

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

LOST IN A DREAM

Dawn Simmons

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LOST IN A DREAM

By Dawn Simmons

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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LOST IN A DREAM

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Photo Description

A young man is staring into the camera. We can only see his face. His eyes are the purest blue, made more striking by a mask of black paint. His face is dirty, and a hand cradles his cheek.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Night after night, I dream of him. His eyes haunt me even when I'm awake. Who is he? I feel compelled to find him, but I'm not even sure that he is real.

Sincerely,

Jilly

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: BDSM, dark, dreamscape, incubus, interspecies, therapist

Content Warnings: breath play

Word Count: 12,444

LOST IN A DREAM

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Ethan couldn't move.

He had such a hard time opening his eyes that he knew, at once, he was dreaming. He sucked in a breath in an effort not to let fear overwhelm him, to remind himself this was a dream. Nothing that happened here and now could harm him.

Even the soft light from the candles made him blink because it was too much for him. It took him a moment to see himself in the mirror above the bed. His breath caught in his throat at his own reflection.

He was tied up. The sight was so familiar, yet it was like an old wound reopening. It had been too long since he last had anyone he trusted enough to leave himself in their hands, and it hurt even more when he remembered that this, Ethan tied up and ready for the taking, was what Shane would have called a work of art. The locks of Ethan's black hair fanned out over the pillow, as stark a contrast as the white rope against his dark brown skin.

"Pretty, don't you think?" The bed moved, and Ethan's eyes met his captor's; they were a blue so deep that he could have lost himself in them, and covered by a mask of black paint.

He'd recognize those eyes anywhere. They haunted him every day, full of promise and threat, staring at him from behind his closed eyelids. Ethan couldn't remember anything from his dreams except for those eyes and how exhausted they left him. More than once, he'd thought he recognized someone because they looked at him in a similar way. Every time, he'd been wrong.

This was a dream.

Maybe he should have been more scared, but as soon as the man straddled him, desire obliterated his fear.

He was small and light in a way that made Ethan feel big, even though at five-foot-ten, he'd never thought himself that tall. Everything about the man—the way he moved, his teasing smile—made him seem curiously pixie-like.

From the moment they touched, it felt as if Ethan's mind was covered by a dense fog. He couldn't speak, he could barely think. He could only feel.

At least, until Blue-Eyes laid his hands on Ethan's wrists before raking blunt nails down the inside of Ethan's arms from wrist to shoulders, leaving trails of fire in his wake.

Ethan's back arched against his will. "Oh, God. Do it again, please."

Surprised blue eyes flashed up to his. The man hesitated before repeating the gesture, this time on either side of Ethan's chest. Ethan's mouth dropped open on a gasp. It hurt so fucking good.

Blue-Eyes tilted his head, staring at him as his fingers followed the lines his nails had traced, feeding the fire under Ethan's skin. "How did you do this?" He sounded so unsure, as if talking wasn't something he did often. As if he didn't know how to use words or his own voice.

"Do what?" Ethan asked, completely lost.

Blue-Eyes's smile was almost indulgent as he bent down to lay a kiss on Ethan's collarbone. "It doesn't matter."

Ethan shivered, feeling the words against his skin more than he heard them. When Blue-Eyes looked up, his teasing smile was back. Almost a smirk.

Without another word, Blue-Eyes rested a hand against Ethan's chest while the other reached for Ethan's cock.

"What are you—" Every word flew right out of Ethan's head when Blue-Eyes took Ethan in his ass in one long, easy stroke.

"Stop talking," Blue-Eyes whispered.

Ethan's head fell back against the pillow as he found his cock buried in the warmth of Blue-Eyes's body. It was too easy, too simple, but he knew it was a dream. And it had been so long. He couldn't think anymore, as if all of his brain cells had shut down the moment Blue-Eyes had taken him into his ass. So he closed his eyes and allowed himself to focus on nothing but the tight heat around his cock, the sure hand that was using his body for support as Blue-Eyes rode him into oblivion.

How long it lasted, Ethan couldn't say. He couldn't move, even within the range the rope would have usually allowed. He wasn't even tempted to strain against his bonds, to try and thrust up into Blue-Eyes's willing body. Pleasure coursed through him, but he somehow knew that release wasn't Blue-Eyes's only goal, that he was looking for something Ethan didn't know if he could give.

Instead of being scared as he should be, Ethan could only focus on the pleasure given to him, on how good it felt to have a partner using him like he loved to be. He was too vulnerable in that position, he knew it, but he didn't want to do anything to make it stop.

It was as if the whole universe opened up in front of him as Blue-Eyes brought him to completion. He came, buried deep in Blue-Eyes's body, his orgasm leaving him boneless against the bed.

He had a hard time blinking his eyes open as Blue-Eyes slowly released him.

When their eyes met, Blue-Eyes seemed puzzled. "You should already be gone."

Ethan smiled. Nothing about this whole dream made sense. "What's your name?"

Blue-Eyes froze in place, still straddling Ethan's body. He tilted his head as if he, himself, were wondering. "Damien," he said, and it almost sounded like a question before he repeated, with more assurance, "Damien."

"Damien," Ethan said, savoring the name. "How did you slip into my dreams?"

Damien blinked at him, like he couldn't believe Ethan had really asked that. "It's what I do."

Suddenly realizing that he could move again—the ropes had faded away as if they'd never existed—Ethan reached for Damien and brushed a strand of dark brown hair away from Damien's forehead. "I don't get it."

"You don't need to." Damien visibly hesitated again. "What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You did something. You shouldn't be able to talk to me or touch me."

"Are you a nightmare?" Ethan couldn't help but ask, amused. "Otherwise, well, this is my dream."

Damien shook his head and snapped his fingers. The color of the walls changed to a soft blue, and a bird sang in the distance. "No. This is my world."

Ethan suddenly felt groggy. He had a hard time getting the words out. "I don't know what I did."

As his eyes closed of their own accord, he heard Damien say, “If you figure it out, please do it again.”

If you figure it out, please do it again.

The words followed Ethan back to his own bed. He expected the dream to start fading as soon as he woke up, just the same, he supposed, as it had every other time, leaving behind only the memory of Damien’s eyes. This time, though, it was as if his mind had gotten hold of the dream and refused to let it go.

Damien’s words were like the song of a siren, luring Ethan in until he couldn’t escape.

It was morning already, sunlight filtering through the drapes. For the first time in weeks, Ethan felt well rested. Every night before, when he’d woken up to the sight of Damien staring at him, he’d felt almost ill, as if something had drained him to his very core. Now, he felt revitalized in a way he hadn’t since... well, since he and Shane broke up.

And the memories weren’t disappearing. Ethan remembered every moment, every word, every touch, every feeling. If anything, they seemed to grow stronger with each second that passed.

He had done something last night that had led to this.

