

*The Eighth
Acolyte Reader*



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Lead Boy

by Jaymee Chelsea

I couldn't believe this was the final concert of the season. I sing solo soprano, and I was chosen as Lead Boy. I'd beat out the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, and I was only eleven – wow! It was the greatest honor that anyone could ever give me.

I was sitting in the dining hall with the thirty other boys from the advanced choir and we were chowing down on pizza when Dak, my roommate, said, "Man I can't *believe* we're finished." He pounded on the table. "We're outa here tomorrow! No more singin'! No more *Vocalizes!*" He made a face over at Jason, who was sitting on the other side of him.

I got a kind of catch in my throat and I almost choked on a swallow of Pepsi. "Enunciate, Dak!" I joked, afraid my eyes would fill up with tears. "E-nun-ci-ate!"

"Shit!" he said. "I *know* that! But I ain't in class and I can talk the way I want!"

We laughed, but the thought that I might not see him again really tugged at me. He was my best friend. We roomed together and played sports together and ate together and laughed together. We were singing partners and I could honestly say it was because of him that I made Lead Boy. When I was lonesome or was thinking about something else and couldn't focus in choir class, or in a concert, all I'd have to do was look over at him and watch him singing his heart out and it sort of filled me with this swelling feeling, like a balloon right in the middle of my chest. And I felt like I'd gotta do my best so's he'd be proud of me.

'Course, I *do* belong to the advanced choir and I *am* the only boy in the choir that can hit a high C and hold it. I think that helped me make Lead Boy. I *do* sing good, after all, and got a vibrato and everything. And I had a solo that night in the concert. It's a Vienna Boys' Choir specialty: *Pueri Concinite*. Mr. Jackson, our choir director, made a special deal with the director of the Vienna Boys' Choir to use it that night especially. It was his last concert – he was going to spend the next two years studying in Europe. He wanted to celebrate with that song. We'd got the university's orchestra and *everything!*

At our morning rehearsal Mr. Jackson had told us he had a special surprise for us. And he said, on the way out, "Oh, and by the way

Jaymee, those duets I've had you working on with Dak? The Mendelssohn *Grass*, and Weber *Pie Jesu*. You're singing them in the concert."

Those pieces? In the concert! Dude! They were *hard!* Even if I loved singing them and I could really shine on them, I got to thinking about the concert, and standing up there all alone in front of the choir, and I got a flutter in my belly. It made me so excited I wanted to go running through the quad turning cartwheels. When Dak and Jason and me left the chow hall for our dorm room to get our robes for the concert, I *did* turn a cartwheel. Dak laughed. He tried it too but ended up flat on his butt. It was so funny that we all three sat there laughing. Then I did the stupidest thing: I put my arm around him and kissed him on the cheek.

"C'mon Jaymee!" he said, real pissed off. He pulled himself away from me and wiped his cheek with his hand. "Don't get queer on me!"

Jason just sat there looking at us and giggled.

I have to tell you I'd wanted to kiss him like that for a long time, even if he was a year older than me, but I was always afraid. Tonight I was so excited and full of joy and laughter I just couldn't help myself.

I laughed nervously. "I wouldn't do *nothing* on you, Dak," I said, grinning, trying to smooth things over. I sure didn't want him to stop liking me.

That was an hour before the concert started. We got dressed in our Sunday Bests and pulled on our robes. All the other boys wore white robes with blue trim. Because I was Lead Boy, I got to wear a pale blue robe with gold trim. Dak kept saying things like, "Man, I wish I was in that robe!" It was what the robe *meant*. I got to sing the solos tonight. I got to stand out front where everybody could see me. It was like that robe was telling everybody I was the best of all of them. I'd have my photo taken to hang in the hall with all the other Lead Boys of the last jillion years.

All Dak said as we were crossing the quad to the recital hall was, "I think I ate too much." Then he burped happily.

And we opened the door to the recital hall.

And we heard.

The most glorious sound that could ever be produced by boys' voices.

And we saw the choir warming up. Thirty boys dressed in red-and-white robes, gathered around the 12-foot Steinway, and even their vocalizes were beautiful. Dak looked at me and I looked at him. Was *this* the surprise Mr. Jackson had for us? A dual concert with another boys'

choir?

My heart started jumping around in my chest and it was like I could hardly breathe. Man, doing your level best in front of all the townspeople and parents was hard enough, but to have to sing in front of boys who'd probably already performed these pieces and knew what they really ought to sound like – well, you couldn't make any mistakes because they'd surely hear them and know you weren't much good! Now I was beginning to get nervous. Holy smoke! What if I screwed up?

