

Fisher had no ready answer for that, other than to stick out his tongue, which proved to be a mistake, as Hunter took it into his own mouth and kissed him until he was weak in the knees.

Now it was Halloween night, not a cloud in the sky and no mention of any rain in the forecast. They were preparing for the onslaught of costumed youngsters seeking sweet treats, no doubt expecting Hunter's usual Halloween extravaganza. They would be arriving any moment. Fisher's stomach was doing flip-flops. He worried that he wouldn't be able to pull this off. Maybe Hunter should do it alone. He made the mistake of suggesting that very thing.

"Nonsense, you'll be fine," Hunter reassured him. "Let's talk." He pulled Fisher onto his lap on the sofa, one eye trained on the door, despite Fisher's protestations that they had no time.

"We'll make time," he said, and Fisher realized he couldn't wriggle out of it, so he gave up.

"Look," Hunter began, "I know you're upset about losing your job, and rightly so. What he did was wrong."

"I bet Lana put him up to it," Fisher conjectured.

"That could be, I think you may be right. It wouldn't really surprise me."

"Hunter?"

"Hmmmmm?"

"Last night, when we were standing outside, just before Lana and her band of pyros came out," Fisher had wondered about this ever since, and he wanted to find out the answer, "what were you going to tell me?"

Hunter chuckled, a sound that was almost a purr, and Fisher thought it seemed like a rather complacent purr at that. "I was trying to work up the nerve to tell you I loved you and always had," he admitted.

Fisher was completely stunned.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then, when Lana came out... I mean, the way she acted, I was sure you and her were together, why didn't you... "

"What could I do? You ran off, remember? I called you, but I guess you didn't hear me, over the crowd."

So Fisher hadn't imagined what he'd thought he heard. "What was Lana doing, saying you were engaged?" he wanted to know, frowning.

"I dunno, she never mentioned it to me. I think she knew better. Probably something she came up with to entertain her friends. As soon as you left, I shook her off and went inside, but I couldn't find you, not right away. Not until I caught you on the patio, literally."

Fisher leaned his head on the shoulder of Hunter's ornate costume. "I was afraid you were going to tell me you loved her and wanted to marry her," he confessed in a small voice.

"Fisher, you can be damn silly at times," Hunter admonished him, catching his lips with his own. Which handily ended anything Fisher had been about to say.

They were interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell, the signal that children were out and about. And ready for tricks or treats. Their first visitor turned out to be about three years old, wearing a ballerina costume. She stood proudly on her tippy toes, or as close as she could get at her age, and when her mother said dance, she pirouetted prettily for them, earning her extra candy. After she left there was a gap, as it was still early in the evening, so they returned to the couch.

"About the bills," Fisher began, "I'll go out and get something tomorrow, don't worry about it..."

Hunter cut him off. "You'll do no such thing."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. What you told me last night."

In the small hours of the night, as they lay cuddled in Fisher's bed, too excited to sleep, Fisher had confessed to everything that had happened to him from the moment he hit his head at Lana's house until he found himself in Hunter's arms. He left nothing out, no matter how embarrassing. Not like Hunter hadn't lived through most of it the first time too. When he asked Hunter why Arthur Rimbaud should look like Leonardo di Caprio, Hunter had an easy answer. "Because Leo played him in the movie, Total Eclipse."

Fisher had never seen the movie, so he hadn't known that. Odd. But at least that explained that. Somewhat.

"Haven't you gotten it through your thick head yet?" Hunter gave him a stern look.

"Hey, I'm not thick-headed," Fisher protested. He knew what Hunter meant, he just didn't believe it.

"You're a great writer, Fisher," Hunter told him, softly stroking the hand he held within his own. "It's time you got the chance to prove it. Start looking for a publisher for your novel. I have some money saved up, so we'll be fine, I promise."



Fisher shook his head adamantly. "Hunter, no, that's not fair. And how can I sell what I don't have? It's gone, I threw it away years ago."

The doorbell rang, cutting off Hunter's response. "Think you can handle this one?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he left the room,.

Fisher nodded, perplexed, but he went to the door. The little ones must come out first, he decided. Standing there were siblings, a boy and a girl, dressed as the most adorable little animals—a baby tiger and a baby lamb. Just as precious as could be. Their mother thanked him kindly. "I don't think I've seen you before," she commented, "Doesn't Hunter live here anymore?"