Pushing away his blankets, he sat on the side of the bed, thinking back on the night before. It had been a night like any other, but his day at work had been so long. He loved his job as a counselor, loved that it allowed him to feel like he was paying forward by helping troubled teens the same way someone had once helped him. Sometimes, though, his work really took its toll on him. Like yesterday. After talking to some kids whose best friend had just killed himself, trying to help them, he’d felt ready to collapse when he’d finally got home, and he’d known the next day would be more of the same. He’d needed sleep.

So even though he was doing his best not to depend on his damn sleeping pills, he’d taken one before bed. He hadn’t done that in weeks.

Could the explanation really be that simple?

Ethan avoided answering that question for a full week.

He fell asleep without any outside help and didn’t see Damien again.

However, he realized how off-kilter he'd felt the last couple of weeks. How exhausted he'd been all the time, as if no matter how much sleep he got, it would never be enough. As if sleeping took more out of him than everything he did while he was awake.

All it took was one day of waking up well rested and hearing his colleagues commenting on how much better he looked and sounded. It was so much easier to do his job without feeling like his clients' issues were eating him up, but it only lasted one day.

Then he fell back into the same fog, into a place where nothing and no one could really touch him. It was similar enough to the way he'd felt after his father's death when he was fifteen, to freak him out.

After a week, Ethan was ready to sleep for a month, and even that, he thought, wouldn't make everything better. As much as he knew that whatever was going on with his dreams wasn't normal, it was also clear that his damn pills were the only thing holding him together.

And it didn't matter that he knew it could only be bad for him. He wanted to see Damien again.

Ethan wasn't tied up this time. He could move freely, and it was a lot easier to shake off the spell Damien had him under.

They were in the same room, the same bed as the time before, but everything felt different.

Damien was straddling him, staring at him like Ethan was an enigma he couldn't decipher.

Slowly, Ethan raised himself up on his elbows and asked, "What do you want?"

Damien seemed completely lost, even more than the last time when Ethan had asked for his name. "This isn't about what I want."

"Isn't it?"

When Damien didn't say anything, Ethan sat up and laid his hands on Damien's lower back to pull him closer and kiss him, soft and sweet, leaving him room to take control if he wanted to. He didn't.

When they separated, Ethan was breathing hard, but Damien looked like a deer in the headlights, which was enough to make Ethan uncomfortable, prompting him to ask, "What are you?"

Damien almost jerked away, as if the question had taken him by surprise. He opened his mouth and closed it, as if trying to figure out what to say. "I can only be what you want me to be."

Ethan felt sick to his stomach, but he remembered, indeed, how the previous dream had been all about what he wanted, giving him everything he hadn't had since Shane.

Gently, he tried to release Damien, but Damien held onto his hands to keep him right where he was.

"What are you doing?" Damien asked.

"This isn't right." It felt like he was using Damien, like Damien wasn't getting anything out of this.

Damien's smile was almost amused. "You're much too good a person, you know that?"

"And you aren't." It wasn't a question.

Damien nodded, looking proud of Ethan for figuring it out. "I'm not even a person. You should be trying to get away from me."

"I can't." The words were out before Ethan could think them through. "Can I?"

His smile downright devious, Damien finally seemed like he was back in control, like he knew where this was going. "No, you can't." His hands found Ethan's throat and tightened, providing just enough of a hint of danger to make Ethan hard as a rock in a nanosecond. "By the time I'm done with you, you won't want to."

Maybe Ethan should have been scared. Instead, Damien's words went right to his head, filling him with a lust so strong, it made him dizzy. He rested his palms on the bed to support himself, but other than that, he didn't move.

Bright blue eyes full of mischief, Damien stared at Ethan with such intensity that Ethan couldn't look away. He could feel Damien move his hips with slow precision, rubbing his cock against Ethan's, could feel Damien's fingers tightening and releasing in a rhythm that Ethan couldn't guess. He wasn't trying to. He wanted to stay like this forever, in this space where he didn't have to think, where he could let go, where every hint of danger only made the moment more perfect. Looking anywhere but at Damien's eyes would have been impossible.

The kiss that followed felt like Damien was trying to steal the very breath from Ethan's mouth as his fingers tightened and tightened, cutting off Ethan's air.

And Damien did it again and again, each time with a kiss and the teasing sensation of Damien pressing himself against Ethan, never providing enough friction to bring Ethan to orgasm.

Ethan took a long, deep breath every time Damien released the pressure. It was like the air was filling him from head to toe. He felt more alive than he did when he was awake.

Damien released him for a second too long, and Ethan had a fleeting memory of Shane, of nights spent in bed, laughing and teasing. Of long conversations about wants and needs, safewords and limits before they ever did anything. And fear crept in.

This was a dream, Ethan reminded himself. It could be perfect because it didn't have to obey the same rules.

"Why aren't you with me?" Damien asked, soft and dangerous.

It was a dream, so Ethan didn't see why he had to give the same kind of thoughtful explanation he would if they'd met for real. "Bring me back to you," was all he said.

With the kind of determination that could have been scary if Ethan hadn't been so far beyond fear, Damien released Ethan's neck, took hold of Ethan's cock as he raised himself up on his knees and lined Ethan's cock up with his hole.

Ethan let out a long, drawn out, "Fuuuck," when Damien took him in without any effort. It was surreal how easy it was, how he found himself suddenly surrounded by tight, wet heat, as if Damien could just will his body into being ready. Which, well, he probably could.

This is my world.

Ethan's head fell back and within a second, he found himself half-sitting on the bed, propped against the wall without either of them having to move, giving him all the support he needed to take Damien's assault on his senses.

"Help me move."

Ethan's hands found Damien's ass, gently guiding him up and down, almost losing his breath again before Damien's hands found his neck.

“Careful,” he whispered, with the sliver of breath he still had. “I’m gonna shoot.”

“No, you won’t.” Laying his hands on Ethan’s neck, Damien tightened them just a fraction, just enough that Ethan couldn’t say anything else. “This is the best part about this being a dream. You *can’t* come unless I allow it.”

Once again, Ethan lost himself, staring into Damien’s eyes as Damien increased the pressure on his neck. His dick was pulsing, his whole body tense with barely held back need, his lungs burning from the lack of air. His hands were still on Damien’s ass, but he couldn’t move anymore.

He was frozen in time; the moment went on and on and on until there were black spots in his vision.

When Damien released him, as Ethan frantically sucked in as much air as he could, Damien whispered, “Now. Fuck me, make me feel it.”

Suddenly, Ethan could move again. He saw the surprise in Damien’s eyes when Ethan rolled them over, felt a rush of power when Damien didn’t even try to get control back, when he went, willing and obviously curious.

Ethan’s need to come faded to the background, a burning under his skin that suddenly didn’t matter so much. More than anything, he wanted to see Damien’s carefully built facade disappear, wanted to see more of the vulnerability he’d gotten hints of earlier.

