

Loose Id

CAROLYN GRAY

A RED-TAINTED

Silence



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Loose Id.[®]
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A Red-Tainted Silence

Carolyn Gray

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with much love and affection to Linda Gremillion, without whom it would never have existed. Thank you for your friendship and encouragement in bringing my boys to life. You rock!

Part One

Prologue

Durango, Colorado -- Present Day

“Brandon? Hey, what’s wrong?”

The soft voice startled me from the torture I’d been inflicting on myself all morning. I clicked off the video I now had completely memorized and closed my laptop. I glanced at the still, white-cloaked figure lying in the hospital bed across the room from my chair, putting on my game face, but it was too late. Though a thick layer of blankets all but hid Nicholas from my eyes, I realized he had been watching me for some time.

It was cold in the room. Outside, the La Plata mountains loomed, and snow had fallen heavily the night before, coating everything I could see through the window. I swear I’d never been around so much snow in my life, nor had I ever been so damned cold. It’d crept deep inside me and taken up what I feared would be permanent residence.

“Nothing’s wrong, Nick. Why do you ask?”

“You look upset.”

I swallowed against the lump in my throat and the sudden stab of pain that movement caused in my back. Never thought stitches could hurt so much more than a broken leg, but then, I’d never had thirty stitches before, had my back sliced open before. Not that it mattered.

What I had suffered was nothing compared to what Nicholas had endured.

“You should go back to sleep,” I told him.

“I feel like I’ve been asleep for a week.”

“You have been, almost.”

“Then why do I still feel so tired? Come talk to me, Brandon.”

Forcing a smile, I set my laptop on the flower-laden tray next to me. I'd also never seen so many flowers in my life. Diehard fans of our band, Dream, along with our friends, family, fellow musicians -- so many plants, gifts, and flowers had been delivered since Nick's rescue became public, he'd insisted on sharing them with the other hospital inmates.

The teddy bears and other stuffed animals had gone to the children's wing -- except for the koala bear tucked beneath Nick's covers. That bear, he'd insisted on keeping. He'd fallen in love with Australia when we'd visited there, and I guess it reminded him of happier times. My own room was noticeably empty, but no one except for Nick's manager, Marisa; my brother Adam; and my cousin knew I was here, too -- at least not yet. The press conference scheduled for Friday would take care of that.

I grabbed my crutches and hobbled pretty roughly over to the bed. I still hadn't mastered the blasted things. "It's to be expected, the doc said. Feeling so tired. Remember?"

A soft smile ghosted over Nick's face before fading, making my heart seize. Even that much effort taxed him. "Sort of. There's a lot I don't remember."

And I was grateful for that. "Don't push it, Nick. It'll take a while." I adjusted the blankets beneath his chin, waiting in vain for that dazzling smile to brighten his face at my fussing. I missed that smile so badly.

"I thought I heard music," he finally said when I pulled away.

I flinched. He'd heard music, all right -- his music. Not ours. "Did I wake you?"

"No. You sure you're okay?" he asked again, his voice small, lost beneath the pain. He sounded like a child, not the thirty-one-year-old man he was. His gaze searched mine, seeking reassurance. I knew he needed me to be the strong one now, for both of us. I'd never been good at being the strong one, despite his belief to the contrary, but I could fake it. I was a master at that.

I glanced at the IV drip running into his arm. He'd been awake for a while, long enough to feel every scratch, tear, and stitch. Of those, he had quite a few more than me. I thought about calling the nurse, but if I did, she'd make me go to my own room. She liked doing that.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me," I said.

"I'll always worry about you."

Just like Nicholas. Worried over me when he was the one half dead.

"I'm okay, Nick. I wouldn't kid you."

Disbelief clouded Nick's face, and his wide blue eyes -- eyes I had thought I'd never look into again -- showed he knew I was lying, but he'd go along with it anyway. For now. I cleared my throat against the sudden tightness, the clenching in my chest.

God, how I wanted him to laugh again.

"What were you looking at?" he asked.

I glanced at the laptop. Forced the false smile back on my face. “Just a video some fan made. It’s nothing.”

Nicholas closed his eyes and nodded, then winced against the pain, hurting too much to push me. Taking my crutches from beneath my arms, I eased onto the edge of the bed, watching his face as I did so, but his expression didn’t change for the worse. I exhaled in relief and reached for the Demerol button, then pressed it into his hand.

He curled his fingers around mine. “Don’t want to use it.”

“That’s why it’s there, Nicholas.”

“I don’t do drugs.”

I chuckled softly and pressed the button for him. “Exception time.” With my other hand, I brushed a damp lock from his forehead, feeling the upsweep of fear that’d become so familiar to me over the last few weeks since Nicholas, after flying halfway across the country to demand a place in my life again, had been kidnapped on his way home from the airport. But I fought the fear down. Now, I could. Nicholas was going to be okay. Eventually.

I hoped we would be, too.

As the meds hit, his pain-creased forehead eased, and he drifted back to sleep. I brushed his hair back again, wanting so badly to kiss his pain away. But I didn’t dare kiss him; there was nowhere I could without fear of hurting him. If he’d even welcome it -- it’d been a long time since we’d been nice to each other.

I planned to change that. Though what had happened to him had brought us together again, for now, I knew it wasn’t enough to keep us from going our separate ways again once we left Colorado. I’d hurt him too much the one place where he was most vulnerable -- his heart. I had no idea if he’d forgiven me for that, or if he ever would.

I thought of the video again, made of clips from interviews, concerts, different events we’d attended together, and wanted to scream over what I’d lost because I hadn’t seen -- couldn’t see -- how beautiful Nicholas and I were together. Not just as musical partners, but as partners in life, as well. It’d taken a stranger, someone I’d never met, to capture all those moments on tape and open my eyes.

Such a dickhead.

I watched him sleep. Pale as a ghost, white as a sheet -- that was Nicholas. It worried me, the lack of color beneath the bruises, the dark smudges under his eyes. At least the bruises were fading a little. He’d lost a lot of blood, the doctors had said, and lack of food for several weeks had left him gaunt. But he was still beautiful to me. I knew he’d hate the scar on his cheek, but it was a small thing to deal with compared to the alternative.

He should’ve been dead.

I sighed, stroking his fingers with my thumb. I couldn’t sit here for long -- I couldn’t sit anywhere for long. Already my leg throbbed in protest; I was supposed to keep it elevated. I knew the nurse would come any minute and force me back to my room, but it wouldn’t do

any good -- I'd just sneak back here. I'd rather be where I could keep an eye on Nicholas. The detective assigned to his case said he was safe now, but something kept me from believing.

Even though I knew it was true because *I'd* killed the bastard who'd hurt Nicholas.

I couldn't sleep anyway. Every time I closed my eyes, the panicky feeling would tumble back. Too late. I was too late to stop what'd been done to my Nicholas. I lifted his fingers to my lips -- his hand was so cold -- and kissed the very tips, practically the only place not hurt on his entire body. I tucked his arm back under the covers, rearranging the koala bear.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you again," I whispered, this time meaning it. I'd told him that how many times over the years? And broken that promise every time. But this time ... this time ...

Surprising even myself, I then dared to brush my lips across his as gently as I could. He gave no sign he felt anything. Wild longing shocked through me. I wanted to lose myself in him, crawl inside him and hold him tight, but I couldn't. Dammit, I couldn't.

I hobbled back to the chair. After trying for about five minutes to get comfortable, I gave up and pulled the covers back over me. I picked up my laptop and paused. My fingers hovered over the keys, but I didn't let myself watch the video again.

Instead, I found myself searching my documents folder for a file I'd started the night before. I still wasn't sure what I was doing was a good idea, but desperation to breach the gap I'd created between us had me figuring what the hell.

Maybe for once words would work -- written ones, since I was so lousy at articulating my deepest thoughts, at least when it really mattered. I'd tried to tell him how I felt through my music. Tried to show him, without the words that fell so easily from his mind and from his heart, how I loved him. But it hadn't been enough. I knew and accepted that now.

But maybe this way I could reach him. Let him know I loved him and always had. Why had I found it so impossible to say those three words? I love you. So simple. So easy. But I'd rarely told him, not with words, and words were what Nicholas understood the best.

So maybe by going back to the beginning, when we first met, before the craziness got hold of us, I'd understand it myself. I'd tell him a story about a boy who hadn't understood what was really important in life. Who'd let the best thing that had ever happened to him slip through his fingers and disappear into dust.

I'd tell him about me. The real me. The inside me that he deserved to know.

Maybe then we'd find ourselves leaving this hospital, this town, together.

God, how I wanted that.

I set my fingers on the keys and began.

Chapter One

I'll never forget the first time I saw him -- the wild shock of black hair, the beautiful blue eyes, the full lips with that perfected pout. Such a diva, even from the beginning. I was entranced, smitten, mesmerized. He had the face of an angel, and the voice of one, too. And almost from the start, I began the pattern of losing Nicholas. I was good at that. I guess I never believed I really deserved him, what he would bring to us both. What we would experience because of him. What we could be because of him. What I could be because of the strength and belief he had in me.

Denial denial denial.

Damn, I was good at that.

* * * * *

Murrieta, California -- The Past

"Thanks for taking us, Brandon."

"No problem," I said, glancing at my cousin Jenny. She sat in the front seat of my Volkswagen, her three friends giggling in the back seat. Every time I looked in the rearview mirror, one or all three of them would look at me, then go into another giggle fit.

Ninth graders.

"This is for a class, right?" I asked Jenny, trying to ignore her friends.

She nodded. "Yeah. We have to see two plays a semester and write a report. Turn here."

"Kay." I glanced at the rearview mirror again, and once more her friends looked at me, then burst into laughter. I sighed and glanced at Jenny. She rolled her eyes.

"Sorry about the idiots, Brandon."

"Hey, we're not idiots."

"Is it our fault your cousin is so cute?" the redhead said.

"Yeah, you could've warned us," the third one said. "He's hot."

Fits of laughter again. My face burned and I shifted uncomfortably, wishing I was anywhere but around these girls. Later, I would look back at that moment and realize my reaction to female attention never did change. As Dream took off, those same friends of Jenny's were even more unmerciful whenever I happened to be around them. I was *theirs* they'd claim. I, *the* Brandon Ashwood, actually took them to a play. They *knew* me.

Jenny told me later one of them -- or maybe all of them -- claimed to have been my girlfriend for a time. They were all cute, I guess, but definitely not my type. I didn't refute their claims, though. It came in handy, having a lot of "former" girlfriends when fans went digging into my past. And dig they did.

I glanced at Jenny again and she shrugged. She mouthed "sorry," then winked. I grinned back. It wasn't her fault, after all, that they thought I was cute (though as skinny as I was then, I sure didn't see what they saw).

More hushed talking in the back. Things like "You ask him" and "No, you, you're the one who wants to know." I took a deep breath and tried to make myself relax. This was going to be a long, long evening.

The dark-haired one -- Missy -- finally said, "Is it true you dropped out of school, Brandon?"

"Yeah," I said. "Last year."

"Why'd you drop out?"

"To play music."

More hushed whispering. Snatches of "He's so quiet" and "Doesn't say much" and "Yeah, but he's cute." Jenny snickered at me. I vowed to get even with her for this. I sighed again -- I'd cornered the market on that this evening, it looked like.

"Oh, wow, cool. What do you play?"

"Guitar, keyboards, drums."

"Wow, all that? That's awesome. You have a band?"

"More or less."

"Their singer has mono," Jenny said.

To tell the truth, it was worse than that. Reggie, lead singer for our band, Ashwood, was seriously unreliable. Good, but unreliable. I'd had to cancel several gigs I'd worked hard to put together, including that night's. The mono incident was the last in a long string of reasons why things hadn't been going so well. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a

mistake by dropping out of high school. Not that I missed it; I wasn't that good of a student, except in band and math.

It looked like I'd just traded homework nightmares for other, even more complicated worries. First Reg broke an arm, then broke up with his girlfriend -- he was useless for a month after that -- and now, mono. So he claimed. I didn't know for sure; he hadn't shown up for rehearsal in over five days, or called. If it'd been just me who had a say in the matter, I would've fired him months ago.

As it was, here it was a Friday night, and no gig, another missed opportunity. So when my cousin had called, begging me to take her and her friends to the high school to see *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, I had no reason to refuse. Besides, I like my cousin Sprout. I still call her that. Like me, she'd inherited the blond hair, green eyes, and the long and lean genes that somehow had skipped our mothers. Sprout and I could've almost been twins.

"I don't care if he is. He's adorable."

"Adorable? He's beautiful!"

"And his voice, too. It's so sexy. He should've been Joseph."

"Probably thought he's too short. You sure he's gay?"

I choked, then glanced in the mirror, but for once the girls didn't catch me. Who were they talking about?

More laughter in the back. "Oh, yeah. They broke up, though. They went to the senior dance together and got kicked out and that was that."

"That's sad," Jenny said, glancing at me.

I jerked my gaze back to the mirror. Missy was nodding her head. "What's sad is he could have any girl he wants, and he doesn't want them."

"Why would a guy want to ... you know ... another guy, anyway?"

Who were they talking about?

"I mean, how do they even ... you know ... do it?"

Another fit of giggles. I gripped the steering wheel and swallowed hard, wondering what all I'd missed while my thoughts wandered. My face burned as the conversation continued as if I weren't even there -- or maybe because I *was* there. I let my breath out in a whoosh. Jenny looked at me, her eyes showing a curiosity that made me uncomfortable. She kept looking at me like that. I looked back at the road.

"Um, who are you guys talking about?" I finally asked, cursing myself.

"The guy who plays Jacob."

"Nicholas Kilmain." All three girls in the back sighed.

And that was the first time I heard his name, in a car full of giggling, sighing ninth-grade girls. In the coming years, I'd see a lot of that kind of behavior directed toward

Nicholas. I'd watch him eat it up and run with it as I drowned in horrible want and envy, but right then I had no idea how Nicholas Kilmain would irrevocably change my life. Would I have done anything different if I'd known? Would I have dropped the girls off, disappeared for two hours, and missed the most important revelation of my life?

As I write this now, and watch Nicholas as he sleeps in his hospital bed, I have to answer no. No, despite all the pain and heartache ... No. I wouldn't have done anything different, at least not about the early years. Later, though ...

I pulled into the high school parking lot and after a few minutes of searching finally found a spot. The lot was jam-packed with cars. All for a high school play? I got out of the car and looked around as I held the seat for the girls to get out. They were giggling again about something and, arms linked, headed for the auditorium. I locked my car and followed, realizing then that Jenny had stayed behind.

"What's up, Sprout?" I asked her, looping my arm around her shoulder. I really liked Jenny a lot -- over the years she would time and again be the one I'd turn to whenever things got really rough. No other woman knew me like Jenny did. Not even my mom.

"Not much. You okay, Brandon?" she asked, sliding her arm around my waist.

"Yeah. Why do you ask?"

She shrugged as we followed after her friends. Missy looked over her shoulder, a wistful expression on her face.

"Watch out, Missy has the hots for you."

I grimaced and pulled her closer. "Missy's out of luck. You're my date tonight."

She laughed. "Don't worry, I won't let her sit next to you."

"Thanks. So why'd you ask if I was okay?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know. Mom says things aren't going so well for you. She's worried. She thinks you guys should fire Reggie."

I grinned. "Yeah, my mom's told me that a lot lately."

"So, why don't you?"

Now it was my turn to shrug. "Finding a decent singer is hard. It's everything. Reg has a great voice, but --"

"But he's never there." She paused. "I have a confession to make."

"What?"

"I have an ulterior motive for asking you to take us tonight." We joined the end of the line, and I dropped my arm from around her shoulder. We stood a few feet from her friends. Their heads were bowed over a program. Giggling again.

"And what would that be?"

Her eyes danced. "I want you to hear this guy. Nicholas Kilmain. He's incredible, Brandon. I just know he'd be perfect for your band."

“But he’s ... You guys said he was gay.”

She peered up at me, her eyes conveying a seriousness I saw often in Jenny’s eyes. “That doesn’t matter to you, though. Does it?”

My face heated. Icy prickles ran up my spine. I had to force myself to not look away. Act cool. Stuff my hands in my pocket. “What do you mean by that?”

She smiled then, a sorta sad smile, as she gripped my arm and leaned toward me. I automatically bent my head to her. “Because you are, too.”

I snapped my head back and wrenched from her grasp. Missy and the other two turned and looked at me, eyes wide with curiosity. I glared at Jenny. “Fuck, Jenn. What makes you say that?”

But the persistent brat merely smiled and grabbed my hand. “Because Jenny just knows things, that’s why.”

“But --”

She pulled me close. “Stop looking so freaked out. No one else knows.”

“But I’m not --” She looked at me, her expression stern. A sudden rush of fear settled around me. “How did --” I closed my eyes, the world reeling about me. God, I hoped no one else realized I was about to have a breakdown right outside the auditorium.

“Brandon, I’m sorry,” Jenny said. She still had hold of my hand. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought maybe it’d be easier if you knew that I knew.”

I ran my free hand over my face, fought for a casual look as the crowd began to move into the auditorium. I couldn’t say anything. My mouth was dry. I pulled my hand away from Jenny, mumbled an excuse about needing to find the bathroom, and all but ran for the nearest men’s room. I stumbled in and headed for a stall, grateful no one gave me more than a passing glance.

I banged the door shut and locked it, then sat on the toilet’s edge and buried my face in my hands. Tears of embarrassment welled in my eyes and I brushed them angrily away. How had Jenny known? What did she see when she looked at me? And why now ... dammit, why’d she have to bring it up now? I’d barely begun to acknowledge the fact myself that I might be gay. That it was guy that turned me on, not girls. It confused and sickened me, and I couldn’t stop.

How had Jenny known? Did I have “I Like Boys” written on my forehead?

I was so fucking confused.

I’m not sure how long I sat in there. The bathroom soon emptied, and I heard the first strains of intro music as it filtered through the walls. With a sigh I got up and left the stall. I imagined that Jenny was cursing me about now for overreacting and that her friends were wondering what was up.

I splashed water on my face and stared at myself in the mirror, watched the droplets fall into the sink. “Fucking fag,” I told my image just as someone walked into the bathroom.

The guy eyed me in disgust, then went back out the door. I bowed my head. Great. He'd heard me.

"Can things get any worse?" I said to my mirror self, but didn't wait for it to answer. I was afraid what that other Brandon would say.

Jenny had waited for me outside. I hesitated when I saw her, then stuffed my hands in my pockets. She looked at me, worried, her hands clasped to her chest. "Oh, Brandon, I'm so sorry. Really. I promise not to tell anyone, ever, unless you want me to."

I didn't know what else to do, so I just nodded. She did, of course, keep that promise. For that alone I love my cousin, even though at that moment I really wanted to strangle her.

"Where are we sitting?" I said, relieved that my voice sounded almost normal.

"I saved you a place. Come on."

She slipped her hand into mine and squeezed. I squeezed back and let her lead me to our seats. Her friends looked at me as we took our places, but fortunately it was dark already, and they couldn't see my flushed face. Jenny laid her head on my shoulder. I found myself smiling into the dark and squeezed her hand.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" she whispered.

"No. I'm not mad, Jenny. Just --" I shook my head. "I can't talk about it right now, okay?"

She nodded, and the music swelled as the play began. The high school had a kick-ass drama department. It almost made me wish I'd stayed in school, though my own high school's plays all sucked.

I found myself forgetting my troubles as I lost myself in the beauty of the timeless music. Maybe I should write music for plays, I thought. Forget the band altogether, move to Los Angeles ... That, of course, didn't appeal. The thought of leaving Murrieta -- of leaving home -- terrified me. I wasn't too comfortable around strangers, never had been, though when I was on stage, and playing my guitar or keyboards, I could forget about my fears.

The play was fabulous. From time to time I'd notice Jenny watching me. Once, she watched me for so long that I leaned over and whispered, "You're not going to know what to write in your essay if you don't stop looking at me."

She laughed. "I saw it last night," she whispered back. "This is the last performance. That's why I called you." She squealed then and said, "Here he comes! That's Nicholas!"

I sat back in my chair, glad Jenny'd dropped my hand. I gripped my knees and watched as this boy -- he hardly looked old enough to be a senior -- with black hair and dazzling blue eyes in a pale, dirt-smudged face entered the scene and turned and grinned.

The audience went wild.

I looked at Jenny, stunned.

"They love him," she said, and all I could do was nod.

He had the audience -- including me -- eating out of his hand. And, oh, how he knew it, as he strutted around, flashed that grin, *lived* his part. His timing was perfection, his moves practiced and sure. He totally stole the show from the boy who played Joseph. I had to wonder why he hadn't gotten that part. Except he was a little short; the guy who played Joseph towered over him. And I guess was better-looking, in a hard kind of way.

But it was Nicholas who entranced me. He smiled, laughed, delivered his lines in such a way that we were *there*. I was there with him, beside him where I longed to be. He and the guy who played Joseph and all the others tore into the next musical number, and I found myself completely lost as to what was going on.

I didn't care. I was too busy falling in love.

I felt Jenny's eyes on me, felt her hand touch mine. My own hands were clammy, the auditorium steamed. My jeans felt two sizes too small, and I shuddered with embarrassment. As the song came to a stop, I felt torn into tiny bits when he exited the stage. I realized I'd stopped breathing. I wiped my hand across my mouth. I was shaking. Oh, fuck, I was shaking. I closed my eyes, felt Jenny's arm wrap around my shoulders.

I groaned. My face burned. She'd witnessed my complete disintegration. I was mortified as I turned to look at her, but the loving, delighted grin she wore on her face reassured me like nothing else could have.

And then the stage faded to black, except for a single circle of light. In the middle of that light sat a battered wooden bench, and as I held my breath, mesmerized -- as was everyone else in the audience -- "Jacob" walked into the light and sat down, his hands clasped between his knees. I held my breath, my body throbbing as strains to a song I'd never heard filled the auditorium.

He began to sing.

I don't think anyone breathed for the next five minutes. I know I didn't.

Now that he sang alone, I could hear exactly what had made Jenny think of me. His voice, clear and strong, higher than I thought it would be but oh-so-perfect, filtered over us - - over me -- wrapping itself around my senses. I was possessed, entranced. I couldn't move, couldn't take my eyes off him as I drowned in the words and the music. My heart thumped wildly in my chest, and I knew then, as his calm gaze settled on me -- on me! -- in the darkness, where I knew of course he couldn't see me, that I'd found him.

Jenny was right. Here was our singer -- *my* singer.

I had to have him.

At that moment I knew that he and I -- somehow, someway -- would live, write, work, and love together. No one else could give him what he needed -- the music to carry that remarkable voice higher and higher.

The guy was a fettered star, and I wanted to be the one to break him free.

It didn't matter that I was hardly more than a kid myself. Shit, I was barely seventeen, he about a year older, I guessed, and, to my chagrin, not a dropout like me. But I knew. *I knew*. He left me breathless, and any shame I felt for the throbbing heat exploding in my groin was forgotten as the last strains of the song ended.

The stage darkened and the lights went up. The audience went wild. Jenny turned to me, her face triumphant. "See? He's perfect!"

All I could do was nod. Jenny did know things. Her grin turned sly. "Want to meet him after it's over?"

Again, all I could do was nod. I couldn't move. She laughed. "Intermission. Want something to drink?"

"Yeah," I choked out. She kissed me on the cheek and stood. I prayed she wasn't aware of just how profound an effect Nicholas Kilmain had on me. I tried to think of anything and everything gross and disgusting I could think of -- fat men in Speedos almost did the trick -- to try to calm myself down. I grabbed the program as Jenny and her friends left -- chattering about *him* -- and scanned the cast list until I found his name. Nicholas Kilmain. The song he'd sung was titled "Betrayed."

Disbelief filled me and I felt my heart pounding again. He'd written the lyrics himself. I flipped the program over; they were printed on the back. I scanned through them, almost as mesmerized by the words from the boy as I was by the boy himself.

They were haunting, beautiful, so sad. A song of betrayal, yes, but also of hope.

By the time the play resumed, I'd memorized the words. His words that came to mean everything to me over the coming months. Strange words that didn't really fit the play, but the crowd had loved them nonetheless. Nicholas Kilmain was accepted, loved, admired by his peers and teachers as I never had been by my own, and the song had been his gift to them. That was simply the way Nicholas was, and still is.

As soon as the play was over, I followed Jenny to the front of the auditorium, tagging along after her like some overgrown puppy. She asked person after person if they'd seen Nicholas, but no one seemed to know where he'd gone. Determined, Jenny grabbed my hand and went backstage. But it was to no avail. No one had seen him. He'd disappeared the moment the play was over.

"That's what he always does," we were told by the guy who'd played Joseph. He jerked his costume off and threw it onto the ground. "No one knows where he goes."

"Won't he be back?" Jenny asked, looking away as he pulled a t-shirt on.

He shook his head and said, "Knowing Nicholas, we'll never see him again."

"Why?" I asked, finding my voice. Panic raced through me. This couldn't be happening. I had to meet him. Talk to him. "I've got to find him. Where does he live?"

"Can't help you there."

“Why?” I repeated, feeling like an idiot, but I didn’t care. I felt Jenny’s hand on me, but I shook it off. The guy looked up at me, his expression stone cold. Finally he answered, “Because no one knows where he lives. He graduated at Christmas and his parents moved away. He just stuck around to do the play.” He smirked at me, then hauled a backpack onto his shoulder and walked away.

I couldn’t believe it, didn’t want to believe that I’d never see Nicholas again, never hear his voice again. But it seemed like that was going to happen.

* * * * *

The months passed. Reggie quit Ashwood, and we found another singer, better than him, and reliable, too. We got more and more gigs, and I wasn’t so broke all the time anymore. My brother Adam got an apartment and I moved in with him, though we went home to our mom’s almost every night for dinner.

I love my mom. She never asked questions, but she knew I was hurting deep inside. She’d just hug me, love me, tell me someday it would be all right. As much as it hurt, I never believed her, and she knew that, but she’d keep telling me anyway.

My music became everything to me as I pushed the issue of my sexuality deep inside myself. I finally accepted that, yeah, I had to be gay, though I stopped looking at other guys’ butts and no longer worried that anyone outside of Jenny would find out.

There was nothing *to* find out. Sex didn’t matter to me anymore -- I’d lost the one I wanted. The only one I wanted. At first I dated a few girls in a useless attempt to get his eyes, his voice, his face out of my mind, but it didn’t work. He was still there, and he refused to leave, staying as clear and sharp in my memory as when I’d first seen him.

Jenny got me all the pictures from the drama department that she could find. I pasted them into a book that I hid on my bookshelf at my parents’ house. I didn’t dare give Adam the chance to find it. I felt like one sick puppy every time I took that book out and stroked the tiny face inside, but I did it anyway. I still have that book. I still look at that book, the pictures smudged by years of falling tears.

God, I’m pathetic.

I’d lay awake on my cot in my brother’s apartment, and like a ghost, Nick’s face would reappear in my mind. Mel Gibson was replaced by Nicholas Kilmain in my fantasy jerk-off sessions. Time passed, and I found myself playing Nick’s song over and over again on my guitar.

Whenever I was alone and played it, I cried.

See? Pathetic.

My bandmates tried to get me to tell them about the song, but I refused. Soon, they stopped asking. I withdrew into my music even further then, writing every spare moment I had, but never finding in our new singer, Jake, the virtuosity I needed for my music.

It was Nick's voice I wrote for, though no one knew it.

The rest of that year passed. Then another.

I tried to find him. Jenny did her best to help, but no matter who we asked, who we talked to, we failed. Nicholas Kilmain had disappeared as if he'd never existed. The school wouldn't tell us anything -- like we were going to find and kidnap him or something -- and none of the kids he'd hung out with ever heard from him anymore. He was gone, just gone.

I sank into depression. Got sick a lot, losing weight I couldn't afford to lose. Became withdrawn and listless, finding peace only in my music. Jenny held me more than once over those months as I cried my frustrations into her shoulder. Without Jenny, I might've given up. Not on finding Nicholas, but on myself.

But he had existed. I'd heard him, felt him, *experienced* him. I had his words in my heart to prove it. It would, I knew, just be a matter of time before I found him again, and then I would never, ever let him go.

And at long last, it happened. The day finally came when Nicholas Kilmain walked back into my life, when I least expected him.

When I saw him, I fainted on the spot.

Chapter Two

“Hey, you okay?”

A soft, cool hand placed itself on my forehead. *His* hand. A whimper escaped me -- oh, so masculine, Brandon. I opened my eyes, blinked. Everything was fuzzy. The back of my head felt like a jackhammer had ripped into it, and my elbows smarted -- and dammit, my left hand. I pulled it to my chest and closed my eyes as a single tear escaped. I'd hurt the palm of my hand. Dammit dammit dammit.

Fingers wiped the tear away. His fingers. My eyes shot open, and I gasped as the fuzziness cleared and those incredible blue eyes I'd longed to see again stared down at me. I startled in shock.

“Lay easy,” Nicholas said in that velvet voice of his. “You hit pretty hard.”

He didn't realize the half of it. My brother pushed Nicholas away as he knelt beside me. “What the fuck happened, Brandon?” He was pissed. Not concerned -- pissed. No “Hey, little brother, you okay? Want me to call an ambulance? Mom?” Just “What the fuck happened?” That's Adam.

“I -- I don't know,” I stammered. “Help me sit up. Don't touch my hand.”

Adam grabbed one upper arm, and Nicholas -- oh, God, Nicholas -- the other. Together they lifted me to a sitting position, my legs sprawled for balance on the gritty floor as I fought a sudden wave of nausea. I wrapped my good hand around my stomach and bowed over, willed myself not to toss my lunch right at the feet of the man of my dreams. I took a few gasping breaths, wincing with the pain and dizziness.

Adam stood and I looked up. His mouth pressed into a grimace as he shook his head at me. “Your timing really sucks, man.”

Annoyed, I said, “I didn't pass out on purpose, Adam.”

He scowled and stepped back as Nicholas moved in front of him. Nicholas cast a look of disapproval in Adam's direction and crouched in front of me, his elbows resting on his knees, hands between, as his gaze studied my face.

"Let me see your hand." He grinned, totally misinterpreting my horrified expression. If only he knew how many times I'd imagined him saying something like that, or at least the "let me" part. But not like this. Not with my brother glaring down at us. "Don't worry; I'm an expert at playground injuries." At my puzzled frown, he laughed. "I work at a preschool."

A teacher. The guy was a teacher? And of little kids, at that? I hesitated again, then held out my hand. He took it, and I closed my eyes as an eddying wave of joy soared from the connection between us and into my heart. Sappy, I know, but my stomach did little flips and my chest tightened. I was afraid to open my eyes, for fear of what he'd see in them. But I had to peek, steal these moments and memorize everything about him that I could.

He was oblivious to me, as involved as he was in examining my hand. His teeth grabbed his lower lip and let it go again, making me shiver with the simple sensuality of the gesture. His gaze shot to mine, and I stared at him through his bangs, feeling my face heat when I couldn't tear myself away. The corner of his mouth rose, and then he looked down again. My neck burned with embarrassment. What must he think, my looking at him like that?

But he acted as if he hadn't noticed. I breathed a sigh of relief. He bit his lip again -- how had I not realized before how beautiful his mouth was, how full his lips were? My secret little pictures didn't do him justice; that was for sure. How could a guy's lips be so ... luscious? I'd never kissed a guy before, but right then, despite the very real fear that I would throw up any second, I wanted to kiss him. Adam and the other guys be damned.

Still oblivious to me -- at least, I hoped he was -- he turned my hand over, shaking his head as he picked out a few pieces of gravel that'd burrowed into my skin. His soft fingers gently probed my palm and I winced, pulling my hand back.

"That hurts."

He smiled in chagrin. "Sorry. I don't want to hurt you, but these need to come out." I nodded for him to go ahead. "I don't think it's broken. Maybe sprained," he said. He rubbed the calluses on my fingertips. "Guitarist?"

I nodded. "And keyboards and drums."

He smiled in appreciation. "Virtuoso." Then he bent back to his task, carefully pulling out the last bit of gravel.

I swallowed, embarrassed, and blurted out, "What are you doing here?" Suave, Brandon. Then exactly what was going on filtered through my jangled brain. Wild hope coursed through me. He looked up, not letting go of me when he could've, his hand cradling mine, and only then did I realize how weird my question must've sounded.

"Saw your advertisement for a singer. New group?"

"No. Ours had to quit," I said.

He glanced at the other guys standing around watching, and let go of my hand with a quirky smile. "Sorry I was late. Had to fill in at the record store for an hour or so after school. Work there part-time."

"Yeah, and it doesn't matter anyway, now his hand's hurt," my brother said. "Shit, Brandon. Why'd you faint? You getting sick again or something? Now how are we going to finish?"

"Maybe if you get him some ice, at least his hand won't swell," Nicholas said. "And some for his head, too." My brother glared at him, then sauntered off. Nicholas turned to me and smiled shyly as he brushed his bangs behind his ear. I'd come to adore that gesture later, at least until he cut his bangs off. I hated it when he did that. But right then, I feared I'd never see him again, not after seeing Adam's disgust.

"Sorry about that. But you do need to get ice on it. Think you can stand up?"