"Yeah, he's still here. I'm helping him out this year." Fisher smiled.

"Cool. See you next year, happy Halloween." She waved to him before ushering the children from the porch, heading toward the house next door.

By the time that he returned to the living room, Hunter was back and sitting on the sofa once again, a bundle of paper in his hands. Fisher gave him a perplexed glance.

"Did you do okay?" Hunter asked.

"Yeah, fine. What's that?" He stepped closer to Hunter, almost warily, wondering what his friend was up to. Surely it couldn't be what he was thinking it might be. No, the possibilities of that were slim to none.

Except that it was exactly that, which sent the law of probability straight out the door.

"What? How? I mean, how could you? How did you get it? I threw that away. It's trash, not worth the paper it's printed on."

"Stop it!" Hunter's voice broke into Fisher's rambling. "No, it's not trash. It's good. Sure, it needs a little touching up, but damn, you were in high school when you wrote it. I couldn't let you throw this away. I rescued it the day you tossed it. Don't listen to your mom, she doesn't understand. You are one talented man, Fisher Roberts, and don't you ever forget it. Now you've been given the chance to explore your potential, and you're going to take it. Do you understand me?"

Fisher couldn't believe what he was seeing. His novel. It still existed, when he thought it had long ago been consigned to the landfill. But it was saved, after all. By Hunter, no less. How did that man manage to always save the day, somehow?

"I love you, Mister Long, do you know that?" he asked, throwing his arms around Hunter, and clinging to him tightly.

"And I think you know by now how much I love you, Mister Roberts," Hunter replied, holding him close. "And you know me well enough not to argue with me anymore, right?"

"Right," came the reply, muffled by Hunter's chest.

"All right then, are you ready to give them what they want?"

"I am."

"Then let's do it."

One more kiss—or two—or three. Finally, out the door to await further arrivals.

Hunter had set up a good-sized area of the front yard as a cemetery, complete with tilted headstones in assorted sizes, draped in stretchy grey cobwebs and decorated with assorted Halloween paraphernalia—a witch's cauldron, a black cat, a few hands seemingly erupting from the ground, a mummy, a Frankenstein's monster, and assorted bats which hung from strings. He had draped spider webs in the trees, planted plastic spiders on them. The effect was enhanced by the lights which Hunter had carefully placed to increase the eeriness factor of the chilling tableau. Nothing too frightening, but enough to make the casual visitor shiver.

The walk up to the house was lined with luminaries that Hunter had crafted—paper bags decorated with pictures of mummies and vampires and witches, weighted down with uncooked beans and rice, a small tea light providing the illumination. Just at the end of the walk, by the sidewalk, a carved jack-o'-lantern with an appropriately fierce grin welcomed visitors.

The candy itself filled another, larger, cauldron, which sat on a TV tray near a couple of chairs, should the adults want to sit and watch the children explore the cemetery. An open cooler was filled with ice and soda. It was more like a social gathering than just a stop on the Halloween tour of the neighborhood. When Hunter did things, he went all out. Fisher loved that about him.

They had discussed doing something special for the kids, putting on some sort of an act, but time had really run out, at least as far as doing something together, so they settled for watching the kids go through the cemetery, and conversing with the adults. Next year would be different, Hunter promised with a knowing smirk.

Fisher was truly impressed with Hunter's performance. This was the first time he had ever witnessed what went on during Halloween, normally finding an excuse to go out, avoiding the house until well after the last trick-or-treaters had made an appearance. Now he was seeing it first hand, and he was amazed.

The kids all knew Hunter, and so did their parents. Most of them appeared to be regulars. Fisher could have sworn that they didn't all live in the neighborhood, did they? He didn't know them, and they didn't know him. But when Hunter introduced him, they all smiled, welcoming him into this holiday madness known as Halloween.

Hunter complimented their costumes, and asked each one if they had a trick before they got their treat. He knelt at the level of the small ones, giving them his solemn attention. They all smiled at him, and performed for him, giggling. Even the older ones would tell riddles, or jokes.

Hunter would pretend to be stumped at the former, and laugh at the latter. The parents would stand around and relax, grateful for something to drink, and the chance to stop walking, even if only for a few minutes.