So he guided Damien’s spread legs to lock around his hips before fucking inside Damien again, almost losing himself at the tight heat that welcomed him. But somehow, he didn’t want this to be about him.

He paid more attention to Damien’s reactions than to his own, watching until he saw Damien’s eyes flutter closed of their own will, until Damien’s mouth opened in a perfect ‘O’. Only then did he start fucking Damien for real, using hard, long thrusts that were almost too much, even for him.

His orgasm took him by surprise, his balls drawing up before he was ready. His hand found Damien’s cock as he buried himself deep inside Damien’s body. With single-minded determination, he stroked Damien until Damien preceded him over the edge, the sudden pulse of Damien’s ass around his cock making him come as hard as if Damien still had his hands around Ethan’s throat, stealing his breath.

Ethan held himself up on his elbows until Damien pulled him down to rest on his body. Still trying to catch his breath, Ethan closed his eyes as he pulled

out and rolled onto his back, smiling when Damien followed him and curled up against his chest.

When he opened his eyes, Damien was looking at him, amused.

“You should already be gone,” Damien said.

Ethan knew that, too, but he had a feeling that very little about what was currently going on between them would follow the rules Damien was used to.

And he really didn’t feel like he was about to wake up. “Looks like I’m not going anywhere.”

Damien moved onto his stomach, still lying half over Ethan, his fingers tracing the line of Ethan’s jaw. “I don’t get this. I don’t get you.”

“What’s so special about me?” Ethan asked, a soft smile still playing on his face.

“You should be scared of me.”

Ethan knew he wouldn’t like the answer, yet he heard himself ask, “Why?”

“I could kill you,” Damien said as if it was evident. “I was killing you, before you started doing... whatever it is that’s giving you some control when we’re here.”

The hint of fear was back. Before it could take hold of him, Ethan forced himself to say, “If I tell you that I figured it out, that I know what it is that’s stopping you from killing me. Would you tell me not to do it?”

It took so long for Damien to say anything that Ethan started feeling groggy again. Just as he thought he wouldn’t get a reply, Damien said, “No. Don’t stop. I like this,” and then, as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was saying, “I like you.”

It was pure insanity, the kind Ethan should have figured out how to put a stop to as soon as he could.

But he couldn’t.

Because he liked Damien, too.

Ethan didn’t always remember his dreams, but even when he didn’t, Damien’s eyes haunted him through the day. However, as long as he kept taking his sleeping pills, he didn’t feel as drained as he had in the first couple of

weeks. The last thing he wanted was to depend on the damn things but right now, they felt like a compromise, considering that the only other solution would have been to figure out how to get rid of Damien.

And that was the last thing Ethan wanted, even though he was aware how much of a risk he was taking. His dreams felt more real than anything else could be, made him feel more alive than he had in a very, very long time.

And he kept thinking about them, turning the events of the night before over in his head all day long, whenever he remembered them. If not, he lost himself daydreaming about deep-blue eyes that made him feel like their owner could see inside his very soul.

Which led to moments like this one, with Amy, one of his colleagues, standing in the doorway to his office and staring at him in amusement.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

She entered his office and bumped the door with her hip to close it behind her. “What’s wrong with you? I had to knock three times before you realized I was there.”

“Sorry, I... Sorry. What is it?”

Instead of telling him what she wanted, she walked up to him and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Did you meet someone?”

Ethan let out a playful groan as he rubbed a hand against his forehead, trying to chase away the image of deep-blue eyes that had suddenly flashed in his mind. “You would know if I had.” It was the truth, after all. When he was dating someone, Ethan couldn’t stop gushing about his lover, until everyone was sick of listening to him.

“Well, then.” She looked actually concerned when she continued, “You know what my next question is going to be.”

This time, Ethan’s annoyance was real all the way through. “No, I am not back with my ex. Jesus, Amy, how many times are you going to ask me that?”

“You two are still friends and were together for how many years? It’s a legitimate question!”

“We are still friends because we’ve been friends since kindergarten.” Ethan took a deep breath. “Please, Amy, stop. You of all people should understand that I didn’t want to mess up a twenty-plus year friendship over a failed relationship. That’s the reason Shane and I broke up in the first place. We had to stop before we ended up hating each other.”

Amy didn't seem convinced. "I'd agree with you if that relationship had been healthy in the first place."

With a sigh, Ethan said, "And it's none of your business. *Drop it.*" He'd long ago given up on convincing her that everything that went on between him and Shane had been consensual; they got along great on pretty much everything else, but she firmly believed that the kind of relationship he'd had with Shane was inherently abusive and that Ethan just wasn't ready to admit it. "Did you have a professional reason for being here, or did you just want to meddle in my love life?"

"Your absence of one, you mean," she said, lightly, and Ethan took it for the peace offering it was, giving her a smile. "I did, actually. This," she handed him the file she'd been carrying, "was supposed to end up on my caseload, but I think it might be more up your alley than mine."

He took the file and laid it on his desk. "Let me have a look."

He was standing in front of an open window. Outside, he could see a snowstorm of the kind he'd only ever witnessed on Christmases spent at his grandparents' house. Yet he wasn't cold, and the snow dancing outside never made it inside. He knew, then, that it was another dream.

He felt a presence behind him and said, "Your world is very, very strange."

Damien's laugh sounded ethereal. "No, this is all yours."

Ethan threw him a look over his shoulder, surprised both by the answer and Damien's newfound easiness with words, but Damien merely shrugged and said, "I was curious to see what you'd come up with."

Damien walked up to him and wrapped his arms around him. "Where is this?"

Ethan stared at the snow, wondering if it was just a random winter, but no, it wasn't. "My father's parents' place. When I was a kid, we went there every Christmas."

"Not anymore?"

"After my sister and I started college, it became more complicated. We want to, but we don't always make it." And since his father's death, everything was different. But he didn't want to say that. He shook his head, trying to get a better hold of his thoughts. "Why do you care?"

“As I said, I was curious.”

Ethan had a feeling it was more than that, but he didn't ask. Instead, he turned around and found Damien staring at him like he was trying to drink him in. “What are you?” He was going to keep on asking that question until he got a real answer.

The teasing smile Ethan remembered was firmly back on Damien's face. “Whatever you need me to be.”

Without meaning to, Ethan took a step back. This was too perfect, too familiar.

He forgot everything he'd meant to say when Damien pushed himself up on his tiptoes. Ethan had to hold back a laugh when that wasn't enough to get Damien the kiss he so obviously wanted, and he started to pout. “You're too tall.”

“Aren't you the one who set us up like this?”

“No.” Damien went back down on his feet, still pouting. “This is on you. I wanted to see what you'd create if I let you.”

If I let you. The words brought a shiver of thrill up Ethan's back. He knew he should have been scared, but this was just... strange. It was a dream, but it was so far from a nightmare that it felt like Ethan had no idea which way was up or down anymore.

“Why am I here?”