I nodded. This time, I didn't freak so bad as his arm wrapped around my shoulders, then slid to my waist. He was shorter than me, but he was strong and held me up easily. My head began to spin and I closed my eyes and leaned into him -- I couldn't help it, honest. Then the nausea really kicked in.

"Are you going to faint again?" he asked, concern in his voice.

"I ... I don't think ... I don't know. I must be getting sick," I said, embarrassed now by my weakness. I'd *fainted*. Fuck. One of the other guys grabbed a chair, and I sat heavily in it, my hand still cradled to my chest. Adam reappeared with a couple of bags of ice, glaring at Nicholas again.

"Here," he said, tossing the bags at me.

Nicholas grabbed them out of the air and then placed one in my unhurt hand, his fingers grazing mine. The other bag he held up to my head and cocked one eyebrow, seeking permission. I swallowed hard and said, "Thanks." I couldn't look him in the eye.

"No problem." He stood close to me then, close enough where I could smell leather and the faint hint of soap, that smell that was uniquely male and Nicholas. He gently placed one hand on my shoulder, the ice bag to the back of my head. I hissed, and he squeezed my shoulder, removing the ice. "Want me to stop?"

I tried to shake my head, but that hurt too much. "No," I whispered, closing my eyes again as he shifted against me, his thigh brushing my arm. My eyes shot open as I felt his body's warmth through the leather, and I began to shake. *Please let him think it's the ice, or from hitting my head. Please, please, please ...*

He moved against me again. Was he oblivious to what he was doing to me? Or did he know?

I panicked, looking around to find Adam staring at me, an annoyed look on his face. I saw his gaze flicker in distaste at what Nicholas wore, a red t-shirt and black leather jacket

and pants. Adam thought leather was “gay,” not the image he envisioned for Ashwood. I hadn’t dared point out how many of his favorite, quite straight rockstars wore leather. He scowled at Nicholas, turning to the others. “Come on, then. We’ll just have to do this without you, Brandon. Who was next?”

Nicholas moved away from me a little and the auditions continued. I sat in the chair with my leaky bag of ice, my head pounding and my heart pounding, and one by one the singers sang. I don’t remember a single face that stood behind that microphone, a single voice on that stage, even with the lights full on. Our makeshift studio was in the back of one of the bars where we played regularly. The acoustics were horrible and the floors hadn’t been cleaned in years, but it was cheap, and we could come and go as we pleased.

After a few minutes, Nicholas placed my hand on the ice on my head, smiled reassuringly at me, then walked over to take the last place in line. When the ice started to drip down my shirt, I gave up and dropped it to the floor, then forced myself to pay attention to the singers.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Nicholas leaned against the wall, his arms folded across his chest, and watched. And I watched him. He’d changed some in the two years since I’d seen him last. His face was almost ethereally pale, which made his blue eyes stand out all the more, and he was maybe a bit overweight, but not overly so. He just looked as if he’d been stuck inside a lot, didn’t have time to take care of himself.

To me, he was beautiful.

He nodded in time to the music, visibly wincing when the others failed to hit their notes. From time to time he’d glance my way and catch me looking at him, and smile shyly back at me before dipping his head and blushing, fixing his gaze back on the person singing. My heart soared. What did he see when he looked at me? What did he think of me looking at him?

Please, please, please sing like you did that night, I thought. Then Adam can’t refuse you.

Finally Nick’s turn came. I guess I’d secretly hoped he’d sing *his* song, but he didn’t. And then it was my turn to wince. The guy was still good -- there was no doubt he was better than any of those we’d heard -- but I could tell his voice was out of practice. A little rusty. It hurt to know that he’d not been singing much, maybe only nursery rhymes.

God, he deserved so much better than that.

He finished, shrugging as he talked to Adam. The disappointment on Nick’s face was easy to read. As he walked away to join the other singers, my gaze drifted to his butt. How could it not? Oh, God, I thought, feeling the first decent spontaneous hard-on I’d had in a long time come on right there, right in front of my brother and bandmates and all the other singers as they listened to Adam’s final thanks-and-we’ll-be-in-touch speech. Then, some singly and others in groups, they all filed away. I wanted to chase after Nicholas, stop him, tell him wait, I want you --

Instead I moved my hand and the bag of ice to my lap.

Before he disappeared from my view, he turned and looked over his shoulder. Caught me watching. He grinned, sashayed his butt once, and laughed at my reaction. Then he disappeared around the corner. I bit back a moan of longing to follow him, but I couldn't.

It about killed me.

Soon Adam and my other bandmates and I were alone. "How's your hand?" Adam asked.

Ah, being nice now, are you? I flexed my fingers and winced. "Hurts, but I'll be okay. Which one did you guys like?" *Please please please.*

Adam sorted through the resumes the guys had left, shrugging. "I don't know. That Harvey guy was pretty good."

Cody, our drummer, groaned. "Ugly mother. Uglier than me. That won't go over too good with the girls."

Adam snorted. "You want pretty? That Nicholas freak was sure pretty."

My heart seized.

"Too damned pretty," Stephen, the bassist said. "Looks gay to me."

"I don't think so," I said, trying to appear nonchalant. I pushed myself to my feet, joining them. "He has a look, yeah, but he's probably straight. The girls would go nuts over him." I thought of Jenny and her friends. I could hardly wait to call her.

"Well, I don't like him. His voice was too high, anyway." Adam glared at me, then pulled out another piece of paper. "I think we should ask this Harry guy back."

"Harvey. Can I see the list?" Stephen asked, taking the sheet of paper, pushing me aside.

I said nothing as I stepped back, feeling a wave of nausea come over me. That was that. Adam didn't like Nicholas, so he was out. I closed my eyes as misery took over. I'd lost him, again.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," I said, then promptly was.

* * * * *

"Adam is a jerk."

I nodded into Jenny's shoulder, grateful for her warm arms wrapped around me as I sobbed like a baby. So pathetic, Brandon. She'd come over to the apartment the moment I called her, barely able to choke out more than, "I saw him." She of course knew immediately the "him" I meant. By the time she got to my apartment, I was a complete wreck. My hand hurt, my head hurt, my heart was shattered into a thousand pieces, and I was sicker than my dog had been when he'd eaten a whole frozen pizza by himself. Disgusting.

"What am I gonna do, Jenn?"

Ever the practical Sprout, she pushed me up where we sat on my bed and with a tissue wiped away my tears. "You're such a mess, Bean," she told me.

As she knew I would, I smiled. "Since when did I become a bean?"

She grinned. "If I'm a sprout, you're definitely a bean. Look, Brandon," she said, chucking me beneath the chin. She shook her head and smiled. "Screw Adam, I say. Do you really need him?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She sighed, then laid a hand on my head. "You hit your head really hard, Bean. Think. You've got Nick's resume now, right? You can find him yourself. Start your own band. Who needs Adam, anyway?"

I swallowed. "But we've always played together."

"So maybe it's time not to. Sometimes bands split up; the players need to go different directions. There's nothing wrong with that. It happens." She grinned, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Get the guy's resume, find out where he is, and go find him." She grabbed the phone and held it out to me. "Call Adam. Right now."

I hesitated, then took the phone and dialed my parents' house, where Adam had gone after dropping me off at the apartment. I hadn't felt like eating or being around anyone. Misery does not love company, though I was glad for Sprout's.

A minute later, my world reeled around me and I hung up the phone. I folded over, burying my head in my pillows as another sob exploded through me.

"Dammit, Brandon, what's wrong? What did he say?"

"He threw it away," I said, my voice muffled.

"What?" Her hands grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me up.

"I've lost him again, Sprout. Adam tore up his resume and threw it away."

She grimaced. "Like I said, Adam is a jerk. We'll find him, Brandon. I promise. Tell me everything you can remember. Everything he said."

* * * * *

A preschool teacher, and he worked at some record store. That was all I knew, other than that Adam had been right about one thing -- I was getting sick. By the next morning, I couldn't get out of my bed except to throw up. It got so bad over the next couple of days that my mom fetched me back home, tucked me into my old bedroom, and hovered over me hour after hour.

Then the real fun began, and the flu hit me coming and going. I lost six pounds in five days, and while I was busy being miserable, Ashwood's new singer signed up.

It wasn't Nicholas.

Adam and the others had decided on the ugly dude, not asking my opinion. Harvey. (What kind of name is that for a lead singer?). I should've been used to that kind of treatment, of course, as they never cared for my opinion before (little brothers don't count), but this time it burned. It festered.

But I didn't say anything, because Jenny was right. I didn't need Adam. With Nick's voice, I could do it all -- keyboards, guitars, drums. It'd be insane, but as sick as I was, and as young and foolish and furious as I was, I didn't think for a minute I couldn't. I just had to find Nicholas.

I was nearing the end of my misery, finally able to eat a few spoonfuls of soup and some crackers, when Jenny came bounding into my room, a folder in one hand.

"Hey, Bean, you're looking better," she said, plopping onto my bed and stealing one of my crackers.

"I feel a little better. At least I don't feel like I'm about to take the dirt nap anytime soon. I'm still not a hundred percent."

She grinned. "This should help you out."

"What is it?"

"Flyers."

I took the folder she handed me and opened it. Inside were several multicolored sheets of paper. I picked one up and set the folder down, then scanned the paper. Though my stomach muscles were still sore as all get-out, I felt like laughing for the first time in days. "Flyers?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, why not? I made up a whole bunch of them. Missy, Tari, Karen, and I've started to put them up all over town, stick them in windshields, hand them out to strangers."

I licked my lips, cracked and dry from illness, and took a sip of water, trying to hide the sudden welling of tears in my eyes. "Sprout, you are nuts. But I love you."

Leaning over, she hugged me, then kissed me on the cheek. "Whatever it takes. We're going to find Nicholas for you. I'm also going to call all the record stores in the phone book. I figured I'd have more luck doing that than calling preschools."

I looked at the flyer, shaking my head. I glanced up at Jenny and she grinned. "WANTED: VERY MUCH ALIVE -- Nicholas Kilmain, Singer, sought for new band forming in California. If you have any information regarding his whereabouts, call Brandon Ashwood --" I frowned at her. "That's your number."

"Didn't think you'd want Adam to get the phone calls. Do you?"

"Hell no. Thanks, Sprout." I leaned back against my pillows. "What did you tell your friends?"

"Just the truth. That you want him to be in your band. Nothing else."

"Sprout ..." I hesitated.

"Yeah? What is it, Bean?"

I shrugged, looked down at the flyer again. "I ... I never asked you. How did you --" I glanced at the open door to my bedroom. I had no idea how my parents would react if they knew their youngest son was gay, and I sure didn't want them, or even worse, Adam, to find out now. My oldest brother, Jonathan ... I had no idea what he would do. "How did you know --" I gestured at my chest. "That I'm --" My face heated.

She cocked her head to one side and contemplated me. "I don't know, Brandon. It wasn't any one thing, really. Just the way you are around girls, how whenever we went to the movies it'd be the guys you'd talk to me about, not the girls. I don't think you even realized it." At my deepened blush, she grinned.

I groaned, not believing what she was saying. "That's it? That's all? I wasn't even sure myself, you know, that day." I huffed beneath my breath. "I still can't believe you figured it out, even before I did."

"I wasn't completely positive until I saw your reaction to Nicholas. When you were watching him ..." She touched my hand. "You should've seen your face. That's when I was really positive I was right."

I buried my face in my hands. "I feel like such an idiot," I said.

"Why? He's beautiful. If I were a guy, I'd probably like him, too."

I burst out laughing at that and wrapped my arms around her shoulders, pulling her tight. "What would I do without you?"

"You'll never have to find out, I promise." We pulled back. I couldn't wipe the grin from my face. "It's good to see you smiling. You don't do it enough," she said.

"Maybe I'll have more of a reason to soon, thanks to you. I want him so bad, Jenn."

"I know. We'll find him this time. I promise."

"Hey guys, what's up?"

Jenny yelped, and I coughed and pulled back, shocked as I looked up to find Adam in the doorway. Grabbing my water, I took a deep swallow, praying Adam hadn't heard anything. Once I'd regained my composure I looked up -- and stilled when he wouldn't meet my eye.

"What's wrong, Adam?" I asked.

"Um, Brandon, I don't know how to tell you this, but --" He looked down at the ground. "Shit."

"What's going on," I asked again, pushing my covers back. I only had boxers on, but I didn't care. I stood, feeling slightly dizzy, and had to grab hold of the bed to steady myself.

"Our new singer? Well, he left."

I groaned. "Harvey quit? I didn't even get to play with the guy. Why'd he quit?"

Adam grimaced. "It's worse than that, Brandon. He stole everything."

I gripped the bed harder. "What do you mean, he stole everything?"

"Keyboards, drums, he cleaned us out. There's nothing in the studio. Nothing."

"No," I said, thumping the bed as my anger soared. My guitar was safe at home, but my keyboards? I had hundreds invested in them. Hundreds. And I was still paying on one of them, too. "Did you call the police?"

"Yeah, I did. Just got done with them."

"Shit!"

"That's what I said. Sorry, Brandon."

I collapsed onto the side of the bed, burying my face in my hands. I felt Jenny's hand on my shoulder. Then horror soared through me, twisting my gut so hard I gasped. I looked up at Adam, my mouth working soundlessly. He hadn't moved. His face was as white as my bedroom walls.

"My music," I finally choked out. I stood. He took a step back. "My music, Adam. Where's my music?" My voice shook. "Adam, please, don't tell me he took my music."

"I'm sorry, Brandon."

I reeled back as if punched. "Fuck!" I grabbed my bedside lamp and smashed it against the wall, feeling my life shatter into a million multicolored shards.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Brandon, what's wrong now?"

I looked up from my laptop and took a deep breath. "Nothing, Nicholas."

He cocked an eyebrow at me from his hospital bed. "That's what you say every time I ask you what's with the sad face. Except this time, you look pissed."

I hit Save and closed my laptop. "I am pissed. Or was."

"Why?"

Nick's like a Jack Russell -- he refuses to let things go. "I was just remembering about that guy Harvey who stole all our equipment," I said, knowing he wouldn't take anything but a straight answer. *Before I found you again*, I mentally finished, as we never talk about that short but tragic time in our lives. We would have to now though. I was going to make us. But not tonight. Not now. I was almost to that point in the story, and it made me sick to even think about it ... but I had to.

It was the basis for all our misery, after all, in the coming years, the blackness that discolored the edges of all that was good about Dream, and me and Nicholas. A darkness that could've been avoided if I hadn't been such a self-centered idiot, so stupid --

"And stole your music," he added, snapping me out of my sudden plunge into despair.

I nodded, taking a deep breath. "Yeah. That, too."

"It still hurts, doesn't it? Even after all these years."

"Yeah, it does." The bastard had managed to record some of my songs and still probably makes royalties off them, though he's now a has-been. I pushed Harvey out of my mind. I definitely didn't need to get worked up over something I couldn't change. Besides, he never found the popularity with my music that he no doubt expected, especially after Dream took off -- he didn't have Nick's voice.

"What are you doing over there, anyway? You've been writing on that thing for the last two days. You don't have a new email play pal, do you?" A hint of a whine crept into his voice, making me grin. That sounded more like the Nicholas I knew and loved, and so I welcomed it.

Still, I debated answering him, then shrugged. Why not? Putting the foot to my chair down, I grabbed my crutches and swung my way over to Nicholas. The last two days of solid rest had made him look a lot better. He didn't seem to be in so much pain. I reached out and pushed a strand of hair from his face. "You're my only play pal, Nicholas," I said.

He blushed. My heart soared. "So what are you doing, then?" he asked.

"I'm writing you a story."

A small grin crept onto his face. "Is it wicked?"

I laughed. "Well, it will be eventually. Right now, though, it's just kind of sad." I took Nick's hand. He didn't pull back, and that made me glad. His hand, so ice cold a couple days before, now felt warm and alive. Maybe, I thought, looking at his eyes that were a little less red-rimmed, his complexion that was a little less pale, he really was getting better.

What he needed was some fresh air and sun, but that wouldn't happen anytime soon. I glanced out the window. It was still snowing. I wished it would blizzard. That wouldn't happen, of course. And the press conference would take place the next afternoon, snowstorm or not.

Nick's thumb stroked the top of my hand, sending shivers down my spine. We'd not had time to talk about anything between us yet, but like me -- at least it looked like it -- Nicholas was willing to keep the door open until we could have that talk. But not yet. Not until I finished my story and he had a chance to read it.

"Why is it sad? You're writing about your music getting stolen?"

I grinned. "No, I'm writing about you." His eyes widened. "And me."

"Brandon," he said, a glint in his eye. "Fiction? I could make a few suggestions, if you like."

But I shook my head. "Not fiction. It's ... it's the truth." A lump suddenly dwelled in my throat. After a moment of ineffectively struggling to say something, I thumped the bed with a fist. A bitter laugh escaped me. "See? This is -- I can't even tell you what it's about without freaking out."

He laid cool fingers on my arm. "Then don't tell me. I'll wait to read it. I just hope it doesn't stay sad. Why are you writing it, though, if it makes you feel bad?"

I forced myself to look at him. "I'm -- I'm trying ..." I shook my head, rubbed my hand across my eyes. Damn, I was so tired. "I'm trying to make it good between us, Nicholas. I don't want to lose you again. I've let that happen too many times in the past. So I'm trying --" I closed my eyes, swallowed against the lump in my throat. Nicholas tugged on my hand, pulling me toward him. I pulled back. "No, I don't want to hurt you --"

"You won't," he said. "Come here, Brandon." I still hesitated -- he was so broken, so bruised -- but he tugged again, moving gingerly over in his bed as he held his covers back. "Spoon with me," he whispered, making me laugh through my tears.

I nodded, curling up on my right side, facing away from him, scared I'd hurt him anyway. He still had IVs in his arm, and the blasted catheter, which he loathed quite vocally, but somehow we were able to meld together, his bare feet wrapped over my cast. I pulled the cover back over us and relaxed against his pillows. I buried my face in them and breathed in. Essence of Nicholas -- there was nothing like it.

"Nurse Barracuda is going to freak when she sees this," Nicholas said.

"You mean Nurse Ratched?"

"Freddy Krueger's wife."

"Godzilla," I said.

"I thought Godzilla was a boy?" I looked over my shoulder at him, eyebrow raised, and he nodded. "Point taken."

I turned my face back into his pillows. "Don't worry, though. Nurse Goodall is on duty tonight. She won't care. She adores you"

"Glad I haven't lost all my charm."

"As if you could, Nicholas. As if you could," I said softly.

A shudder of longing raced through me as he oh-so-carefully curled up against my back. He wrapped his arm around my waist, taking care not to rub against my stitches, and snuggled his face into the back of my neck. His breath stroked warmly against me, and then I felt the brush of his lips against my shoulder. I grinned and laced my fingers through his, taking care not to squeeze.

"Goodnight, Brandon," he said, his breath whispery with fatigue.

"Goodnight, Nicholas. Sleep well."

"I will with you here. And, Brandon?"

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to lose you again, either.”

I smiled through a teary haze into the darkness. “You won’t. I promise,” I said and reached for the switch to turn off the light.

Chapter Three

“Mr. Ashwood. Wake up.”

I slowly opened my eyes. Blinking against the low light, I found myself looking into Nurse Goodall’s smiling face. “What time is it?” I asked, realizing then that Nicholas still slept.

“Five-thirty.”

Shit.

Sometime during the night, I’d turned over and curled against Nick’s side, while he sprawled as he always did on his back, arms and legs akimbo. I, on the other hand, was scooted almost off the bed -- if not for the rail, I’d have been on the floor. I closed my eyes, realizing that my body hurt. I was stiff, sore; my stitches felt like they were pulling. They couldn’t come out soon enough.

My broken leg was covered by one of Nick’s, and my left arm had turned into Nick’s pillow. He slept on, oblivious to having taken over the bed, but I didn’t mind. Not when looking at his face and how comfortably he slept.

“He looks so peaceful,” I said, brushing my fingers across his cheek. I gently lifted his chin and kissed him without waking him, then blushed, my gaze flicking to the nurse. “Sorry.”

“Don’t mind me. You have a right to be happy. He definitely made a turn for the better yesterday. I’m going to take out his catheter now.”

I looked at the nurse in surprise. “Now?”

She nodded. “I leave at six. I think he’d rather I do it than --”

“Than Nurse Ratched.”

She turned to a tray that I just then noticed and slipped on a pair of gloves. "Exactly." She winked.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Not necessary. This will take just a minute."

"Shouldn't you wake him up?" I asked as she pulled back the cover. I concentrated on the clock on the wall -- I really didn't want to see this.

"No. He won't feel a thing, believe me. He's a little sedated anyway."

"Oh. Good." I gulped, my gaze drawn back to what she was doing. First she pulled the cover up a little further and checked the wound that had nearly killed Nicholas. The puckered arc across his stomach and around his side made me wince, but her pleased hum reassured me like nothing else could've.

"Looks really good," she said.

"It does?"

She looked up at me and smiled. "Absolutely. It will scar, and badly, but no one but you and he will notice. And somehow, I don't think he'll mind you seeing it." She winked at me again and I felt my face heat. Then she walked around the bed and checked my stitches, too, her hands cool and light on my skin. "Good, very good. You'll both be getting your stitches out today, I suspect." She smiled at my frown. "Don't worry, Mr. Ashwood. Your doctor prefers handling that herself."

"You sure I shouldn't leave?"

"You're fine. Close your eyes if you'd like."

She emptied the bag and pulled off the tape that held the catheter tubing in place to Nick's thigh. Despite myself, I watched, fascinated, as she gently pulled the catheter out.

"Is that it?" I said as she put the used catheter in a plastic bag and sealed it.

"That's it." Nicholas hadn't moved. Hadn't even twitched. "He's a free man now."

I chuckled. "He'll be damn glad that thing's out."

She cleaned him up a little, then pulled the cover back in place. "Tell him it may be a little while before he can go again, and there may be a little pinkish tinge when he first voids. Maybe a little discomfort. Any more than that, he should tell the nurse on duty."

"Nurse Godzilla."

She grinned. "You boys take care. I'll see you tonight."

"Thanks. And thanks for caring so much."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Ashwood." She smiled fondly at Nicholas. "He's a pleasure to help. Patients like you boys are why I do what I do."

Then we were alone. Nicholas sighed in his sleep and smiled -- maybe he sensed the offending dick monster, as he'd called it more than once, was gone. I realized then that I needed to visit the boy's room myself. Taking care not to wake him, I eased out of the bed,

grabbed my crutches, and took care of business. Then, despite the ridiculously early hour, I found my gaze drawn to my laptop, and my fingers began to itch.

The hard times were approaching -- the first parts of our lives together that I dreaded writing about. But it had to be done.

With a sigh of longing directed at the bed and Nicholas -- it would be nice to climb back in beside him, cramped bed or no -- I returned to my chair, revved up the laptop, and got back to work. If I was lucky, I'd be able to get in a few pages before Nurse Barracuda chased me out of the room.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

A couple more days passed before I felt well enough to get dressed in something other than boxers and a robe. I'd been sick for a week. Having all my music and equipment stolen, and finding, connecting with, and losing Nicholas all in one afternoon had made me feel even worse. My head had finally stopped hurting, as had my hand, but that depressed me even further. I could no longer remember how his touch felt against my skin.

I didn't want to get out of bed. I didn't even bother turning on the light or opening the curtains, just lay in the dark, letting my anger and despair roil over me. Jenny hadn't gotten any responses to her flyers except for some prank calls, which made me wallow ever deeper in my misery. I knew I needed to shake this, but couldn't let it go. Not yet.

Finally my mom came in and kissed me on the forehead. She wrinkled her nose. "Brandon, you need to get up. At least take a shower, let me change these sheets."

Guess she was right. I had gotten kind of rank.

So I dragged myself up and into the shower, kinda freaked at just how skinny I'd gotten in so short a time. Six, seven pounds doesn't sound like much, but on me it was. If I didn't gain it back, Sprout would add "string" to her nickname for me. The shower did make me feel better, though. After gelling my hair and shaving, I pulled on my jean shorts and an old AC-DC t-shirt my brother Jonathan had discarded. All my clothes were at the apartment.

So I emerged from my cave at last. While I was in the shower, my mom had pulled the curtains back and stripped my bed, but hadn't made it yet -- think she did that on purpose so I wouldn't crawl right back in. Smart mom.

Padding barefoot through the house, I ended up in the kitchen. She'd left me a note: *Gone to the store to pick up some chicken and Oreo cookies.* I grinned. Oreos, the best medicine.

I fixed myself a glass of ice water, then leaned against the sink and stared through the kitchen door into the room beyond, my gaze settling on the baby grand piano, which gobbled up most of the front room.

Sunlight glinted across the wooden floors and bathed the piano in beckoning light. My fingers twitched. It'd been a long time since I'd sat and played anything but electronic keyboards, and I realized I kinda missed the purity of the piano's sound.

I was nine when my parents got the baby grand for me. My older brothers' musical interests had taken them different directions, but I'd shown from a very early age to have a gift for the piano and for memorizing music. I spent years banging away on our old upright, spending all the hours I could spare sitting on its hard bench. My butt still remembers that bench.

But the upright was old and easily went out of tune, especially as much as I played it. After a time, I began to get frustrated with the sound quality, and my playing sessions would abruptly end. My mom would watch me storm off and yank open the back door, slamming it behind me as I went outside to mope. I'd never answer when she'd ask me what was wrong. I began to play less and picked up the guitar, finding in it a lot of the pleasure I'd had playing the piano. But it was never the same.

Then, one weekend, I went with my parents on vacation to the home of a friend of theirs. They were rich, these friends, living in a huge house overlooking the ocean. I remember vowing to myself that someday I'd have a place overlooking the ocean, too. That dream became reality, but back then I didn't really believe it would ever happen. After all, I was just a kid, nobody special.

The house was incredible, with room after room packed with antiques and amazing artifacts from all over the world. Giant urns from Egypt, a stuffed tiger from India, Ming vases, fine porcelains, a collection of snuff boxes made of precious metals and stones, each one different from the other, that fascinated me. I remember asking what a snuff was and everyone laughing.

But everything in that house paled in comparison to the piano that graced a ballroom-size room with windows that soared three stories high. I remember standing on the pale pink marble floor in leather shoes that hurt my feet and staring at the piano, feeling the same itch in my fingers to play that I felt now. The piano was huge -- a concert grand, slick and black. I'd never seen anything like it. The owner of the house, Mr. Halprin, asked me if I knew how to play. When I mutely nodded, he gestured for me to show him.

So, I did.

I think he expected chopsticks or something, because as Mozart, Debussy, Chopin, even a little Lee Joplin -- I loved ragtime -- poured from my fingers, his smile grew wider and wider. I nearly cried with the joy of it as my music filled the room. I forgot the audience watching and listening, and I closed my eyes as the music took me in. I'd finish one piece, then go on to another, and another. My arms and back began to hurt, but I didn't care. The sound was flawless, perfection. The keys smooth and alive beneath my fingers. I felt like I'd come home. Each strike of the hammer, each note, lifted me up to the ceiling and filled the aching loneliness that was my childhood.

I didn't want to stop, but finally I began to falter. A hand rested on my shoulder, startling me. I looked up then, blinking. I must've looked like an owl caught in bright sunlight, because Mr. Halprin burst out into deep-seated laughter. He didn't say much else, but I do know that soon after that, I came home from school one day to find a baby grand sitting in the living room, the old upright and the couch and chair (there wasn't room) gone.

I always suspected Mr. Halprin had something to do with it, but my parents never said and I didn't ask. At ten years old, I felt like I'd been reborn.

My weekly chore was polishing the piano, one duty I never minded. Make me polish windows and I'd run screaming, but shove a bottle of piano polish and a rag into my hands, and I'd feel like bursting into song even though I'm a lousy singer. Adam thought I was loony, and he was probably right, but sometimes I'd polish that piano three or four times a week. I couldn't explain then why I got such comfort from the simple task. I couldn't explain a lot of my feelings back then.

I looked at the baby grand that day after mom had forced me out of bed and decided it probably hadn't been touched since I'd moved in with Adam. So, looking under the sink, I was happy to find a fairly new bottle of polish. I found a soft cloth and padded into the living room, smiling in anticipation of my task.

For the next hour, I worked over that piano from end to end, rubbing away countless fingerprints, grimacing at the faint scratches from the blasted cat my mom briefly owned, finally finishing where I'd always finished when I was a kid -- lying down and stretched out beneath, my head situated next to the pedals, where I could look up at whatever imaginary pianist I could conjure. I'd imagined all kinds of famous people played my piano, like Elton John. I lived in an imaginary world a lot of the time when I was young -- it was much kinder to me than reality.

The day I did sit down and play with the real Elton John, all my fantasies paled in comparison to the reality. But back then, who would've thought such a thing could happen to me?

My mom had often come in whenever I was at that point. She would tease me, saying I didn't need to polish underneath, too, but then she'd sit down on the bench and talk to me for a while. We'd had some great conversations that way, me finding it easier to talk to her while she looked sorta upside down at me than when we were face to face.

The back door slammed. I heard her coming into the kitchen. "Brandon?"

"In here," I called out, grinning as I heard her laugh when she spied where I was.

"Stay put, son. I'll be there in a minute."

The floor was hard and I was getting a little chilly, but I didn't move, just grinned like a fool as she put up the groceries and finally came and sat on the bench and looked down at me, a beautiful smile brightening her face.

Damn, I love my mom.

I guess it was inevitable that we'd end up there. She'd been patient with me all week, knowing more than the flu and the stolen music and keyboards ate at me. It was time to talk, though I dreaded it. "Looks good, honey. Your piano's been neglected lately."

With me lying like that, my mom's mouth looked funny when she talked. Once, I'd convinced her to let me draw eyes and a nose on her chin so that when she talked, it had looked like some alien creature was talking to me. I laughed. "Can I draw a nose and eyes --"

"No, Brandon, you may not." She smiled at me then. "You feeling better?" she asked.

"Much."

"Good. I'm making chicken soup for dinner for you."

"With Oreos for dessert? Thanks."

"I bought two packages. That may be the only way to get more meat on your bones, son." Then she hesitated. "I talked with the mom of one of Jenny's friends today."

"What about?"

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out one of Jenny's flyers. "About this. She found a stack of these in her daughter's room and wanted to know why you were looking for that boy."

That boy. I swallowed. "What did she say?"

"She told me she'd forbidden her daughter to help pass them out. She was quite upset because, as she put it, Nicholas Kilmain is, and I quote her words, 'a fag,' and she didn't want her daughter 'associating with such people.' I also talked with Adam today about him. Adam's opinion was pretty harsh."

"Why?" I said, unable to keep the anger from my voice. "Because Nicholas cared when I fainted? Because he told Adam to get me some ice? Did Adam tell you what *he* said? 'Your timing really sucks, Brandon.' That's what he said."

I pushed my way out from underneath the piano and walked away, hurt battering at me. But Mom was fast; she grabbed my arm and stopped me, turning me around, placing her hands on my shoulders. I bowed my head, the anger falling away at the compassion in her eyes.

"Adam probably wasn't the best person to ask, Brandon, but I didn't have anyone else. You don't know the boy, what kind of person he is. And he obviously upset you."

How could I tell her he upset me because he'd walked away and now I couldn't find him? Because I wanted him so bad, seeing him leave about killed me? I couldn't find the words, so I remained silent. I think, though, my silence was more telling than if I'd protested.

"Why are you trying to find him, Brandon?"

I blinked, feeling nausea pool in my stomach. I licked my lips, suddenly dry, and looked anywhere but at my mom. I wished I hadn't gone in there. I wasn't ready for this. I

couldn't lie to her when she asked me anything point blank. Never have been able to, then or now.

"I have to, Mom. He's --" I closed my eyes, feeling my face flush with humiliation, and fear. "I just have to. Ever since I first saw him, heard him sing, I knew I had to have him." I opened my eyes. "I want him so bad it hurts."

If she was shocked at my words, she did a remarkable job of not letting on. I mean, if it'd been me, hearing my son was practically in love with another guy, I'd have said *something*. But she didn't. At least, not what I expected. "He's the boy who was in the play you went to with Jenny a couple of years ago, isn't he?"

I gulped in shock. "How'd you know about that?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "You were so depressed after that, and I started to worry. You wouldn't talk to me, Brandon."

I hung my head. "I know. I'm sorry."

"So when I found the pictures in your room, I put two and two together."

I snapped my head up. "Shit, Mom, I never left them out."

"But Adam did."

My face must've turned ten shades of white. Dizziness socked me between the eyes. With a gasp, my mom helped me ease down onto the floor and lean against the wall. I drew my knees up and bowed my head, wrapping my arms around my legs. She sat next to me. Tears of degradation rolled down my cheeks, and my nose started to run. I flinched when I felt a hand stroke my hair, but she didn't stop.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," I choked out.

"Sorry about what, honey?"

I lifted my head and laid my cheek against my bare knees. "I've disappointed you so much."

Anger flared in her eyes, making me hold my breath. "Brandon Ashwood. You are *not* a disappointment to me, or to your father. Why would you say such a thing?"

"But ... I dropped out of school, I've gotten nowhere with my music, and now all of it's gone. My keyboards are gone, and I'm not even done paying for them; and I keep getting sick; and I can't even find a decent job, or take care of myself. And now --" But the words stuck in my throat. I couldn't speak, could only shake my head and bury my face in my arms again.