The kids had the most amazing costumes, some of which were familiar to Fisher, others he had no clue about. But Hunter recognized them all, and he pointed them out to Fisher as each owner proudly displayed his or her work, whether homemade or store bought. Peals of laughter resounded, as well as the titters and eeks that the cemetery drew. When Hunter urged them to put their hand into the cauldron, some did, hesitantly, quickly withdrawing them with a squeal, when he told them they had just touched someone's entrails. Of course, it was just gummi worms, but they felt creepy enough to pass as people innards. He always showed the kids what they really were, and then everyone laughed about it.

Fisher hadn't realized just how much he had come out of his shell until, in a respite between callers, Hunter kissed him softly, and said he was proud of him.

"For what?"

"For this," he replied, "for being here with me and doing this with me. Thank you for that, Fisher."

Fisher trembled at that gentle touch. "This is fun," he admitted, "I'm sorry I've been such a jerk before. Thanks for letting me do this with you. I'll always be with you, I hope you know that."

"I do," Hunter solemnly replied, kissing him again.

The evening was winding down. There were fewer and fewer children. The young ones were long in bed, and the older ones were preparing for other activities.

Fisher had no doubt in his mind that Holly would show up as promised, and she did, somewhere around nine o'clock as the Halloween traffic was thinning out. She was dressed as a gypsy, colorful scarf tied about her henna tinted hair, and her variegated skirts swirled about her long legs as she strode up the walk, past the group of pre-teens that were just leaving. She had added an eye patch for effect, and she cackled at the children, who shrieked in fake terror. When she reached the two of them, she pulled up the patch. Fisher knew why, without having to be told. Hunter had claimed his hand, and was holding it. And Fisher hadn't even fussed about it, even knowing that people would see them. She was staring directly at their joined hands. And smirking.

"Well, well, well, what's all this then?" the forthright Holly arched both brows at the two, before breaking into a huge grin, when Fisher began to squirm a bit.

"Do you have to be so loud?" he complained, hoping to get her to tone it down, even a little bit. She only laughed the louder, and Hunter wasn't helping any. In fact, he made it worse, by bringing Fisher's hand to his lips and kissing it. Fisher blushed, but he didn't object.

"Yeah, I do!" she chortled, wagging her finger at him. "Toldja, toldja, toldja, toldja..."

"What are you, twelve all of a sudden?" But Fisher found himself grinning back, because he was so incredibly happy. It felt like he had suddenly awakened into a fairy tale, albeit a Halloween fairy tale. But that wasn't so bad, was it?

"It's about time, Fisher Roberts. And you, Mister Long, I expect there'll be no more of this drawing the ladies like flies for you, eh? You all done flitting about from flower to flower?"

Hunter threw back his sleek head and laughed, while Fisher blushed even more brightly.

"Holly, seriously? Besides, those are mixed metaphors you're using. I think what you really mean is..."

"Oh, shut up," she interrupted, laughing at Fisher. "I don't care what they are; you both know what I mean." She gave Hunter an arch look. "I'm surprised you two aren't performing this year for the kids. That's your usual style, isn't it?" The year before Hunter had done a few magic tricks, which had wowed the neighborhood kids. And a few of their mothers.

"Next year," Hunter promised, "I already have an idea. I'm thinking about a guillotine..."

Fisher gave him a what-the-hell look. Sometimes he just couldn't tell if Hunter was kidding or not.

"So, I can tell what you are," Holly said to Fisher, "but I'm not sure about you. Who are you supposed to be?"

"A vampire, of course," Hunter smirked. "And Fisher is my willing victim." That produced an innuendo-filled snort from Holly.

"Willing, is he? That I already knew." Holly laughed. "But does he have the marks to prove it?" Fisher wore a cavalryman's scarf about his neck, part of the costume. He made no effort to remove it.

Holly, not being shy, tried to shift it out of the way. He didn't put up much of a fight, mostly because he didn't want to cause a scene, or ruin the Halloween display. She gasped when she saw the two small marks on his neck. He hadn't thought to cover them up with anything. Not like he owned makeup, anyway.

"Wow, those look good." She gave Hunter an admiring glance. "You did a good job on those, they look very real."

"Thank you," Hunter clicked his heels together and bowed with false modesty. Very false modesty.

Fisher tightened the scarf back into place. "Why do something if you're not going to do it well?" he murmured, grateful she had assumed them to be the product of Halloween magic, and not simply the marks left by Hunter's fangs.

"Got fangs? Lemme see," Holly demanded, and Hunter obligingly opened his mouth, producing more oohs and aaahs.