Another teasing smile and Damien pulled Ethan across the room, toward the bed. “Can't you guess?”

Ethan went easily, too easily maybe. He still felt like he should be scared, like he needed to put a stop to whatever this was before it was too late, before he lost himself.

Yet, every time that thought crossed his mind, deep-blue eyes caught his, and he couldn't look away.

“What are you?” he asked again while Damien eased him down on the bed and straddled him.

“There are no words for what I am.”

Ethan had no chance to say anything else. Damien leaned over him, whispered a soft, “No more questions,” before capturing his mouth in a kiss so gentle that it didn't feel like a prelude to anything else.

When Damien released him, Ethan's eyelids felt heavy, his whole body languid. There were no bonds holding him in place, but he couldn't move. He didn't even want to.

Damien laid a trail of kisses and small bites down Ethan's chest until he reached Ethan's cock. His smile became downright wicked before he took Ethan's cock in his mouth and swallowed him down to the root in one go.

Ethan had barely noticed that he was hard, but now, he was right on the edge, hanging only by his fingertips. His mouth opened on a moan that turned into a sound of protest when Damien released him.

"You know what I like the most about this being a dream?" Damien asked, bussing a kiss against the head of Ethan's cock. "It doesn't matter how close you are. If I want, I can keep you on the edge for hours until you don't know if you're begging me to stop or to keep going."

And he proceeded to do exactly that.

The more time passed, the harder it became for Ethan to remember that it wasn't real. That even when he woke up sore like he'd spent the whole night having sex, it wasn't real. It didn't matter how many times he told himself that; he wanted more.

So when friends asked him if he'd met someone, he had to resist the temptation to say *yes*. When they teased him about how little sleep he seemed to be getting—the sleeping pills helped, but he never managed a full night anymore—he was tempted to brag about the reason.

Even when he almost didn't sleep, he felt awake, healthy, *alive*. More alive than ever before.

It wasn't a good thing, he knew that. It might kill him in the end. He knew that too.

But he couldn't seem to make it stop.

It might have been easier if it had been only sex. If he'd kept on waking up with almost no memories of his dreams except for Damien's eyes and the feeling that whoever he kept meeting in his dreams, they were as deadly as they were seductive.

But it stopped being just that from the moment they started talking.

Ethan closed his eyes for a moment. He felt languid and sated, his whole body about to melt into the mattress.

When he opened his eyes again, he found Damien staring at him like he expected him to disappear any second now.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Ethan teased. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Damien gave him a soft smile. “I thought I was the one who could read your mind.”

“You always do that.” Ethan stretched, holding back a smile when he heard Damien’s sharp intake of breath. It was very satisfying to know he wasn’t the only one affected by what happened here. “You’re really against post-sex cuddling, is that it?”

Letting out a laugh, Damien relented, crawling from his spot at the end of the bed to lie down next to Ethan. “Better?”

“Much better.” Ethan pulled Damien against him. He wasn’t feeling sleepy yet.

“I don’t know how you do this.”

For once, Ethan didn’t ask what Damien meant. They’d had this conversation often enough that he knew exactly what Damien was talking about, and he had no idea how to tell Damien that he was wrong. That Ethan wasn’t doing anything, no matter what Damien thought. That he didn’t have any control over what happened here for the very simple reason that he didn’t know how. His own explanation was that his sleeping pills put him in a state that built some kind of wall that Damien couldn’t quite step through. It made very little sense, but it was the best he had.

So no, he didn’t control anything. Except for the fact that if he didn’t want this, he would have figured out how to make it stop a long time ago.

He only said, “I don’t know, either.”

Damien tilted his head against the pillow, still staring at Ethan. “I really don’t understand you. You’re nothing like I was expecting.”

“Is that so?”

He could see Damien’s hesitation before Damien said, “Usually, I’m brought to people who welcome what I have to give. People full of pain and grief who want an easy death. I thought that’s who you were, too.”

“Is that...” Ethan trailed off as he swallowed hard. He wasn’t a complete idiot, and every time he heard Damien talk like this, it scared him a little. It was just never enough to convince him that he should end this. “Is that what you are? What you do?”

“Will you never stop asking questions?” Damien didn’t sound angry, though. More like fond and amused.

So Ethan said, “Fair’s fair. You can read my mind. You know everything there is to know about me.”

“No, I don’t. I’m not omniscient. I can’t see everything at every moment.”

“Still... and I know nothing about you.”

Damien’s smile disappeared like a door closing in Ethan’s face. “Because there is nothing to know about me.”

Ethan brought a hand up to Damien’s cheek, followed the line of his jaw with his fingertips. “I don’t believe you.”

“This,” Damien gestured toward the rest of the room, “is all that exists for me. It’s all I know. There’s nothing for me to tell you except for the other people I killed before you.”

Maybe Ethan should have been scared. Yet he heard himself ask, “Is that what you mean to do to me?”

“No.” Damien’s voice was so determined, it gave the impression that he would fight through heaven and hell to stop it from happening if he had to. “I don’t wish to do you any harm.” He paused; then he admitted, “Not anymore.”

Somehow, that was good enough for Ethan. “That sounds like a very sad, lonely life.”

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for me.” Damien kept his voice light, but Ethan could see that he was starting to feel insulted. “It’s all I know. I never wished for more. This is my life.”

It felt wrong. Like Damien’s words were hollow, like he, himself, didn’t believe a word of what he was saying. He probably had, once, but Ethan was almost certain that he didn’t now. Not anymore.

And as crazy as it sounded, Ethan wanted to show him that it could be more, that he could have more. It felt as if Damien was a prisoner of this world as much as anyone who had ever been caught in his web.

Ethan wanted nothing more than to free him. He couldn't help but ask, "How can I find you?"

Damien's eyes widened in surprise, and his voice was very, very soft when he said, "Don't be silly, Ethan. You can't find me anywhere else. I only exist here."

"Hey, big boy."

It took Ethan a minute to spot Shane who was slouching against the side of Ethan's building. It was an early Saturday morning, and Ethan was coming back home with his groceries for the week. After a long week at work, he was completely drained, yet he felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth.

"Hey there, skinny."

The nicknames were as old as their friendship, dating back to a time when Ethan had been just a little chubby and Shane as lean as a beanpole. They didn't make sense anymore, not now that Ethan was all lean muscle, now that Shane and his six-foot-five frame towered over him. But they'd become an inside joke between them, comfortable and safe.

"I didn't know you were back in town," Ethan said as he walked closer, switching his grocery bags to one hand, so he could pull his friend into a one-armed hug.

"Didn't you hear?" Shane smiled, letting Ethan steer him toward the entrance. "My little sister is getting engaged. I promised Mom I would be there, so I thought I'd come back a couple of days early and, you know, enjoy your guest bedroom."

Ethan snorted. It was so like Shane to assume he would be welcome even though he'd appeared without warning.

Thing was, he was. And Ethan knew that Shane would have done the same thing for him.