From there on the evening just got stranger and stranger. When Mr. Jackson came and warmed us up, he told us the other kids were from the St. Thomas choir from New York City. Wow, I'd actually heard of them! Then after the warm-up Mr. Jackson pulled me aside and introduced me to this boy from the other choir, name of Peter. He was a little older than me. Maybe fourteen. He had dark hair and big brown eyes that seemed to look right into me. He said, "Nice to meet you," and shook my hand, which surprised me because kids around here don't usually shake hands. It was then that Mr. Jackson told me I would be singing the duets with him.

I almost fainted. "But I thought Dak and me... I don't..."

"You'll be fine! What better way to combine a concert than have the Lead Boys from both choirs sing together? Now, both of you go over your parts in the practice room – you'll have to hurry. You've only got about half an hour."

I was in a daze, like *Glorias* were popping out of my head and spilling all over the place. When we were finally alone in the practice room, Peter looked at me with those sparkling brown eyes and said, "So you're the Lead Boy from Hosannah Music Camp."

Those eyes cut right into my soul. I squirmed in my chair. I couldn't look at him. "Yeah, guess I am," I said, but so soft I was afraid he didn't hear me.

I was just about to repeat myself when he said, "You must be pretty good."

I blushed and couldn't answer. I mean, what do you say when someone lays that one on you?

He turned his chair to the piano. "I'm Lead Boy at St. Thomas," he announced. As if I didn't know. He placed his music on the piano stand then played our pitches for the *Grüss*. I hummed mine in my head. But he didn't sing. Instead, he looked at me again and asked, "You as good as me?"

What was this kid trying to do? I didn't know if he was messing with my mind or what. I was on my guard more than ever now. I tried to

make my voice as even as possible and told him, "I don't know if I'm as good as you. I've never heard you."

Now, for the first time, he grinned at me, showing these wonderful white teeth. He patted me once on my leg. "You're okay, for a little guy." He played our pitches again.

"What do you mean 'for a little guy'?" I said.

Now I saw *him* blush. He cleared his throat. "Let's just sing." He hummed his pitch.

I hummed mine, and we sang the first line of the duet: *Wohin ich geh' und schaue in Feld und Wald und Tal*. It sounded *awesome!* Even without accompaniment.

But I was still troubled by this boy and the way he put me off. "What did you mean 'for a little guy'?" I repeated.

He looked over at me, then fiddled with the sheets of music. "I was here last year," he said. "I had just turned thirteen. It was my third summer and there wasn't anything I wanted more than to be Lead Boy. I practiced my guts out but I didn't make it. A boy of fourteen was chosen. He was so damned good! I knew I'd never have a chance. And the year before that it was an older boy. And the same story the year before *that*. This year I didn't come to Hosannah because I was afraid my voice would break." He looked over at me. "But as you can hear, my voice *hasn't* broken yet."

Then I saw his eyes flood and he looked away. "I went back to St. Thomas," he said, "and the director chose me as *Second Boy*. But I lucked out. A week before our tour the Lead Boy's voice broke. Just like that. One moment he was singing this terrific soprano aria, and the next moment he was croaking somewhere in the bass range. Anyhow, that's how I got to be Lead Boy – by default."

He stopped talking and stared at the music in front of him. After a moment I said, "But that doesn't explain what you meant by..."

"What I meant was that you were chosen as Lead Boy at – how old are you? Eleven?"

I nodded.

"There're how many boys here: fifty? eighty?"

"Fifty five. Thirty in the advanced choir. That's the one I'm in."

"And out of those fifty-five boys, about thirty of them are over age twelve. I bet more than three-fourths of them are older than you."

"So?"

"So?" he mimicked. "So that means you are the youngest kid in the history of Hosannah to be made Lead Boy. That's what it means. I

checked. And your first year here, too." He looked over at me and his eyes were swimming. "I would have given anything to be Lead Boy," he said quietly. "*Anything!*"

I was stunned. I sat there not knowing what to say or do. I felt guilty, 'though I didn't know why. Was I wrong to want to be Lead Boy so much? Had Mr. Jackson made a mistake by choosing me?

After a few moments, when he'd wiped his eyes, he gave us our pitches for the *Pie Jesu*, and we sang the song straight through without accompaniment. And he was one of the most terrific singers I'd ever heard. He could project and he was accurate and in tune. I had my hands full just to keep up with him. But I did, and when we were finished, he clapped me on the shoulder. "Now I know why they chose you as Lead Boy: you're good – for a little guy!"