"You two are good!" she squealed. "Fisher Roberts..." She turned on him suddenly. He quailed at the unexpected assault.

"What?" he squeaked.

"The next time I invite you to a party, you can't give me your usual excuse, now can you?"

"What usual excuse?"

"You know." She nodded knowingly. "The one where you tell me you don't do holidays. You don't believe in Halloween, or Christmas or any of that stuff."

Fisher's cheeks warmed, as he acknowledged the truth in her words. Hunter put an arm about his shoulders, and squeezed him reassuringly.

"You're right, I can't," he replied, a small smile playing about his lips. "Yes, we'll come to your Christmas party, Holly. I know that's what you're leading up to. Won't we, Hunter?"

"Yes, dear," Hunter smirked.

Fisher had to refrain from kicking him in the shin for acting up, but he managed not to. Some things never changed. And he was glad of it.

"YAY!" Holly squealed excitedly

The three of them had been so caught up in their conversation that they had been oblivious to the car that had pulled up to the curb, and the woman who swept up the walk toward them. Fisher noticed her first, as she walked up behind Holly.

"Mom!" he stammered.

Holly instantly moved aside, toward the cemetery, out of harm's way. "Ooh, let me see what you did here," she said, weaving between the rows of headstones. She reached down toward the cat that reposed on one "grave", and screamed a moment later when the cat opened its eyes and batted at her hand. It was Lady Madeline Usher, who'd come out to inspect what they had done, and had decided to take a nap there. Hunter had put a pretty Halloween collar on her, and a small black cape, which she had grudgingly permitted. Normally, Fisher would have laughed. He was too busy at the moment to even notice.

"Happy Halloween, Mrs Roberts," Hunter greeted her politely. Fisher noticed that the arm that lay around his shoulders tightened protectively. He made no move to squirm out from under

Hunter's arm, although his stomach was already turning over at the thought of the showdown that might be coming. It'd be something on a par with the OK Corral, but less deadly, hopefully.

"Hello, Hunter," she acknowledged him, turning to her son. "Since when do you do Halloween, Fisher?"

"This is my first year, Mom. But it's going to be a regular tradition." He felt Hunter take his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. Fisher felt secure at his touch. "What are you doing out on Halloween? I thought you liked to skulk at home, with the lights off?" He meant the words lightly, but he couldn't be sure how well he'd managed to convey that in his tone, which was maybe a shade too sarcastic for comfort.

"I was worried about you. Imagine my surprise when I called your office this morning and they said you didn't work there anymore." She gave him a stern look, and he tried not to wriggle uncomfortably. "I've been calling your cell phone as well as the house off and on all afternoon. I left messages, didn't you get them?"

Actually, they'd been so busy they hadn't bothered to check the answering machine, and he'd turned off his phone before going to sleep last night. Holly knew Fisher was gone, and it hadn't occurred to him that he needed to check in with his mother. He would have gotten to it—eventually. He'd just had a lot to think about in the last twenty-four hours, and pardon him if he wasn't quite himself today. For more reasons than one.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't get them," he admitted, "we were out running around all afternoon..."

"You and him?" she interrupted.

"Him has a name, Mom. It's Hunter, remember?" He sighed. He felt an ugly scene coming on. Turning to his lover, he asked, "Think we should call it a night? I don't think anyone else is coming, do you?"

"Sure, we can do that. It is getting late."

"I'll stay out here and wait for stragglers," Holly piped up. Having finished exploring the cemetery, she stood on the periphery of their conversation, trying to stay part of the background, and not intrude on them.

"Thanks, Holly," Fisher said. He glanced at his mother. "Want to come in for a minute?"

She nodded, a bit tersely, and they all headed toward the house, leaving Holly behind. She took a seat in one of the lawn chairs, and reached into the candy cauldron with a grin.

Once inside the house, Fisher was grateful that he'd had the presence of mind to pick up all the discarded clothing from the night before, and straighten up any mess they had made.

Everything was in its normal spotless condition. He motioned her to a chair, even as he asked, "Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you," she declined.

He got two cans of root beer from the kitchen for himself and Hunter. On his return, he found Hunter in his usual spot on the couch, taking his own beside him.

"Are you planning to tell me about it?" she asked.

"About what?" he blushed. There was so much he could tell, but only so much he was willing to divulge. It depended on what she was asking and what she wanted to know.