"Listen to me, son. You are my youngest, and probably my favorite son. No, you are," she said when I looked at her in amazement. "You could never disappoint me. It's been a little rocky for you, but that's to be expected. You *are* young." I dropped my head back down, but she would have none of it. "Look at me, Brandon."

I lifted my head.

She nodded in encouragement. "I believe in you."

Those four words filled me, touched me in a way that nothing else could have. "You do?"

"Yes. Of the three of you, it's you who I know, here --" She touched her heart. "-- to be destined for amazing things. Someday, everyone will know who Brandon Ashwood is. All over the world, for what you have in here." She touched my head. "You have amazing talent, Brandon. An amazing gift that is going to take you places you can't imagine. Your friend Nicholas may well be a part of that journey, as your musical partner and your ... maybe as your life partner as well. But you won't know for sure until you give it a chance. Right?"

I nodded, too dumbfounded to say anything else. She kissed me on the cheek.

"Go wash your face, and take my car and get out of here for a while. The flyers are a good idea, but did you think about checking with music stores?"

"Music stores?"

She smiled at me, then touched me on the nose. "He's a musician, too, isn't he? And from what I've heard, he's quite distinctive. He's bound to go into music stores on occasion. Maybe someone will remember him."

I blinked and found myself grinning. "Why didn't Sprout or I think of that?"

She raised her eyebrows. "She's been in this from the beginning, then, hasn't she?"

I nodded, sheepish. "Yes."

"Figured as much. But I'm glad you two are so close."

"Me, too. Wish I could trade her for Adam."

She smiled at that. "I just wish you'd felt you could tell me about your feelings. Did you think I wouldn't understand?"

"I -- I wasn't sure."

"Like I said, you're young, Brandon. Plenty of time to figure things out, all right? I just don't want to see you so upset anymore. I miss your smiles."

"Sorry about that, Mom. And I didn't mean for you to be embarrassed by that woman."

She laughed then. "Embarrassed? No. I told the bitch to mind her own business."

I wrapped my arms around her neck. "Thank you." I kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you."

She stood, pulling me to my feet. "Go find your singer, Brandon."

"Adam won't be too happy when I do."

She grimaced. "I'll take care of your brother. Just go. Keys are on the counter. But be home by seven, okay? And if you find him, bring him home, too."

* * * * *

After ripping the pages for music stores out of the phonebook, I took my mom's keys and walked out of the house for the first time in a week. It was a hot, sultry day and I was glad I had on shorts. I got into my mom's sedan and began a long afternoon of hunting music stores. Each place I stopped at brought me no closer to finding Nicholas than I'd been the day before, lying like a lump in my bed. At one point I finally got hungry and stopped for a hamburger. I could only eat half of it, though the cherry cola tasted like heaven.

I sat at the table, my half-eaten hamburger pushed aside, and stared at the list. There were more music stores in Murrieta than I'd thought. I usually only went to one, Harrison's, where I had my note for the stolen keyboard I'd only paid about half on. Hopefully the insurance would pay it off and I could get another soon.

Feeling tired and a little nauseous from the hamburger (I wasn't used to eating much), I got back into the car and headed for Harrison's. It'd been a long time since I'd gone in to see Andy, the store's owner. So when I walked in and he looked up and saw me, he excused himself from the customer he'd been talking to and walked toward me, arms open wide.

"Brandon boy, how are you feeling?"

He wrapped me in a bear hug and I laughed. Andy is quite round and quite ... affectionate. I'd always thought he might be gay, but I was too chicken to ask. "I'm okay. Been sick."

He pushed me back, arms on my shoulders, and peered at me closely, his dark eyes narrowed. "So I heard. The flu, eh? Nasty strain romping around Murrieta and it figures you'd catch it." He chuckled me under the chin and frowned. "Lost weight."

"Almost seven pounds."

He shook his head, patting his ample belly. "Maybe I should get the flu. Although I'd need it for a month to make a dent in this blubber." He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and led me toward the keyboards. "Let me finish with this customer. Then we'll talk. I know about that bastard stealing your keyboards." At my gloomy expression, he grinned. "Don't worry. We'll fix you up again. Why not take a look at what I've got?"

"I don't know when the insurance will pay off, Andy."

He waved me away. "Can't have you stranded without keys, can we? That one you were buying wasn't good enough for you anyway. Go on, take a look. Check out my new Rolands."

I blinked, then nodded. Andy had already gone back to his customer. I turned and looked at the row of keyboards, my gaze drawn to the Roland section. Rubbing my fingers together in anticipation, I walked over and sat at one, wincing when I saw the price tag. Twice and then some what I'd paid for the last keyboard.

It wouldn't hurt to check it out, I thought, then pulled on the headset and flipped on the switch. I fiddled with the controls for a little while, playing with different sounds and effects. As I played, my excitement grew -- it was incredible! For the first time since learning

my music had been stolen, I got excited. With keyboards like this, there was no telling what Nicholas and I could do.

I began to work out his song. I usually played it on the guitar, of course, but had started to figure out a version for the keyboards, too. I stopped now and then to adjust a control, change an effect. I was just settling in to play it through again when I felt a tap on my shoulder, then my headphones being pulled off. "We want to hear it, too, you know."

I grinned at Andy, feeling my face flush as I realized several of the store's patrons were watching expectantly. "Okay." I pulled out the headphone jack.

After a moment to compose myself, I began Nick's song, pouring myself into it, losing all sense of my surroundings -- my favorite state of being. I stopped a time or two and adjusted the controls again, then poured on. After I was done, my impromptu audience burst out clapping. I laughed as Andy gave me a hug. I never did mind small groups of people watching me play, where I could see each face. It was the monstrous crowds that came later that would so often freak me out.

"Come on, kid, let's go talk. Somehow, I knew you'd zero in on this one."

"It's fantastic, Andy," I said, standing. "I can't believe how much more it can do." Movement caught the corner of my eye, a flash of red and black, a customer leaving, as were others. I hesitated, then shrugged and followed Andy.

"Come on in here," he said when we reached his office, indicating I take a seat. "I talked to the insurance company while you were messing around out there."

"You did? Why'd they call here?"

"Wanted to check up on your payment history, how much was owed, how much the keyboard was worth, etc." He winked. "You can come pick up your new keyboards whenever you're ready."

I sat back, aghast. "What?"

"I want you to have them now."

"I -- I hardly know what to say, Andy. Why?"

"Because, well, I've known you a long time, Brandon. You're good, very good. Someday I have a feeling that I'll be saying, 'Yeah, Brandon Ashwood always bought his keyboards from Harrison's Music.'" He beamed at me. "I believe in you."

Okay, so I had a real freak-out moment then. For the second time in one day, two people I trusted and cared about had told me they believed in me. What could I do but believe them? Andy sat across from me, his mirth barely hidden at my shock, and I knew protesting would be fruitless. "Um, thanks, Andy. I'll try not to disappoint you."

"You would never disappoint me, Brandon. You'll succeed despite yourself."

He was right about that.

I got up to leave, still a little dazed. As we walked to the front door, I paused. "Wait, Andy, the reason I came in here in the first place was to ask you if you'd ever seen this guy I'm trying to find. He auditioned for us, and his resume ... it got lost. His name is Nicholas Kilmain, and he's a little shorter than me, has black hair and blue eyes, really nice pale skin -" I blushed, but Andy didn't seem to notice my slip.

He slapped himself on the forehead. "I've seen your flyers, but I forgot about them. I'm sorry, Brandon. He was just here."

"What?" I grabbed Andy's arm in my excitement. "When? Where?" I looked around, frantic.

"Easy, Brandon. He was watching and listening to you play."

Hope crashed around me. "What did he do? Just leave?" Was that who I'd seen from the corner of my eye?

Of course it was. He'd left. He'd heard me play and just left. My chest crushed in on me, and I sat down with a hard thump on a piano bench.

"He comes in here a lot before going over to The Book Shed. You'll find him there."

I looked up. "Where's that?" I said, unable to disguise my eagerness.

Andy peered at me. I could see the questions dancing in his eyes. But he didn't ask them. At least, not then. "A few blocks east. Reads his poetry there on Wednesdays."

"Is it Wednesday?" I asked.

Andy laughed. "Yes, Brandon, it's Wednesday. Lost time as well as pounds while you were sick?"

I nodded, barely hearing him. Poetry. If you can't sing your lyrics, then why not speak them?

"It's almost seven. That's when he starts. He's a real hit, believe it or not, so it's likely to be crowded."

"I'm not surprised." I stood and took Andy's proffered hand, then checked my watch. I really had lost track of time. It was almost seven now. "Thanks, Andy. I appreciate it. I appreciate everything. Can I use your phone?"

Chapter Four

After calling my mom and letting her know I'd be late to supper and might have found Nicholas, I headed for The Book Shed. I parked my car a little down the street and followed some university students inside. It was packed, but I found a table toward the back, much to my relief.

I ordered a Coke and waited for the reading to begin, a hum of anticipation running through me. I could hardly sit still and began to make little towers out of sugar packets. I shook my head in disbelief as I thought about Nicholas and where two years had deposited him. Reduced to singing nursery rhymes, and poetry readings, while that remarkable voice lay unused.

But not after tonight. I was going to change his world as much as he'd already changed mine.

I settled down, as did everyone else (there were about fifteen people in all, pretty damn good for a poetry reading, I thought) when Nicholas walked out onto the stage. Wearing a red shirt and black leather pants. That *had* been who I'd seen leaving Harrison's. I wondered if he had any other clothes -- it was the same outfit he'd worn to the audition, with one addition. He had on a Derby hat, which he flipped off his head as he fiddled with his microphone. His hair was mussed up by the hat, but he just shook his head like a terrier and set the hat upside down on the stage.

"Feel free to contribute to my waistline," he said with a grin, patting his stomach.

One of the girls obliged his request by tossing a handful of coins inside the hat. He blew her a kiss, then joked and laughed with the university students for a few minutes longer. I watched with a stab of longing as he hugged and kissed a couple of the girls and, to my somewhat jealous amusement, one guy. The guy smacked Nicholas on the butt and retook his place in the audience.

"Thanks for coming, everybody," Nicholas said. "I appreciate you making me feel less lonely tonight."

"How can you be lonely with that pretty face?" the butt-slapper called out.

The grin on Nick's face was a sad one -- but I wondered if I was the only one who realized that. "You'd be surprised, Richie, you'd be surprised." He readjusted his mic, then licked his lips and said, "Welcome to my strange little world."

Then he opened the door to that world, and I walked in.

He was almost as mesmerizing reciting his lyrics as he was singing. As he spoke, I could hear strands of music playing through my mind, accompanying his words. It was all I could do not to grab a napkin and borrow a pen and start jotting down what I was hearing in my head. I couldn't wait to hear him sing again, hear that voice perform a different sort of magic than what was woven now -- magic defined by me.

But this was good. Very, very good.

I watched, fascinated, and filled with hungry anticipation as he moved comfortably in front of his small audience, charming them with the elegance and cleverness of his words, drawing out their emotions. In between readings, he talked to his friends and money was good-naturedly tossed into the hat. He earned every coin, every bill. Amazing, just amazing, and my inner conviction that we were meant to work together intensified. I could hardly sit still.

He hadn't lost any of his stage presence, that was for sure, though finally he faltered. When he looked up and saw me.

Our gazes locked. Held. Heat flashed through me and my longing for him intensified, my body responding to the first stunned, then comprehending wicked look in his eyes. I got that hard, that fast. From just a look. If ever I worried I'd imagined his effect on me, I was reassured at that moment.

He had me, and he knew it.

I tried to look cool and unaffected, but that was blown out of the water when I nervously took a sip of my drink and spilled some of it on my shirt. I brushed it away and smiled at him sheepishly.

For a long moment we were lost in each other's gazes until one of his friends in the audience yelled, "Wake up, Nicholas!"

He broke his gaze from mine then and laughed nervously. "Sorry." He looked at me again and I smiled, feeling a little more at ease. He wiped a hand across his face and said, "Okay, now where were we, class?"

I settled back, and for the rest of the hour he continued, but now he directed his reading toward me, bathing me in his words. My excitement intensified, but man, how I relished the little bit of painful heaven he was giving me.

I put my hand under the table, an action he didn't miss as I adjusted myself in shorts grown too tight, failing to find a more comfortable arrangement. The pressure of my hand on my dick only made it harder to bear. I feared a major explosion any second and removed my hand again, wrapping it around my Coke, trying to think cold thoughts as I squirmed in my seat. But Nicholas continued his verbal lovemaking to me and I just got hotter.

After a little while, a rather astute girl in the front began to notice something interesting was going on. She turned in her chair, stared at me with an amused smirk on her face, then whispered something to one of her friends. That girl's gaze flickered back and forth between me and Nicholas, and she nodded, then whispered to the person next to her. And on that went. I blushed, drank some more Coke, then realized just how full my bladder was getting. I'd not gone all afternoon and had been plying myself with drinks the whole time.

And now Nick's liquid eyes, braver as he too realized the audience had caught on to what was going on and loved it, devoured me. The smiles, the glances, the growls -- geesh -- he threw in were designed to drive me insane, and it worked. Oh, how it worked. And every damn person in there realized Nicholas Kilmain was courting the blond guy sitting alone at the table in the back. Me. I wanted to run from the embarrassment of it even as I enjoyed every second. Besides, I couldn't move lest everyone see exactly what state he'd put me in.

I think Astute Girl had it figured out.

Finally, the hour was coming to a close. My descent into the sweetest of agonies was almost over. "Okay, my friends, this final poem is dedicated to the handsome boy in the AC-DC t-shirt sitting alone back there." He waved at me. "Hi, Brandon. Good to see you."

You'd think I was drinking liquor, I felt so intoxicated. I couldn't believe what I did next. "Hi, Nicholas," I called back. "Good to see you, too. Very good." The audience laughed and my face heated. I hadn't meant it to come out so full of ... longing.

"Feeling better?" He lifted his hand and touched it, then his head.

All eyes moved to me. I mimicked him, touching my hand and head. "Much. Thanks."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that," he said, the huskiness in his voice unmistakable. The audience crowed, and I felt like melting on the spot. This I hadn't imagined happening when I followed him here. My face was on fire, as was my body. One of the clerks brought me another Coke, and I guzzled it in a futile attempt to cool off.

Then he began his last poem. A love poem, of course, which the audience took to quite spiritedly. As I watched him, I realized I envied him, how he stood on the stage so open and carefree, so assured about who he was, his sexuality, his acceptance by his friends. I would never feel that way about myself, and knew it. That evening in the bookstore was the closest I ever got.

Oh, God. I needed to go to the bathroom, bad. *Bad.*

I crossed my legs and prayed and thought about fat men in Speedos. This time, it didn't work.

Finally, it was over. His friends burst forward with applause and rose to congratulate him, and I knew then I had to run and find the bathroom, quick, so I could talk to him. I ran to the bathroom and made it to an empty stall. A few painful minutes later (it is kinda difficult peeing with a hard-on), but feeling much, much better, and with my libido a bit more tamed, I splashed water on my face, dried it, and left the bathroom, looking for Nicholas.

To my surprise, the crowd had thinned out considerably. I guessed I'd been in there longer than I'd thought. I looked around, panic setting in again as I didn't see Nicholas. I pushed my way through the people still talking and whirled around, looking about frantically. I spied the girl from up front as she was walking out the front door.

"Wait!" I called out, but she didn't hear me. I ran through the room and stopped her. "Wait, where'd Nicholas go?"

She turned to me in surprise. "Where did *you* go? He thought you bolted."

"I --" My face flushed. "I just went to the bathroom. He's gone?"

She gave me a sympathetic smile and rolled her eyes. "I told him you weren't upset. You didn't look freaked out to me."

"He thought I was freaked out? Why?"

"Well, he was afraid he'd embarrassed you, by messing with you like that." She smiled. "He really likes you and thought he'd screwed up and scared you off."

I shook my head, rubbing my hand over my face. "No, no no no, I wasn't embarrassed. I was just full of Coke. Where did he go, do you know?"

She hesitated, shrugged, then pulled me aside. "If you hurry, you can probably catch him. He's walking home."

"Home? He lives around here?"

She grimaced. "No, he lives over on Essex. Essex Haven."

I stared at her in surprise. I knew the place. "The shelter? Why is he living there?"

"His parents moved to Utah, his roommate moved out on him, and he had nowhere else to go." She frowned. "He wouldn't tell his parents what happened and moved in there."

"That's a mile from here, though."

"His car broke down, so he's walking, and he wouldn't let me take him. Go on and catch him. He was kinda upset when he left, but I bet you run faster than he can walk."

I nodded, then said, "Thanks. What's your name?"

"Karen."

"Thanks, Karen." I turned around and took off, heading down the street after Nicholas.

Essex Street. One of the worst areas in the city, the kind of place mostly full of broken-down homes, empty businesses, gangs wars, all that stuff you see on *Cops*. That would explain a lot of things, I thought as I jogged down the street. Why I couldn't find him, why he was so elusive. The guy was practically homeless. Shit, that sucked. Things really weren't so good after all for Nicholas Kilmain, it seemed.

I should've taken my car, but I wasn't thinking. All I had running through my mind was *Find Nicholas*. Dammit, why had he thought I'd bolted? He had to have figured out how and why I'd found him at The Book Shed. He'd known my reaction to him; it was so bloody obvious.

He'd heard me play his song.

My pace slowed as my side started to hurt. I guessed I was still recovering from the flu. A souped-up car with two guys blaring harsh music passed me by, then hooked a left down the street. This area of town made me nervous, and as I turned the corner, I started to understand just how isolated I was. Then, down the street I saw the car at the head of an alley, and empty.

I heard a scream.

Nicholas.

I ran, the pain in my side forgotten, my own vulnerability pushed aside. I had nothing but my fists and my anger to wield against whoever was hurting Nicholas. I passed the car and another scream rent the air, then a voice, his voice, begging, "No, please don't ... don't. *Don't hurt me ...*" Laughter filled the silence, the sound of scuffling and tearing.

"Hold still, you little shit."

"No."

"Grab his arms." Then, "Shit, he bit me! He fuckin' bit me!"

Another scream, then sobbing. I'd never felt so alone, never felt so out of place and defenseless, but they were hurting him. I had to stop them. Walking away never crossed my mind, but I did slow down. Running into the scene unprepared would just end up making me a part of it instead of the one in control.

As I drew closer, I finally saw them -- two men, holding Nicholas down. The bigger one, to my confusion, looked vaguely familiar to me ... I paused as he turned his head and laughed at something his buddy said, and icy-hot shock coursed through me.

It was the guy from the high school play, the guy who played Joseph. Older, bigger -- fatter -- but it was him.

And his intention for Nicholas was clear as, with horrifying ease, he flipped Nicholas onto his stomach and, using a knife, cut off Nick's leather pants despite his struggles.

Panic flew through me. I looked around, frantic, sickened to my stomach. This couldn't be happening. I heard another scream, and it hit me then exactly what had just happened.

"Fuck, no," I whispered, horrified, then shook myself into action. A two-by-four found its way into my hand. I moved to the edge of my hiding place, where I could see but not be seen yet -- except Nick's gaze locked with mine as his attacker's assault shoved his face over and over again into the dirt.

The wild hope in his eyes at seeing me gave me the strength I needed. Roaring at the top of my lungs, I burst from my hiding place. Pulling on all my fear and hatred and disgust for what they were doing to Nicholas, I raised the board back and, just as Nick's rapist turned his head and his cackling friend looked up, smashed the board across the back of his head.

"Shit!" the other guy yelled. "Who the fuck are you?"

My momentum carried me further than I expected, but I skidded to a stop and turned to face him. For a moment I thought he'd run, but I guess a skinny teenage kid in tennis shoes held no threat. He'd underestimated me, of course. I had an older brother who wasn't always kind to me. I knew how to fight.

He stood and charged, hitting me full in the stomach. We stumbled back and I hit the ground, hard, the breath swooshing out of me. I thought I was going to be sick. I couldn't breathe, but I wasn't about to end up on the bottom and at his mercy. I prayed the other guy was still out. As we struggled, I saw him lying still on the ground.

But so was Nicholas.

The guy's fist found my face. The shock of the pain exploded through my head. I'd never felt such agony. But he'd made me mad, and as he pulled back to hit me again, I curled up my own fist and went for his balls with all my strength.

He screamed, much to my satisfaction, even louder than Nicholas had. I pushed him off me and stood and kicked him, then fell on his shoulders and pinned him back, pushing my face into his. "Don't ever touch him again, or I'll kill you. Both of you," I said, then spit on him. He collapsed and didn't move.

I pushed myself off of him and, pulling my ripped and filthy shirt off, stumbled toward Nicholas. He lay on his side, his pale bare legs pulled up to his chest, his blue eyes wide with pain and humiliation.

"Nicholas, Nicholas, oh, shit," I said, reaching for him, then pulling back, unsure if I should try to touch him. But he pushed himself off the ground and fell sobbing into the safety of my arms. I wrapped myself around him, holding on to him as tight as I could, ignoring my body's protest as my own injuries made themselves known, horribly conscious that I was too late to protect him from what had happened.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry," I whispered into his ear, kissing him on the crown of his head, his forehead, his tear- and dirt-stained cheeks. "I should've gotten here sooner. I should've driven my car."

His hands clawed into my bare back as he sobbed. Behind me, his two attackers were starting to moan.

"We've got to get out of here, Nicholas. Come on, can you stand?"

I didn't wait for an answer, but pulled him to his feet, keeping care to look away from his nakedness. I helped him lean against a trashcan. He was shaking so hard he could barely stand. I gave him my shirt, indicating how he should use it. His pale face flushed with embarrassment as he did so, then hurled the offending shirt away. Guess I'd owe Jonathan a t-shirt. I pulled off my shorts, grateful I'd worn boxers and helped him put the shorts on.

Or tried. They didn't fit. I was too damn skinny.

"They don't fit," he said, despair lacing his voice.

"Dammit," I said. Then, not hesitating, I pulled off my boxers, pulled on my shorts, and helped him on with the boxers, which, thankfully, stretched enough to fit. He leaned into me and I started to lead him away.

"Wait, my wallet," he said.

I let go of him and picked up what was left of his leather pants, fishing in the pockets, and pulled out a set of keys, a whole bunch of change, his wallet -- and one of Jenny's flyers. I stuffed everything except for the flyer in my pockets, then wrapped my arm around him again.

We hurried away from the scene, Nicholas leaning on me so much I was almost carrying him. When we reached their car, I looked inside and cursed -- I'd hoped the keys would still be inside, but they weren't. "Come on, they're waking up and might try to follow," I said, then turned back down the street.

"Where are we going?"

"To my parents' house."

He stopped. "No, I can't --"

I tugged on him. "Yes, you can. My mom will understand. I told her all about you."

He looked at me then, hurt and confused, but didn't argue. We made quite a pair, I thought -- stumbling, filthy, bleeding, me half dressed, him in boxers. I wished a cop would drive by. Of course that didn't happen.

We turned the corner just as we heard the souped-up engine start. "Shit," I said, and I felt Nicholas curl into himself.

"They're coming back!" he said, panicking.

I grimaced. "Come on. We'd better hide."

I looked up at the abandoned apartment building we were in front of and decided it would have to do. Half-carrying him up the steps, I tested the door and, surprise, found it unlocked. Boxes, old furniture, pure junk littered the floor. I pushed my way inside and pulled Nicholas after me.

I closed the door and, letting Nicholas go, pushed all the junk I could in front of it, blocking it as best I could by shoving a half-broken chair under the handle. Hopefully if they tried the handle, they'd think it was locked.

It was hot and dark inside, and musty, and it stank, but we'd be safe now. Taking Nicholas by the hand, I gently pulled him up the steps. We climbed one flight, then two, before I found an open door to an apartment in the front of the building. Using my shoulder, I pushed my way inside, grimacing at the mess. But there were windows where I could see out on the street below, and maybe we could open one and cool off.

Night was rapidly falling, and the streetlights were flickering on. We both heard the souped-up engine idling right outside our hiding place. Yeah, they were searching for us, all right. Looking around, I found some relatively clean cardboard and put it on the floor by one of the windows, which was open a crack. Then I found some old, rank sofa cushions, half torn, no doubt by rats and I didn't want to know what else. I grimaced, but propped them against the wall. I sat down then and leaned against the cushions

"Come here and sit down, Nicholas. Come on."

He came to me and slowly eased down, his breath hitching from the pain. I knew he hurt all over, and it would only get worse. The streetlight bathed his pale face, and my heart about broke, seeing the fear and pain there as he looked numbly out onto the street.

Outside, the car doors opened.

"They're getting out," he said, his voice small and trembling. Gone was the commanding stage performer, his confidence, his presence that had so wowed me, replaced by a desperate young man trembling with unrelieved fear. I didn't want to think the Nicholas Kilmain I'd seen on that stage was an illusion and this was his reality. I couldn't bear the thought that he lived in constant fear for his safety, for maybe even his life. All because he was openly gay, and most people in the world weren't like his friends at the bookstore.

I remembered my earlier envy and felt sick -- I had a strong feeling he'd been through this before.

I wanted to reach for him, but was scared to. He seemed to be slipping into someplace I didn't know how to keep him from. But then I reached out anyway, taking his hand in mine. He hardly noticed as my fingers curled around his. I brushed a damp lock of hair away from his face, biting my lip at the evidence of ill treatment at the hands of those thugs. My own injuries meant nothing to me.

The guy from the play had done this. I didn't understand.

"Why did they attack you, Nicholas?" I asked.

He licked his lips but kept staring outside.

"Nicholas Kilmain, we know you're out there, you little fucker."

His eyes widened and he pulled back from the window.

I wished then I'd killed the guy, but I guess at that time of my life I wasn't strong enough yet.

"Yeah, you little creep. Come back here so we can finish what we started."

"You and your little boyfriend can't hide from us, Kilmain."

"We're gonna make your little fuck buddy's life hell, Kilmain."

Nicholas gasped.

"The fucker's gonna wish he never hit me. He was lucky this time."

"Better fuckin' watch your fuckin' back, asshole."

Now that the adrenaline wasn't coursing through me, I realized just how terrified those words made me. Nicholas looked at me, tears shimmering in his eyes, then looked away again and stared through the window. Car doors slammed, making him flinch, but the car didn't leave. No doubt the two thugs were congratulating themselves on their amazing command of the English language.

"I'm sorry, Brandon. I didn't want this to happen," Nicholas said, his voice soft with despair.

I pulled all the fear out of my voice, knowing instinctively he needed me to be strong for him. "How long have they been doing this to you, Nicholas?"

He gave a soft, derisive snort. "Ever since high school. The big one, the one that was ... was raping me?"

I nodded, forcing that visual out of my mind. "Yeah."

"He was my high school boyfriend. Sweet, huh."

Shit. The guy had lied then, that night. He'd had to have known exactly where Nicholas lived. "What happened?"

"I broke up with him. He didn't take to the idea too well, but I couldn't take his abuse anymore." He flicked a sideways glance at me. "He was jealous, I guess. Liked to keep me underneath his thumb. The pathetic thing is, for a long time I let him. But then high school was over, and I hid."

"I know. I tried to find you."

He looked at me full on then. "What?"

I smiled, then remembered I was holding his hand. I stroked the back of it with my thumb, feeling an incredible thrill run through me despite the cold, hard fact that we were stuck in an isolated, trashed-out building, with two monsters waiting to jump us the minute we tried to leave, and no hope of anyone coming and rescuing us. If we got caught this time, I had an idea I'd get the same treatment as Nicholas.

"I was there at your last performance as Jacob. You were fantastic."

A shy smile stole across his face. "You thought so?"

"Oh, yeah. I was totally blown away."

Now he laughed. "I wish I'd known you were there."

"I tried to find you after it was over, but you'd disappeared. I've been looking for you most of the past two years."

He looked down at our joined hands. "I'm sorry. I was hiding so Percy wouldn't find me."

"Percy?"

He grinned slyly. "Percy Blevins. Terrible name, isn't it? Worse than Nicholas."

"I like your name."

He said nothing for a moment, lost in his thoughts. I noticed then he was still breathing hard. He wrapped one arm around his middle and winced. "I think they might've cracked my ribs."

"Lay against me," I said softly, hardly believing my own daring.

He said nothing for a moment, then nodded, but didn't move. "Brandon," he said, his gaze fixed unseeing outside. "Never let them know. Never let on to what you are." He turned to face me then, his eyes wide, sad, haunted. "Some people understand. My friends at the bookstore do, Andy does, but not most people. It's a straight man's world, a hate-filled world for an openly gay boy. Keep it hidden. I should have. And I will from now on." He hesitated. "Have you ever kissed a boy, Brandon?"

I shifted uncomfortably at the sudden turn. "Uh, no, I haven't." But I wanted to kiss him, badly.

"A girl?"

"Lots of times. No big deal." And none *were* a big deal. Each kiss had left me cold, hollow, wanting something more, yet scared, too. As each date ended, I'd been left believing my lack of reaction must mean something was wrong with me. I'd listened to Adam's gay-bashing for years, so it was no wonder, really, that I half-believed homosexuals were sick in the head and, as Adam said, should be castrated.

Lovely brother, huh?

Nicholas shook his head sadly. "You're young. You could be just confused, you know. That happens sometimes."

"I'm not confused."

He smiled wanly at me. "How old are you?"

"Almost twenty."

"Really? I thought you were younger. I'm twenty now." He laughed softly, though he didn't explain why.

"I -- I do know one thing for sure."

"What's that?" He turned to me and blinked.

I swallowed, my gaze drifting over that lovely mouth, into those beautiful eyes. "I -- I'd like to kiss you."

A small smile crept onto his face, but the shimmering in his eyes held me back from taking any sort of action. He looked scared, and I didn't know enough to know if he was scared of me a little, too. I kinda suspected he was just then. After all, he didn't really know me, and I *had* beat up both of those guys.

"I'm glad you found me, Brandon."

"I am, too. This time you aren't getting away from me, Nicholas."

He turned to look out the window again. "My own personal protector," he murmured. "My own white knight, strong and beautiful. Every gay boy's dream. How lucky am I?" He flashed me a smile again and curled his fingers tighter around mine.

"I'll take care of you, Nicholas. I promise they won't hurt you ever again."

He didn't look like he believed it, even though he nodded. Then he smiled wanly at me and said, "You know something? My butt hurts really bad, sitting on this hard floor like this. Do you think we could leave? Maybe sneak out the back way?"

"No. It's not safe yet." I tugged on his hand, pulling him to me. He hesitated, but when I smiled at him, he lay against my bare chest, his head tucked underneath my chin, his hair tickling my nose. I know he had to have heard my heart racing -- it was clocking at light speed right then as I settled against the cushions, Nicholas safe in my arms.

"Better?" I asked, smiling as he nodded. He laid his right hand on my bare chest and began to tickle me with his fingers.

"You have no chest hair."

"Runs in the family," I said.

"I'm a hairy beast already, especially compared to you."

"I don't mind."

"Why, Brandon?"

"Uh, well, I never really thought about it --"

He chuckled. "That's not what I meant. Why did you come after me? I saw the flyers."

"That was my cousin Jenny's idea."

He flinched. "She knows about me? About --"

I nodded. "Sprout, that's what I call her. You'll love her, I promise. She's the one who dragged me to your play in the first place. When I heard you sing that song you wrote, I knew I wanted to work with you. That's why I had to find you."

"Is that all you want from me?" he asked, his voice a teasing whine. "Work?"

I kissed him on his forehead, tasting him freely now that my senses weren't so clouded by fear. He tasted of sweat and soap, a hint of aftershave.

"No. I want more than that, later on. I mean, when we're both ready -- I don't want to rush you in this --" I groaned as Nicholas laughed against my neck and kissed it. I hissed from the pleasure the simple brush of his lips against my bare skin brought, the heat that flashed in my groin. "You'd better not do that anymore, Nicholas," I said, growling deep in my throat, which only made him laugh. "Not here."

He kissed me once more, of course, showing the first hint of the mischievousness that would plague me from then on. "All right. I'll behave. You want to write music with me?"

"Yeah, I do. I think we'll be good together, Nicholas. Really good."

"What about your brother? Don't think he liked me much."

"Screw him. We don't need him. We'll do our own thing, once I get new keyboards."

"What happened to your keyboards?"

Ah, shit. "Well, in his infinite wisdom, my brother chose that Harvey guy to be our lead singer."

"You wanted me?" he asked, a hint of, well, need in his voice.

I stroked his arm in reassurance, smiling as he responded to my touch by burrowing his face into my neck. This wasn't what I'd expected, but it felt right, me playing this role, giving him comfort. I chuckled to myself. Nicholas Kilmain's white knight, that's me.

"You bet I did. But Adam didn't care what I thought. I got sick after that, you know. I had the flu all this past week."

"So that's why you fainted."

"Um, well, probably contributed to it. I fainted because of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. You dazzled me with your presence and I totally lost it."

I felt him chuckle against me. "So what happened?"

I shifted a little and he eased up while I settled back, a little more comfortable. It was an odd thing, holding another guy. But he was kinda soft and so warm against me. I liked it. "So, yes, my dear sweet Nick, that big bad bastard Harvey stole all our instruments, and all my music."