Except that Ethan probably would have called him in advance.

"I don't have a guest bedroom, remember that?" After moving in, Ethan had promptly turned the potential guest bedroom into an office for himself. It made a lot more sense, considering how often he had to work from home in order to get everything done, and the only guests he ever had were the kind who slept in his bed.

But he and Shane argued over it every time.

“We already discussed that, man. You should have one.” Shane put an arm over Ethan’s shoulders. “Your damn couch is way too fucking small.”

“As if I’d make you sleep on the couch,” Ethan said. Truth was, he wouldn’t make anyone sleep on that couch. It was comfortable enough to sit on, but otherwise, it was meant more as an element of decoration than as an actual couch to comfortably slouch on.

“Your bed isn’t much better,” Shane reminded him as Ethan lowered his bags to the ground and pulled out his keys to let them in.

“Not my fault that you’re a giant.”

Ethan’s queen size bed was more than big enough for him, but Shane was always bitching that there wasn’t enough space for two people to sleep on it.

“Not everyone is midget-sized.”

Ethan couldn’t help but laugh. Somehow, that made him think of Damien, and how even Ethan felt big next to him.

“I’m not a midget.”

Ethan headed to the kitchen to put everything away while Shane made himself at home on his couch. Without thinking, he grabbed two beers from the fridge before heading back.

When he handed Shane his bottle, though, instead of thanking him, Shane threw him a strange look. “O-kay. Why are we drinking this early?”

Ethan’s knees buckled when he realized how transparent he was, and he had to grab on the back of the chair next to him in order not to collapse. Accompanying conversations about personal trouble with alcohol was an old habit of theirs, dating back to their late teens, before they got together, before they had any words for what they were to each other. And it was a pattern by now, so just being offered a beer that early in the morning would clue Shane in to the fact that Ethan was in trouble. Knowing Shane, he wouldn’t let it go until he got the whole story out of Ethan. That was the last thing Ethan wanted.

Ethan was holding onto his beer like his life depended on it, his breath coming out in short gasps as he sat and almost bent himself in two. He closed his eyes, doing his best to keep the panic at bay.

Within a second, he felt Shane’s hands close around his knees as Shane inched closer, caging him in with both his legs on either side of Ethan’s. “Hey, hey, Ethan. Come on, baby, breathe for me.”

When Ethan shook his head, completely lost, Shane tightened his grip. “You can do it. Just breathe with me. In and out.”

Slowly, the strength in Shane’s voice, the certainty of his grip on Ethan, seemed to push the panic out of Ethan until he could follow Shane’s rhythm, follow the slow *in and out* as the command it was.

When Ethan could breathe again, what came out of his mouth was almost a sob. He opened his eyes, furiously blinking back tears. It had been so long since he’d last had a panic attack, and even longer since Shane had done this, brought him back to himself with nothing but his presence and his words. He shouldn’t still need this. And yet, here he was.

Shane was staring at him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Ethan swallowed hard as he tried to get his voice back. “You won’t believe me if I say it’s nothing, will you?”

“Not a chance. I haven’t seen you get this bad since your father died.”

Those had been an awful couple of months, and a lot of the time, it had felt like Shane was the only thing keeping Ethan upright. Ethan still believed that it was part of why their relationship couldn’t have lasted: because it had started then, when Ethan had been fucked up and lost and had desperately needed something only Shane knew how to give him.

But this... this was completely different. Ethan wasn’t sure if he could explain it.

“It’s complicated.”

Shane shrugged. “Let’s have a drink. We have all day, after all.”

But Ethan also knew that it meant that there was no way Shane would let him get away with not telling him anything. Sooner or later, he would have to talk.

And maybe that was exactly what Ethan needed. Someone who wouldn’t let it go until he got some real answers.

Ethan soon found out that when Shane had said that they had all day, he really meant it. They had a beer, and they ordered pizza when they got hungry. Much, much later, when the sun was slowly setting behind the horizon, and it became obvious that Ethan couldn’t explain what was going on in his life—that

he wanted to but had no idea how to do it in a way that made sense—Shane gave him a wicked grin and said, “Let’s get you wasted.”

Ethan had laughed at that. So many nights had ended like this when they were teenagers. Thanks to their difference in size, a similar amount of alcohol left Ethan struggling to get a foot in front of the other, while Shane could convince anyone who was watching that he was still sober.

So they had more beer and spent the evening chatting about everything and nothing, about Shane’s sister’s engagement, about their respective jobs. They kept the conversation as light as they could, arguing over the possible results of the upcoming hockey playoffs. Shane, as usual, gave Ethan shit for living in Toronto and being a Habs fan, and Ethan gave as good as he got because, really, how many times had the Leafs made the playoffs in the last ten years?

It wasn’t until much, much later that Shane asked, while giving Ethan a knowing look, “So. Did you meet someone?”

Ethan wasn’t drunk enough that he’d just blurt out the truth. However, the question took him by surprise. So much so that before he could think better of it, he’d said, “yes,” quickly followed by a “no,” then, at Shane’s pointed look, “kind of.”

“And nobody knows this because...?”

Downing the last of his beer, Ethan said, “Because it’s not gonna happen.”

Shane rested his elbows on his knees, all his attention on Ethan. “So what’s the deal with him? He’s closeted? Not boyfriend material?” He pretended to suppress a shudder. “Vanilla?”

Ethan almost laughed, but when he looked at Shane, he was certain his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “It would be so much easier if it was something like that. Whatever we have, whatever I’m hoping for... it’s not real.”

He’s not real was what he wanted to say, but if he did, he would have to explain it. He knew that Shane, with a grandmother that everyone had called a bit of a witch when they were kids, probably wouldn’t dismiss everything Ethan was saying as soon as he admitted that the guy who was doing such a number on him only existed inside his dreams, but that knowledge scared him. Talking about what was going on with someone who believed him would make it more real, horrifying, life-threatening.

Just when the silence threatened to weigh too heavily on them both, Shane said, “Maybe you need to get laid.”

Ethan looked at the ground. “Yeah, because I have so many willing candidates and so much time to try dating again.”

“Who’s talking about dating?” Shane put a hand on Ethan’s knee, waiting until Ethan looked at him before continuing, light and teasing, “All I mean is going out, picking up someone. Maybe even getting a blowjob in the bathroom of a bar. We can go somewhere this weekend if you want. You know I make a hell of a wingman.”

“And you know,” Ethan said, mimicking Shane’s tone, “that I don’t do so well with one-night stands.”

That was an understatement. Ethan just wasn’t that kind of guy. Nameless hookups with strangers left him feeling anything but satisfied.

“Oh, babe,” Shane offered him a grin, a wicked glint in his eyes saying that he was still teasing, “you know I’d offer myself if I thought it might help.”

Ethan knew he was supposed to tease right back, but he couldn’t bring himself to. “It might,” he swallowed, trying to find the courage to finish his sentence, “help. I need to get out of my head.”