Well, that set me smiling from ear to ear. This kid who was probably fourteen years old – three years older than me – was telling me how good I was. "Well, I've been practicing a lot," I mumbled.

He grinned and I saw those flawless white teeth again. "I doubt if you'd *ever* need to practice. You've natural talent."

We left the practice room and got in the concert hall just in time to assemble. The St. Thomas choir sang first. I was *amazed* at how beautiful they sounded. My eyes filled; my breath caught. They did some choruses from one of my favorite works: Bach's Cantata No. 147, and in the *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, when they got to the climax of the piece with the orchestra at full blast and everything so intense, I almost croaked! I could've watched them and listened to them till the end of time.

Then it was our turn, and we walked out there and, boy, was I scared! Before we started I tried to spot Peter in the audience but the stage lights were too bright. I knew he was sitting in the front row. He had to be because him and me were singing the last two duets together. Knowing he was there gave me a kind of confidence, so when I stood up front and sang the *Pueri Concinite* and after that *Mary Stuart's Prayer*, a couple of times my voice caught in my throat, I was so choked with emotion.

That was nothing compared to the way I felt when I saw the whole St. Thomas Choir leave the audience and start filing up on stage. When we were positioned, Mr. Jackson motioned for me and Peter to come down. I looked over at Peter and grinned, and he winked at me.

The first piece was the *Pie Jesu*. We blended so incredibly beautifully – much better than Dak and me. The Mendelssohn *Grüss*

was next and it, frankly, scared me. See, we have to sing it in German. We did okay, but near the end something funny happened to Peter where his note was high and loud. He stopped singing just an instant, then picked it up again, and we finished the song without any more glitches.

The last piece of the concert was *Chichester Psalms*. We had some men from a local church join us for the tenor and bass parts. Peter sang the solo in the second movement, and him and me sang the duet in the third. Again something strange happened in the second movement with Peter's voice. I figured he must've caught cold in the mountain air.

Then everyone was clapping and cheering for us. We got a standing ovation! I glanced over my shoulder at Dak who was grinning like a hyena and coming around with Roger and Jason. Then I looked up at Peter and saw that tears were streaming down his cheeks, only he wasn't grinning through them like a lot of the rest of us were. I reached over and touched his hand, and when he looked at me I could tell he was hurting. "You okay?" I asked him. He shook his head and looked away. He was trying not to cry. I didn't know what was wrong.

We filed off the stage and left the concert hall. In the confusion I somehow lost track of Peter. I wanted to talk to Dak, too, but when I came to him he acted like I smelled bad or something. He'd hardly talk at all, just introduced his parents, said I did a great job, but not like he really meant it, then turned and left. I wanted to follow, but someone else grabbed my hand and started shaking it. Dak shouted from the door, "I ain't sleeping here tonight, Lead Boy. So I guess this is goodbye."

"Wait! Dak!" I shouted, trying to claw my way through the crowd to him. I couldn't figure out his sarcasm. Was he still angry about that kiss on the cheek? Holy smoke, how could I ever have been so stupid?

See, I'd had these fantasies about tears, and us hugging each other and promising to write, and we'd plan to get together during the school year, like for a weekend or something, going to concerts together, stuff like that. But no. He was just gone.

Now everybody was congratulating me and slapping me on the back and butt. I should have felt good about it all but Dak's leaving like that was spoiling it for me – and Peter crying.

My parents hadn't been able to make it to the concert so I'd be sleeping another night in Aspen, and I'd have to spend it alone. Not a happy thought.

Then I saw Peter and shouted to him and he came over and said, real excited, "Did you know that our choir's staying here tonight?"

"No, I didn't." That was good news. Maybe Peter and me could get

together and talk or something.

"You got anyone staying with you?" he asked.

I looked over at the door where Dak had gone out with his parents.

"No. Dak..."

"Can I bunk in with you?"

I was *stunned!* First Peter complimenting me on my singing, now *this!* "Well, y-yeah! Of course!" I blurted, feeling like a fool. "Dak was rooming with me but..."

"That kid you were shouting to?"

"Yes."

"The creep!"

"He's *not* a creep," I protested. Why would Peter talk about Dak like that? "He's my friend. I like him."