He raised his head and looked at me. "That's terrible. All of it?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Everything I've ever written." Everything I'd written for him, but now it didn't seem like such a tragic loss. Getting to know Nicholas would produce new music. I knew that now. "That's why I was at Harrison's, looking at keyboards. You saw me there, didn't you?"

He nodded, then laid his head back down, kissing my collarbone and sending my thoughts tumbling into cartwheels for a moment. "Yeah, I didn't want to bother you. I -- What were you playing?"

"You're not a bother. And you know what I was playing."

"The song I sang in the play."

"That's right. Did you like it?"

"I loved it. It was all I could do not to burst out singing."

I stroked his arm, closing my eyes. "I wish you had, Nicholas. I wish you had."

He stayed silent for a moment, then said, "Me, too."

We held each other for a long moment then, him soothing me just as much as I soothed him, our breaths rapid, our hearts pulsing wildly in our chests. He looked up at me, his gaze searching mine. I didn't want this to be the first time to kiss, when we were both battered and bruised and scared, but I couldn't help myself. He reached up with his hand and cradled my face, and a soft moan escaped me at his touch.

I bent my head to his, brushing my lips across his mouth, tasting him as I'd dreamed of tasting him for so long. He sucked in his breath and pulled away, but just as quickly his lips found mine again. They were soft, full, yet so firm, so warm, so Nicholas. He whimpered as my tongue parted his lips, sought entry into the moist secrets of his mouth. Our tongues danced, not rapidly, but soft and slow as we comforted each other, reassuring each other that we would get through this, that everything would be all right.

I felt dizzy, didn't realize I was holding my breath until he pulled back with a soft, shy smile. "Breathe, Brandon."

I took a deep breath as ordered and laid my head back. "Wow," I said. "I really *did* forget to breathe."

He chuckled. "You kiss nice, Brandon."

"So do you."

He laid his head on my chest, ending our kisses for now. A good thing, as my entire body had inflamed. I took several more calming breaths. He chuckled at me again and ran his finger down my bare chest. "Easy, boy. Calm down."

"I'm trying, I'm trying." I captured his straying hand with my own. "That doesn't help me much."

"Oops. Sorry. How did you know where to find me?"

"Andy told me." I kissed the top of his head again, wanting more, but content to wait until we were truly safe and alone.

"Good ol' Andy. Why did you leave at the end? At the bookstore. I -- I thought I'd scared you off, flirting with you like that."

"No, I just had to pee. Really, really bad."

We held each other in silence for a while. I couldn't voice my thoughts to him, that if I hadn't had to piss, he wouldn't have run off, and he wouldn't have been attacked. We'd still likely be back at the bookstore, talking over coffee, or maybe even at my parents' house, eating chicken soup.

But that hadn't happened, and it was my fault. I pulled him tighter into my arms, feeling tears well in my eyes.

"How often has this happened, Nicholas?"

His voice came out in a bare whisper. "I've lost count."

"That sucks," I whispered.

"Yeah."

"It won't happen again," I repeated. "I promise."

We held each other for what seemed like hours. Finally, the car left, and we both dozed off. When I woke up, it was almost five in the morning. I groaned, and woke Nicholas. We were stiff, hot and sweaty, and filthy. All I wanted was to go home and stand under a shower for about an hour. I imagine Nicholas felt the same, and then some.

Nicholas sat up slowly, wincing, then turned to me wide-eyed. "It wasn't a dream, then. I dreamt you and I finally found each other, but it was real."

"It's for real." I pushed his bangs back. A shy smile was my reward. "Let's get out of here, okay, Nick?"

"Okay, Brandy."

I grinned. That was better than Bean. We made our way out of the building, Nicholas moving a little less easily now that soreness had set in. I didn't feel so hot myself -- I hadn't eaten anything but that half-hamburger the day before, and I still felt some lingering effects of the flu. We finally hit the street, grateful that it was empty.

The walk back to The Book Shed took forever, but finally we made it to the car. Nicholas leaned against it as I took the keys from my shorts pocket and opened the door, then eased him in. I ran around the other side and got in, too, then drove slowly home. Nicholas laid his head back on the seat and closed his eyes.

As I drew nearer to the parents' house, I began to worry -- what would Mom think when she saw us like this? Had she called the cops, gone out looking for me? My heart trip-hammered as I pulled into the driveway. All the lights were on in the house.

As I turned the engine off, the front door opened and out came my dad, my mom, and Jonathan right behind her. Thankfully, no Adam, though seeing Jonathan was a surprise. He'd been in Seattle the last few weeks and I hadn't known he was expected back already. I looked at Nicholas -- he looked terrified, so I reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"It'll be all right. I promise."

He gave me a wavering smile.

I got out of the car, ignoring my mom's startled look, my dad's open mouth, Jonathan's disbelieving stare, and walked over to the passenger side. I opened it and reached in to help Nicholas. He came out slowly, trembling, his hand clutching mine. I turned and faced the

parents and my oldest brother, Nick's hand still clasped in mine behind my back, and took a deep breath.

"Dad, Mom, Jonathan, this is my new singer. I'd like you to meet Nicholas Kilmain."

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

I sat back in my chair, my fingers still on the keys. I didn't think I could go any further, not right now. I felt drained, sucked dry, my heart whipped from side to side from going over the mistakes I'd made that one fateful day. Mistakes we both paid for, but no one more than Nicholas.

He sat now in his bed, greatly relieved to be free of everything but the one IV, sorting through all the cards and letters he'd received. I couldn't help grinning at his disbelief and joy that so many people had cared enough to send him cards. So many -- hundreds, maybe thousands of letters, and they were still coming, some simply addressed, "Nicholas Kilmain, Durango, Colorado." That was enough.

It was like he was Santa Claus or something.

He loved it, though. Every once in awhile he'd insist on reading a card to me. Not that I minded. I loved hearing the strength return to his voice.

"I can't believe all these cards, Brandon," he said.

I laughed. "You think you're inundated now? Just wait until after the press conference. Then you'll have even more."

"A lot of these are addressed to you, too, you know."

I snorted. He'd already extracted a promise from me to help him answer every single card and letter he -- okay, we -- received. He was sorting them now, moving a little slowly as he did so, but it was good to see him doing some sort of activity.

The door opened and a head poked inside, a man about our age that I hadn't seen before. In uniform. A cop? I frowned in concern, catching Nick's confused gaze.

"Brandon Ashwood?" he said, looking from me to Nicholas.

"I'm Brandon Ashwood," I said.

The cop nodded. "Detective Anderson is here. He'd like to talk with you, please."

"He can come in if he'd like."

The cop flicked his gaze to Nicholas. "He's down the hall. I'm to take you to him."

I set my laptop aside and, aware of the panic in Nick's eyes, said, "Give me a second, will you?"

"Sure." The door closed.

I grabbed my crutches and hobbled over to Nicholas. "What do you think he wants, Brandon?" Nicholas said, his eyes wide with undisguised worry. I kissed him on the forehead, remembering our first kiss again. I could hardly wait to really kiss Nicholas again, but he wasn't ready. Not yet.

We'd have to move much slower this time.

"Stop fretting. I'm sure it's just some loose ends that need to be tied up. He told me yesterday he still had some questions to ask."

"So why doesn't he come in here to ask them?"

I grinned. "It's probably not important enough to bother you. Just me." I noted the deepened circles beneath his eyes and began to take away his cards, putting them in the box his assistant, Marisa, had brought to keep them in. "You need to take a nap anyway."

"I'm not that tired."

I smirked as he yawned. "Yeah, baby, I can tell. Scoot under the covers. Mind Brandon."

With mock annoyance, but apparently deciding to let the detective's cryptic visit slide, Nicholas did as I told him to. "Tuck me in."

"You are such a silly." But I did as he asked, putting the koala bear beneath the covers with him. "Better?"

"Everything's better since getting that thing out of my dick."

"Nicholas!" I said, laughing.

"It's true. Have you ever had one of those things shoved up *your* dick?"

"Can't say as I have. Now, go to sleep. You've got time enough before the press conference."

His eyes clouded at that, and he bit his lower lip. One hand snaked out from beneath the covers and caught my arm. "What are we going to tell them, Brandon?"

I knew exactly what he meant. I glanced at the door -- the detective could wait a minute. I brushed my knuckles across his jaw, ending at his chin. With my thumb, I rubbed that luscious bottom lip of his. "What do you want to tell them, Nicholas?"

He bit the tip of my thumb, then took it into his mouth and sucked on it gently. A moan escaped me. How such a simple act could be so sensual, so enticing ... With a growl that brought a delighted light to his eyes, I took my hand away and bent over and kissed him, grinning as his tongue slipped into my mouth, his eagerness unmistakable.

So much for taking it slow.

He tasted so good, like mint toothpaste. Like Nicholas. Better than I remembered, so sweet, so beautiful. Then, as I shifted awkwardly -- I was trying to balance on my crutches and kiss him at the same time without falling on him -- he pulled back. With both hands he cradled my face, his gaze boring into mine.

"I want to tell them the truth."

"That we're together?"

"That we're *back* together."

I leaned into one of his hands. It was so warm, and I felt that warmth spread through me at the simple addition to my words.

"Brandon?"

I nodded. "Okay, Nicholas. I'd like that."

His hands began to stroke my face. A nervous gesture. He hesitated, opened his lips to say something, then closed them again. "Brandon, I want -- They'll ask about Dream."

I'd known this was coming. It was inevitable. I knew what Nicholas wanted, craved, had to have. He couldn't *not* be out there, writing music, creating, and above all else, performing. And he wanted me with him. Even more so now that he knew some of the truth as to why I'd pulled back so hard, so fiercely. Why I'd ruined everything.

To protect him. Always, to protect *him*.

But I could tell by the way his hands stilled that he fully expected me to say no. There was still much that I'd had to deal with that he didn't know specifics about yet, but he knew I would tell him now. So, I gave him what he wanted. I could, now. Now that we were free.

"We'll tell them we're working together again, Nicholas. If that's okay with you."

His hands moved to my shoulders, clutching them over and over again before moving back to my face. He nodded, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Yes," he finally whispered, then opened his eyes and wiped his tears away. "Yes. Are you sure, Brandon? I want to be sure this is what you want. I know how hard it is on you, to be away from home."

I sat on the bed, taking his hands in mine. "It *is* hard, but not like it was before. I'm older. Wiser. The concert world's different now, too, Nicholas."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't I know it."

"We'll probably have to do smaller venues --"

"I don't care. Not anymore."

"And smaller tours."

"We'll be in control now, Brandon. It won't be like before. I promise."

"You bet it won't."

Not now that the madman who had made my life -- our lives -- such hell was gone, now that we knew to listen to ourselves and not what others said who thought they knew what was best for us but really didn't. We'd both seen the bitter results of twisted words and wouldn't let that happen again.

No one would *ever* control us again.

The door opened and the cop stuck his head in again. "Mr. Ashwood?"

"Sorry. I'm coming."

I squeezed Nick's hands and kissed him again. "Take a nap. I'll be right back."

After tucking in and kissing Nicholas once more -- could you blame me? -- I picked up my crutches and followed the cop outside the door. I frowned as I noted another police officer had taken up a spot outside Nick's hospital room. "What's going on?"

"Detective Anderson will explain, Mr. Ashwood."

Fear clawed at me. Something had happened. *No*, I thought, wanting nothing more than to turn around and hobble straight back to Nicholas. But like a June bug drawn to a porch light, I followed after the cop down the hall, moving past him when he held a door open for me.

"Detective?" I said as I swung into the room. "What's going on? Why is there a cop outside Nick's door?"

The detective nodded once to the cop who had accompanied me. When he didn't leave, but stood at the door -- guarding it -- dread reached up and grabbed me by the throat.

Guarding *me*.

"The autopsy results came back in, Mr. Ashwood. I'm sorry. The man you killed wasn't Percy Blevins."

Disbelief punched me in the gut. My surroundings darkened. I felt myself falling. Hands grabbed me, and I felt myself eased into a chair. With a gasp I took a deep breath. I felt like I was going to be sick. Finally I ground out, "What do you mean, it wasn't Percy? I saw him. I killed him. He can't hurt Nicholas anymore."

The detective pulled a chair up to me and shook his head. Not Percy. It wasn't Percy. I started to shake. The detective laid a hand on my shoulder.

"We're still trying to ID him. He looked very similar to Mr. Blevins, but he wasn't him."

"Then where is Percy?"

The detective hesitated. "He's in jail, in Los Angeles."

I stared at the detective. "What do you mean? In jail?"

"He committed murder eight years ago, Mr. Ashwood, and has been there ever since. He's not the person who's been blackmailing you all this time. And we don't think it was the guy you killed, either. We found a number of incriminating things in his apartment that lead us to believe he was being paid by someone, starting only about six months ago."

I looked at the detective then, shocked and confused. "What do you mean? I -- I don't understand." Blevins wasn't who had been blackmailing me? Wasn't the guy who I'd killed? But who else could it be? It made no sense. "Blevins, it had to be Blevins. He's the only one that it could've been."

The other guy who had attacked Nicholas that horrible day had died years ago in a car accident.

"Does a company called Hallifax mean anything to you?"

I shook my head. I felt dizzy. Disoriented. "No. No it doesn't."

"Apparently, Hallifax is a company in name only, drawing on funds in a Swiss bank account. This man, whoever he was, was being paid by Hallifax to torment Mr. Kilmain, according to what we found on his computer. He had specific instructions what to do, and when, to Mr. Kilmain. And there was more."

I covered my face with my hands. "What else did you find?"

"Tapes. About a hundred of them. They were in envelopes, ready to be mailed out to different rags. There's a possibility some already had been -- we have postal receipts. We'll do our best to track them down."

Oh, my God. My face blistered with humiliation. Now I really did feel like throwing up. "What was on the tapes?" I said dully.

"You and Mr. Kilmain. In Hawaii."

Hawaii. Our first real vacation. I sat back in my seat. There'd be no doubt now that Nicholas Kilmain and Brandon Ashwood fucked each other, and had been doing so for a long, long time. I wanted a cigarette right then, bad. I hadn't smoked in more than a year, but at that moment I didn't give a damn about my lungs.

I was afraid to look up at the detective. See the disgust in his eyes -- he'd seen the tape. That was apparent. How could he not be disgusted? What had been so beautiful, a private thing between me and Nicholas, had been twisted by this madman, reproduced and ... and mailed out.

I hadn't killed Percy, so who the fuck had I killed? Who'd been blackmailing me, all these years?

"So now what, Detective?" I asked, my voice hollowed, defeated. All the joy was gone. How was I going to tell Nicholas?

"I've placed a twenty-four-hour watch on you both. The press conference is cancelled."

I looked up at that. "What?"

But he didn't get a chance to answer; a blood-curling scream echoed through the halls and straight into my heart.

Nicholas!

Chapter Five

The detective shot from his chair, drawing his gun. I froze for a moment, my heart beating wildly in my chest as the echoes of Nick's scream reverberated in my mind.

I kicked into action, grabbing my crutches, but the detective reached the door before I could get them under my arms. "Keep him here," he said to the cop, then disappeared through the door, his footsteps echoing as he ran down the hallway.

Like hell.

"Out of my way." I tried to push past the cop, but he was a damn sight bigger than me and likely weighed twice as much. He grabbed me by the shoulders and held on. "Let me go," I demanded, wrenching away from him and nearly falling. He reached out and steadied me. It pissed me off and I pulled back, but to no avail. He didn't let me go.

"No, Mr. Ashwood. You're not going anywhere. Not until we know what's going on."

I trembled in his steadying hands. "Let me go, now," I said through clenched teeth.

But he shook his head. "Can't do that."

I shuddered with fear and anger, and glared over the cop's shoulder at the door. Stupid fucking broken leg. Even if I could get past him, he'd catch me in a second, and he knew it. I thought about whacking him with one of my crutches, right where it would stun even a halfback like him, but I knew it was useless. I was stuck.

"Shit," I said, tearing the word out from deep in my gut as I wrenched away from his grip.

"Sorry, Mr. Ashwood."

"Yeah, I know."

I half-stumbled, my crutches catching on his foot, and steadied myself before he could. He cocked his head to listen to whatever was going on outside the door, then nodded at me

in apology, I guess. I hobbled over to the window and stared at the cold, harsh scene below me. I hated Colorado. I hated the snow. I hated this hospital. I hated the helplessness that kept me bound to this room, watched over like I was a child who couldn't even piss without supervision. I felt like a prisoner all over again as I fought to keep the panic down.

What the hell was going on?

I laid my hands against the window panes, balancing on my crutches. So cold. So damn cold out there, beneath my hands. The parking lot was below my window. I could see a TV van of some sort pulling into a space. There were others, of course. The press conference. I thumped the glass with my hand, then did it again, harder. And harder. I bit my lip and did it again, making the window shake, crazily imagining breaking the glass, feeling the shards slip into my skin, making me feel anything but the terror skittering through me now.

"Mr. Ashwood, please be careful --"

The door opened. I whirled around, barely able to stop the pent-up panic from exploding, and hobbled over to the cop sticking his head inside. His gaze fell on me. "Mr. Ashwood, Mr. Kilmain needs you. He's all right."

I'd be the judge of that. I brushed angrily past the cop guarding me -- he followed, much to my annoyance -- and swung my way back to Nick's room.

The cop who had fetched me stopped me. "Not in there. We moved him," he said, indicating the room across the hall.

I pushed my way into the room. "Nick." I headed straight for the bed where Nicholas lay, pale and ghostly underneath blankets. "What happened, Nick?" I set my crutches aside and cradled his face. "Look at me, Nicholas," I said, touching his face, his shoulders, his chest. He seemed okay, but for the deadness in his eyes as he turned them to me.

"Barkley. They killed Barkley."

"What?" That was impossible. My brother was with Barkley, at Nick's house in New York.

Detective Anderson stepped up. "Mr. Kilmain received a package while we were down the hall." He glanced at Nicholas. I reached for Nick's hand. He clung to me as if he'd never let go. As he had when I'd first found him.

"It had --" Nicholas closed his eyes and turned his head. Tears streamed down his cheek.

"There were animal remains inside, and a picture of his dog."

And that's why Nicholas had screamed.

Without hesitation I grabbed the phone. I asked for an outside line, only to learn I couldn't make a long-distance call. "I need a blasted phone that works," I said, slamming it down. The detective handed me his. "I'll reimburse you," I told him, quickly dialing Nick's home phone with an ease that belied how little I'd called it over the past two and a half years.

I waited for its ring as I sat on the edge of the bed. "Come on, come on," I whispered, casting a glance at Nicholas. He'd clenched his hands to his chest as if he were praying. Perhaps he was.

"Hello?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "It's Brandon. Where's Barkley."

"Hey, bro, what's up? Barkley's right here. Why?" And I heard the anxious canine snuffling. "Get down, Barkley, shit dog. Sorry, Brandon, he jumped on me when he heard his name."

I reached out, stroked Nick's face. He'd been holding his breath as I talked, staring through the bedrail. He'd had a hell of a cruel shock, and fury pumped through me, but I fought to calm my voice. "Nicholas, he's still with my brother. He's fine. That wasn't him."

Nicholas turned to me, disbelief on his face. He reached for my hand and I held on to him, tight. "Are you sure?" he said.

I turned back to the phone. "Can Nicholas talk to him?"

My brother didn't laugh at the odd request. "Brandon, what's going on?"

I closed my eyes, squeezing them tight, and took a deep breath as my chest finally loosened. "Someone sent a package to Nicholas, made it look like ... like Barkley."

"Oh, shit. Someone sent him a dead dog?"

"I think so. I haven't seen it."

"Shit, yeah, put Nicholas on. Come here, Barkley -- Hey, easy dog!"

I handed the phone to Nicholas. He took it from me, his gaze holding mine as he hesitated. I nodded in encouragement, and he put the phone to his ear.

"Barkley? You there, bud?" he said, his voice soft, unsure. Eyes shut, he clenched my hand once, then released it to wipe away his tears. He smiled at me and nodded, relief flooding his face. "Okay. Good. That would be ..." He sighed. "... wonderful."

I brushed away his tears myself, then bent down and kissed him briefly on the lips before pulling back. I looked up at the detective -- sympathy and a hard edge of anger similar to what I was feeling ghosted his face. Nicholas ended the call and handed the detective his telephone. "Thank you, detective."

"Get some rest, Mr. Kilmain. I want to talk to Mr. Ashwood for a few minutes."

"Brandon, your brother's going to bring Barkley to me. They're leaving tomorrow."

I nodded. We'd already planned on that. We'd been going to surprise Nicholas, but this was probably best. Barkley would go nuts when he saw Nicholas again after so long, and it would be good for him to have his dog around until we could get out of here. He loved that dog. That dog was his family, like his child.

And whoever had done this to him, sent that package, knew it.

“Good. By the time they get here, we’ll be out of this place, I promise,” I said, stroking his jaw line with one finger.

He smiled tiredly and leaned into my touch. Then he took a deep breath; a little color had returned to his face. “Hey, what time is the press conference?”

The detective grimaced. “We’ll cancel it.”

Nick’s eyes widened and his gaze flicked to me. “No, we can’t do that. I’m fine now.”

I hesitated, but the detective said, “We could postpone it for a couple of hours. Give you time to recover a bit.”

I glanced at my watch. “Three now. Six?”

The detective nodded and left the room for a moment. When he was gone, Nicholas and I said nothing to each other, just held each other’s hands. There was no need to say a word.

I remembered this, the comfortable silence, the quiet companionship. Despite most people’s beliefs to the contrary, Nicholas had a quiet, reflective side. He loved to read and would lose himself for hours with his nose in a book, even a textbook, inhaling whatever was inside. He liked to share what he learned. He’d taught me a lot that way over the years, just by reading things to me, often while I was trying to do something else, but I hadn’t minded.

I’d always envied him, his voracious need to learn, his ability to absorb. I’d admired him, too, for finishing school. It wasn’t like he’d had to -- I sure never found it necessary -- but Nicholas didn’t like leaving things undone. It settled on me then -- that was the last time I’d heard from him, before he’d disappeared. He’d finished college, taking his final classes and graduating just this past summer. He’d called me out of the blue one day to let me know he’d gotten his diploma.

I’d been congratulatory, of course, but formal, abrupt. We’d hung up after just a couple of minutes. I don’t know what *he’d* done, but I’d gone to the beach after that and stared into the waves for hours, unseeing, going over and over again how his voice sounded, trying to decide if that was really need I’d heard in his voice. If he’d really missed me.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked me now.

I shook my head. “Berating myself.”

“For?”

“For never sending you a graduation present. I’m proud of you, Nicholas. Did you know that?”

“Kiss me. Show me.”

I laughed, leaning down to do as he asked. His hand captured the back of my head when I would’ve pulled away. I let our kiss deepen, reveling in the amazing feel of his tongue. I’d starved for the feel of that tongue against mine. I smiled into our kiss and he released me.

“What are you smiling about?”

I sat back up, wiping the moisture on his lip away. “I don’t know. I’m just so happy you’re okay. That your dog is okay. That you still want to kiss me.”

“I never stopped wanting that, Brandon.”

I nodded, taking his hand in mine and bringing it to my lips, kissing his knuckles, laying my cheek against his still-bruised hand. “I know. I know.”

The detective returned. “All set. Six o’clock, bottom floor.”

“Thought I heard groans from the basement,” Nicholas said.

“We need to talk.” The detective looked at me, and I nodded.

Nicholas frowned at our conspiratorial glance. “What is it? What haven’t you told me?”

“Mr. Kilmain, the reason I came to the hospital this afternoon was to tell Mr. Ashwood that the autopsy on the man he -- on your captor was completed this morning. It wasn’t Percy Blevins.”

“You’re kidding.” Nicholas snorted, his eyes disbelieving. “I know that was Percy. It couldn’t have been anyone else.”

“You were blindfolded the entire time in captivity, Mr. Kilmain, and this is probably why. Blevins is alive and in prison in Los Angeles. It wasn’t him.”

If I’d expected Nicholas to crumple in fear, I was wrong to make assumptions. His gaze hardened; his jaw clenched. His hands curled over the bedrails, gripping until his knuckles turned even whiter than they already were. “Who was it, then? Who did this to me?” he demanded.

“We don’t know yet. But he didn’t act alone.”

Then I heard a word I’d never, ever heard Nicholas say. “Fuck!”

I had to agree with him. “If you don’t want to do the conference, we can wait another day, Nicholas.”

“No. I can handle it,” he said, his blue eyes glinting with anger. “Whoever the bastard is that sent that ... that package to me, is sitting out there, gloating. I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing I freaked out.”

“Nicholas,” I said, then hesitated, but I knew that defiant look in his eyes. He wouldn’t be dissuaded. “All right. I’d like to talk alone with Nicholas for a minute, detective. If you don’t mind.”

He nodded and stepped a little away, but didn’t leave us completely alone. Somehow I doubted we’d have much alone time now. The two uniformed cops still stood at the door like royal guards -- stern, expressionless, keeping an eye on us. I wondered what they thought of our kissing, and decided I didn’t care.

Damn, I’d come a long, long way.

“Nick, there’s more. They found copies of a tape in this guy’s place.”

"Copies of a tape? What tape?"

Here it was, at last. That which I'd vowed never, ever to tell Nicholas. I sat on the bed again, taking Nick's hand in mine. "Remember when we went to Hawaii that time? Just the two of us?" I said, lowering my voice.

A wary smile spread across his face. It'd been just after our first number-one single. To celebrate we'd jumped on a plane the next day and taken off for the Hawaiian Islands -- I'd promised Nicholas I'd go with him there to see the volcanoes, if we ever had a number one. I didn't like to break promises, though it happened too often anyway.

But that one was easy. It was the best weekend of my life, the last one before everything started to sour.

"I remember. That was heaven."

I smiled, because he was right. "Yeah, it was."

"We had that little place on the beach, just the two of us, secluded. I'd like to go back there someday."

I sure as hell wouldn't. "Someone filmed us the entire time we were there, Nicholas."

He stilled. He held his breath, turning his face to me as realization hit. "No way."

"Yes," I said softly. "Everything we did was captured on film. Everything." My face heated as I remembered some of what had gone on there. We'd been young, maybe a little naïve to be carrying on like we had, infinitely creative. We'd discovered sides to each other and ourselves that weekend that neither of us had expected existed.

"The blackmail," he whispered, his gaze hardening. He snatched his hand from mine. "This is what it was, isn't it? It was all about that, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

He started to shake. I reached for him, but he stunned me by pulling away. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't let him ruin you. You were just starting to take off --"

"*We* were just starting to take off," he said, his voice low with anger. "*We*, Brandon. It was always *we*. *Us*. The two of us," he said, thumping my chest. "Fuck you. Why didn't you tell me?"

I gulped, stunned. "He -- he threatened to expose us. Send the tape everywhere. It would've destroyed Dream."

He glared at me. "So *you* made the decision to pay that bastard money, to keep the tape out of circulation. Is that it?"

I nodded, taken aback by his anger. I hadn't expected this. Tears, humiliation -- but anger? "I couldn't let him ruin everything. So, yeah, I paid him to leave you alone."

"But don't you see? It ruined everything anyway. That's why you pulled back. That's why you quit on me, wasn't it?"

I couldn't deny what he said, could only nod. Nicholas shrank away from me. The detective glanced up and away again. "I didn't know he'd go this far, in the end," I said, my voice hurting from the clog in my throat, the unshed tears. "After a while, he started to threaten you, Nicholas. I couldn't let that happen."

"He threatened me? When? When did he start to threaten me like that?"

The familiar misery washed over me. "Hungary. When we were in Hungary."

Nicholas covered his face with his hands. The cuts and bruises on them were healing, but at that moment they looked as fresh and accusatory as if he'd just been hurt. I closed my eyes as the memory of how I'd found him flashed in my mind -- naked except for the cursed blindfold, filthy, bruised, nearly bleeding to death, his legs and arms bound. It burned. How that memory burned.

"I made a mistake, Nicholas. You're right about that. I should've told you." I shook my head, running my hand wearily over my face. I was so tired. So damned tired. "But I was young, and scared, and I remembered what he said, that night -- that first night." Remembered panic seized me. I tried to fight it down, but it showed in my voice. "I couldn't let that happen to you again."

"But it did anyway, didn't it?" he said softly. "And it doesn't even sound like it was Blevins. Dammit, you should've told me. I had the right to know someone else was fucking with our lives."

I couldn't stand the harsh anger lacing his voice. He had every right to be angry, of course, but I couldn't stand hearing it. "I should have told you, because now I know that would've taken his power away from him. But I couldn't see that then. All I knew was how happy you were. I -- I didn't want to spoil it."

"Oh, Brandon," he said wearily. "So you pulled back. And that's when it *did* start to spoil for me. For us both."

I nodded and stared at a tiny hole in my cargo pants I hadn't noticed before. I didn't look up as the sheets rustled and the bed creaked. The hole blurred. Had I lost him again? Had the confession of what I'd done -- and not done -- ruined any chance we had together? My breath hitched; my stomach clenched. I wrapped my arms around myself as a black hole of despair bearing my name reached up and grabbed me and pulled me inside.

It scared me.

"Brandon." When I didn't move, he reached up and cupped my chin, forcing me to look at him. My breath caught when I saw the expression in his eyes -- disbelief, sadness, irritation, yeah, but compassion, too. "I wouldn't have cared about the tape. I wouldn't have cared who saw it. You mattered far, far more to me than any old tape, my reputation, what have you. And besides, it's not like we would've lost that many fans. They weren't stupid. I always thought it was pretty obvious the way I felt about you, up there on stage."

"I'm sorry," I said, unable to think of anything beyond that. "I'm sorry, Nicholas." I bowed my head, pulling away from his touch. I couldn't bear it. I felt such the fool, a lonely, stupid fool.

But Nicholas wasn't done with me yet. He took me by the shoulders, pulling at me. I hesitated, then realized I couldn't fight with him over this, didn't want to. I let myself be pulled stiffly to his chest. I sensed the detective walking past. The two cops left with him. In a moment, we were alone. I felt a sob wrack through me -- a sob of relief as his hands carefully rubbed my back, my arms. I collapsed against him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I said, over and over again.

He hushed me, kissing the tears from my cheek. "What's done is done. It doesn't matter anymore."

"But it does, Nicholas, it does. That wasn't Percy. All this time, it wasn't Percy. Who was it?" I asked, bewildered.

He pulled me even closer to him, and I found myself curled up against him. His hands didn't stop the soothing, stroking. I sighed against his neck, realizing just how good and special it felt. I hadn't let myself be cared for in so long. I was so used to the role fate had assigned me that first night -- paladin, white knight, protector, caretaker -- even though I hadn't actually played that role since that day we went our separate ways. I didn't know what to do. How to act. I had to fight against pushing away. I sensed, deep down, that this was important to us, important to our recovery.

Our healing.

I had to let go. I had to let *him* take care of *me*.

It might be the only way we survived this.

Hot tears continued to cascade down my cheeks, soaking his hospital gown. My fingers stroked the soft curls of hair at his throat, finding comfort in the familiar fuzziness that was Nicholas.

"It's not over, is it?" he said softly, brushing my hair back from my face. I closed my eyes. "Some crazy idiot's still after us."

"Yeah."

"So, what are we going to do?" he whispered, rubbing his cheek against my forehead. "How do we find out who's been running our lives all this time, eh?"

I don't think he expected an answer. I had none to give. "I'm scared, Nick." I found incredible relief in the admittance.

"So am I," he said with a chuckle. "But we need to do this."

"The press conference," I said dully.

"Yeah. Let's fight this bastard, okay? Together. Look at me, Brandon."

I pulled back and did as he asked. He shook his head at me. "Look at what I did to you," he said, but at my expression of denial a fierce glint shined in his eye. "No, it's my fault, too. That you felt you had no other choice than to pay the guy. I made you what you were just as much as you made me what I was. But we aren't what we were anymore. Now we are what we are, today. And he doesn't know us, does he?" He cocked his head and grinned. "If that makes sense."

"In an odd way, yeah, it does," I said, caught by the heated look in his eyes.

"We did some pretty interesting things in Hawaii," he said, his gaze raking over my face.

I wiped my cheeks, embarrassed -- my eyes were puffing from the wild rage of emotions of the last few minutes. "Yes, we did."

"Remember that little sliver of beach we found, the little pail and shovel Lee bought for me?"

"And the wine. Don't forget the wine."

"Hey, I didn't drink it. That was you."

My face heated even more and I burst out laughing. "What a mistake that was."

I'd passed out from the heat and the cheap wine, within an hour of finding our little private cove. I'd been exhausted from the plane ride -- back then, I'd still hated flying. Hadn't understood it. Now I have my pilot's license, but then flying had been sheer torment and left me wrung out. But I hadn't been able to resist Nick's enthusiasm. He'd wanted to hit the beach immediately, so of course I'd gone along. And had paid the price for falling asleep on him.

He smiled at me wistfully. "You made a most interesting foundation for a sand castle."

"Especially the flagpole."

His smile spread to his eyes, but then he sobered. "Brandon, I'm sorry, too. Man, we had a lot of fun, but we sure made our share of mistakes. There were some things we did right, though."

I smirked. "Such as?"

"We made beautiful music together."

I nodded, stunned by his simple assuredness. "Yeah, we did, didn't we?"

His mouth drew my gaze. He noticed, bit his lower lip, and then slowly let it pull from between his teeth. Tease. He knew how much I loved his lips. Fat lips, he always called them. To me they were perfection.