He felt his heart hammer in his chest. He needed that, in a way that he hadn’t realized until the moment the idea hung in the air between them. Not so much getting out his head, but he needed something tangible to hold onto, something to remind him what was real and what wasn’t. Besides, he and Shane still hooked up from time to time. It wouldn’t be that different.

Except that Shane remained silent for so long that Ethan lost all confidence. “Forget I said anything,” he said, interrupting Shane just when he opened his mouth. “It was a bad idea.”

“I didn’t say no.”

Ethan, who had started staring at the floor again, looked up at Shane, surprised.

“But,” Shane continued once he had Ethan’s attention again, “if what you want is to get out of your head as you said? We’re both too drunk to make that happen.” Shane waited until Ethan gave a small nod, admitting that Shane was right. “Let’s sleep it off. If you still want this tomorrow, we’ll talk. Sound good?”

“Yeah.” Ethan cleared his throat, trying to get rid of the tightness he felt there. “Sounds great.”

Shane moved closer on the couch until their knees were touching. “Remember, though. I’ll need to have a better idea of what’s going on in there,” he tapped a finger against the side of Ethan’s forehead, “before I do anything.”

“I know.”

Ethan had no idea if he could explain it in a way that made sense to anybody but him.

But he was sure as hell going to try.

When Ethan opened his eyes, he saw Damien sitting next to him on the bed, none of Damien’s attention on him. Instead, Damien was staring at something in the distance.

Ethan raised himself on his elbows, his eyes going wide as he realized what Damien was looking at. It was a window that Damien had created out of thin air, showing the inside of Ethan’s bedroom with Ethan nowhere in sight, and Shane sleeping in his bed.

Shane was lying on his front, hugging the pillow. The sheets had pooled around his hips. He wasn’t naked, but for someone who didn’t know that, it was easy to believe it.

Slowly, Ethan sat too, expecting Damien to make the window disappear once he saw that Ethan was here. Instead, Damien kept staring and asked, “Who is he?”

That question was never easy to answer. Most people had trouble understanding the way things were between them; the lengths they both went to, working to salvage twenty-plus years of friendship when their relationship crashed and burned, was completely foreign to them.

Yet, this time, it was easy to say, “My ex,” because he knew, somehow, that Damien would understand everything else hidden behind the simple word.

“What is he doing in your bed?”

Ethan stared at Damien who was pointedly not looking at him, and couldn’t help but smile. “Are you jealous?”

“Why would I be?” Damien was attempting indifference, but Ethan saw right through him.

“I don’t know, you tell me.” He spread his legs, gently grabbed Damien around the waist to pull him toward him. Damien went easily, still not looking

at Ethan, even as he settled himself more comfortably, resting against Ethan's chest. "He's been my best friend my whole life. I love him, but man, me and him together? It so doesn't work. Been there, done that, not gonna try again. I'm not gonna ditch you for him."

Damien went rigid. "Because you can't."

A shiver of fear climbed its way up Ethan's back, but he did his best not to let it show. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said." Damien's voice sounded like it was on the verge of breaking. "You never had a choice. If you had, you wouldn't be here."

The words cut deep and hurt, but all Ethan did was to brush a kiss against Damien's hair. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. This," Damien enfolded the whole room with a gesture of his hand, "is hurting you. There's no future here. None that doesn't end with you dead."

Ethan knew he should be scared, but there was something in the way Damien said it, so far from the indifferent curiosity he'd shown during their first nights together, that made it impossible. "You could always stop."

Damien threw him a look over his shoulder. "I can't." He sounded bitter and scared. "I've tried already when I realized how much you were changing me. It's not working. I don't want to hurt you," he looked away, "but I can't stop."

"Maybe there's a way," Ethan whispered. "We just have to find it."

Damien laughed, cynical and horrible, like nails on a chalkboard. "There's no we." He pushed away from Ethan, stood up, and walked to the window he'd created. "This is my world. This is who I am. No matter how much I wish I could change, I can't."

Ethan wanted to say something, anything, but he couldn't find the words. Deep down, he knew that Damien was right, that the smart thing would have been to figure out how to stop this early on. He wished that they could have more, the same way Damien wished he could change, but both those things were impossible.

"I didn't know what I was missing until someone dangled it in front of my nose, and now... I don't understand what I'm feeling. I shouldn't care about you. I shouldn't want more than this." Again, Damien made a gesture that

included the whole room. He sounded downright miserable when he said, “What does he have that I don’t?”

What Ethan wanted, more than anything, was to comfort Damien, but he couldn’t allow himself to. He had to remember that this wasn’t real, that no matter how good it felt, it was self-destructive at best.

They both wished that things could be different, but it didn’t matter. Here, Damien was a predator and Ethan his prey. There could be no happy ending.

So he forced himself to forget that he and Shane would never happen again, that they were much happier as friends.

And he answered Damien’s question in the only way that felt right.

“He’s real.”

When Damien finally turned to look at him, fire was burning in his eyes. But he never got the chance to say what he wanted.

The dream started collapsing around them, and Ethan brought a hand to his throat as he desperately tried to suck in a breath.

Something was tightening around his neck, tightening and tightening...

Ethan woke up screaming and gasping for air, his throat burning. He couldn’t even open his eyes, so when someone touched him, he started struggling.

“Whoa! Ethan, it’s me! Wait, I’ll remove it, okay?”

In a second, Ethan blinked open his eyes and was able to breath. He put as much space as he could between himself and Shane, moving until he had his back pressed against the wall.

He rubbed his throat. “What the fuck, Shane?”

“I’m sorry. It was the only way I knew to wake you up.” Ethan’s eyes went wide when he saw what Shane was showing him: the spiral of infinity pendant that Shane always wore. “But since the spell in this is tailored to me, not to you... Look, I’m really sorry.”

“Did you have to wake me up like that?”

It was Shane’s turn to stare. “Are you fucking serious? You were thrashing and whining like you were having the worst nightmare. Why would I let you sleep through that?”

Ethan couldn't say anything to that. He knew he didn't make sense, but he couldn't help himself.

Shane sighed. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I wish I could tell you, but I don't know how to explain it."

"Let me try." Shane moved closer, sitting on the side of the bed. "You've been having a hard time sleeping for days. Most of the time, you manage a couple of hours, no more than that. If you do sleep a full night, you're exhausted anyway. You somehow never catch up on your sleep. You know you have long, elaborate dreams every night, but you don't remember them. All you can remember is a detail or two, details that haunt you through the whole day. You can't think of anything else." Looking at him intently, Shane continued, "Sounds familiar?"

Looking down at the bed, Ethan said, "More or less. It's been going on for weeks, not days." From the corner of his eyes, he saw Shane move toward him, alarmed, and raised a hand to stop him. "When it started, I thought it was a weird case of insomnia, so I took pills for it. I started sleeping better, I'm not feeling so exhausted anymore, but the dreams never stopped."