"Well he wasn't much of a friend tonight, was he?" He pulled me toward the door of the reception hall. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

We walked along the sidewalk in the dark, our robes billowing in the cold night air. "What'd Dak do?" I asked. "He's my friend. We did *everything* together."

"Yeah, I bet. He's a jerk just the same."

"No, he isn't," I said quietly. I was beginning to wonder why I'd ever liked Peter.

"You should've heard what he was saying about you to his parents and everybody else he saw back there." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

I stopped walking. "What was he saying?"

"Only that *he* should have been chosen for Lead Boy. And that you were a queer who tried to kiss him all the time. He got so sick of it he asked to get moved to another dorm but they wouldn't let him."

"He didn't!" I said, "I mean, try to get moved. It's a lie!"

"And the only reason you got to be Lead Boy was because you and Mr. Jackson were probably, you know, queering off. In the showers and stuff. He was making you out as one bad *motherfucker*."

And then pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place: remembering the other boys whispering about me and looking at me real funny like, and me thinking it was just because they knew I was going to be chosen as Lead Boy; and Mr. Jackson touching me and stuff, and me *liking* it and not even thinking nothing about it.

How could I have been so stupid? And what if they told my father? Well, that did it. My head started spinning. It felt like the whole world was crashing in around me. I could actually see myself tumbling to the

ground, sort of in slow motion.

I came to with my head on Peter's lap. "C'mon, Jaymee," he was saying. "Wake up." He was stroking my cheek. "Let's go to your room."

He helped me stand, and we walked with his arm around me and I was glad because right then I didn't think I could walk straight without someone helping me. I'd never felt so alone in all my life.

My side of my room was a mess but Dak's was squeaky clean. I suppose his folks had done that, made up the bed and all – Dak sure wouldn't have. I just sat there on my unmade bed and stared off into nothing. I couldn't believe what Peter had told me about Dak. Why *me*? I'd never done nothing to hurt him. All this time I'd thought Dak and me were best friends. I burned when I thought about kissing him before the concert, with Jason watching. *That* time was real. But what was this gunk about all the other times?

"Aren't you gonna go to bed?" Peter said. I looked up, and there he was, undressed, right down to his underwear, and I was staring at this really good-looking chest and well-developed muscles, thin, hard belly and belly button, and a very obvious lump in his underwear. Dak I knew from the showers was small down there, like me. Not Peter – he was *big*!

I finally tore my eyes away from his underwear and stood up and pulled my choir robe off. Peter crawled into bed, turned on his side and propped his head up on an arm, watching me. And now I was all self-conscious. It was weird. I'd never felt uncomfortable undressing in front of anyone. Not even girls. I run around my home in just my underwear all the time, with my sister and her friends in the room, too.

"I better turn off the light," I said, and did so, and got out of my clothes, piling them on the floor. I crawled into bed and snuggled down into the covers, still shivering from the cold mountain air.

When I was finally settled in the sheets and comfortable, I saw Peter's head was still propped up on an arm so he could look over at me. The blanket was down to his waist and his chest was bare. I couldn't really see his face because of the darkness but I could make out its outline.

After a moment, he asked me, "You do it?"

"Huh?" I asked. He was making me nervous.

"What he said you did. Did you?"

I blushed. I was sure happy it was dark in the room. "Maybe some of it...."

"Were you always trying to kiss him and stuff? Like he said?"

"It was only once. And it didn't happen until today."

"Did you, you know... Was it...?"

"It was because I was excited. Hyped up. I didn't mean nothing by it. It was the only time I ever did it." I was starting to feel trapped. "It was... stupid."

He was quiet for a time, just looking over at me. Then he turned onto his back and perched his hands behind his head. My eyes were beginning to get used to the dark. "What about Mr. Jackson? You ever...?"

"I never did *nothing* with him!" I shouted. I sat up in my bed and hugged my knees to my chest and rocked back and forth. "I don't even know what Dak was talking about. The only time I was naked was when I was showering. And Dak and the others were there, but *never* Mr. Jackson."

I lay back down and the impact of Dak's lies flashed through my mind: maybe they'd not let me return to camp, maybe they'd tell my father who'd surely believe them before he got the truth from me. Father was like that: believe the worst first then listen for an explanation later. Tears flooded my eyes.

"I wouldn't have minded," Peter said quietly.

"Minded?" I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Being kissed by you." He turned in his bed to face me once more.

"Kissing's queer, and I'm not ever going to do it again," I said.

"Who told you that?"