I didn't wait for further invitation, but captured them with my own. His tongue pushed between my teeth, forcing my mouth to open. I groaned. Not losing contact, I slid over his body, taking care not to hurt his side or my own broken leg. He spread his legs, allowing me

to lie between them, and I settled into the familiar space. Oh, God, I hadn't done this in so long ...

I pulled back, breathless, before capturing his mouth again. I felt the incredible sensation of his dick hardening beneath me. It dug into my stomach as we continued to kiss, but I welcomed the discomfort. My whole body was inflamed.

"Guess I *am* getting better," he murmured against my lips.

"I'll say."

"Don't guess that door has a lock on it, does it?"

I dropped my head to his chest, chuckling. "No, dammit. But then, most patients don't usually need to worry about getting caught making out with each other."

He kissed my nose. "We're definitely not most patients."

My entire body shot through with heat as his hand smoothed down my side, cradled my butt, and squeezed. I captured his lips again, exploring his mouth as he allowed me to possess him. His fingers slid deeper, teasing through my cargos that intimate spot he'd once claimed as his own. I pulled back, breathless, at the provocative touch.

He grinned. "Forget to breathe again?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah."

"Know what I'd like to do now?" I raised one eyebrow at him and he shook his head. "It'll be a while for that. What I want is a shower. A nice, long, hot shower. Nurse Ratched isn't on duty anymore, is she?"

"No. The good Nurse Goodall should be here now. I'll go find her if you'd like."

He pulled me down for another kiss. I felt a thrill run through me at the possessiveness of it, the strength that flowed through him and into me. I pulled back, shaking my head.

"No secrets, Brandon. What are you thinking?"

"How strong you've become. How amazing you are."

"Ha. You heard me scream --"

"I did, and I would've done the same thing. You know they wouldn't let me come to you? Pissed me off."

He grinned. "My white knight still."

I laughed. "You don't need a white knight anymore, Nicholas. You do fine on your own."

"I'll always need you."

I captured his sigh with my mouth and held it, the warmth of his lips pushing away the last of the coldness in my heart.

The door opened and I pulled back. We both cringed like schoolboys as Nurse Goodall entered. My face heated, and Nick's was a nice shade of rosy pink. "Good afternoon, boys. Guess what time it is?" she said, completely unfazed by how she'd found us.

I looked at Nicholas and shrugged. “Um, time to extricate me from this embarrassing position?”

She laughed at that. “Time to get those stitches out. Then it’s to the showers for both of you.” She smiled at us, then frowned in mock sternness as Nicholas and I eyed each other. “Alone. You’ll have to save that for when you get out of here. Now come on, Mr. Ashwood. To your room. I’ll take care of Mr. Kilmain.”

I eased off Nicholas, grateful she’d busied herself with preparing the bathroom. I bent down and kissed him one more time. My gaze roved over his obvious erection, which he was vainly trying to smooth away with his hand. “Think about fat men in Speedos,” I whispered, laughing as he swatted me on the butt.

I grabbed my crutches and swung past Nurse Goodall as she emerged from the bathroom, stopping to kiss her on the cheek. “Thank you.”

She smiled. “Go on with you. You’ll feel much better once you get those stitches out.” She winked. “Though you seem like you’re feeling pretty good now anyway.”

“Will Nick get to go back to his room then?”

“I’ll let you know when he’s there. Go.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

She was right. The stitch removal went well, and I took a much needed shower, my leg wrapped up in a nice plastic sock. It was four by the time Nicholas was back in his bed again, no sign of the afternoon’s trauma evident. He’d fallen asleep, exhausted from getting his stitches (really staples) out, and from his shower, but sleep wouldn’t come to me.

I was too relieved, too happy -- despite the threat hanging over our heads -- to rest as ordered. Two hours before press conference time. I had no doubt the speculations were flying as to why the delay, but I didn’t care. Let them wait. Let those who wouldn’t, leave. I no longer felt the characteristic fear that used to come at the thought of getting in front of cameras, or the obligation to give them what they wanted.

I was in control now, and it felt damn good.

I settled into my familiar position in my chair, pulling my laptop to me and opening it. I rested my chin on my hand and waited for it to warm up, glancing at Nicholas. He was snoring. I grinned. I settled back, finding it much more comfortable to sit now that the stitches were out. I shifted -- yeah, that was good, no more pulling. I started to open my story to pick up where I’d left off.

But first, I put on my headphones, opened my playlist, and played the first selection. As Nick’s voice filled my ears, I felt the memories of the past resurface, and my mind drifted to that morning in my parents’ driveway. As the song ended -- it no longer brought me to tears, though I’d never shake the regret -- I began to write again, realizing it wasn’t just for Nicholas anymore that I was doing this, but for myself as well.

The healing had begun at last.

Chapter Six

California -- The Past

The front porch light illuminated me and Nicholas as we stood at an impasse in my parents' driveway. I didn't know what to do except wait and try to stay calm until someone made the next move. I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat and glanced at the darkened houses around us, praying none of the neighbors would come looking for their papers this early and notice the scene unfolding on my parents' front lawn.

My mom's gaze passed over me, one eyebrow rising in question as she took in the bruise on the side of my face, my bare chest. Her gaze then settled on Nicholas where he stood behind me, drifting down to my boxers that he wore. She startled a second, then smiled warmly at him, but he drew closer to me, his breath rapid and hot as it brushed against my bare neck. His nervousness reverberated through his clammy hand to mine. I squeezed it tight; he squeezed back.

"It's good to meet you, Nicholas. You boys come on inside," my mom said.

"Hold on." My mom looked at my dad, surprised. He stepped in front of her, anger narrowing his eyes to slits as he bore down on me. "I think you have some explaining to do, young man," he said. "Where the hell have you been? Adam drove all over town looking for you. You could have called."

"Sorry, Dad. I -- I couldn't get to a phone."

Now I wished I hadn't brought Nicholas home with me. Where we would've gone instead, I don't know, but the look on my dad's face made me nauseous. I could see the disbelief in his eyes as he looked from me to Nicholas and back again. We were holding hands -- that was obvious. I knew then Adam had told him what he thought of Nicholas. I

stiffened my shoulders and looked up at my dad in defiance, steeling myself. He scowled, turned away. I cringed inside. His dismissal hurt more than I could've believed.

"What happened to your face, Brandon?" Jonathan said, his gaze raking over Nicholas. "Let me guess. Fighting over your new boyfriend?"

"Jonathan," my mom warned. "That was uncalled for."

"Hey, just speculating. Adam said Nicholas was a pretty boy. He said that's why you wanted him for the band even though he couldn't sing worth a crap. Was he right, Brandon?"

"Shut up and leave Nicholas out of this, Jonathan." I took a step toward him as anger punched through me. I'd never wanted to hit my oldest brother as much as I did right then. Only Nick's hand holding me back kept me from swinging at Jonathan's smirking face.

Jonathan threw up his hands. "Hey, sorry. It doesn't matter to me if you guys are gay. I think it's funny. Especially with a Grade-A homophobe like Adam for a brother."

"Quiet, Jonathan," my dad warned.

"But they're holding hands, Dad. Just wondering how long he's been batting for the other team --"

My dad cut him short. "Your brother's not gay," he said.

"Yes, I am," I said softly.

My dad's face whitened in shock as he looked at me. "What did you say?"

"I said I am. I'm -- I'm gay." I squeezed Nick's hand, hard. I know I crushed his fingers, but he squeezed back, reassuring me like nothing else could have. A door slammed a few houses down. I wondered how many of our neighbors were watching now.

"Shit," my dad said beneath his breath, then rubbed his hand angrily through his hair. "You act as if you mean it."

"I do mean it."

"You're too young to know any such thing, Brandon --"

"No," I said, cutting him off. Something I wouldn't normally dare do to my dad. "And it has nothing to do with Nicholas, so don't look at him like it's his fault. I've known since I was seventeen, suspected it even before then. I'm gay," I said again.

My dad shook his head in disgust as he looked over my shoulder at Nicholas. My heart trip-hammered. My face heated from humiliation at his reaction. What was Nicholas thinking? I'd told him it would be all right to come here. And now this.

"I'm sorry, Brandon," Nicholas whispered behind me. His forehead rested between my shoulder blades. I realized he was shaking. I stiffened my arm in back of me to support him. He hurt, and I didn't know how much longer he could take this.

I wasn't sure how much longer I could, either. Then I made a decision that, on reflection, probably wasn't very smart, and put Nicholas into a position he likely wasn't

ready for. But I did it anyway. I glanced at my mom, pulled Nick's arm around my waist, and covered his hand with my own. After a moment's hesitation, his fingers linked with mine and squeezed tight. I almost smiled in relief.

No one spoke for a long moment as the reality of the situation sank in. I'd just come out to my family. On the driveway in front of my parents' house, no less, with who knew what nosy neighbors watching.

Jonathan whooped in triumph. "Shit," he said. "This is great. I knew it. I told you, Dad. I fucking knew it. My baby brother's a fucking fairy."

"Watch your language, Jonathan," my dad said to him. "And you --" He pointed a finger at me as his gaze dropped to my fingers linked with Nick's. "-- I won't have any of that ... I won't have it in my house, Brandon. I won't tolerate --"

Jonathan snickered. "Yeah, no sex orgies."

My mom laid a hand on my dad's shoulder, stopping him, her expression one of anger. But not at me.

"Shut up, Jonathan," my mom said. She faced him and my dad, standing between them and me and Nicholas. "Both of you hush. Right now. This can be discussed later when we're not standing in the middle of the driveway entertaining the neighbors."

"Brandon's home. I told him to bring Nicholas with him if he found him. Its obvious they're hurt." She glanced at me over her shoulder, her expression one of steel, before turning to my brother. "Jonathan, get my first aid kit and take it to the kitchen. Steven, go call Adam; let him know Brandon is okay, but he's not to come over. I don't need to put up with him right now as well as you two."

My dad made an exasperated noise, then turned on his heel. "Come on, Jonathan," he said, leaving me and Nicholas alone with my mom.

I looked desperately at her as she turned around, nervousness making my heart beat wildly in my chest. "I'm sorry, Mom."

She closed the distance between us and laid her hands on my shoulders. "Are you okay?" Her worried gaze flicked to Nicholas. He shrank behind me -- I think if I hadn't held his arm tight against my waist, he would've bolted.

"I'm okay, but Nick's hurt."

"Brandon, maybe I should just go --"

"No. You're not going back there," I said curtly.

My mom shook her head. "You're not going anywhere, either of you. Nicholas, come on inside. I promise you, Brandon's father and brother will behave themselves."

I stepped away from Nicholas, releasing his hand but putting my arm around his shoulders. "Come on. I'll help you in," I said.

My mom gasped as she took in Nick's disheveled state, now that she could see all of him in the porch light. She reached for his hand, taking it in hers. He pulled back, but she held on. "Honey, what happened to you?"

Nicholas glanced at me, his eyes pleading that I not tell her what actually happened. "I -- I was attacked." He looked away. "Brandon stopped them."

My mom's eyes widened in comprehension. She looked at me. "Brandon?"

I was glad Jonathan and my dad were gone. "Yes." What else could I say?

She straightened her shoulders. "Do you know who it was?" She didn't take her eyes off me.

"No."

My mom didn't look satisfied. "We should call the police. Those boys --"

"No!" Nicholas pulled his hand from hers and leaned against me, trembling as he buried his face in my shoulder. I pulled him close, wrapping both arms protectively around him, briefly embarrassed about doing so in front of my mom and then thinking it didn't matter.

Nicholas mattered.

"Honey," my mom said, more gently now. "We can't just ignore what happened." She looked at me again. "To either of you."

"Please, Mom," I begged.

She grimaced. I half expected her to tell me she was going to call the cops anyway. If she'd known exactly what they'd done to Nicholas, she would've.

"I'm sorry," Nicholas said.

"It's okay," I said, rubbing my hand over his back. "It's okay."

He pulled back. "No, it's not. I've ruined everything for you."

"Everything's fine, Nicholas. Take him inside, Brandon."

"What about Dad and Jonathan?"

She shook her head. "I'll have a few words with them. They'll come around, I promise, once they're over the shock."

"And Adam?"

"Like I said yesterday, I'll deal with Adam. Now scoot, both of you. Get inside. We've provided enough gossip fodder for the neighbors for one morning."

I had no doubt of that. "Please, come inside with me, Nicholas."

"Are you sure you want me to?" he said softly.

I hated the wariness in his eyes. "Yeah. I'm sure." He didn't protest again -- I think he hurt too much, was too exhausted. I took him into the house and into my room, where I helped him sit on my bed.

"It's not much, but its home, most of the time," I said, feeling oddly nervous now. "I live with Adam usually, but I came back here while I was sick. I won't be going back to his place, I don't think."

He didn't look around, just kept his eyes downcast. Miserable. I knew he didn't really want to be there, but I refused to take him back to the shelter, and there was nowhere else where we could go.

I wasn't letting him out of my sight.

"I'll start your shower for you," I said, cursing the sudden awkwardness between us.

"Thanks."

"And I'll get you some clothes. There's got to be something in here that'll fit. If only I wasn't so damn skinny," I said, half to myself. I yanked open a dresser drawer, pulling out a couple pairs of clean boxers and a t-shirt I thought would fit him, and grimaced at my shorts. No way any of them would fit.

"Try these."

I turned to see Jonathan in my doorway, a pair of navy shorts in his hands. Nicholas looked up and stiffened. His hands gripped the side of the bed. Jonathan cast him a glance and shrugged. "We're about the same size," he said, holding out the shorts.

Nicholas looked at me, then reached gingerly out to take them. "Thanks."

"I won't bite, you know. I just bark a lot."

"Jonathan," I warned.

He threw up his hands again. "Hey, it's not every day you realize your baby brother's gay. It explains a lot, though," he said, grinning as he stroked the stubble on his jaw.

"Explains what?" I said tersely, closing the dresser drawer with a little more force than necessary.

"Why you were never grounded for having girls in your room like Adam and I were."

I smiled at that despite myself. "I was just sneakier than you." I glanced at Nicholas. He looked at me, his eyes questioning.

Jonathan laughed at Nick's expression. "At least you tried girls, then?"

"Tried, didn't like."

My brother shook his head. "Man. Unbelievable. I don't get it, but --" He shrugged. "Boys it is, then. Or maybe just this boy. He is kinda cute, I guess. For a guy."

Even Nicholas smiled a little at that, but quickly dropped his gaze, hiding beneath his bangs. I rolled my eyes at Jonathan, feeling a little bit eased by his teasing.

I knew Adam wouldn't be so easily swayed.

"You hungry? I was going to make breakfast before you guys showed up and nearly rocked the house off its foundation. Like waffles, Nicholas?"

Nicholas lifted his chin at that, his blue eyes wistful. "Yes, I love waffles."

“Good. Bacon?”

“No, thank you. I’m a vegetarian,” Nicholas said. “I appreciate the offer, though.”

“Damn, he’s polite, Brandon. We may have to straighten up our acts around here.”

I glanced at Nicholas. He looked a little more relaxed now, much to my relief. “I’ll eat his,” I said, suddenly hungry. I took a deep breath, realizing the knots in my stomach had eased, too. Maybe it was going to be all right. At least until we encountered Adam again.

Jonathan’s gaze fell to my bare chest. “I’ll make you two rashers. Mom’s right; you’ve gotten too skinny, Brandy boy. Take your showers so you can eat. Mom’s got her Snoopy bandages out, too, so hurry it up.”

Then he left us alone. “I’m sorry about my brother,” I said.

“It’s okay. He’s not too bad.”

“Bossy, though.”

Nicholas grinned. “Big brothers usually are.”

Before I could take the opening and ask him about his family, Nicholas started to push himself to his feet, then gasped at a sudden stab of pain that sent him back to the bed.

“Nicholas!” I rushed to him. I knelt beside him, my hands on his shoulders as he bent over, arms wrapped around his waist. “What’s wrong?”

“Hurts. Moved too fast, I guess.” He sat up, slowly. “I’ll feel better after a shower, I think. Would you mind doing something for me?”

“Sure. What?”

“Take off my shoes and socks for me? I don’t think I can manage it.”

“Oh. Sure.” I glanced at the open door. I leapt over and closed it, then returned to him. I knelt down again and took off his shoes and socks. I glanced up at him, wrinkling my nose. He gave me a small smile. “Cute feet.”

“No, they aren’t. I have ugly toes.” He wiggled them, grinning. I smiled back at him. He seemed to be relaxing now that we were alone, and I was glad. I couldn’t bear the thought of him being uncomfortable around me.

“Wait until you see *my* toes,” I said. “Let’s get your shirt off next, then.” I paused as he pulled back. “What’s wrong?”

He glanced at me, his face pinkening. “I’m, I -- I don’t want you to see --”

“See what?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I’m just -- I’m fat,” he blurted out.

Remembering the feel of him in my arms just a few hours ago, I started to smile, but realized he was serious. It really bothered him. “No, you aren’t fat,” I said, trying to be reassuring. “You’re cuddly. That’s different. Now, come on. Let Brandon have the shirt, Nick.”

He smiled shyly but raised his arms -- carefully -- and I eased them out, wincing as I saw the bruises that Percy had left behind. "Damn, Nicholas," I said, feeling my anger start to rise as I helped him stand.

"It's not as bad as it looks. I just bruise easy."

I had to disagree. It looked terrible. Bruises mottled his ribcage, upper arms, and chest. I shook my head. Then my focus changed as I realized I was seeing Nicholas naked for the first time. Well, at least half-naked, a privilege I hadn't expected so soon.

I pushed the image of him in the alley out of my mind. That time definitely didn't count.

But this did. My gaze roved over his face, hovering at the hollow at the base of his throat. He wore a simple gold chain around his neck that glittered against his fair skin. Dark blond hair sprinkled over his chest and down his stomach into a narrow line that disappeared into his boxers. I gulped. My boxers.

He was fuzzy, but no hairy monster like he'd claimed to be. He was just a little shorter than me, too, I realized as we stood face to face for the first time. I hurriedly kicked off my tennis shoes and stood in front of him again. I smiled down at him, and he smiled back with such a comical expression that I had to laugh.

"What are you thinking?" I asked him.

He tapped one finger to his chin, eyeing me speculatively. "Perfect height," he said, his gaze centered on my mouth. I felt my breath quicken.

"For what?"

"For kissing you," he whispered, then raised his lips to mine. I startled -- I hadn't expected that -- but as the kiss deepened, I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair. His tongue invaded my mouth, too briefly, too quickly, and then he pulled away, leaving me reeling.

"Wow," I said, dropping my hands.

"See? Perfect height."

He kissed me again, a sweet, chaste kiss this time, then smiled and touched his fingers to his lips as he pulled back. He lifted his hand and touched the side of my head, shaking his own as he examined my injury. "Hurts?"

"It's okay," I said, still a little breathless. He looked at me, his expression skeptical. I shrugged. "It hurts a little."

His fingers trailed to my lips then, touching them. I watched his eyes, half-hooded, inviting. I took a deep breath and kissed his fingertips before he could pull away, and he giggled. He *giggled*. I bent down a little to examine the bruises around his ribs, touching him as lightly as I could. I felt his eyes watching me. I shook my head, wincing in sympathy as he flinched at my touch. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

I gave him the same look he'd just given me.

"Okay, you got me. It hurts."

I nodded. How could so much damage have been done in such a short amount of time? I was mere minutes behind Percy and his jackass friend. "I don't think anything's broken but you'll be sore for awhile." Then I realized something. "Some of these bruises are old, Nicholas."

"Yes."

"He's attacked you before. Recently," I said, not disguising my anger. "How long ago?"

"Last week. After ... after the audition."

"Fuck." His head shot up at that, his gaze boring into mine. I grimaced, remembering then how Percy had verbally assaulted Nicholas. "Sorry," I said, straightening. "Let me see your back."

"I'm okay."

"Let me see anyway."

Nicholas hesitated, then turned around. I ran my hands down his back, my tan skin dark against his almost ghostly pale. He trembled beneath my touch as I neared the small of his back. I brushed my fingers across the hollow at the base of his spine, wanting to but not quite daring to bend down and kiss him there.

I promised myself I would, soon. I ran my hands back up to his shoulder blades and over his shoulders and down his arms, laughing softly at what I discovered.

"Goosebumps?"

"Can't help it."

I laughed. He was so soft, so different from me. I couldn't believe I was touching him like this, and he was letting me. "You're so beautiful," I said.

He snorted softly. "No, I'm not."

I realized then that Percy's attacks had probably had another effect on Nicholas. If I ever saw that bastard again, I'd kill him for his cruelty. I wondered just how thoroughly Percy had crushed him. I couldn't do anything about Percy now, but I could do something about Nicholas.

"Yes, you are. To me," I said softly, sliding my hands around his waist. I smiled as he instinctively sucked in his gut when I rubbed his stomach -- so he had a little bit of a belly. I really did like it, the softness of his skin against the roughness of my palms, the contrast of my tanned skin against his pale.

I pulled him gently to me and kissed the back of his neck, beneath his hair. A moan escaped him and he dropped his head back onto my shoulder, covering my hands with his own. Holding my hands there? Maybe. I know I wanted to dip lower, see if he'd responded

to me as I did to him, but I didn't pull my hands away. I would gladly take things at whatever pace he needed to set.

So I lost myself in the sensation of simply holding him, feeling his skin against mine, his warmth blending with my own. The brush of his hair against my face, the rise and fall of his chest. How many times had I imagined this? Fantasized this? Too many to count. The reality was so much better. I couldn't believe it, either -- all my earlier nervousness was gone, lost in the heady scent that was Nicholas in my arms. I stilled myself, hoping the feel of my arousal pressing into his back wouldn't freak him out. But instead he pushed back against me, making *me* shudder with goosebumps.

"I'm not beautiful," he protested again, but lacking the vehemence of earlier.

"Yeah, you are. A little filthy, but still beautiful."

He rewarded me with a soft laugh. "Probably smell, too."

"So do I."

"Not as bad as me."

"Yeah, right. You smell fine. I was the one lying against those nasty pillows without a shirt on."

He half turned his head toward me. Relief filled me as I saw a mischievous glint in his eye. "Maybe you *should* take a shower first, then, stinky boy."

A sudden vision of sharing a shower with him filled my mind, but I quashed it, remembering my dad's warning. With great reluctance I released him. "I'll take a shower in my parents' bathroom. Need any help?"

"No, I'll be okay."

I grabbed the clothes I'd pulled out of the drawer and handed them to him. "I'll meet you in the kitchen when you're done."

"Waffles," he said, grinning. "I'm starved."

"Me, too. Jonathan's okay, Nicholas. He says stupid things sometimes, but he usually gets over it. And I'm sorry about my dad, too. I didn't expect him to react like he did."

He nodded, then hesitated, his eyes boring into mine. "Brandon?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

Then he turned and disappeared into the bathroom. I wondered exactly what he was thanking me for, but it didn't matter. The look in his eyes said it all.

He wanted me.

Swiping my clothes off the dresser, I left my room, passing by the kitchen, where I saw my dad kissing my mom goodbye. I froze as his gaze turned to me. My excitement over what had just passed between me and Nicholas died as he approached. I took a step back, meeting the wall. I flattened against it.

My dad shook his head and stopped. "My gosh, son. I'm not going to hit you."

"Sorry. I know," I said, forcing myself to relax.

He spread his hands in apology. "It's just a bit of a shock -- Damn." He pinched the bridge of his nose, a habit he had when he was searching for the right thing to say but didn't know exactly how to get it out. He dropped his hand. "At least this explains one thing."

I glanced at my mom over his shoulder where she hovered, concern etched on her face. I looked back at my dad. "Explains what?"

"Why I never had to ground you for having girls in your room like I did your brothers."

I bit the inside of my lip as Jonathan jumped behind my mom and grinned at me.

See? he mouthed.

I shrugged, turning back to my dad. "Yeah, well --"

"I just figured you'd learned a thing or two from your brothers."

I dropped my gaze to the floor, but couldn't hide my smile. "I did. Just not that."

My dad clapped me on the shoulder. "Well, we'll talk later about ... about all this. But tell your ..."

He looked at me, helpless.

"Nicholas."

"Yes. Right. Tell Nicholas I'm sorry if I frightened him."

"I will."

"We'll talk tonight. About all this."

"Okay, Dad."

He looked at me for a moment, shook his head, then without another word left for work. I collapsed against the wall and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, both Jonathan and my mom were grinning at me. I smiled at them in relief, then escaped to my parents' bathroom.

My shower was quick. The place on the side of my face where Percy's buddy had hit me pounded in the hot water, making me a little dizzy. That and lack of food, I thought. And, maybe, knowing Nicholas was in another part of the house, having a shower, too.

I pushed *that* thought out of my mind.

When I got out of the shower, I toweled quickly -- the hot water had loosened the stiffness I felt -- and then, still naked, I leaned over the sink to look at myself in the mirror. I winced as I examined the side of my face. At least my eye wasn't swollen shut. I stepped away from the mirror. And stopped.

I looked at my reflection. Nicholas had worries about how his body looked to me. I knew how he felt. I spread my hands across my stomach and grimaced. I'd lost weight over the past two years. I'd weighed more at eighteen than I did now. About ten pounds more.

No, more than that, sixteen pounds. Now I was way too thin -- I looked like a fucking scarecrow. Like I'd been in prison, living on bread and water for months.

Talk about unattractive.

I turned away in disgust, grabbing my clothes and yanking on my boxers and shirt. I pulled on my shorts and left the bathroom, rubbing my towel over my hair as I walked into the kitchen. The rich smell of butter, hot syrup, and crisp bacon made my stomach growl. Jonathan motioned for me to sit, then placed a plateful of waffles in front of me. "Here you go. Round one."

"Geesh, Jonathan. I can't eat all that," I said as I stared at the waffle mountain. He plunked six strips of bacon on my plate. "Whoa," I said.

"Eat. You need it. I'll get you some milk."

"Has Nicholas come out yet?" I winced at Jonathan's amused expression, belatedly realizing what I'd said.

My mom entered the kitchen then. "No," she said, smiling as she took a place at the table, oblivious to what I'd said. She frowned at Jonathan's snickering. "I just checked on him. He fell asleep after his shower, poor kid."

I laid my fork down. "Are you sure he's okay --" I started to stand.

She put a hand on my arm, stopping me. "He's fine. Just exhausted. I covered him with a blanket and he didn't even flinch."

I sat back in my chair. "Thanks, Mom. I'm not surprised. We didn't get much sleep last night."

"Busy?" Jonathan asked innocently, then laughed as my face heated.

"Not what you think, Jonathan. The guys who beat Nicholas up and gave me this --" I touched my face. "-- chased after us. We had to hide in an old apartment building all night."

"You're kidding," my brother said, sobering. "Sorry."

My mom pulled out a chair and sat. "Brandon, who were these boys? Do you know?"

"Nick's ex-boyfriend from high school was one of them. I don't know who the other one was."

"Maybe we should call the police," Jonathan said. "Little bastards might enjoy a couple of nights in jail." He snorted.

"No," I said. "No police."

"Jonathan's right for once, son."

"Thanks a lot, Mom," Jonathan said.

She ignored him. "You boys were attacked. You could've been seriously hurt. Those boys had no right to hurt either one of you."

"Nick doesn't want them involved," I said.

"Cops won't do anything anyway," Jonathan said. "He's a little beat up, but that's it. Guys get in fights all the time. They won't care."

"Well, they should care," my mom said, clearly unhappy.

But Jonathan was right about that, too. What would the cops do? I knew Nick wouldn't tell what they were doing to him. I wouldn't either. I'd all but promised not to.

I pushed my plate away. Thinking about it killed my appetite.

"Oh, no, you don't," my mom said, pushing the plate back. "Eat."

I sighed and picked up my fork, cutting a piece of waffle and plunking it in my mouth. I closed my eyes -- it tasted like heaven. I ate another, and another, before settling back in my chair. "Delicious."

"I know. I'm a hell of a cook," Jonathan said.

"Pat yourself on the back, why don't you."

"Nobody else will. Eat some bacon. It's crispy, just like you like it."

I looked from Jonathan to my mom. Neither was eating. "Is this a conspiracy?"

My mom smiled. I relaxed a little, glad she'd given up on the cop thing. "Of course it is. We're going to fatten you up whether you like it or not."

I ate two pieces of bacon, took another bite of waffle with both of them eyeing me, drank an entire glass of milk, and pushed aside my plate. I'd barely dented the mound. "That's it. That's all I can handle. Especially with you two watching me."

"Where'd you finally find him, anyway?" my brother asked.

"Reading poetry at a bookstore."

"He's a poet," my mom said. "That's wonderful. Tell us more about him."

"Well, he goes to the university. I don't know what he's studying, though. He works at a record store. He's an incredible lyricist. And he's a part-time teacher."

"You're kidding," Jonathan said.

"Nope, not kidding. Preschool."

"The guy's a fucking saint."

"Jonathan," my mom warned.

"Sorry. Geesh, Brandon. The guy's a polite, vegetarian, poet-lyricist-preschool-teacher who's also a university student. And he sings?"

"He does that best of all."

"I figured Adam was screwed in the head about that one. Does Nicholas know about you?"

I sobered. "Does he know I'm a cussing, meat-loving high school dropout without a job, who also drinks and smokes occasionally? No. Not yet." I stared at my plate, realizing then I hadn't had a cigarette in over a week. "Not much of a catch, am I?"

“Not true. Who’s also an amazingly gifted musician, a deeply caring individual, and an incredible human being? Brandon Ashwood, that’s who,” my mom said.

“You’re just saying that because you’re my mom and have to.”

“I’m saying it because it’s the truth.”

“Why does he live at a shelter?” Jonathan asked. “Where is his family?”

I poked at the leftover waffles with my fork. “I don’t know. I haven’t asked.” I dropped my fork on the plate and stood. “He lost his roommate, his car broke down, and he couldn’t afford anything by himself, so he moved there. I’m going to go check on him.”

“And I’ve got to shove off,” Jonathan said. “Got some errands to run. Oh, and Sprout’s going to come by after school. She’s worried about you.”

“Thanks, Jonathan.”

“No prob.”

My mom cleared her throat. “You’re not leaving this mess, young man. I have to go to work, too.”

“I’ll clean up,” I said. “You guys go on.”

My mom stood and kissed me on the cheek. “Don’t go waking him up, you hear? He’s been through a lot and needs to sleep more than anything. He can have something later. I’ll try to come up with something good for supper that he can eat.” She paused. “If he wants to talk to the police, I’ll take him.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, truly grateful. She looked at me for a moment, a smile on her face. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Why? Because for the first time in a long time, you look happy.”

I felt my face heat, but I couldn’t help returning her smile. “I am, Mom. I can’t believe I finally found him.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Remember what I said yesterday. Give it your best shot, Brandon. You won’t know what can happen unless you try.”

“I know.” I folded her into my arms and hugged her tight. “Thank you for everything. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“And hey, where’s my Snoopy bandage?”

She laughed, grabbing one from her first aid kit and carefully placing it on the side of my face. “There you go.” She kissed it, kissed me again, then left me to my chore.

I started to clean the kitchen. Jonathan left, promising to be back before Adam got off work and came skulking around. After a while, my mom emerged from her room and, with a kiss, left me, too.

I was finally alone in the house. With Nicholas.

As soon as my mom's car left the driveway, I went to my bedroom. The door was closed. As quietly as I could, I opened it and peered inside. My mom had, as she'd said, covered Nicholas with a blanket. She'd also closed the blinds. I walked over to my bed, pulling my desk chair after me, and then sat, elbows on my knees, and stared at Nicholas. It was barely light enough in the room to see his face, but I could tell he slept peacefully, untroubled. A strand of hair had fallen across his cheek and I reached out and moved it, tucking it behind his ear. He didn't move.

Nicholas. My Nicholas. Asleep in my bed.

Simply fucking amazing.

I sat back in the chair and watched him for a while, the rise and fall of his chest. He moved once, startling me as he flung one arm to the side and stretched across the bed.

A bed hog. Great. And a violent one, too.

I longed to climb in with him anyway, but knew that would be stupid -- he'd let me in some, but I knew that, thanks to Percy, I'd be foolish to rush him.

Rush him toward what, though? What did I want from him?

I sighed as I stood. I wasn't entirely sure myself what I wanted from him. I wanted his voice, his talent, his creativity. I smiled. I wanted to kiss him and hold him. Beyond that was uncharted territory for me. I'd never even been with a guy before, didn't know the first thing about having sex with a guy beyond the basic mechanics, except that I wanted to do it with Nicholas.

The thought sent a wave of sizzling heat racing through me, but I didn't even know who to ask to find out what I needed to know to follow through. I couldn't ask Nicholas, either. I didn't want him to think I was an idiot.

What a novice.

I left the room, closing the door softly behind me. I felt restless, antsy. I found myself walking to the kitchen again, then veered toward my piano, shiny and untouched, in the front room. I stood for a moment, staring at it. This was it, then, I thought as I flexed my fingers. I had my singer. We had a future. This was it, finally, what I'd been wanting for so long -- to create music and give it to the world.

In a way, the thought of what might possibly come terrified me, but I pushed the fear aside. With Nicholas as my partner, I could handle it. I could handle anything.