When silence was the only answer he got, he asked, "You know what's wrong with me, don't you?"

Shane nodded. "Same thing happened to me when we were... fifteen I think? It ended fast because I was used to talking to my grandma whenever something happened that I couldn't explain. She figured out what was wrong, gave me this," he indicated his pendant, "and taught me the spell I needed to banish the being who had invaded my dreams."

"It's that dangerous?"

"If you don't put a stop to it, sooner or later it's going to kill you."

Ethan sucked in a breath. He knew that already, of course, but hearing somebody else, somebody he trusted, say it somehow made it more real.

"You don't seem that surprised," Shane said, gently.

"Because I'm not. I knew whatever was happening was wrong, I just..." Again, Ethan looked away. "It felt real, you know? More real than anything I've felt in a fucking long time."

There was a long, long silence that felt like it would swallow Ethan whole until Shane broke it. "That's why you wanted us to scene."

“Yeah.”

He needed something real, tangible, something that he could hold onto before the feeling of his dreams being more real, having more meaning than anything that happened when he was awake, came back.

Something that would stop him from falling into the same trap.

“On one condition,” Shane said with a soft smile.

“What is it?”

“Tomorrow, we’re going shopping and finding you something a bit like this,” Shane showed Ethan his pendant again. “Something that means enough to you that it can protect you. When I’m with the family, I’ll ask my grandma for another copy of the spell, and I’ll send it to you.” He interrupted just as Ethan was about to protest, “I’m not telling you what to do. It’s your choice.”

“But?” Ethan asked. He knew Shane better than that.

Shane moved a little closer until he could grab one of Ethan’s hands in both of his. “Please, promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

Ethan couldn’t make that promise without it being a lie. Still, he said, “I’ll try.”

The necklace Ethan chose was a small raven in full flight. He’d never been into symbols the way Shane was, and this would look less out of place on him if he started to wear it day in, day out.

Ethan shook his head at himself when he realized that it was still an *if*. He’d known for a while now that what was going on with Damien was dangerous for him, and what Shane told him only confirmed what he already believed.

He should have been happy to have the solution offered to him on a silver platter by the one person he’d always trusted with his life, with his very soul. If it had happened before he and Damien started talking, he would have been. Now, though, he couldn’t help but think that his situation had nothing to do with what Shane had gone through when they were teenagers.

Except the difference wasn’t anything but luck. Good or bad, Ethan couldn’t say yet.

Besides, what other choice did he have? He couldn’t depend forever on the damn pills that he’d worked so hard not to need. Not without feeling like he was undoing his own efforts in the most self-destructive way possible.

So he stopped taking his sleeping pills. After another week of dreams he could barely remember that left him exhausted and drained—when he knew he'd reached the end of his rope—he learned the spell by heart and put the raven necklace around his neck before going to bed.

Ethan opened his eyes, and for a moment, he wondered if he'd even fallen asleep. He was in his own bedroom, his own bed, and he was still wearing the boxer briefs he always wore to sleep.

Yet when he sat up in bed, confused, he found Damien sitting in the chair that Ethan used to read in every night before bed, right next to the window, as if Damien had wanted to put as much distance as he could between them.

He expected Damien to come closer when he noticed Ethan watching him.

All Damien did was to glare accusingly at the necklace Ethan was wearing.

“Are you really going to stay over there?” Ethan asked when he couldn't stand the silence anymore.

“I can't come any closer as long as you have that thing around your neck.”

A week ago, maybe that would have been enough to make Ethan take off the necklace and forget the whole thing. This time, though, he stood his ground. “Too bad.”

Damien finally stopped staring at the necklace and looked at Ethan's face instead. “So this is it. Isn't it?”

Ethan held back a laugh. “Don't you dare pretend to be the one who's hurt.”

Pulling his feet up on the chair, Damien locked his arms around his bent knees as if he was trying to make himself smaller. “I wasn't expecting this to happen. Not anymore.” He tilted his head, staring at Ethan. “What changed?”

“Don't you know already?”

Damien shook his head. “Can I see?”

With an amused smile, Ethan asked, “Since when do you need permission?”

Damien almost spit the next words out. “Since you put that fucking thing around your neck!”

That left Ethan almost speechless. “I haven't used the spell yet.”

“But you believe it will protect you. So this,” Ethan encompassed the whole room with a gesture of his hand, “is your dream, more than it's my world.”

That might explain why, for the first time since Damien had first appeared in Ethan's dreams, he looked scared, like he didn't know which way was up or down anymore. But Ethan wasn't about to ask.

"Go ahead," he said instead.

"Close your eyes."

Ethan obeyed without really meaning to. As soon as he did, his last time with Shane started playing behind his closed eyelids. Ethan couldn't hear what they were saying, but he didn't need to. He remembered every second.

He'd been standing, hands up, palms flat against the wall, muscles straining to hold the position. He'd spit out the gag in his mouth almost as soon as they'd started. It hadn't been meant to keep him silent; it was nothing but a reminder that, while his condo was pretty much soundproof, Shane expected him to stay quiet.

While he watched, he could almost feel the caress of Shane's belt against the curve where his ass met his thighs, where he knew a real hit could hurt so good, and hear his own groan of frustration. Shane had already been teasing him for long minutes by then, and it had taken everything Ethan had not to order him to hurry.

Just when Ethan had thought that the anticipation alone would drive him insane, Shane had laid a grounding hand on his shoulder and said, "Twenty. I want you to count them out."

Ethan couldn't recognize his own mumbling, but it sounded far too close to the heartfelt "Fuck you" that he'd held back at the last second.

Shane's answer had been a soft chuckle, low and dirty. "You don't get to hide from this, boy. You fucked up, so you're gonna count."

As much as it had frustrated Ethan in the moment, because he'd wanted nothing more than the freedom to lose himself in the sensations, now he had to admit that Shane had given him exactly what he'd needed: to be held accountable. He knew that he should have tried to figure out what the hell was wrong with his dreams weeks ago, and he hadn't, even though he'd been fully aware that they weren't good for him. Even though Damien had given him every hint that, if Ethan stopped taking his damn pills, what Damien was doing would eventually kill him.

It had happened a week ago, yet Ethan felt every bruise, every welt as if Shane had laid them on his skin yesterday. Right now, he needed the reminder.

He needed somebody else lending him their strength, something to remind him that this, here, wasn't real, and that he had to put a stop to it.

When he opened his eyes again, Damien looked like he was about to cry. "Is that why you kept coming back to me?"

It took Ethan a moment to understand what Damien was saying. "If you're asking if I enjoyed what we did, then the answer is yes, it's part of it. But that's not why I didn't try to stop this earlier. I'm a sub, not suicidal."

Or at least, not anymore, not for a long time. He'd fought for that peace of mind so hard that letting it go like this would mean betraying himself and everything he thought he was.