"Everybody. That's why I got into trouble. Dak thought I was wrong for kissing him *once*. And it *is* wrong." My voice choked. "And I hate it!"

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"You're crazy. There's nothing wrong with kissing. Lot's of people do it."

"Well, that's – that's different. That's because they love you."

"I'll bet until tonight you loved Dak. Or at least liked him a lot. So how can kissing him be wrong?"

"It wasn't really a kiss; I just touched his cheek with my lips, anyway. It wasn't on his mouth. I don't even know why I did it." Boy, was I feeling miserable!

"You ever kissed anybody on the mouth?"

My heart started up again, pounding like a drum, and a tingle fluttered through my belly. Something really unusual was in the air, and I was scared. "No," I whispered.

"You want to try it?" he asked me quietly, so quietly that I could barely hear him.

"Now?" My mouth went dry.

"Why not?"

"Uh..."

"If you don't like it, you don't ever have to do it again. Besides, I won't tell, like Dak did."

Well, this kid was getting to me, where I *live!* I was having trouble breathing, and the fluttering in my belly was now more like a herd of hippopotamuses charging about. I wanted to do it, more than anything, but I was scared, too.

Curiosity won. I decided to try it. I pulled myself out of bed and went over to him. He threw off his covers and turned onto his back. He opened his arms. In the dim light coming through the window I could see really good now. And he was gorgeous! I just stood there looking at his body – his bare chest, his legs, the bulge in his briefs that was now more like a hammer handle.

I leaned down and aimed my mouth for his mouth. It wasn't very comfortable. My lips touched his and I sucked in, making a smooching sound, then straightened up. "Well?" I said. I was trembling, and not just from the cold. I was hugging my arms to my chest. My peepee was stiff and poking out like a flag pole from my Funpals, which I hoped he didn't see.

"That wasn't much of a kiss," he said.

"Well, I haven't had much practice," I said.

"Try it again, but this time, lie down on top of me. It'll be easier. And it'll stop you shivering so hard."

Geez! My heart started thumping harder, if that was possible. Get down onto him? Get down onto that fantastic body stretched out there to welcome me, all hard and strong and warm? I was too excited to even think about not doing what he said, so I put a knee on the near side of the bed and sort of lowered myself down and he wrapped his arms around me and I tried kissing him again, trying to make a smooching sound, my lips puckered out.

"You're too stiff," Peter whispered. "Wet your lips and relax. Make them sloppy."

I did that and tried again. Our lips touched and now, boy, it was like a thousand volts hit me – in my gut, in my heart! My lips were slightly apart and sliding against his. It was awesome!

I pulled back. "How was that?" I asked him.

"Great!" he sighed, still holding me and stroking my back and shoulders. "It's fun kissing you. With a little practice, you'll be a great kisser."

I giggled and we did it again. This time we slid our lips all around, over our chins and noses. He sucked in my upper lip until I could feel it graze those perfect white teeth of his. He nibbled. Gently. Boy, I just wanted to kiss and kiss, feeling everything build and get me all excited.

He pulled my lips off. "Wait!" he said. "I gotta breathe!" He panted a little, his hands moving gently back and forth over my neck and arms. I'd never laid on top of anyone like that before, both of us just wearing our briefs. The feel of skin against skin was unbelievable, but I was trembling like to shake the bed to pieces!

"You're cold," he whispered and snuggled with me, wrapping his arms completely around me, hugging me like I was some kind of teddy bear. We fitted together like two spoons. He pulled the blanket over both of us. I started warming up, feeling very comfortable. I'd been in a kind of "push-up" position with my hands on either side of his chest. Now I relaxed and put my full weight on him, resting my shaking arms.

"Here's another kind of kissing," he whispered, and pulled my face down and kissed me again. This time his tongue slid into my mouth.

I jumped back. "Yuck!" I said. I spat and wiped my lips on the back of my hand, making a big show of it.

"Wait," he said. "That's called French kissing, and it's great."

"It's yucky!"

"Not when you get used to it."

"But isn't it dirty?"

I felt him shrug. "I don't know. But who cares? Everybody that's in love does it."

"Love?" I was confused. "But I'm not..."

He didn't let me finish, but pulled my head back down and his lips met mine again, and once more his tongue slid into my mouth.

This time I didn't pull away. My tongue met his and we played touching games with our tongues while he stroked my back and shoulders and even played with my hair. Okay, it's yucky, I thought, but if Peter likes it, so what? And by now I was so full of excitement I'd have done just about anything!