How naïve I was then. Blissfully naïve.

I whirled around and closed the door behind me, then closed the other door leading to the living room. Hopefully that would be enough barriers so as to not wake Nicholas.

Then I sat down and, for the first time in too many months to count, brought my baby grand to life.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Mr. Ashwood?"

I looked up from my laptop at the nurse, then glanced at Nicholas. He still slept, his arm flung to the side as it had been that day he'd first slept in my bed. "Yes?"

"Your cousin is here to see you. I told her Mr. Kilmain was sleeping --"

"Jenny?"

I set my laptop aside after saving the file and stood, grabbing my crutches. With a last glance at Nicholas, I left the room, closing the door behind me. Jenny stood in the hallway, her hands clasped together, a goofy grin on her face. I hurried over to her, laughing as she all but jumped into my arms.

"You came," I said, wrapping my arms around her as best I could without toppling both of us over.

She squeezed me tight, then kissed me. "Of course I did. I told you I would. Are you okay, Bean? I've been so worried about you."

I dropped my head to her shoulder, pulling her tighter, taking care not to smash her swollen belly. I couldn't believe she'd come all the way to Colorado so close to having her baby. I couldn't speak over the lump in my throat as I cradled her against me.

"Hey, hey, Bean, it's okay," she whispered, stroking the back of my neck. "Is Nicholas okay?"

I nodded, took a deep breath, and pulled back. "Sorry," I said, wiping my face of the unexpected onslaught of tears. "Been a long day."

She reached up and brushed the moisture off my cheeks. "I heard. I talked to your brother."

"He's bringing Barkley tomorrow. Nicholas won't be able to fly for a while, so we thought it'd be best to bring his dog out here."

"Good. Where will you guys stay?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know when they'll let Nicholas go. I've got Marisa looking into it."

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "So, she's back in your life. How do you feel about that?"

I shrugged. "Okay, I guess. She and I will have to have a long talk. I think she'll be shocked when she finds out I have no intention of leaving Nicholas again."

"She'll be freaked."

I grinned. "Probably. Yeah."

Jenny laughed. "Is there somewhere we can talk for a while? A coffee shop maybe?"

I glanced at the cop hovering nearby. I hadn't noticed his presence before. "We can go to my room. I don't want to leave the floor."

"You're not in there with Nicholas?"

"I'm usually in there, yeah, but I have my own room." I led the way, and with a pointed look at the cop, I closed the door. "My own personal bodyguard," I said to Jenn.

"Cute."

I rolled my eyes. "Not my type. How are you feeling now, anyway?"

"You mean, how's Bubba?" she said, patting her stomach. "He's fine. Big. A monster in the making."

"I can't believe Rex let you come."

"Like he had a choice? You needed me. Besides, he came, too. He's parking the rental, but he'll leave us alone for a while."

I lay on my bed as she pulled a chair up and sat beside me. I turned onto my side so I could see her. I yawned. "Sorry about that. This was a mistake. I wasn't tired until I lay down."

"You can take a nap if you like. I'll watch over you."

I reached my hand out and grasped her hand. "You always have. But I can't. Press conference is in less than half an hour."

She grimaced. "What are you going to say, do you know?"

"Yeah."

She waited, then huffed in exasperation. "So --"

I laughed, releasing her hand. "We're back together."

"For real? I mean, you and Nicholas?"

"Yes. For real. Me and Nicholas."

She squealed, standing awkwardly and grabbing me for a hug. "I am so happy for you! Everything's really okay?"

I shrugged. "We're working on it."

"Which means what? Geesh, Brandon, this is like pulling teeth!" she said as she sat back down. "Tell me!"

"Which means we're going to try writing together again. And living together again."

She sucked in her breath then beamed at me. "You're kidding. No, you're not. Are you sure? How?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Whatever it takes. I'm not letting him go again, Jenny."

"Does he know about the tape?" she asked softly.

"Yeah. I told him today."

"How'd he take it?"

I looked down at my hand, and clenched it. "Not good. He was angry."

"He had a right to be, Brandon."

"He was mad at me."

She leaned forward, grimacing at Bubba. "Darn kid," she muttered, then took my hand. "He was mad at you for not telling him?"

"Yes, at first. But he forgave me," I said, closing my eyes.

"Oh, Brandon. I'm so sorry you had to go through this."

I smiled sadly at her. "It's okay. The guy I killed wasn't Blevins, Jenn."

She laid a hand on her stomach and sat back, her face registering her shock. "Brandon, no."

I grimaced, then lay on my back and stared at the ceiling. I was still tender, but damn, it felt good. "He was just a fall guy, Jenn. Someone paid to torture Nicholas. Blevins is in some jail in Los Angeles."

"How long has he been there?"

"Eight years. It wasn't him, Jenn. All this time it wasn't him," I said, my voice registering my continued shock. I still couldn't believe it.

"The cops have no idea who was really behind the blackmail?"

I gritted my teeth, shaking my head. "No. Not yet."

"What did Nicholas say after he forgave you?"

I turned my head and smiled at her. "He's tough, Jenn. He's ready to do whatever it takes to find who did this to him."

"To you both."

I nodded. "To us both."

There was a knock on the door. I sighed. "Come in."

The cop walked in. At my worried look, he raised a hand. "Detective Anderson is here, says everything is ready downstairs."

"Is Nicholas awake?"

"Yes, sir. He says he'll meet you at the elevator."

I looked at Jenny. "Want to come along?"

She grinned and stood with an ease belying her advanced state of pregnancy. I still couldn't believe it -- my Sprout, having a kid. Her own little sprout. I was going to spoil him rotten.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything. This is going to be entertaining, I have a feeling."

"You're right about that, Jenn. You're right about that."

I picked up my crutches and stood. As we met up with Nicholas in his wheelchair outside the elevator, I realized this press conference could be dangerous, too. Whoever was

after us could be watching every move we made, everything we said. It had to be someone close to Nicholas to know about Barkley. To take that picture and anticipate his reaction.

And only a handful of people were capable of doing that.

Chapter Seven

"All right, Mr. Ashwood. Here you go. Have a seat."

I looked down at Nurse Goodall from where I stood balanced on my crutches next to Jenny (who was mugging with Nicholas) outside the elevator. The nurse had her hands on an empty wheelchair.

"Excuse me?" I said.

She pointed to the chair and gave me a mock glare. Nicholas looked at me, finally letting Jenny go. His eyes lit up. "All right, caravan!"

"I can walk," I protested, even as four hands -- the nurse's and Jenny's -- forced me to sit. "I'm fine, guys."

"Too bad. You're still a patient, too, you know," Jenny said. She took my crutches as Nurse Goodall arranged my feet on the foot rests.

"I am perfectly capable of --"

"Hush, Brandon. Enjoy the ride," Jenny said.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered. "It's just a broken foot."

Nicholas leaned toward the nurse. "You may have to give him a shot. Calm him down."

"I have some Valium," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"Good stuff," Nicholas said. "Might do the trick, but then he may start drooling in front of the reporters --"

I groaned. "I give, I give. Can we just get on with this?"

The elevator arrived. Nurse Goodall pushed Nicholas inside. As I tried to roll myself in, I got stuck. This really was ridiculous; it wasn't like we were going to have to cross the entire building, and I was having no trouble navigating the crutches anymore.

One of the cops -- Mutt, Nicholas called him (the other was Jeff, so Mutt and Jeff they became) -- pushed me in the rest of the way until I was face to face with Nicholas. Both cops were imposing, solid men, with huge biceps and pecs that made Nicholas raise his eyebrows in appreciation (which earned him a whomp from my good foot). Jeff was a pale redhead, Mutt dark, Hispanic, I thought. They would be our guards for as long as we were in Durango and needed them.

I was glad of it.

"Okay, Brandon?" Jenny rested one hand on my shoulder and I looked up at her -- finding myself eye to eye with her belly.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Are you sure this isn't twins?" I muttered. "You're huge."

She popped me on the shoulder, her expression annoyed until I kissed her on the stomach.

"Sorry, Hoss."

"That better be him you're calling Hoss, and not me," she said.

As the elevator traveled down, I looked at Nicholas. "You look quite fetching," I told him. And he did. He had on a navy velvet robe, red satin pajamas, and house shoes.

I just had on my cargos, a t-shirt, and a tennis shoe. As always, Nicholas outshined me - but I didn't care.

Nicholas smoothed his robe. "Thank you. I thought so, too."

"Hair looks good. Who did it?"

"Our nurse of a thousand talents." Nicholas bent his head down, spreading his hair. "My gray roots are showing, though."

I laughed. "We'll touch it up when we get out of here."

"I think you should let it grow out," Jenny said. "I like it the natural look."

Nicholas looked at me. I shrugged. "I don't care. I like you gray. I like you dark-headed. You could be bald, for all I care."

A grin split his face, bringing color to his cheeks. "Really?"

I smiled as the elevator lurched to a stop. "Really."

He pushed his hair back from his forehead. "Good, 'cause I may be headed that direction."

"Everybody hold," Jeff said. "I'll check the hallway before we proceed."

Nicholas rolled his eyes as Jeff let the doors open and stuck his head out. "SWAT team wannabe," Nicholas whispered to me.

Jeff turned and frowned. Nicholas stared up at the ceiling, all innocence.

After a moment Jeff said to his partner, "All clear. We can proceed."

I caught Nick's gaze. He was smiling, but the worry in his eyes was unmistakable. "It'll be all right, Nicholas."

His smile faltered. He didn't look as reassured as I'd hoped. In fact, the closer we got to the room where the conference would be held, the more worried it looked like he was getting. The more defeated. By the time we reached the hallway that led to our destination, he'd shrunk down in his chair and looked lost, a little boy, hurt and scared.

We shouldn't have done this today. One more day wouldn't have hurt, would've been better for Nicholas. And for me.

We turned the corner and rolled down a narrow hallway, me in front of Nicholas, Mutt leading the way. The hallway was empty until we passed a nurses' station -- all eyes were on us, and more than one nurse whispered as we passed by. I only heard snatches, but it was enough.

I found I couldn't care less.

"Here we go," Mutt said, opening the door. Inside the room, heads swiveled toward us, looking through the doorway, anticipation and excitement on their faces. Dozens of faces. Cameras, lights -- microphones had been set up on a table in front of them all, with room for us to be wheeled in.

My first instinct was to cringe. Draw back. Turn away. But Jenny squeezed my shoulder, reassuring me. I was glad she was here.

I glanced briefly at the crowd and noted one face with relief. "Jenny," I said, motioning to her. "See that woman there? The African American woman in the white sweater?"

"Yes, what about her?"

"Would you ask her to come out here, please? And close the door behind you, okay? If you get inundated, tell them we'll be there in a moment."

She looked at me, curious, but nodded and entered the room, closing the door behind her.

Brave Sprout.

I glanced at Nicholas. I got up from my wheelchair and placing my hands on either side of his chair's arms, leaned down, and kissed him on the forehead. "Hey, you all right? Looking kinda pale."

He nodded, then rested his forehead against mine. "Actually? I'm scared shitless."

"There's a dozen cops in there. No one can do anything to us." I glanced up at Jeff. "Was everyone searched before being allowed in?"

"Yes, we did a full body scan on everyone."

I turned back to Nicholas and stroked his face with my hand. "Come on, Nick, we can get through this. Kemma's here."

Relief shot across his face. "You're kidding. Really?"

“Yeah. She’ll help us, okay?”

He nodded, then tilted his face up to me. The door opened behind us, completely exposing us as I bent and kissed Nicholas full on the lips. Such exquisite timing.

“Oh, my God, that’s sick,” I heard a female voice exclaim. I whipped around, grabbed my crutches, and looked past a startled Jenny and a scowling Kemma, who moved protectively to Nick’s side. I stood in the doorway, not bothering to conceal my anger as I zeroed in on the owner of the voice.

“Leave,” I said to her. “Now.”

The woman glared at me, then said something to her camera guy. His eyes widened. He started to speak, anger in his eyes, but she cut him short and stormed out the door in the back. The camera guy followed, shaking his head.

I turned to the rest of the reporters. “Anyone else have a problem with what you just saw, I’ll ask you to leave now.” No one moved. I nodded curtly and forced myself to relax. “All right. Thanks for waiting all afternoon. I apologize for that, but we had stitches to be removed.”

“How many, Brandon?” one of the guys up front said. “And where?”

The reporters all shifted, relaxing. I forced myself to smile. “Twenty-eight, on my back. Give me a couple minutes and we’ll be ready to start.”

Then I left, and Jeff closed the door behind me.

“Kemma,” I said, genuinely relieved to see the journalist.

“Brandon,” she said, hugging me. She pulled back, shaking her head as she cradled my face. “It’s so good to see you both again. And you especially, Nicholas. Scaring us so like that.” She released me and bent down to kiss Nicholas on the lips. He sighed in contentment.

“Good to see a familiar face, Kem,” he said. “How about another kiss?”

She laughed and obliged him, and then, shaking her head at him as she had me, said, “You going to be okay?” She brushed her fingers through his hair, ruffling it. He grinned happily, leaning into her hand like a cat.

“With you on the other side of the table, yes.”

“Ahem,” I said. Kemma straightened and grinned. Now *she* had the feline look in her eyes. She gave me a kiss, too -- Nicholas yelped and pulled me away.

“You two cut that out,” he said in mock fury.

Kemma pulled back with a laugh. “Sorry, Brandon. Something tells me he won’t share you with me anymore.”

Nicholas reached his hand up to me and I took it. “No. Sorry, Kem,” he said. “My sharing days are over. And so are Brandon’s.”

Kemma grinned. Nicholas cocked his head at me and sighed. We’d both agreed once that if we were straight guys, we’d have a fight over Kemma Steves. Smart, savvy, beautiful.

Long, thick hair pulled back into a ponytail, flawless ebony skin, black eyes that were always dancing, and the sexiest lips on a woman I'd ever seen.

Though not as sexy as Nick's, of course.

"So what can I do for you boys? The natives are getting restless in there."

"Seething with jealousy directed at you," Nicholas said.

"I can handle it."

"I don't doubt it."

I glanced at the doorway. "I'd just like for you to field for us if you could, Kemma. Nick's still really weak. I'm afraid they'll ask questions he's not ready for."

"I'll be all right, Brandon."

I shook my head. "It's been a rough day. I won't have you worn out any more than you already are. Where is your doc, by the way?" I asked, my gaze falling on the ever-patient Nurse Goodall. "I thought she was going to be here."

"She was called into surgery. I'm to keep an eye on Mr. Kilmain."

"He'll be in good hands, then."

Kemma said, "Sure, I'll be happy to help you guys out. But --"

I turned to her, my gaze steady with hers. "You'll get the full scoop. What we don't or can't yet tell the rest of them. How long are you staying in Durango?"

"As long as I need to." She knew me well -- I'd keep my promise and would make it worth her while. Kemma and I had run into each other dozens of times over the years. She'd heard the good, the bad, the ugly about Dream. She'd kept quiet on an incident or two that could've destroyed what we'd carefully built up, including a stunt I'd pulled once that landed me in jail overnight in some tiny town in Texas, and for that she had my eternal thanks and respect. Her expression sobered, and she touched me on the arm, concerned. "It's not over, is it?" she said softly.

I shook my head, glancing at Nicholas. "No."

She nodded. "Absolutely I'll help, then, though this is a friendly crowd. Now. They're just happy to be here for Nicholas. You know the first thing they'll ask, though. That kiss was something. What did it mean?"

My face heated, but I shrugged. "Exactly what that bitch I kicked out thought."

Kemma burst out laughing. "That's what I thought. Great."

"You ready, Nicholas?"

He nodded. "Better let the SWAT boys in to case the joint first."

For the first time, Jeff grinned. But then he pushed open the door, straightened his shoulders, and strode purposefully inside.

"Into the chair," Jenny said, taking my crutches. I rolled my eyes at her but obliged.

First I, then Nicholas, was rolled in. And as I'd hoped, once we were in place in front of the microphones, Nicholas straightened a little in his chair. Kemma returned to her spot, ignoring the few annoyed looks cast her way. I did recognize a couple other faces, to my surprise. Jenny took a chair off to the side, where she wouldn't be in camera range. Her husband, Rex, slipped in at that moment and stood beside her. I nodded to him and he nodded back, his expression serious. It was hard still for me to believe that my crazy, fun-loving cousin had married such a solemn guy.

But then, likely people would have the same bemused thoughts about me and Nicholas.

Jeff and Mutt stood behind us, against the wall. Nurse Goodall hovered protectively behind Nicholas.

And, in the back and along the sides of the room, were a half-dozen uniformed cops, and the detective was there, too.

Okay. Well, if there was any question that Nicholas was still in danger, all the firepower in the room would clue in even the most ignorant.

I leaned over to Nicholas and looked him in the eye. "Ready?"

He grinned. Color heightened his cheeks, emphasizing his paleness. "Carry on, Kimosabe."

I laughed and turned to the cameras, the journalists, the reporters and adjusted the microphone. "Thanks for coming. Nicholas and I are glad you're here."

"I'm *ecstatic* I'm here," Nicholas quipped.

The audience laughed.

"How does it feel to be a free man, Mr. Kilmain?"

He leaned forward to the microphone and eyed the guy who'd spoken. "You can call me Nicholas. If you want. I'm not that much older than you, you know."

"All right, then, Nicholas, how does it feel to be free?"

He looked at his IV bag. "I'm still attached to this thing, but I'm good. The worst was yanked out yesterday."

"Nicholas," I warned.

"I'm not gonna tell them. Don't worry, Brandon." He winked at the audience. "He gets embarrassed so easily."

"Tell us what, Nicholas? Come on --"

"About the dick monster." The reporters laughed. "You wouldn't believe all the things they had connected me to. That was the worst, though. It was such a relief to finally be able to pee on my own."

I shook my head.

"Brandon said you guys had your stitches out today. How many did you have?"

"Want to see?"

Always the showman, even after all he'd been through.

I watched as all eyes focused on Nicholas. As always, I faded into the background while the spotlight trained on him. He illuminated; I reflected -- there was never a question about that, and this was no exception.

He ever so slowly stood. There was no faking how weak he was, the pain-bright eyes, the sudden paling of already ghostly skin. Murmurs of shock and dismay filled the room. Nicholas had no business doing this, but I kept my mouth shut. If showing his scars helped exorcise demons, who was I to stop him?

Nurse Goodall helped him stand, all but supporting him. I glanced at the reporters, saw the surprise and the sympathy on their faces as this once-vital guy known for his boundless energy had to be assisted to his feet and supported as, with visibly shaking hands, he opened his robe and pulled up his shirt. Cameras flashed as he exposed the vicious swath across his stomach and side, the jagged path the staples had left all the way up to mere inches below his left armpit.

He let his shirt fall and, with Nurse Goodall's help, eased back into the chair.

The questions came fast, then.

"So what happened to you while in captivity, Nicholas?"

"Did you think you were going to die?"

"Did you give up hope?"

"What did Blevins do to you, Nicholas? Other than give you that scar?"

I glanced desperately at Kemma.

"Tell us about that kiss," she said.

"Ah, well," Nicholas said, shifting in his chair, focusing on Kemma gratefully. "What kiss? Oh, you mean the one out in the hallway?"

"Yes. *That* kiss," Kemma said. "What did it mean?"

I pulled my microphone to me. "Exactly what you thought it meant." I glanced at Kemma, at the other journalists. Maybe a couple sort of embarrassed faces, but nothing unexpected.

Ah, yes, that was easy, I thought. Easier than I thought, surprised at the lack of reaction. Maybe Nicholas had been right that people who knew us wouldn't be surprised. That the tape's existence really hadn't mattered. That thought was sobering, considering it had colored every major decision I'd made over the past nine years.

"So, what does this mean for your fans, guys?" another reporter asked. "You know what they'll want to know."

At that question, the room hushed. I wasn't so conceited as to believe every person in this room was a Dream fan -- maybe only a handful -- but this was why they were here, of course. Why they'd been sent.

When word had gotten out about Nick's kidnapping, the music world's eye had swiveled to Murrieta, California, where I was visiting my parents in their new home. I'd done what every fan had hoped I would -- dropped everything and gotten involved in the search for Nicholas.

According to Marisa, the internet fan sites had gone nuts. Brandon Sightings, as she called them, were reported daily (only a handful of those were legit -- I pretty much stayed low), and every conceivable scenario for what was happening to Nicholas and what I was going through was spit out, chewed on, torn apart, speculated on, even freaking celebrated. That last disgusted me so much I forbade Marisa from telling me about anything she read on the internet anymore.

But even while Nick's whereabouts weren't known, even when the very real possibility that he was dead somewhere existed, the speculation that this would bring us together again roared across the world.

Now the world would see if they were right.

"Here we go," Nicholas whispered beneath his breath. He glanced at me, his eyes bright with anticipation, then fading with concern. In his eyes, I could read what he couldn't voice. *Are you sure?*

I nodded, then reached my hand out to him. He took it. Cameras swiveled. I smiled at him, gave him a little shrug. He shook his head, nodded to me. *You do it*, his eyes said, and he squeezed my fingers. I gripped his hand, hard, feeling my chest tighten, unable to take my eyes away from him. Our surroundings faded. All I saw was him. We'd said it once in private, but now -- now we were about to totally commit ourselves.

And I wanted it. Wanted it bad.

He tugged on my hand. I knew what he was asking, saw the unmistakable randy desire in his eyes. Countless times he'd looked at me like this on stage, while performing, in front of people -- a blatant invitation to come on over, Brandon, and show them what we are. What we mean to each other.

And how many times had I ignored him? Just kept on playing my guitar, or the keyboards, feigning ignorance, faking my reaction, casting a mask over my face so that no one could see that I was alternating between dying inside from desire and from shame?

Those days were over. I couldn't fake it anymore. My mask was shattered, my heart unfrozen. Our audience held no terror for me -- not over this, at least. I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and regret as I thought about all those times on stage, in front of thousands of fans who knew -- *they knew* -- what we were, and I'd cruelly ignored Nicholas, killed the hope in his eyes so often that finally his playful antics lost their inspiration and simply became part of the script.

Sing the chorus, flirt with Brandon, sing the next song, grind on Brandon -- no, wait, supposed to hug Brandon by the third stanza of the second chorus of the eighth song. It all

became rote. It all became uninspired. What had been a beautiful thing between us had died into normalcy.

Nicholas squeezed my hand, his eyes questioning. Had the pain of those memories reflected in my eyes just then? My heart burst open at that moment as I looked at the man I loved more than life itself, the man I had almost -- gladly -- given my life for that he might survive. My breath quickened, my hands spasmodically clasped Nick's, and he held on, rubbing my fingers with his thumb, trying to soothe whatever had brought the panic to my eyes.

Give them what they want.

And I did. I leaned across the arm of my wheelchair; he did the same, the joy and relief in his eyes unmistakable as he realized I wasn't about to bolt. Our lips met, and we kissed -- sweet, chaste, reminding me in a flood of memories of those first tender kisses we'd shared. We broke apart, touched foreheads, looking at each other, our eyes locked, goofy grin on his face, goofy grin on mine.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you, too."

"Love you more."

"Impossible."

"Anything's possible now that I have you back."

"True," I said with a laugh, then kissed him again.

"Uh, guys," Kemma's voice said, breaking into our little private world.

We both looked up, blinking. I cleared my throat. I did not release Nick's hand. My face felt flushed, but it wasn't from embarrassment as I looked at all the reporters, some wide-eyed with shock, more with fascination, and a few like Kemma -- beaming like Cheshire cats.

"Yes, Kemma?"

"Does this mean you guys are back together again?"

Another reported piped up. "Does this mean y'all are shagging each other now?"

Nicholas burst out laughing at that. "Do I look like I'm in any condition to shag anyone?"

I shook my head and cleared my throat. "Kemma, the answer to your question is yes, we are. Back together, I mean."

"And what's your answer, Nicholas?"

He leaned toward the mic, slid his gaze my way, and in a conspiratorial whisper said, "We will be, as soon as I can possibly manage it."

I about fainted on the spot. Flames of desire caused by his words -- by the conviction behind them -- whammed through me so hard I totally lost my train of thought. I know -- *I know* -- it was all over my face, my reaction, the shocked pleasure at his words.

Oh, how I couldn't *wait* to see the articles on this press conference. And the pics.

I shifted in my seat and gave Nicholas a warning look to behave -- and he smiled so sweetly at me, I found myself shaking my head and grinning.

"So there will be more Dream music?"

I glanced at Nicholas at that. "Not yet. Nick's next solo CD will be out in, what, two weeks?"

He shrugged. "I rather lost track of time."

"Two weeks," I said. "That will keep him busy doing interviews and such."

"Will you be touring, Nicholas?"

He shook his head at that. "I honestly don't know. I'm hurt pretty bad, feeling pretty weak. Looks like I'll be busy trying to get better for a while. Maybe writing some new songs with Brandon, resting, trying to gain some weight."

"What about the tape?"

I stilled. Panic thumped through my chest. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the detective drop his hands to his side and zero in on the person who'd spoken.

I looked at the guy who'd brought the reality of what Nicholas and I were dealing with back to the forefront. "I presume you've watched it," I said quietly.

He nodded. "It came to our station yesterday."

I sat back in my chair. "I would appreciate it if you would turn it over to the police. That gentleman there in the brown suit is in charge of the case."

"What's on the tape?" another reporter asked.

I glanced at Kemma. She shrugged, had no idea. I shook my head when she started to say something -- this, we needed to get out. I glanced at Nicholas. He'd paled considerably, but held himself stoically. I noticed Nurse Goodall's hand was on his shoulder. She was frowning.

"Copies of the tape were sent out, and others were going to be sent out, by the man who ... kidnapped Nicholas."

"The man you killed, Brandon?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"What's on the tape?" another voice asked.

I smirked and ran a hand over my face. "Something that would rival Tommy Lee and Pam Anderson's. Maybe even surpass it for its ... entertainment value."

A low rumble as bodies shifted, glances sent the way of the guy who'd actually seen it.

"Of you and Nicholas?" Kemma asked.

"Yes. Of me and Nicholas, when we were first together. A trip to Hawaii we'd taken. We had no idea, but we were being filmed the entire time."

The detective walked up to the front of the room at that moment. "I'd like to ask that no more questions be asked about the tape. We don't know how many were mailed out, but I'd appreciate it if any more do come to light, that they be delivered to me in care of the Durango Police Department. Thank you."

The detective turned to me, and I glanced at Nicholas. He looked sick. "All right, sorry, folks, we're going to have to end this. Nick's about worn out. Thank you for coming."

Nurse Goodall didn't wait. She had Nicholas turned about and wheeled out of the room so fast the crowd didn't have time to react. Jeff followed, but I hung back. Once Nicholas was out of the room, the reporters all prepared to leave. I stood and grabbed my crutches. Jenny and Rex hovered nearby. I almost grinned -- none of the reporters except Kemma noticed I was still there. The star was gone. My Nicholas.

"So, you going back to your rooms now?" Jenny asked as we left, Mutt following on my heels, as was the detective.

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired."

We stopped outside in the hall. "How about if we come by tomorrow?"

"I'd like that. You, too, Rex."

He extended his hand then and I took it. The reporters filed past on their way out, noticing then that I was still hanging around, but with Mutt's stern look, I was left alone.

Maybe I should hire the guy permanently, I thought.

A few reporters were looking around as if they were hunting for Nicholas, and I saw the sighs of exasperation when they realized he was gone. Then I saw Kemma. I called out to her, "Call tomorrow," and smiled as several people frowned at her. With a flick of her hand she waltzed off, camera guy in tow.

After saying my goodbyes, I escaped. Except from Mutt. He and I got on an empty elevator and made our way back to the rooms. By the time I got back to Nick's room, he was already in bed, robe off, lying back in his pillows, exhausted.

"Hey," I said, coming round and sitting on the side of his bed.

"Hey. You did good," he said.

I shrugged. "It went better than I thought."

"Except for the tape."

"Yeah, well, I imagine that won't be the only one to crop up, Nicholas."

He laid a hand on my chest. "And like I told you, I don't care. I don't think I did anything to be ashamed of. Not for a guy in love with his partner."

I smiled, then took his hand. "Did you love me then?"

"I told you so."

"I loved you, too."

He stilled. "But you hardly ever said it. Why was it so hard for you, Brandon?"

"Stupid youth. Didn't realize how good what we had was until I'd chased it away." I paused. "Fear."

"Now you can say it without fear."

"Yes. I can. Even though whoever is behind all this is still out there. I won't let him come between us again."

"Good. I'm glad. I won't either."

His gaze softened, and he smiled so happily at me I had to reach out and touch him. I leaned toward him and tucked his collar back into place, then ran a hand down his satin pjs. I love satin.

"How about we take a small nap before our lovely supper arrives?" I said.

A slow smile crept over his face, and he scooted over, patting the bed next to him. "Hop on up, baby. Forget the nap. Let's suck face instead."

"Nicholas!" I laughed as I set my crutches aside and climbed into bed with him. He turned onto his side, facing me. I did the same. I smiled as he kissed me on my nose, ran a hand down the side of my face, then cradled my cheek in his hand. He inched closer to me, and our lips met ...

The wait for our dinner to arrive flew by like it was nothing at all.

Chapter Eight

California -- The Past

The morning hours passed slowly as I waited for Nicholas to wake. Blissful, sweet morning hours, which saw me playing my piano for a while, then wandering down the hallway toward my bedroom, a smile playing on my lips each time I saw him still curled up in my bed. Or splayed across it, twisted in the sheets, pillows bunched up in his arms one time, on the floor the next.

For a guy with sore ribs, he moved around an awful lot.

Noon came and went. I found myself back in the kitchen making a sandwich and pouring myself a glass of milk. Nicholas would be starving by the time he finally woke up, I was sure, but I didn't know what a vegetarian would eat. Not a ham sandwich.

I wondered if he ate cheese.

I looked down at my shirt and realized I'd gotten mustard on it. With a sigh I yanked it off -- it was kinda hot in the house anyway. A good day for surfing, but I figured I'd probably drown if I tried, I was still so tired. I couldn't leave Nicholas alone anyway.

So I sat at the table, a music magazine in front of me, though the words I was trying to read kept blending together. My eyes refused to focus. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't stop thinking about him, in my bed, in my life, and what it meant. If I was even right about what it meant. I was at once exhausted, exhilarated, anxious, and jittery. And still recovering from the flu, which made me dizzy.

Or maybe just the thought of him in my bed made me dizzy.

I wanted Nicholas to wake up -- but that made me nervous, too. What would he say when he did? The night's events had given him little choice but to rely on me to help him. But there would be no reason for him to stay now. He could disappear if he wanted to -- and

he might. What if he *did* want to leave when he got up? What if Percy's threats made him feel like he had no choice? Those weren't idle threats the bastard had made.

And they were directed at me, too.

I'd made an enemy. It was just a matter of time before he found out it was me who had beamed him with that board and he tracked me down.

As I sat and stared at the magazine, my half-eaten sandwich forgotten, worries I didn't care much for really started to surface. Maybe I'd read Nick wrong. Maybe he only went along with my insistence that we come here because he'd had no other choice.

Maybe he was in my room now, lying there awake and staring at the ceiling like I so often did, wondering how the hell he was going to get out of this mess. He didn't know me. I could be just as crazy as Percy. He had friends who would take him in, far more legitimate friends than me. People who weren't surrounded by others who would judge him. Educated friends who obviously cared for him. That girl, Karen.

That guy who smacked him on the butt.

I dreaded telling him I'd dropped out of school. Didn't have a job. Loved steak, fish, chicken. Smoked whenever I could snatch a cigarette from my brothers. Drank beer. Craved one now but there wasn't any in the house. Spent my days alone out on the beach or surfing, my nights writing music for someone who I'd never actually met and didn't really have any hope of meeting.

Pathetic.

I touched my lips, realizing then something that gave me a wild sense of joy -- *Nicholas* had instigated the kisses we'd shared. I'd held him on my insistence, comforted him, yeah -- I still couldn't believe he'd called me his white knight -- but the kiss in the abandoned apartment, the kisses in my room were all his doing. The kisses on my lips, my neck, my collarbone.

And then I remembered the look he'd given me as I'd gone to take my shower. He wanted me. He really wanted me. *Me*.

Why? that irritatingly familiar voice of self-defeat said in my mind. *Why would he want you? After all, he knows very little about you, Brandy boy. Right now all you are is another pretty face with a sizeable crush on him. What's so special about that?* He'd had that before, it was obvious. And would again.

Nick's just like that -- people want to be around someone like him, someone who's inherently fascinating. Intriguing. Desirable. Beautiful. He's electric, magnetic, flashy, especially when the center of attention. And he gives it back, in spades, tripling what he's given and delivering it to those around him and embracing them tight. He does it with such flare, with such charm, he is irresistible. Both sexes see that in him. I'd seen that for myself, saw it even more as the years went by and he took the world by storm.

Back then, the way I saw things, I was just another boy who wanted a piece of Nicholas Kilmain. What right did I have to that?

I pushed my plate aside and stood, this time fighting the urge to go down the hallway and check on him. I grabbed my stained shirt and returned to the piano and started to play, trying to calm my nerves, trying to convince myself with the soothing music -- a nocturne I'm especially fond of -- that it was just exhaustion twisting my thoughts around. He'd kissed me. More than once. I'd seen the desire in his eyes at the bookstore, felt him tremble beneath my touch as we stood together in my room. He was hurt, yet he'd still wanted me.