"Why, then?" It sounded like Damien didn't really want to hear the answer, but he had to ask.

It broke Ethan's heart a little bit more when he realized that, even if he wanted to, he couldn't lie to Damien. "Because I could have loved you."

Somehow, that made Damien curl in on himself as if hit by a physical blow. "I could have loved you, too."

It hurt to hear it, but maybe Ethan had needed that. A clear reminder that they were from different worlds, that they couldn't be together.

With a sigh, he closed a hand around his necklace.

"Can I ask for something first?"

Ethan didn't remove his hand, but he said, "Go ahead."

Slowly, Damien unfolded himself from the chair and walked up to Ethan, still keeping a little distance between the two of them. "One last kiss. Please."

Ethan was tempted, but the quiet demand made something inside him recoil. A line from Shane's email stood bright in his memory, a passage that Ethan knew he'd reproduced straight from his grandma's book. "All it takes is one kiss, willingly given, while the victim is fully aware of what they're doing, and there will be no saving them." He gave Damien a sad smile. "Did you really think my friend wouldn't have warned me about that?"

He watched Damien's eyes widen in horror, saw the tremor run through him. "It's not why I asked. Believe me; I don't want to do you any harm."

"I believe you." And Ethan really did. That's why this was hurting so much. He had to do this, he had no other option, but he really didn't want to. "Except that's what it would do if I did. So I can't."

Damien took a step back. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him. “Go ahead. Banish me.”

Holding onto his necklace so hard that the edges dug into the skin of his hand, Ethan recited the spell.

Ethan started sleeping better the very next night. There were no more nightmares, no more dreams that haunted him all day long.

More and more, though, as the days passed, Ethan felt like he had lost a very important part of himself. He knew it was a ridiculous thought, one that could only lead to a slippery, dangerous road, but he couldn't stop.

It had to show in his behavior, somehow, because Amy had taken to asking him almost daily if he was okay, to the point where, when she asked him the same question again while they were alone in the break room, he finally told her, a lot harsher than he meant to be, “I'm fine. I'm sleeping better than I have in weeks. Don't you have something else to worry about?”

She looked taken aback and pointed her spoon at him. “You don't need to bite my head off. It's just been a long time since I've last seen you this out of sort.”

Ethan sighed. He knew she was right, and taking his frustration out on her wouldn't help. “I swear I'm fine.” When she arched a dubious eyebrow at him, he quickly added, “Or at least I will be. I just need to move on.”

Amy stopped with her spoon halfway to her mouth. “So you did meet someone.”

Staring at his lunch, Ethan said, “It didn't go anywhere. Nothing to worry about.”

“You know you can talk to me if you want to, right?”

Ethan offered her an amused smile. “You're not exactly unbiased.”

It was her turn to sigh. “Please, Ethan, I'm trying to be your friend, not your shrink.”

“I know. But I can't talk about it yet.” He didn't know if he ever would. If it wasn't for the necklace he never took off, he might have wondered if the weeks of half-remembered dreams had been real.

“If you change your mind, I'm here.”

He didn't think he would, but it felt good to know that she was there for him if he wanted. "I'll remember that."

Moving on was proving to be much harder than Ethan had expected. He had to force himself to keep the necklace on at all times, aware that if he took it off, he would be lost. Damien probably had his claws in somebody else already, but without the protection of the spell, it would be like Ethan had a beacon shining over his head, a siren song calling out to every being like Damien.

Ethan hadn't been lying when he told Damien that he wasn't suicidal. So he kept on reminding himself that nothing could bring back what they had during those few weeks and tried to move on.

Almost two weeks later, he was still feeling completely off-kilter, and he had no idea what could make everything right again. He was sleeping well, sure, but everything else felt wrong. He was impatient with everybody, quick to lose his temper the same way he had when faced with Amy's innocent question. It got to the point where he almost had a case taken out of his hands because his boss doubted he could handle it. That hurt more than everything else. Ethan had always been good at what he did; he had a way to connect with the teens he worked with, to make them open up. Losing that would have felt like losing everything.

He couldn't let what had happened mess with his head like that. He needed to do something to get himself out of that rut. So that night, when a bunch of old college friends got together for drinks in town, he decided to join them.

They hadn't seen each other in so long that they all looked as uneasy as Ethan felt. Somehow, that made it possible to fit in, to let the alcohol flow and allow him to open up to real people again.

Just when he thought that the night was a success as far as giving him something else to think of, Louis, who had been his roommate way back when, laid a shaky hand on his shoulder and said, his eyes shining, "Dude, the guy over there's been staring at you for the last fifteen minutes."

Ethan laughed. He so wasn't there to pick up someone. Then he turned to look in the direction Louis was pointing at. His laugh died in his throat, and he sobered up at once.

The guy in question was small, a little thing with deep-blue eyes that Ethan would recognize anywhere. Damien.

"Do you know him?"

Ethan pinched himself, just to make sure he wasn't dreaming again, then he checked that his raven pendant was still around his neck. "Kind of."

Then he made his way through the throng of bodies on unsteady legs. It was impossible, and yet...

He stopped in front of the table where the Damien look-alike was sitting, and asked, "Do we know each other?"

Damien's smile was soft, so far from the smirk Ethan was used to seeing on his face, but his voice was strong and confident. "I've been looking for you for more than a week."

All the air seemed to leave Ethan's lungs in a rush. He held onto the table to stop himself from falling. "I thought you said I wouldn't be able to find you. That you weren't real."

"It was true when I said it."

Ethan still couldn't believe his eyes. "What changed?"

"You did this." At Ethan's incredulous look, Damien explained, "The spell you cast is powered by your will. I guess you didn't want me gone. You wanted me real."

"You guess?" Ethan repeated.

Damien shrugged. "This has never happened to me before. I don't know if it's permanent. I don't know if I'm linked to you, if I'm going to disappear again if something happens to you." He frowned. "And I can't say for sure because I can't read your mind anymore. It's very confusing."

"It's not a bad thing." Ethan took a deep breath. "It means we get to start over if we want to."

"How do you mean?"

It was so strange to think that Damien had no idea what it meant to be human, that he would have to learn it all. Ethan wanted so badly to help him along.

"Like this." Ethan sat in the chair next to Damien. "Hi, I'm Ethan. Can I buy you a drink?"

Damien laughed in delight, a sound that Ethan hoped to hear a lot more in the future. "Damien," he said when he could finally stop laughing. "Yes. I would really like that."

It made no sense that Damien was here, drinking with him, but Ethan didn't care.

Because now, maybe, just maybe, they could be together for real.

The End

Author Bio

Dawn has been telling stories for as long as she can remember. She's French, born and raised in Quebec, where everlasting winter is the norm and hockey, a way of life. Her idea of paradise is a snowy winter day spent reading by the fireplace with a cup of hot chocolate and a purring cat by her side.

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