We continued to kiss and slip our lips against each others', and our tongues were sliding around and bumping against our front teeth, and now Peter was thrusting his hips against me as we kissed and snuggled and I could feel something poking my leg when he thrust. My mind registered

what it was, but I didn't dare think about it.

I lost track of time as Peter thrust harder and faster, and that something poking me when he thrust sent goose bumps all through me, and his breathing quickened and his kisses got more and more intense and I could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and suddenly I had the most awesome feeling I'd ever experienced in my whole life. It filled me and it was like my body was laughing all through inside-out and I held my breath, and suddenly Peter spasmed and held me so tight it was like he was trying to choke me, and he stopped breathing and shuddered. I thought he was having a seizure or something which near scared me to death, but I couldn't do anything about it because of the terrific feeling pounding through me, making me all weak and like Jello.

Then it just nicely started to fade away and I came slowly back to reality and felt Peter still spasming and holding his breath, squeezing my butt with his hands.

Honest to Pete, I was about to get up and go fetch the nurse when he sort of relaxed and released me. Whatever had zapped him, it was over. His hands started petting me again. I laid my head on his shoulder and snuggled my face into his neck, beginning to get my strength back, smelling his skin and his hair, feeling his arms around me. It was the first time anybody'd ever held me like that. I loved it. And I loved him. I didn't ever want him to let me go because he made me feel, I don't know, safe? Not so alone?

Then I remembered his seizure or whatever it was. "What happened to you?" I asked. "I thought you were dying."

He didn't answer me, and then I realized he was quietly crying. "Peter?" I said. "What's wrong?" I rose up to look at him.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me down again. "M-my voice!" he finally managed to blurt out.

His voice! I had forgotten that he'd lost it a couple of times in the concert. "It's just a cold. The mountain air. The altitude. It'll get better."

"Don't you understand?" he cried, his voice tight. "It broke tonight! I'm finished!"

Oh, Geez! Of course! Like the Lead Boy he'd replaced. He wasn't a little kid any longer – anyhow not down *there!* I didn't know what to say, except, "Maybe it's just tired. Maybe..."

"It's not tired," he said. "It's gone. And I can't sing any more!" I could feel his hot tears running between our cheeks. "All I ever wanted to do was sing. And now, on the same night, my greatest triumph and my worst nightmare." He tried to laugh, but it was part sob. "Pretty pathetic,

aren't I?" He sniffed and wiped his eyes. "But at least I became a man with someone I love."

Became a man? Someone he loved? Who was that? I didn't think I was getting the whole picture, but I didn't want to pry. "I don't think you're pathetic," I said. I hugged his neck on one side as I snuggled my face into his shoulder. "I think you're pretty fantastic."

His hands went up to my head and he brought my face up to his again and kissed me. It was a different kind of kiss, still wet and sloppy, but now somehow warm and comfortable.

We ended the kiss and I lay back on top of him and snuggled my face against his neck. I played with a lock of his hair. "I'm sorry about your voice. I wish there was something I could do."

"Let's just lie here like this. That'll help for a little while."

"Okay," I said, and kissed his neck. I wished it could be *me* that he loved. But I didn't know how to go about it. "What did you mean about becoming a man with someone you loved?"

"You're pretty dense, aren't you?" he said, putting his hand gently under my chin and turning my face up so he could look at me in the darkened room.

I shrugged and started stroking the nipple of his right breast. "I don't know. I guess..." Sigh. Why would he love *me*? I was just a dopey kid he hardly knew.

He ruffled my hair. "If you haven't noticed, there's someone that loves you with all his heart, and has since the first moment he laid eyes on you, and loved you even more when he heard you sing, and loved you even *even* more when he heard..." His voice choked, and he swallowed and cleared his throat, but he went on, "...when he heard your roommate say those shitty things about you and saw how hurt you were."

Oh, geez! Now I felt ten feet tall. My eyes flooded. I kissed his cheek and snuggled my face for the zillionth time into his shoulder. Wow! He *loved* me! I wanted to say something more, but I didn't know the words to express how I was feeling, so I just settled for that tremendous warm hug I was in. I think I went to sleep like that, laying partly on top of him, snuggling with him, playing with a lock of his hair, feeling his arms around me and knowing he loved me, after we'd quietly talked about the concert for a while. I didn't ever want to let him go, especially after this mind-blowing experience.

Tomorrow we'd board our separate buses and part, him to New York, and me to Denver. I may never see him again. It hurt too much to even think about it. So I didn't.