Hadn't he?

"Damn, Ashwood," I said in irritation. "This is getting fucking ridiculous."

Determined to put the inane ramblings in my head aside, I moved onto another piece, one my grandfather had enjoyed. I liked the piece despite that fact. He and I had often been at odds when he was alive, and much of my dislike of him -- and my fear -- was because of his attitude toward, as he'd put it, "fuckin' queers." That's how he always said it -- "Did you see those fuckin' queers on the tube?" Then he'd mumble something about "cocksuckers" and how it should be a law they be made into eunuchs. How my mom had come out so ... normal ... with him as a father I don't know. She told me once that it was *because* he hated people who were "different" that she went the other direction in her own attitudes.

I would be forever grateful for that.

What would he have done had he known his youngest grandson was destined to like boys? Tried to get my mom to disown me, I'm sure. Send me "away," wherever that was. Just as long as it was far away from him.

Thankfully, he died before I was thirteen and he never knew my secret.

There were other relatives I knew would take such a stand regarding just my association with Nicholas, much less if I admitted to being his ... lover. I stopped playing and leaned on the piano. I rested my forehead on my folded arms. The thought was sobering. Once word got out about me and Nicholas ... I didn't want to think about it. I couldn't.

It would be easier if they never knew. If we kept what we had hidden --

Misery washed over me. I was so sick of hiding what I was. My eyes burned. I was so tired, but I didn't want to sleep, not yet. I had to watch over Nicholas.

"Why'd you stop playing?"

I sucked in my breath. My heart pounded in my ears as Nicholas approached on bare feet, his footsteps so quiet on the wooden floor I hadn't heard him walk in. I turned my head and eyed him. "Hey, that's my robe."

He looked down at my raggedy plaid robe and smiled, then pulled it tighter around him. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. Come sit with me."

I sat back up and watched him as he hesitated, then joined me on the bench. He still looked sleepy, but much better. He'd had another shower, too. His skin was smooth, pale. Flawless. He smiled apologetically. "I borrowed your razor. Hope you don't mind."

"You can use anything of mine. Except for my toothbrush."

He held up his finger and grinned. "I used this, at least for now. That was lovely, whatever you were playing," he said. "Will you play some more?"

Grateful for his suggestion, I nodded. I put my hands on the keys and began to play again, closing my eyes as the music rose around me, as the heat from Nick's body next to mine infiltrated my consciousness. I continued playing, segueing into another, more difficult piece, and then another, glancing at Nicholas on occasion to see he was watching my hands with rapt attention, nodding his head slightly in time to the rhythm.

Occasionally I'd glance at him to find him watching me, his gaze hovering over my bare chest. Color flushed his cheeks each time I caught him. My heart skipped a beat when he pressed his hip and thigh against my own. The contact comforted me, though. I found myself relaxing, enjoying my audience of one.

He shifted slightly on the seat. I caught his wince and stopped.

"You okay?"

He wrapped one arm around his ribs. "Still hurts, but I'm hungry, too, I think." He sighed. "I missed the waffles, didn't I?"

"Yeah. I ate yours."

"Good. You need it," he said, touching my side, making me shiver at his touch. "I can see your ribs."

I laughed. "You sound like my mom. Are you hungry? I can make you something."

His blue eyes looked at me with regret. "No, I'm okay. I'll get something at work. I have to go in at four."

"You do?" I couldn't keep the disappointment from my voice. "You should call in if you're still hurting that much."

He shook his head. "I can't. Larry's counting on me. I close on Thursdays."

I played a scale, not wanting Nicholas to see in my eyes any more of the disappointment he'd already heard in my voice. "How late do you have to work?" I asked. I absently started to pick out a melody, my fingers picking out the song I played more often any other. Especially when I was feeling down.

"Until eleven-thirty. I don't know how I'm going to get there, though, come to think of it."

"My cousin will be here soon. She can take us to my car. You can use it."

"You don't have anything to do tonight?"

I put my other hand on the keys, and Nicholas smiled as he recognized the song. His song. “No, I think I’ll probably crash until you get home.”

“You haven’t slept yet?” he asked, incredulous.

I shook my head. “I didn’t want you to wake up and think you were alone. I checked on you, made sure you were okay.”

His eyes twinkled at that. “You’re good to me, Brandon. Thanks. Your parents won’t mind if I come back? I don’t want to impose --”

I started the piece over. “You aren’t an imposition, Nicholas. I want you to come --” I looked at him, my hands stilling on the keys. His blue eyes bore into mine, then away again. “-- back to me,” I finished. “You aren’t going back there.”

“I can’t stay here, Brandon. It wouldn’t ... it wouldn’t be right.”

“Why not?” I half turned to him, hating the small edge of panic in my voice. “My mom said it was fine --”

He laid his fingers on my arm, calming me. “I’ll come back here tonight, I promise.” His touch against my bare skin was soft, yet it burned. I stared at his fingers as they curled around my wrist for a brief moment -- skin so pale against my own sun-gold -- then eased down to my hand. He touched my fingers, then turned my hand over and touched the palm. He traced over my skin. I wanted to snatch my hand away it tickled so much, but I stretched my fingers out instead, allowing his study, both by touch and by sight, to continue.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore?” he asked.

I couldn’t answer, only shake my head.

“I wanted to kiss it that day, you know that?” He looked up at me then, melting me with his eyes. “But I didn’t dare.”

“You can now,” I said, finding my voice.

Not taking his gaze from mine, he lifted my hand to his lips, then tenderly kissed the once-injured spot. “All better?” he asked, his voice soft.

I licked my lips and nodded. Could he not hear the wild pounding of my heart? It felt like it was going to burst from my chest any second. The piano bench felt hard beneath my backside, making me sharply aware just how long I’d sat there. And how just the look in his eyes was making me hard. Once noticed, I couldn’t push the throbbing between my legs out of my mind.

“It would’ve been a shame if you’d really hurt it. You play the piano so beautifully.”

I swallowed, my gaze drifting down to his lips, then away again, embarrassed. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Those lips would be my undoing, I thought. Every time I looked at them, I wanted to kiss them. I began to play his piece again. With a soft chuckle, he leaned in to me, then kissed my bare shoulder.

I flashed him an embarrassed smile, which he answered with one of his own. And then he began to sing. Startled, I faltered for a moment before catching up again. His voice, a little rough still from sleep, and probably from not being able to properly breathe, filled the room. And then my heart pounded wildly for an additional reason -- the perfect harmonization of piano and voice.

Of him and me. Just as I'd dreamed it would be.

"Play it again," he said, frowning. I began again, and when he joined in once more, this time his voice was more assured and with different inflections, a little change to the melody here and there. He closed his eyes as he sang, spreading his hands out, losing himself in the passion of his words. I nearly faltered again on my part, I was so entranced.

When the song came to an end, his voice held the last note, his eyes remained closed, and such a look of rapture glowed on his face I literally stopped breathing, my hands still on the keys.

His fans would love him.

He slowly opened his eyes and blinked as he focused again on his surroundings. Then with a soft smile, he turned to me and, in a move so smoothly orchestrated I almost wondered if he'd been planning it throughout the song, brought his hand to my face and gently turned me to face him before drawing close, his breath brushing across my cheek.

I gasped at the sudden soft insistence of his lips pressed into mine. His free hand splayed across my bare chest, his quick awareness of the wild pounding of my heart evidenced by his soft chuckle. His lips brushed teasingly across mine, asking to be let in. I opened my mouth, allowing his tongue inside. If I'd thought his kisses on this new day together would be tentative, as unsure as my own, I was wrong.

He commanded the kiss. Swift and sure he laid claim to my mouth, his lips and tongue exploring, imploring me to allow him deeper. With a sigh I relaxed, closed my eyes, breathed in the scents that were Nicholas: clean skin, soap, my shampoo. The hand on my chest began to rub in small circles, and my breath caught as his fingers found and teased first one nipple, then the other. I pulled back, wide-eyed, but his questioning smile saw me nodding my head.

I looked down at his hand on my rapidly rising and falling chest, and watched in fascination as his fingers trailed down to my stomach -- a swift look up resulted in a nod from me -- and then, making me gasp though I tried to control it, his hand rested on my swollen dick trapped in my jeans. I shifted beneath his touch, realizing just how uncomfortable I'd grown, how I yearned for him to touch me *more*.

"Brandon," he said. He palmed my erection, pulling my mouth back to his. I groaned into the kiss, a shudder coursing through my body and making him laugh. "You are so adorable," he murmured. "So untouched."

I broke away from his mouth at that, awkwardness making me blush. "I'm sorry."

He looked at me in surprise. "Sorry? For what?"

I looked down at his hand. I didn't know what to do. "I -- I've never -- I didn't think you'd want --"

A grin broke across his face. "Didn't want what, Brandon? You thought I didn't want you?"

"No, no, I meant -- I --" I faltered.

He reached up and cradled my face with both hands, his expression perplexed. "What is it? You can tell me."

"I don't know what to do," I said, my voice dropping to a whisper as my worst fear came to the surface -- that he'd be turned off by my inexperience. "I've never done this. Are you sure? After last night --"

"You sweet, beautiful boy." He leaned forward, touching his forehead to mine in a gesture that over the years would be repeated between us countless times. "Last night, what happened to me, had nothing to do with us. I want you. I've wanted you since I first saw you fall on the ground right in front of me at the audition." He smiled shyly.

I pulled back, shaking my head at the memory. "I still feel like such a fool over that --"

"Don't. Brandon," he whispered. He ran his fingers through my hair, then cradled the back of my head and pulled me close. Our lips met again, and as our kiss deepened, I reached out and smoothed my hand around his backside, finding a strangely erotic thrill in feeling *my* robe covering *his* body. He squirmed at my touch, laughing softly into my mouth. "That's better," he said, pulling back a little. "Just go with what feels right. Don't be afraid."

I dropped my gaze to his hand -- it had wandered back to my erection. He rubbed my stiffness, making me groan with frustration. I dropped my head back, arching my spine, balancing myself on the bench with my hands and spreading my legs wider. I closed my eyes as his hand proved to me he knew exactly what he was doing.

"God, you are so blatantly sexy, Brandon. Does that feel good?"

With my head still back, I looked at him out of slit eyes. "What do you think?"

"Take your jeans off," he said, his voice sensual, low, making me shudder.

"Here? On the piano bench?" I said.

"I want to see you naked at your piano."

"You want me to play for you naked," I said, laughing as I stood and unfastened my jeans.

"Call it a suddenly acknowledged fantasy." He reached up, covering my hands as I started to pull my jeans down, stopping me. He looked up at me. "Wait," he said, then kissed the flat of my stomach, just above my boxer's waistband. I shuddered at the feel of his lips there, so close --

The doorbell rang.

I froze, horrified, then looked at my watch. "Oh God, no."

"Who could that be?" Nicholas said, pulling back.

"My cousin. Jonathan told me she was coming by after school."

"What time is it?" Nicholas asked, disappointment heavy in his voice.

I gulped. "Quarter after three. Shit."

"Shoot! I'm gonna be late!" Nicholas leaped up, gasping as his sudden movement reminded him of his battered body.

"Are you okay?" I said, reaching for him.

He waved me away. "I'm fine. I'm okay. Just forgot there for a minute." He stood and took a deep breath, one hand on the piano to steady him. "I'll survive."

The doorbell rang again. "I'm coming!" I yelled in irritation, yanking on my shirt.

Nicholas sighed. "Not yet, apparently."

"Nicholas," I admonished. Nicholas burst out laughing as the doorbell rang again. "I said I'm coming, hold on!" I yelled again as Nicholas rushed giggling from the room.

"I'll be dressed in two minutes," he yelled over his shoulder and disappeared down the hallway.

"Fuck," I said to myself as I looked at my obvious erection. I refastened my jeans and yanked my t-shirt down, hoping it would cover the obvious. With a snarl I pulled open the door. "I said I was coming --"

Jenny stood smirking on the porch. "That didn't take long."

"Sprout," I groaned, then turned around and walked back into the living room, leaving her to follow after me.

"Missy's here, too," she said as I flopped down on the couch and grabbed a pillow to hold.

"Melissa," a voice said as its owner followed Jenny into the room. She smiled sweetly at me. I gave her what I imagined was a pretty sick smile back.

"Since when? The 'Melissa,' I mean," I said, fighting to make my voice normal. I hugged the pillow to my stomach.

She tossed her dark hair from her shoulders and sighed. "I'm not a little kid anymore, you know, Brandon." Her voice trailed off and she stared at the doorway. "Oh. Wow. It's you."

I turned to see Nicholas in the doorway. He had on my brother's clothes. Blue jeans and the loudest orange and yellow shirt I'd ever seen. I winced. "I'm not sure that shirt is you, Nick," I said.

He looked down and shrugged. "It's what he left for me. I like it."

"You're Nicholas Kilmain, right?"

Nicholas looked up, his eyes widening in fascination. "Uh, yeah," he said, extending his hand. Melissa was quite stunning -- even I appreciated that fact, and apparently so did Nicholas -- a dark, exotic girl who I had actually at one time dreamt about taking out. But that wouldn't have been fair to her -- she was Jenny's best friend, a fact I was keenly aware of. It would've only ended in disappointment.

"Melissa." She took his hand and shook it. "I remember you in that play."

"You saw me?"

She cast me a glance. "Yes, I went with Brandon."

I squirmed uncomfortably on the couch. "And Jenny, and another friend. Nicholas, this is my cousin Jenny."

"Jenny of the flyers?" he asked.

"Hi, Nicholas. Yup, that's me," she said. Then, being Jenny, a handshake wasn't enough. She folded him into her arms and hugged him. "I am *so* glad to finally meet you."

"Whoa, careful," he said, but when she loosened her grip and didn't relinquish him, he hugged her back. "Just a little sore."

She released him. "I guess I'd better not ask you two why."

I dropped my head in my hands. Nicholas laughed.

"What's going on?" Melissa asked.

I looked up then, catching her looking at me. Her eyes widened. She looked at Nicholas, then back at me. I could feel my face flush. Nicholas wasn't fazed in the least. He leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms across his chest.

"So, what are you guys doing? I mean, gonna do now?" Jenny asked, artlessly trying, and failing, to turn Melissa's mind from the train of thought it was inevitably following. "We're going to the mall. Want to come?"

But Melissa wouldn't be pushed aside. She shook her head as Jenny tugged on her arm. But then she smiled. "So," she said, "I guess this means it's really over between us, huh, Brandon?"

"What?" I yelped. "What's over?"

She rolled her eyes. "No way I can compete with Nicholas Kilmain."

"Nick's just my new singer," I said, wincing at the defensive squeak in my voice.

Nicholas stuck his tongue out at me.

"Okay, whatever you say. You guys want to go to the mall or not?" she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief and sat back. "Can't. Nicholas has to go to work, and I'm too tired. Can you drop him off at my car? It's at my apartment."

"Sure, no problem. You guys ready?"

"Um, I've just got to get my keys," Nicholas said and disappeared.

Once he was gone, Melissa turned and headed for the door, then stopped as she reached it, and turned back to me and Jenny. She smiled sadly at me. "I'm happy you found each other, Brandon. I have a question, though. That night at the high school play, did you like him then?"

I flicked my gaze to Jenny and then nodded. "Yeah."

"Thought so. Okay, I'll be in the car." Then she left.

I stood. "Jenny --"

"Brandon!" she squealed, then jumped into my arms, kissing me on the cheek. "I'm so happy you found him!"

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tight before letting her go. "Me, too."

"But what happened? Your mom called at midnight, worried sick about you."

I glanced at the doorway. "We didn't get back here until almost six."

"In the morning? What happened? Nick's hurt, too, I can tell. And hey, you've got mustard on your shirt."

I looked down and shrugged. "I can't tell you right now, but it's been a kinda rough twenty-four hours."

Sympathy colored her expression. "Your parents, what did they say?"

I grimaced. "Well, Mom already knew ... knew why I was looking for Nicholas."

"She was cool with it, right?"

"Yeah, she was. But my dad and Jonathan kinda freaked out at first."

"Did you *tell* them?"

I looked at Sprout, shaking my head. "I didn't have to," I said, then grinned shyly. I glanced at the doorway to make sure Nicholas hadn't returned. "I think it was written all over my face, how I felt about him. And we were kinda holding hands, too."

"Oh, Brandon," she said, clasping her hands dramatically to her face. "That is so sweet. But ... what about Adam?"

I picked up my keys from the coffee table, where I'd left them earlier. "I'm not looking forward to that. I wish I didn't have to talk to him at all," I said. "I'm really afraid of what he'll try to do to Nicholas. And me, too, once he learns that ... learns that I have every intention of staying with him," I finished. "I'm pretty sure he won't want us in Ashwood."

"Once he learns you've come out."

I cringed. "I don't want it spread around, Jenny. Melissa --"

"Will keep her mouth shut. She may mope a bit about it, about you and Nicholas, but she'll get over it."

"Good. I just don't think I can handle everyone knowing about this. It's no one's business but my own."

"I'm ready."

I looked up. Nicholas stood in the doorway, his expression solemn. I wondered how much he'd heard. What he thought about what I'd said. But I remembered what he'd said in the abandoned apartment -- and at that moment, looking at the disappointment on his face, I wondered if he really believed it.

"Okay, let's go, then. Here's my keys." I handed them to Nicholas, smiling in relief as his fingers lingered on mine.

"Thanks," he said, tossing the keys into the air. "Sure you trust me with your wheels?"

"You haven't seen them yet, obviously," Jenny said, laughing as she headed outside.

As I started to walk him to the car, Nicholas stopped me. He glanced toward the car -- Jenny popped inside, and she and Melissa immediately dropped into conversation.

I said, "I hope what I said didn't upset you --"

"No, no of course not. I think you're right. I said it myself last night, that we shouldn't let anyone know about ..." His voice trailed off. He glanced away, hurt in his eyes. I was stunned at his sudden vulnerability. I could hardly keep up with the ricochet of his emotions -- from confident, to unsure, and back again. He licked his lips, those lips. "About us," he finished so low I could barely hear him.

"Nicholas," I said, reaching out to take his hand in mine. "Nick." I didn't know what else to say to him. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yes. I guess so."

I smiled at him and, with a quick glance to be sure the girls weren't watching, brushed my lips against his. "It does upset you."

He shrugged. "It does a little. It just sucks that it has to be this way."

"It won't be when we're alone."

"And when will that be? By the time I get back here, your parents will be home," he said, his frustration searing his words.

"We can go back to my apartment."

"Except Adam might be there. No way," he said. He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "All I want to do is finish what I began."

I sucked in my breath. "Nicholas," I said. My whole body thrummed.

He opened his eyes, the corner of his mouth lifting in a quirk. "Brandon," he said, glancing at the rapid rise and fall of my chest, "you are so easy. I love that about you."

All I could do was nod, and then he kissed me. I reached for him, splayed my hands over his hips, and pulled him close, welcoming his sigh into my mouth before I broke away. "I wish you didn't have to go," I said.

“Me, either.” His lips met mine again.

A car’s horn broke the spell. We pulled back, startled. Jenny yelled, “Come on, Nick! You’re gonna be late!”

“Yeah, you can suck face later!”

I groaned. Nicholas laughed. Then the brat planted a sloppy kiss on my mouth before dashing down the steps and heading for the car.

* * * * *

I spent the rest of the day in my room, my guitar cradled in my arms, thinking about Nicholas.

I missed him. Bad.

My parents and Jonathan came home, but I was too tired to talk to them. My mom took one look at me, asked where Nicholas was, and when I told her, sent me to bed.

“Scoot. Now. I don’t want to see you until the morning.”

“Nicholas won’t be back until after midnight. He has a key, though.”

“That’s fine. I’ll likely be up,” my dad said. “I’ve got some papers to review. Go on to bed, son. You look exhausted. I’ll tell Nicholas he can use the guest room.”

I nodded, quelling my disappointment. Jonathan eyed me, shrugging his shoulders in sympathy. I looked away. When *would* we get to be alone? At this rate, I’d still be a virgin at twenty-five.

I left my parents and Jonathan watching TV. Once I got to my room, I closed my door and took another shower. Then, groaning that it was only eight o’clock and it would be hours yet before I saw Nicholas again, I fell naked and still slightly damp into my bed.

It smelled like Nicholas. I hugged one of my pillows to my chest, wondering if he’d thought the same thoughts when he’d first climbed into my bed -- that it smelled like me. Of course, Mom had just changed my sheets, but maybe he thought that anyway.

Still smiling, I fell asleep.

Sometime later something woke me. It had gotten dark out. I rose up in the bed and opened my blinds, then checked my clock. No car outside in the driveway, no Nicholas. It was just about midnight, so he should be home soon. Not that I would see him -- my dad’s thoughts on the matter of where Nicholas should sleep were pretty damn clear.

Maybe we could rent a hotel room. Except I had no money.

I fell onto my back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. The moon was bright tonight and illuminated the furniture in my room, my soccer trophies, my first surfboard, scarred and busted, in the corner. I wondered what Nicholas thought of my room, what it said about me.

I wondered about him, too -- what he was like as a kid, what had been on his walls. I had pics of surfers riding killer waves, posters of my favorite soccer players. I'd wanted to play professional soccer once, but that was one dream I'd given up.

In favor of the one that now rested in my palm.

I rested my hand on my stomach, realizing I was a little hungry, but too tired to get up. My hand on my skin felt good, but I wished it was someone else's. His. I began to rub my stomach, watching myself in the moonlight. A warm shiver moved from my hand down to my groin. My pulse increased, an image of Nicholas naked invading my mind, him beside me, his hand rubbing my stomach, moving lower, covering my throbbing erection.

Man, I'd gotten hard fast.

I moaned, arching my back as I grasped myself, as I rubbed my thumb over the weeping tip of my dick. No, Nick's thumb, Nick's thumb stroking me, his hand pulling, squeezing, settling into a rhythm that would bring me to the sweetest result. I spread my legs, exposing myself to my ghost lover, shame warring with the eroticism of my fantasy as I imagined Nicholas between my legs, stroking my balls, exploring that nether region I longed to have probed by his hands, his fingers, his dick.

That thought made me shudder out of control.

With my free hand, I touched my chest, squeezing my nipples as he had. My hips bucked as I increased my rhythm, the thrusting into my hand. Sweat formed a fine sheen over my stomach, my chest, my face, my thighs.

And then I heard my car drive up and come to a stop. I gasped. He was home! My dick felt heavy and thick, throbbing with the unbelievable need for release. With a final cry and his name exploding from my lips, I came, jettisoning over my stomach and chest.

Still in the final downward spiral of coming, I heard the front door open and close, heard him greet my father. I froze, panicking as I heard him walk down the hallway.

Toward my room.

I curled up on my side, my back to the door. I was sticky and sweaty and my room reeked of sex. My sex. Alone sex. Without-Nicholas sex. I grabbed a pillowcase off a pillow and swiped my chest and stomach, futilely trying to wipe the last traces off what I'd done from my stubbornly still-half-erect dick.

The door opened. I dropped the pillowcase off the side of the bed and froze -- then, only then, realized my bare ass was hanging completely out of the covers.

Looking back, I realize how silly I was. If I'd been a little older, a little more experienced, I would've just turned over and grinned at Nicholas and not been embarrassed by what I'd just done. But I was young and *very* inexperienced, and my first reaction was to react to him as I would've to my brothers if they'd caught me jacking off.

I pretended to be asleep.

He came into the room, closing the door behind him. He approached. I heard him suck in his breath. He knew I'd come recently. I fought to keep my breath even, not let on that I'd just then done what he knew damn well I'd just done.

I felt fingers on my bare backside. "Brandon, you still awake?"

In, out, in, out ...

I heard him chuckle softly as his fingers stroked my butt -- how I didn't jerk at his touch, I didn't know. Then he moved away from the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I heard the shower turn on then -- the guy took more showers! I groaned, stretching out on my stomach, burying my burning face in my pillow.

Stupid. So stupid. He *knew* -- and had obviously thought it amusing.

I took several more deep, calming breaths. And then, inexplicably, I guess my body sated, I succumbed once more to exhaustion and fell back asleep.

Chapter Nine

I wish I remembered what I was dreaming in the moments before I next woke up. I figure it must've been something terrifying, something along the lines of being chased by a pack of slathering, blood-soaked werewolves, or crashing in a plane.

Or maybe I was dreaming about Percy and his buddy, coming after me.

All I knew was what Nicholas told me happened, and the pain that came afterward.

And the tenderness.

I was sleeping, peacefully sprawled across the bed. Nicholas had come out of the shower and, apparently, as he put it, was so entranced by the way my naked self was illuminated by the moonlight coming through the window, he simply *had* to kiss me on the cheek before going to the guest room where my dad had ordered him to sleep.

I shot awake with a cry, batting at him, hitting him across the face as I rose up in the bed. I reared back, caught in the tangle of sheets, arms flailing, confused about where I was. I fell backwards off my bed, cracking the back of my skull on the windowsill.

Pain shot through my head with blinding ferocity. I cried out and slumped down, my breath totally stolen away. Hot tears sprang to my eyes as I curled up on the floor behind my bed. Stunning agony grabbed me and nausea socked me in the stomach. I clutched futility at the pain, blackness swirling around me and threatening to take me over as I writhed on the floor, gasping from the worst pain I'd ever felt in my life.

"Brandon!"

I heard his voice and felt his arms around me -- Nicholas, I'd hit Nicholas -- trying in vain to soothe me. His efforts were of no use. The pain wouldn't stop. It pounded through my head, relentless, pounding pounding pounding ...

"Oh, God, you're bleeding. Hold on."

Dizziness clouded my vision as I tried to pull myself up, still clutching the back of my head. He turned on the light.

"No!" I cried, gasping as the light penetrated and amplified the pain thrumming behind my eyes. He turned it off.

"I'm sorry. Hold on."

I collapsed over the bed, a sob rising from deep inside me. I felt hot stickiness under my fingers and then gentle hands tugging on me, pulling me onto the bed.

"Shh, Brandon, it's okay," Nicholas whispered. I screwed my eyes tight as I felt a towel pressed to my head. The pain reached its frenzy point, pummeling at me. Another sob escaped me and I curled up, completely freaked by the pain. I'd never ever felt such agony, and it'd been so stupid, what I'd done. Falling out of bed.

Nicholas pulled me close and rubbed my arm and back, rocking me like I was a child, whispering soothingly into my ear. I buried my face in the crook of his neck, pressing against him as hot tears coursed down my face. My nakedness added to my shame.

"It's okay, Brandon. The worst is over. It's going away. The pain is going away. You'll be okay now. I promise. I promise."

I clutched at him, curled up as tight as I could in his arms, my breath catching as, finally, the pain started to ebb. But the tears wouldn't stop streaming down my face. It *hurt*.

"There you go. Shhh, Brandon, it's okay. I have you now."

My breath hitched as I sank down and buried my face in his comforting warmth. I was hurting too much at first to realize it was his thigh that I clutched, his lap where I now buried my face. He continued to stroke my back as I slowly felt the tightness in my chest ease, my bunched-up muscles relax, and the pounding lessen.

After a little while he said, "Can you hold on, Brandon? You need some ice on this."

I didn't want him to go, but I nodded. A mistake, as the pain flared again. "Okay," I whispered.

"Good boy."

I shifted on the bed as he got up. He placed my hand on the towel to hold it to my head and left, bolting from my room. Embarrassment of another sort now took hold -- I couldn't believe I'd freaked out. I'd hit him. I'd *hit* him. I covered my face with my free hand as I lay curled up on my side. How my parents hadn't heard me cry out, I didn't know.

I pulled the towel from my head and looked at it in a shaft of moonlight. It wasn't soaked with blood, thank God, but I knew I had to have a hell of a cut on my head.

Nicholas returned, a glass of water in one hand, a bag of ice in the other, and a bottle of pain killers under his arm. He set the glass and the bag down and opened up the bottle, shaking several out.

"Here, take this," he said. I lifted up from the bed, and the dizziness whomped me from behind. I groaned, collapsing again.

"I can't," I said. "Not yet."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll just set them here for you, okay? You can take them when you're ready." He moved away from the bed.

"Don't leave me, Nicholas," I said.

He chuckled softly. "I'm not, babe. Can you scoot over?"

I did as he asked, though it sent new cartwheels of pain through my head. He arranged the pillows so he could lean against them, pausing when he fluffed the one without a case, then fixed the covers before climbing in. "Okay, come here."

"But what about your bruises --"

"I'm fine. Barely feel them anymore. Don't worry about me."

I didn't believe him, but I let him pull me to him. My earlier shame seemed ridiculous to me now in the face of his tenderness. I laid my head on his stomach as he indicated I should, and he pulled the covers over us both. I closed my eyes, drinking in his warmth, the gentle rise and fall as he breathed, the smell of freshly soaped skin, the feel of his arm across my bare back. He had on boxers and a t-shirt -- one of mine.

"That's my shirt," I whispered, smiling at the feel of him laughing beneath my cheek.

"You said I could use whatever of yours I wanted. Except your toothbrush. Here comes the ice."

I hissed as he laid it on my head, and he jerked it away.

"Too cold? Hold on. Sit up a little." I did as he asked, guarding myself against sudden movement. He pulled the t-shirt off, then gently soothed me back into place. Now my hot face rested against his cool bare skin. I laid my hand on his stomach, tickling the hairs around his bellybutton. "Hey, that's not fair. I can't retaliate while you're injured."

"Sorry," I said, wincing as he placed the ice, now wrapped in my t-shirt, back on my head. "I'm sorry I hit you, too."

"I'm fine. I'm the one who should be sorry. Are you always so violent when you wake up?"

"No. I guess I was having a bad dream."

He stroked the hair from my face and brushed away the last of my tears. I couldn't believe I'd cried so hard. I don't ever remember crying that hard, not even when I was little and fell off my skateboard and broke my arm.

"You weren't dreaming about last night, were you?" he asked softly.

I shuddered. "I don't know. Maybe I was. I don't remember."

He ran his hand up and down my arm, and I felt fresh tears spring to my eyes. I wiped them away. "I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"Sobbing like a baby."

His fingers tickled my cheek, played with my ear. "Hey, it's not like I haven't cried in your arms already. Now we're even."

I took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Brandon," he admonished. "You about busted your head open. For the second time in just over a week. It's no shame to cry. No one will know about it except you and me. By the way, have I thanked you for that?" he asked.

I moved my head so I could see his face in the gentle light from the window. "For what?"

"For being there for me. For coming after me. If you hadn't, I don't know what --" His voice hitched then, and I felt a tremble run through him. "He had someone I didn't know with him this time. He never did before, Brandon. I think -- I think *he* was going to rape me, too."

"Nicholas," I whispered. "It didn't happen. Don't think about it."

"I try not to, but I can't stop it. It won't get out of my head. I can't wash it away."

Then I understood why all the showers. I kissed his stomach, dislodging my ice pack. I reached up and pulled the ice away, dropping it on the floor. I brushed my lips across his soft skin and smiled as he hissed and then held his breath.

My head's pounding had dulled, though it wasn't gone. Propping myself up on my elbow, I reached for the painkillers, popped them into my mouth, and then took a drink. After setting the glass down, I looked at Nicholas. I wished I could see his face more clearly than the moonlight allowed, but it was enough. I trailed my fingers down his smooth cheek, smiling -- he'd shaved again, too. I could feel rather than see his mouth curve into a smile.

"You're with me now, Nick. They can't hurt you here."

"I know. I was so glad you let me come back here tonight."

"Let you? I wanted you to."

"I -- I know. Thank you."

I realized then just how scared he still was about what had happened. I was scared, too. "They didn't come by the store or anything, did they?"

"No. Percy did once, a long time ago, and Charlie told him if he ever set foot in the store again, he'd call the police."

"I should've come with you. I wasn't thinking."

"I was okay. I'm fine now. Lie down, Brandon."

I did as he told me to, tucking my head -- carefully -- into the crook of his shoulder. He was shorter than me, but broader in the chest, and soft. It was quite comfortable. I inched closer to him, close but not quite touching him along the full length of his body.

I wished he didn't have boxers on.

I splayed my hand across his bare chest, and he covered it with his own. "Maybe I should go back to the guest room now," he said.

"Why?"

"If your dad catches me in here, there'll be hell to pay," he said.

"You're not going anywhere."

His chest vibrated. "Yes, sir."

"That was easy."

"Who am I to argue with a naked man?"

I closed my eyes and smiled. "Smart boy."

"You always sleep in the nude?"

"Yes," I said, then yawned. I winced. "Ouch, that hurt."

"Better now, though?"

"Yeah." Exhaustion pulled at me, and I felt myself relaxing at last to the feel of him stroking my arm. His fingers trailed down my side, then slipped underneath the covers to my backside. This time I jerked under his light touch. "Hey, that's not fair."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Just startled me. Uh, Nicholas?"

His hand stilled. "Yes?"

"What you said earlier ..."

His hand rested on my hipbone, sending ripples of warmth to my groin and making my chest constrict. "About what?"

"About --" Oh, God. I buried my face in his chest as his fingers started to play with the crease between my groin and thigh. "Not playing fair, Nicholas," I mumbled.

"Want me to stop?"

"No."