"Well, first, I guess, why you don't work at the magazine anymore?"

"I was downsized, Mom. The economy, you know? It's my turn to feel its effects."

"Downsized? You mean they just let you go, just like that?" She sounded offended on her son's behalf.

"Well, Mr Sheldrake offered me a chance to relocate. To San Diego. Or other places. But I turned him down." Fisher took a sip of the cold soda. He felt Hunter's hand brush across his leg, and he was comforted by his action.

"Why didn't you want to relocate? I hear San Diego is a nice place."

He quailed under her stern gaze, then took a deep breath. "I don't want to relocate anywhere, Mom. I like it here. Besides, the cost of living out there is a lot worse. The housing prices are ridiculous."

"Is that the only reason that you don't want to leave?" she asked.

"No, it's not. There are other reasons. I think you've figured them out, though, haven't you?" He raised his head, held it up boldly, as he returned her gaze, refusing to back down. "I'm staying because I want to be with Hunter. We want to be together."

"We *are* together," Hunter added.

"We *are* together," Fisher affirmed. He reached for Hunter, locking their hands together. "I told you I love him, Mom, remember? It turns out he loves me too, so we're going to stay here, and see what happens."

His mother said nothing, her stony gaze flickering between the two young men.

"Mom, you could say something. Congratulations would be nice. I'm happy for you would be even nicer."

"I'm not a liar, and you know that, Fisher."

"Yes, you are!" he snapped, surprising even himself with the vehemence with which he delivered the words. "You let me think Dad didn't care about me, that he left because he didn't care. You made me feel unwanted, like I'd done something wrong."

"You're wrong, Fisher," she protested, "I always wanted you, don't you know that?"

"On your terms. You wanted me to be something I wasn't. You never saw who I really am, and I let you get away with it. But no more. I've learned a few things in the last day or so, about me and Hunter. It's made me realize how much I've always loved him, and wanted to have him love me back. I found out that he does love me. So now I have that chance that I always dreamed of, and I'm going to take it, Mom." His eyes glittered with tears, as he addressed her earnestly. "Can't you be happy for us, please? We're going to have a future together, a good one. We're going to make it happen."

"I love your son," Hunter interjected, "more than you can imagine. I'd do anything for him. Anything. Please don't push him away. He's still your son. He's quite a remarkable man and a very talented writer, if you'd only just see him as he is."

"Are you going to find another job?" she asked, directing her attention to Fisher, as if Hunter hadn't spoken. "I'm sure you can get on at some other magazine. They aren't the only one, after all. And you do have a journalism degree."

"A degree that you wanted, not me," Fisher interjected. "No, I don't want to. I'm tired of pretending that I like to write articles, when what I really want to do is write novels. Maybe short stories. I don't know. But I'm going to find out. Hunter's going to give me that chance. He kept my book, when you told me to get rid of it. He saved it for me, 'cause he believes in me. He loves me, Mom, can't you please accept that?" His voice was on the verge of cracking, the tears far too close to the surface for comfort.

"Mrs Roberts, please," Hunter said softly.

Fisher felt him squeeze his hand, as he fought back the panic attack he was sure was coming. Not now, not now, he prayed beneath his breath, attempting to hold on.

"I can go," Hunter offered, "if you'd like to talk to Fisher alone." He made as if to rise, but Fisher clung, refusing to let him up.

"No!" he said, in a firm voice. "If she has something to say, let her say it to both of us. Together. That's the way it's going to be from now on, Mom. Get used to it."

"Fisher... "

He saw with some surprise that her eyes seemed to be wet. He didn't remember ever seeing his mother cry before. "Fisher, I do love you. I always have. Everything I've ever done has been for you, surely you realize that?"

He couldn't help but nod, hearing the sincerity in her voice. But he wasn't going to budge on this. He heard her sigh softly.

"I just want you to be happy, Fisher. That's all."



"I am happy, Mom, happier than I've ever been in my whole life. Incredibly happy. Hunter makes me happy. He always has, but I've been too scared to accept my feelings for him, for what they are. I'm not scared anymore, Mom. I love him. Please accept us for who we are. Please." He knew he probably sounded like he was begging, and maybe he was, but he did love his mother and he didn't want to lose her any more than she wanted to lose him. At the same time, he also wasn't willing to compromise on this. It was far too important to him.

His mother sat in silence. He could hear the seconds ticking away between them, maddeningly, before she finally drew a deep breath and sighed. "Fisher, I'm not perfect, I know. But I do what I can, and I try. And I've always tried to give you everything I could, to raise you as well as I could by myself. Maybe some of the choices I made weren't always the best ones, but they were done with the best of intentions." She turned her gaze on Hunter. "I knew he loved you, even before he told me. I do know my son, contrary to popular opinion. I guess I hoped he would outgrow you, Hunter. Get married, have kids, like normal boys do."

Fisher glared at his mother, and she held up one hand in apology.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I spoke without thinking. But in my own defense, it's how I was raised. It's not easy to change how you think about something. Or someone. But no, that doesn't make it right, I know. I haven't thought highly of you before, Hunter, I admit it. I thought you were the worst thing that ever happened to my son, even though I considered your mother a friend, and still do. I hated when you bought this house together. I even hated how you went to the prom together, even if you didn't call it that. But I knew. I could see it when the two of you turned up in the same damn suit, looking so pleased with yourselves. And then when you stayed out all night. The funny thing was that I wasn't even really worried, because I knew you were together. Even if I didn't like that you were together, I just knew Hunter wouldn't let anything happen to you, Fisher. I could see he was good for that much." She sighed again, pushed her glasses a little higher up the bridge of her nose, swiping at the tears which were falling.

"Mom..." Fisher's own tears overflowed his eyes, running down his cheeks.

"I'll try," she said, "that's all I can do. But I do promise to try. Just don't cut me out of your life, please, Fisher. I couldn't bear it if I lost you. You're all I have." Her voice quavered uncertainly, a note Fisher had never heard before.

"You have me too," Hunter said softly. "You haven't lost a son, you've gained a daughter," he quipped. That produced a slight smile. "Okay, a second son, then," he amended, with a smile.

"Thank you," she said. Rising from her seat, she moved toward her son, who also rose, and they met in the middle of the room in a heartfelt embrace. Nothing was said as they held one another. Fisher removed one arm, held it toward his lover, and Hunter joined them in what was

now a group hug. Mrs Roberts was the first to break free. Sniffling, she reached for her purse, which sat next to the chair.

"You know, Hunter, if I were a few years younger, I might give my son a run for his money," she teased them unexpectedly.

"Mom!" Fisher's mouth dropped open in surprise. Hunter just laughed.

"Fisher, I may be your mother, but I'm not dead," she said, winking at him. "I can see how handsome he is. Almost as handsome as you," and she kissed her son on the cheek, smiling when he blushed.

"All right, gentlemen, I'm going to go. I didn't mean to disrupt your evening. I was just concerned about you, Fisher." She moved toward the door, and they followed her.

"I was going to call you, Mom, honest, I just... "

"I know, I really do understand." She managed a small smile, standing in the open doorway. She took Fisher's face between her hands, looking deep into his eyes. "I can see it," she said, "I can really see it. It's in there. Your happiness. I am happy for you." She released him with a kiss upon his cheek, before she turned to Hunter. "Thank you for that," she said, "for that look in my son's eyes." And she surprised them both by kissing Hunter's cheek, before she took her leave of them.

Once Fisher's mother was back in her car and on her way, Holly approached them where they still stood, in the doorway, together. She looked from one to another.

"Was that as bad as I think it was?"

Fisher shook his head. "No, not really. Could have been worse, don't you think?" He looked toward Hunter for corroboration.

"Much worse," Hunter agreed. He slid his arm about Fisher's waist. Fisher leaned in to him. Holly sighed at the sight.

"You two are too much... I think I'll go home and read a romance novel before I go to bed. Suddenly I'm in the mood for love." She winked at them. "Or maybe I'll just write one. And let you two star in it." She laughed, ducking quickly before Fisher's well-aimed punch even began to connect with her shoulder.

"Okay, I'm outta here," she laughed. "I'll talk to you tomorrow and you can tell me about everything else then." She pretended to yawn, fooling no one. "I'm too tired to listen now." She gave each of them a peck on the cheek, before removing herself to her car, waving through the window until she was out of sight.

Hunter's arms were so warm and comfortable, Fisher didn't want to move, but he knew they had to. It was getting late, and besides, standing here wouldn't be comfortable all that long. Not like sitting on the couch. Or lying in their bed. Fisher blushed at his own thoughts.

"We should clean up the yard for the night, I think," he suggested. Hunter readily agreed, and they broke apart, temporarily, in order to do so. They carried in the candy that was left in the cauldron, and the TV tray, the cooler with the remaining soda, which Hunter was quick to put into the refrigerator so it wouldn't get warm. They folded up the lawn chairs, brought Lady Madeline into the house and fed her, before returning to the yard once more. The cemetery and all the Halloween decorations would stay where they were for least another week or so. All that remained to be done was to blow out the luminaries, and the jack-o'-lantern. They would remain where they were too. No one would bother them.

Fisher took one side of the walk, Hunter the other; together they blew out the tea lights in the glowing luminaries, one by one. They came to the end, where the jack-o'-lantern sat in solitary splendor. A quick breath put an end to his nightly reign.

"Hunter?"

"HMMMMM?"

"Next year, will you show me how to make one of those?"

"Sure, baby." Hunter smiled, drawing his lover to him for a kiss. They stood together, lost in the moment, until the sound of a car engine in the distance brought them back to reality.

"Ready for bed?" Fisher asked, as he stretched and feigned a yawn.

Hunter shook his head and chuckled. "I know what you really want, and it isn't sleep."

"It's not, Mister Know-it-all?" Fisher pretended indignation.

"No, it isn't, Mister Know-nothing." He laughed and moved beyond Fisher's reach, as Fisher pretended to lunge at him, laughing. That lasted all of a minute, before he put his arm about Fisher, and they began to walk toward the house.

"Tell me what it is I really want, if you're so wise," Fisher riposted, trying not to smile.

"Me, of course."

"Because you're so irresistible?"

"Yes, and incredibly sexy, too."

Fisher laughed, unable to keep up the charade. "And just a bit full of yourself, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Hunter hedged, "and maybe I'd rather be full of you?"

Fisher blushed, but didn't deny the attraction in that idea. "What about dinner?"

"Dinner? Dinner?" Hunter scoffed. "Who needs stinkin' dinner? Besides, I've been watching you eat candy all night. I think you need to burn off some excess energy."

"Oh you do, do you? How do you propose I do that?" Fisher asked, with a knowing smirk.

"I think you'll find a way." They walked into the house, closing the door firmly behind them, turning off the outside light.

Then they raced to the bedroom, laughing all the way.

THE END

\*\*\*

### About the Author

Julie Lynn Hayes has lived in St Louis for most of her life. She currently resides with her twenty year old daughter, and two felines, who are under the mistaken impression that the house belongs to them. Writing is her passion and she is happy to share it with her readers. Besides writing fiction, she is on the staff of two local conventions—BishieCon and KawaKon—and in 2012, EctoCon.

Julie Lynn Hayes is a dreamer of dreams, a lover of life; a believer in justice for all. A lifelong resident of the St. Louis area, she lives with her youngest daughter Sarah and two cats, writing and reviewing and working to see that gay marriage becomes a reality in her lifetime. She would love to hear from her readers, and welcomes all comments.

She has a website which is an ongoing WIP, as well as a blog. She would love to hear from anyone who cares to write her.

Webpage:  
[www.julielynnhayes.com](http://www.julielynnhayes.com)

Blog:  
[www.julielynnhayes.blogspot.com](http://www.julielynnhayes.blogspot.com)

Email:  
[tothemax.wolf@gmail.com](mailto:tothemax.wolf@gmail.com)

### Also by Julie Lynn Hayes

Available at Silver Publishing:

*A Special Christmas*  
*Leonardo di Caprio is a Vampire*

TO THE MAX  
*For Love of Max* (June 4)

Writing with S.L. Danielson  
*My Fair Vampire* (coming in October)

Available at All Romance Ebooks:

*Lawn Boy*  
*Sex on the Beach*

TO THE MAX  
*To the Max*

Available at Dreamspinner Press:

*The Prince Wore Pink Stilettos*  
*Sweet Dreams, My Love*

TO THE MAX  
*To the Max*

Available at Wicked Nights:

CAPTIVATIONS (monthly serial)

*Captivations*  
*All That Jazz*  
*To Err is Human*  
*Sins of the Past*  
*Defender of the Faith*  
*End of Night*

FORBIDDEN (monthly serial)

*Sanctum* (coming May 27)

Other Titles by Julie Lynn Hayes  
*Sex on the Beach Christmas Style*

**Writing as Reinette**

DARK LOVE  
*Dark Love*