"About what, then?" he said, his fingers dipping precariously lower. "What do you want to know?"

I moved my leg back, which served to allow the tantalizing strokes to go where I wanted them so badly to go. I swallowed, a shudder running through me. I couldn't believe I'd done that. I cleared my throat, tried to focus. Which was hard, given the heat of his hand so close ... "Uh, what you said, when you saw me. At the audition. Why? I mean --"

"Why do I want you?"

My breath caught in my throat at the ease with which he picked up on my muddled train of thought. I nearly forgot to breathe as one finger -- accidentally? -- brushed against my growing erection.

He tucked his hand between my thighs. I lifted my leg a little to allow him better access. His touch was slowly but surely chasing away the pain in my head, replacing it with desire. Teasingly, tantalizingly, he stroked and explored; he was surely going to drive me wild. I moaned into his chest.

"Sweet Brandon," he whispered so softly I barely heard him.

I realized then where this was headed. Exactly where my dad had warned us not to go while under his roof, and I found that I just didn't give a damn. It terrified me, taking this step already, but I didn't want to stop.

"Yeah, that's it," I ground out. "What was it that you saw?"

"I'll tell you."

He released me then, making me mourn the loss of contact. But he wasn't pulling away. Instead he pushed me gently onto my back, pulling his arm from under me until he'd folded himself over my body. His arousal, still cloaked by his boxers, pushed into me. I gasped, bucking my hips involuntarily as he continued his tactile exploration of my body.

Now I could see his face clearly in the moonlight, see the barefaced need illuminated in his eyes. He smiled, his eyes half-closed as he watched me react to his touch. "I love how you do that, Brandon," he said, his voice low with wonder.

"Do what?"

I arched back as his fingers brushed along the length of my shaft. I closed my eyes and bit my lip. He'd touched me, *there*. The reality of Nicholas touching me was much, much better than anything my naïve imagination had ever dreamed up. I sank my fingers into the bedcovers, pulling my legs up in response. I couldn't help myself.

His hand stilled, covering me. "The way you react, so open to me. You don't try to hide what you're feeling."

I opened my eyes and turned my head to him. "Not when I'm alone with you," I said, breathless.

His mouth descended on mine, kissing me tenderly as he wrapped his hand around me. Then he pulled away, making me moan. He scrunched his eyebrows together as if in deep thought. I was dying, but I wanted to know what he was thinking.

"What did I see?" he said, getting back to the earlier question. I couldn't believe the control he had. "I don't know if I can explain it. All I know is when I walked into that audition, I felt like I was pulled toward you. The moment I saw you, even before you saw me, I knew --" He closed his eyes, catching his lip between his teeth. Then he smiled down at me. "I knew you were going to change my life. And then, when you turned and saw me, and *fainted* ..." He dropped his face to my chest and kissed it, licking my nipple. I gasped, again.

"Do that to me sometime, okay? I promise you'll be amazed."

"Okay," I said, willing to agree to anything at that point even though I didn't understand then what he meant, exactly.

I did later, though.

He continued on with his line of thought. "I couldn't believe you fainted. Then when you came to and looked up at me, I don't know. The way you looked at me -- it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen."

"I'm not beautiful. I'm scrawny."

He tapped my ribs. "Now who's freaking out about his body? I like you just the way you are. You overwhelmed me then, you know, and then I went and messed up my audition --"

"You were fantastic."

"Says you. Says nobody else."

"Stephen thought you were good."

He snorted. "Yeah, well, it was agony to walk away from there. Away from you. I knew I'd screwed up, but I hoped ..." He shrugged. "But I didn't hear anything. I convinced myself what I'd seen in your eyes was an illusion."

"It wasn't. When I saw you, I --" I stopped, frustrated by my inability to get out what I meant. "I don't know what happened, exactly. I'd given up hope of seeing you again. It just came as a shock to see you there."

"I made that much of an impression on you? How old were you, sixteen? When you saw me the first time?"

"No, seventeen. But I knew I wanted you even then," I said softly. I reached up and touched his face, grazing my thumb over his lips. I startled in surprise as I felt a tear trickle down his face. "Nicholas," I whispered. I hated myself then, so bad at words. Not like him. I didn't know what to say.

But he kissed my thumb, shaking his head, reading my mind again. "That's enough. Just the way you say my name, that's enough for me."

"Why did you leave the music store?" This was a crazy time to be talking about this, but I had to know.

"I freaked out. I'd messed up the audition and never heard from you. I'd hoped -- I'd hoped that I would hear from you."

"Adam tore up your resume. I didn't know where you were."

"And you were sick, too, I know. Then I saw the flyer on a car, just as I was walking up to Harrison's. And then there you were inside." He shook his head. "I don't know. Stupid, I guess, to react that way, but all I could do was stand there and watch you. So handsome, so talented. The expression on your face --"

"You could see my face?"

"You closed your eyes. And then you played my song ... and I bolted." He shook his head, pressing his lips together. "I clearly wasn't thinking."

"Andy told me where you were."

"And then, there you were." The look of wonder I'd seen at the bookstore suffused his face. "I couldn't believe it. I'd been kicking myself for the past half-hour for being so stupid, but I had the flyer and fully intended to call you the next morning. But then I saw you in my audience. A beautiful golden vision looking at me, spilling your Coke for me, getting hard for me in a roomful of people, and I nearly did the fainting then. I knew then for sure you were the one I'd been waiting for. You were like an angel sitting there, drawing my words from me. I could see the music to my words in your eyes, Brandon. You had no instrument, but I could see the music in your eyes."

My face heated, and I was grateful it was too dark for him to see. The way he had with words stunned me. He laughed, falling over me before pulling back and looking down at his boxers.

"I still have these things on?" he said, then popped out of the bed to yank them off.

He did it so fast I couldn't see a thing, but then he lay on top of me, gently easing my legs apart so he could lie between them. He squirmed into position and laid his head on my chest. I was speechless, struck dumb by the sensations roiling through me -- Nicholas naked between my legs; Nick's skin, still warm from his shower and tickly against my own; Nick's hardened dick pressed against my own.

All talking ceased.

His mouth snared mine again as his hand reached between us, capturing both our shafts and pushing them together. I opened my legs wider, wrapping them around his hips and then sliding them down again, curling my toes. I couldn't hold still. I moaned into his mouth as he stroked me, his hips grinding against me while I slowly pumped into his hand. I clutched his shoulders, digging my fingers into his skin. The pleasure-pain brought a soft cry from deep inside him, and he moved harder against me, his mouth crushing me with such driving need I felt swallowed whole.

There was nothing vulnerable or shy about this Nicholas. His mouth explored mine, then moved to plant kisses along my jaw line. He captured my earlobe in his teeth and softly growled in my ear, making me smile. He was the one in command of what was happening between us, and I succumbed to him willingly, all my earlier fears of not being good enough for him gone.

I smoothed my hands down his back and clutched his backside as he explored my chest with his tongue, his lips, his teeth. Tiny nips that made me cry out and arch beneath him. He was heavier than me, his weight pressing me down into the mattress. All pain from my head was forgotten as he rammed his hips into mine, his dick into mine, over and over again as the friction between us built up higher and higher, bringing us both to the edge of something that I had never really thought possible.

I couldn't hold on much longer, didn't want to, wanted it to last forever. Wanted his weight on me forever, to feel his lips, the frantic kisses, the slick warmth of his body overtaking mine.

"Oh, God, Brandon," he whispered.

"I'm close, I'm close," I said as I clutched his back. I couldn't believe this was happening. My dick was so hot against his that I felt on fire.

"Brandon!" he cried out and pulled his mouth to mine, smothering the cries he couldn't stop as he came with a final, rippling surge. I reached down to his butt and held on as wave after wave ripped through him, and then I arched back with a gasp as my own explosion ricocheted through me.

"Look at me, Brandon, look at me."

I did as he commanded, though his face was shadowed in the dark. My own was not.

"Beautiful, so beautiful," he murmured.

Down, down, down we came, Nick's face buried against my shoulder, his hand reaching for mine and clasping it tight. Our chests heaved from our efforts, and I pulled him tighter, kissing him on his damp forehead.

"You okay?" he asked, kissing my neck, my flushed shoulders.

"Yeah. I don't feel anything. I feel everything."

He laughed softly into my shoulder at that, started to ease off, but I clutched him tight.

"I'm smooshing you," he said.

"Smooshing? No, it feels good. You feel good."

He pulled up and looked down at me then, grinding his hips against me. "Ready to go again?"

I smacked him on the butt. "Sure." His eyes widened in surprise, and I laughed. "Just kidding. I don't think I can move anymore."

"Me, either." He eased off me anyway, and I sighed at the loss of his body. I watched as he went into the bathroom, smiling in appreciation of his illuminated backside.

I couldn't believe what had just happened. Nicholas Kilmain was *mine*. Or maybe, rather, I was his. And it was just the beginning, I knew -- there was so much I wanted to do with him. Be done to by him. More intimate things than what had already happened between us.

I wanted him inside me.

The thought made me shudder with desire. I wanted him. Oh, yeah, I wanted him again, at least in my mind. I don't think my body could've handled another go round just yet. Or my head, in which the pain was still making its presence known.

He came back with a towel in his hand.

"Stop right there."

He stopped, surprised at my command. "What's wrong?"

I grinned, my eyes drinking in the sight of him, naked in the moonlight. "Just looking."

"Brandon," he admonished, then returned to the bed and cleaned me up. "Is your head really okay?"

"Yeah. I don't feel much pain now. At least, not that I can't handle."

"Good." He tossed the towel aside and burrowed under the covers with me. I turned on my side facing away from him, sighing in stunned contentment as he curled against me and kissed me between the shoulder blades. He wrapped his arm around me, tucking his hand into mine.

"It's already almost two. I should go back to my room."

I didn't want him to go. Not yet anyway. "In a little while. I want to lie with you like this a little longer. I've waited for this for so long," I said, then winced at my admission.

In answer he pulled himself closer to me, then kissed me on the back of my neck. "I'm not going anywhere, Brandon. I'm glad you waited for me, though."

I smiled into the darkness. "Me, too."

That's how my dad found us later that morning, fast asleep, naked and curled in each other's arms.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Earth to Brandon. Come in, Brandon."

I looked up from my laptop to find Nicholas looking down at me. "What are you doing out of bed?" Mutt sat in the corner reading a newspaper. I glanced at the door. It was open, and Jeff leaned against the doorjamb with his hands in his pockets, seemingly lost in thought. A man in a suit walked past the door and looked inside. One stern glance from Jeff, and the man hurried on.

"A guy's gotta pee, you know. What's with the goofy grin?"

I closed my laptop and set it aside, then stood and pulled Nicholas to me while balanced on my good foot. I kissed him. "I was just writing about our first time."

"The first time I took you in the butt?"

"Nicholas!" I said, pulling back and glancing frantically at Jeff. If he noticed, he didn't let on. The guy was really good at ignoring certain things, which I appreciated. "No, not that time."

Nicholas grinned. "Ah, the skull-banging incident, then."

"Yeah. I still can't believe that happened."

"I didn't mean to scare you, you know."

"I know. Need help?" I said, releasing him.

He shook his head and smirked. "No, I think I can handle this one on my own."

Nevertheless, I followed him on my crutches as he made his way slowly to the bathroom. As he entered, I stood outside and leaned against the door.

"I wish I knew what I was dreaming that set me off like that."

"I'm sure it wasn't about me," he called through the door.

"No, that was earlier."

I heard the flush, then the running of water as Nicholas washed his hands. Then the sound of teeth brushing. I peeked inside, and he turned to me and grinned, showing his teeth to me. "Nothing better," he said.

"If you say so."

"Believe me, after six weeks of no toothbrush, this is heaven." He shuffled out of the bathroom. I couldn't help but note the pallor of his skin as he returned to his bed. "But it also wears me out," he admitted as he collapsed onto the bed. He pulled his legs up and laid one hand across his eyes. I sat in the chair next to him, crossing my cast-foot over the other. "You know something, Brandon? There's something I never told you."

"What's that?"

"About that night." He dropped his arm and looked at me, a sly grin on his face.

I tensed. "What about that night?"

His eyes sparkled with mischief. "I never told you -- I knew."

"Knew what?" I said, feigning innocence.

"You wanked off right before I got there, didn't you."

I crossed my arms over my chest, keenly aware of the twinkle in Mutt's eye. "You're telling me you've never wanked off?"

"Of course I have. But the point is, you did it that night and you didn't know I knew."

"I kinda suspected it, Nicholas. When you touched my butt and giggled."

"I didn't giggle. It was a good thing you were asleep -- wait, you weren't asleep, were you?"

"Nope. Not then."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was embarrassed."

"You did wank off because of me, though, didn't you?"

"Well, of course I did."

"Good. Sure didn't slow you down later, at least."

"Can we talk about something else?" I glanced at Mutt, then at Jeff. He'd folded his arms across his chest and continued his blank-stare thing.

"You started this conversation, not me. I know what we can talk about."

I sat on the edge of his bed. "And what would that be?"

He settled back against his pillows, his expression sobering. "What we're going to do next. I want to leave here, Brandon. But I'm scared to go back home. I'm scared to go anywhere. What if he finds us? Whoever it is?"

I took a deep breath. This had been on my mind, too. Flying to California was out of the question. I didn't want to go to his home in New York. I wanted to cocoon somewhere, somewhere safe, until he was stronger. But where? Whoever was behind all this would expect us to do something soon, go somewhere.

He would follow.

At the door, Jeff dropped his arms. "You can't come in here," he said.

"Who is it?" Nicholas asked.

A voice that I hadn't heard in too long to believe said, "Hey, you big brute, I'm part of the family!"

"Tommy!" Nicholas cried. "Jeff, he's okay! Tommy!"

Our former bandmate entered the room, grinning sheepishly. He held a bunch of flowers in his hand. Looking around at the profusion of flowers already in Nick's possession, he sighed. "Damn. Thought I was being original."

"Get over here and give me a hug," Nicholas crowed.

Tommy flicked his gaze at me and smiled tentatively. "Hey, Brandon," he said, but then was swooped into Nick's arms. He closed his eyes and hugged Nicholas tight, nearly whomping him on the head with the flowers. Tommy buried his face in Nick's neck, grasped the back of his head in a fierce hug, then pulled back and kissed him on the cheek. "Damn you, Nicholas, it's good to see you." He wiped his face and laughed nervously. "Look at me, making a fool of myself."

"I don't care. It's so good to see you. Why are you here?" Nicholas lay back in his bed, indicating Tommy should sit. I stood, taking his flowers and setting them on Nick's tray.

"Thanks," Tommy said to me, then looked away again.

"No problem."

"I came to see you. What'dya think? Sam's here, too. He's parking the rental."

"Sam, too?" Nick's grin was miles wide. "I can't believe it."

"Well, we would've been here sooner, but the damn blizzard kept us in Denver for two days."

They fell into talking about this and that. I sat back and stayed out of the conversation, feeling my old unease start to surface. Nicholas glanced at me now and again, beaming at me in his happiness. I smiled back, though I felt more like I should just get up and leave.

When I'd quit the band, Tommy had been furious. We'd come to blows, he and I. His fierce loyalty to Nicholas wasn't unknown to me, but I'd thought he of all people would understand. He had a girlfriend he'd had to leave behind to travel, and he'd missed her terribly.

But he hadn't understood, seeing my quitting as a betrayal of Nicholas. Of course, it was, though the true reasons were never known to Tommy. Things had never been the same between us since. I know he probably wondered what the fuck I was doing, jacking around in Nick's life again. I didn't blame him, not really.

I wondered if he'd seen anything on the press conference yet.

"Hey, hey, look who's here."

I bit back a groan as Sam entered the room, holding a huge teddy bear. "Brandon!" he said, walking around to my side of Nick's bed and shaking my hand. "Good to see you, man. You look great." He patted my cheek. "Put on some weight finally."

"Good to see you, too, Samuel," I said, standing. I pulled my crutches under my arm and moved aside. "Have a seat."

"Hold on, here's the man," Sam said, plunking the teddy bear -- and a stack of papers -- onto my vacated chair. I scooted back out of the way as Sam swooped down on Nicholas and gave him a hug. "Looking good, Nicholas. You'll be back jogging in no time."

Nicholas laughed. "I hate jogging. I can't believe you guys came all this way to see me."

"Hey, man, you couldn't keep us away," Tommy said.

And then the icing on the cake -- Marisa floated in. "Guys! You made it!"

Nicholas gave her a mock frown. "You knew they were coming?"

"Of course I did."

I moved to the end of the bed, making room for Marisa as she, too, took her kisses from Nicholas. I cast my gaze down and away -- to see Mutt watching me from his chair in the corner. He gave me a sympathetic smile. "Uh, Nicholas, I'll be back. Let you guys catch up."

"Okay, Brandon," Nicholas said, oblivious to my sudden misery.

I left the room, leaving Nicholas and his friends to their laughter. Mutt followed. I paused, then headed down the hallway, swinging on my crutches, knowing he would come after me. I stopped at the elevator, dropping my chin to my chest, finally letting out my breath in whoosh. "Fuck."

"Sun's out," he said. "They have a nice garden. Quiet."

"I'd like that."

We got onto the elevator and rode down in silence. He had that stoic-face thing going again. When the elevators opened, he exited first, then nodded to me. Coast was clear. "This way."

He kept pace with me, making me feel rather ... small. Mutt was really quite a big guy. Looks were cast our way as we passed by the main lobby, but they fell on him, not on me. Or so I thought.

"Brandon Ashwood?"

"Oh, my gosh, is that you?"

I paused, stifling a groan. Mutt moved between me and the two young women who had spied and, dammit, recognized me.

I pushed back that thought, took a calming breath. "It's okay, Mutt," I said, then smiled at the two girls. "Yeah, it's me."

"Oh, wow, I can't believe it's you."

The two girls held sandwiches in their hands. Beautiful sandwiches. "Where did you get those?" I asked.

One of the girls, a pretty redhead, pointed to a deli counter I hadn't noticed. "Over there."

"I bet you're sick of hospital food. They make great sandwiches."

"We'll get you one if you want." The two girls looked at each other.

I looked up at Mutt. "Hungry?"

He frowned. I looked intently at him. He nodded. "Yes, actually."

"Good. Mind if we join you?" I asked.

"Oh, wow," the redhead said. "Sure. I'm Katie. This is my sister Stacy."

So I had lunch with two girls I'd never met before, and my bodyguard.

"This is heaven," I said, biting into my sandwich. I closed my eyes, losing myself to the taste of *fresh* lettuce, *fresh* tomatoes, cold cheese, and the sweetest ham I'd ever tasted on soft, nutty rye bread.

"How long are you going to be here, um, Mr. Brandon ... I mean, Brandon," Katie said. "I can't believe I said that."

"A few more days. Why are you two here?"

"Our mom is getting chemo," Stacy said, talking for the first time. I looked into her eyes, very pretty blue ones. Reminded me of Nick's. "She's sick."

"I'm sorry," I said.

She blushed. "Thanks. She likes your music. I can't wait to tell her we had lunch with you."

"Would she be up to a visit?"

Katie shook her head. "Not today. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Done. I can bring Nicholas."

The two girls looked at each other and grinned. "Actually, it's you she always liked the best."

I glanced at Mutt and sat back in my chair. "Really. Not Nicholas?"

"He's cute, but no, she likes you. Is he going to be okay? We saw the press conference."

I felt myself blushing, but neither looked fazed. "He'll be okay eventually. Thanks."

"He's lucky."

I nodded. "Yeah, he is." I finished all I could eat of my sandwich while the girls talked, answering different questions about life on the road until finally I pushed my plate aside. "That was incredible. I'd better be getting back, though."

Katie nodded. "Us, too. Mom doesn't like being alone for long."

I smiled, making both girls blush. Man, that felt good. "She's lucky to have you guys. Thanks for having lunch with me."

"No problem." They stood and we said goodbye, but not until I made them promise to come by and get me whenever their mom was up to it. "That was nice," I said half to myself as the girls left, arm in arm.

"Kindness is the best medicine."

I looked up at Mutt and grinned. "Yeah, I think we all benefited from that. I guess I'll go back up."

Mutt turned at that moment. "Actually, looks like they've come for you."

I looked where he was gesturing with his chin, feeling my heart seize. Nicholas was wrapped up in blankets in a wheelchair and headed directly for me, Jeff pushing. Marisa, Tommy, and Sam -- all three looking rather sheepish -- followed behind. Guilt lanced through me at Nick's worried expression.

"Brandon, there you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I'm fine. Just getting a bite to eat."

He glanced past my shoulders. "Food? Real food?"

"Brandon and I had lunch with two of his fans," Mutt said.

"Oh?" Nicholas said, looking around. No one noticed him. I bit back a grin.

"They're gone already. Their mom's sick, here at the hospital. I promised to go see her later."

"You really had lunch with fans?"

I shrugged.

"Brandon, I'm proud of you." He turned to Tommy, who glanced at me -- but with an expression that suddenly had me wondering what had gone on after I left. "Tommy, would

you be a good friend and get me a really big turkey sandwich? With mustard and pickles and chips and a giant Coke?"

"Sure, no problem."

"I'm starved, too," Sam said. "Come on, Marisa, you're hungry, too."

"I already ate --"

But Sam had grabbed her hand, dragging her away. Mutt signaled to Jeff, and the two went over to put two tables together, leaving me and Nicholas alone but within easy reach.

I looked down at my cast.

"Brandon, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking --"

"It's okay, Nicholas. They're not used to having me around."

"I shouldn't have let them cut you out like that. It won't happen again."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does, Brandon. You're my partner, my lover again." He smiled. "Well, you will be soon enough. Anyway, they're going to accept that, or they'll be out of our lives. Now. Sit down."

I glanced at him, a little taken aback by the stern look in his eye, the firmness of his voice. I glanced at the others -- they were busy ordering sandwiches. With a sigh I pulled up a chair and set my crutches on the floor, clasping my hands together.

Typical defensive Ashwood pose.

"Give me your hand."

I hesitated. He reached his hand out. I put my hand in his. The touch sent a shudder through me, and damned if tears didn't spring into my eyes. I wiped them away. "Sorry. Guess I'm kinda tired."

"You have every right to be. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine."

He sighed, clearly not believing me. "Did you see this?" Nicholas said, handing me a paper I'd just noticed in his lap. "Read it."

I took it, hesitant. "Dream to Reunite." I cleared my throat. "Nicholas Kilmain, solo artist and lead singer of the wildly popular Californian pop duo Dream who, along with his bandmate and partner, Brandon Ashwood --" I looked up then, and he beamed at me. I cleared my throat again. "Um, held a press conference today at Sisters of Mercy Hospital, where they are recovering from injuries. After showing a stunned group of reporters the severe wound inflicted upon him by the man who kidnapped and held him captive for over six weeks in the La Plata mountains, Kilmain went on to announce his and Ashwood's plans to reunite Dream."

I read the rest of the article in silence, biting my lower lip, hard, as my gaze fell on the picture of us holding hands, looking at each other -- post-kiss, I thought.

"The rest of the articles are pretty much the same. No slams against us for being, um, partners in every sense of the word. Not a one."

The picture blurred. I dropped the paper in my lap and covered my face with my free hand.

Nicholas went on. "That's why Tommy was pissed. He thought we'd planned to reunite without him. Sam told him he was nuts, but you know Tommy." Nicholas shrugged.

I took a deep breath. "Tommy would want to? Even though I'm ... I'm ..." I couldn't finish.

"Of course. We're Dream. *We're* Dream. And yeah, he wants to. So does Sam, and I know Lee will. He's a given."

I glanced over at the table where the others were having their sandwiches. Mutt and Jeff stood guard, keeping a watchful eye over me and Nicholas and the others. I clutched Nick's hand. "What about Marisa? She can't be too happy having me around again."

He tugged on my hand. "Brandon. You're being a goose. They know the truth now. They know you didn't want to hurt me. They know you were just trying to protect me. I told them everything."

I sucked in my breath at that. "Nicholas, you probably shouldn't have --"

"They had to know. Otherwise, they would've given you hell. I couldn't have that. Do you hear me?"

I shook my head, realizing what Nicholas had done. "Nicholas, don't you see? You should've let them go on thinking -- Oh, God. Nicholas, now they're in danger, too."

"What do you mean?"

"We know it wasn't Percy. We don't know who it is. Or why they're doing this. I wish --" I sighed. I wished he hadn't said anything at all. "It's too late now."

He blanched, his face paling. "Oh, damn, I didn't think. Oh, sweet move, Nicholas," he muttered, glancing at the others.

Tommy saw his glance. "Hey, Nicholas, your sandwich is getting soggy." He looked at me and smiled tentatively. All I could do was nod.

Oh, Nicholas, what have you done?

"They'll have to go with us," I said softly. I looked at Nicholas. "Wherever we go, they'll have to go, too. And my brother, when he and Barkley get here."

"To Arizona?"

"Arizona! Why there?"

Nicholas grinned. "Tucson. That's where we're going to go. It's hot, even though it's winter, so you can get your tan back."

"That's a crazy reason to go to Tucson, Nicholas."

"That's where I want to go. If ..." He looked stricken. "You'll go, too, won't you?"

I looked at him and melted at the worry in his eyes. "Of course I will, Nicholas. I'm not leaving you."

He closed his eyes, sucking in his breath. "Good. Good. Now, please, can we go over there and eat? I'm starving."

"Okay," I said, starting to rise.

"Hey."

I stopped, startled, to find myself looking at Tommy. I hadn't even seen him approach us.

"Tommy," I said, nodding. Wary.

Then he did something I in no way expected. "Brandon," he said, throwing his arms around me. I fell against him, wrapping my arms around him to keep my balance. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Dammit, why didn't you tell someone?"

"Hey, Tommy, it's okay," I said, finding myself in the awkward position of trying to soothe a man I thought had pretty much hated me for the past two years. "I couldn't."

He pulled away, wiping his eyes and laughing. Then he popped me on the shoulder. "Nicholas explained, dammit. Fuck." He shook his head. "I'm so sorry I was such a jerk."

"So was I, Tommy."

"You had every right to be. Man, what hell you must've gone through. So, you guys are really --" He looked from me to Nicholas. "No joke?"

"No joke."

"All that time, and I didn't know it. I mean, Nicholas was always all over you, but he was all over everybody. But you -- How'd you hide it?" He ran a hand through his hair.

"I had to," I said softly.

Tommy looked at me, shaking his head. "Fuck."

"That pretty much sums it up."

"I'm going to eat now," Nicholas said. "Mind?"

"Oh, sorry," I said, getting out of his way. Jeff came over and wheeled Nicholas to the table, where Marisa and Sam both cast looks my way before getting back to their sandwiches.

Tommy held his hand out to me. I took it, gripping it hard as he clapped me on the back. Carefully. "So, now what?" he said, letting me go.

I sighed. "Well, Nicholas shouldn't have told you guys what was going on. It puts you in a bad position."

His face darkened. "Let that fucker come near you guys, and I'll kill him."

I grinned -- this was the Tommy I remembered. "That's what Mutt and Jeff are for. How's Sylvie?"

He grinned. "Wonderful."

"Is she back home?"

"Yeah. Fuck!" he said, slapping his head. "I forgot to tell you guys. We're getting married!"

"You're kidding. After all these years? It's about time."

He shrugged, blushing. "Yeah, well ... some of us are kinda slow to admit our true feelings."

I laughed at that. "Point taken."

"Come on. Let's join the others."

At my hesitation, he put his arm around my shoulder. "Look," he said. "I know things between you and Marisa haven't been the hottest, but after Nicholas was through chewing me out, he chewed *her* out. I don't think she'll give you any more grief."

I felt my face heat at that. "Damn, he shouldn't have done that."

"I'm glad he did. She needed to be told. I love the lady, but she's too damn controlling of him. Know what he told her?"

"What?" I asked, flicking my gaze to the back of her head.

"He said, 'Marisa, I love you, but I'm *in love* with Brandon. You're not living with us when we go to Tucson. I'm a big boy now.'"

I dropped back my head and laughed at that. Heads swiveled my direction. I let Tommy propel me toward the table. He pulled a chair out next to Nicholas and gently pushed me down. Nicholas looked at me anxiously. I reached out and took his hand in mine, then brought it to my lips and kissed it.

"Geesh," Sam muttered, but he didn't look appalled. Maybe a little embarrassed, but there was no rancor in the look he gave me.

Marisa looked a little uncomfortable, and I was fine with that.

"So, Tucson," I said, looking at my bandmates, at Nicholas. Damn, it felt good to be with them again.

"To Tucson," Nicholas said, raising his Coke. Then he took a swallow and set it down before turning to me, his blue eyes boring into mine. "To us."

And then he kissed me, pretty much killing any lingering doubts the others might've had regarding our feelings for each other.

And I was fine with that, too.

Chapter Ten

California -- The Past

"What the *hell* is going on here?" my dad said, his voice tight with anger. He filled my doorway, his shoulders rigid with disgust.

My whole body ignited with shame as I stared at him in horror. Nicholas pressed against me, his heart pounding against my back. His arm coiled tight against mine; our legs were entwined. Bright sunshine poured through the open blinds and heated the room. We were both warm and sticky. The sheet covered us, but there was no mistaking what we'd been up to sometime or other during the night.

The room reeked of sex.

"Dad, I --"

"Enough, Brandon." My dad looked from me to Nicholas, his face a frozen mask. Except for his eyes -- they glinted with fury. I felt like dying. "Get your clothes on. Now. And you, too," he said to Nicholas.

He slammed the door behind him as he left.

Nicholas fell away from me and groaned. "Oh, shit. Fuck," he said, making me eye him. I'd hardly heard him cuss, but guessed this occasion warranted it.

I swung my legs to the side of the bed. The movement made my head pound. I was afraid I was going to be sick any second, though whether it was because of what I'd seen in my dad's eyes or the relentless pulsing in my head, I couldn't tell. It didn't really matter. I cradled my forehead in my hands and waited for the pounding to ease.

"Yeah, 'oh shit fuck' is right," I muttered.

"What time is it?"

I looked up at my clock. "Guess my dad came home for lunch. It's almost noon."

"You're kidding. Shoot. So much for school today." He sighed. "Brandon, do you want me to go?"

"No. I don't."

I stood and looked down at him, feeling a stirring deep inside me. I couldn't believe it, especially right then -- I guess my dick couldn't care less that the rest of me was in deep shit. Nicholas looked so beautiful, stretched back naked on my bed, his hips swathed with the sheet. His hair was sleep-mussed, his skin pale and sprinkled with dark brown hair, flawless except for the remnants of heat on his cheeks.

And the shadows of bruises still ghosting his ribs.

I picked up my jeans and hurriedly slipped them on, foregoing boxers.

He sighed. "I should've gone to the guest room. It's all my fault --"

"No," I said, cutting him off. "No, Nicholas, no regrets. How can I regret you?" I asked, for once finding the right words.

He smiled, then threw back the sheets, and I saw him wholly naked for the first time. He stretched like a cat in the sunbeams, throwing his arms overhead and rolling onto his stomach. He cradled his cheek on his folded arms and kicked his feet up. He looked at me and sucked on the inside of his mouth, running his tongue along his bottom lip before smiling at me in saucy invitation.

Dizziness threatened to overtake me. All I could do was devour his naked body with my eyes. I clenched my hands, digging my nails into my palms to keep from reaching out to touch him, stroke his back, rub his backside. If I did, I'd be handing my dad even more fuel for his anger.

Blood rushed to my groin, and I shifted my stance. My head pounded. At Nick's knowing expression, I closed my eyes, reaching for my bedside table to steady myself. He chuckled. I heard the mattress creak, and then his mouth brushed against mine. I opened my eyes, shocked to see those incredible soft blue eyes of his watching me. He knelt on the bed, our bare chests so close I could feel his heat. He rested his hands on my shoulders. Any shyness he'd had about his body appeared gone.

Mine was, too.

But now wasn't the time for this. I tried to pull back, but he didn't let me, catching the back of my neck with one hand. His tongue brushed playfully across my lips, and then he kissed my nose, making me smile despite my lingering mortification over being found out by my dad.

"Think we have time for a quickie?"

My hands found his waist, but I held him back, shaking my head. "You're crazy, Nicholas. No, I'd better go talk to him."

He sighed. "Didn't think so. I guess we'll go meet doom together then, huh?" he said, leaning his forehead against mine.

"Yeah."

"It'll be all right, Brandon," he whispered, his warm breath brushing against my face. I didn't think so, but I nodded anyway. He let me go and sat back on the bed. I took a deep breath, trying to psych myself like I did before I played tennis with Jonathan.

"There's my boy," he said with a grin as he watched me bounce up and down on my toes.

I scooped up his shirt and threw it at him. "Not a boy anymore, thanks to you. Get dressed."

He laughed at that. "Not done with you yet, you know." He pulled on his t-shirt, then yanked on his boxers and jeans, before I could think of anything to say to that. He winked at me knowingly. "Come on, time for untying your tongue later."

I nodded and grabbed my shirt, putting it on. I walked barefoot down the hallway toward the kitchen, Nicholas on my heels. I knew the kitchen was where my dad would go - - whenever he was pissed or upset about something, he cooked. Better than throwing things, I guess, though sometimes he came up with some really strange combinations my brothers and I had no choice but to eat. We didn't dare not.

He looked up as we came in, and pointed to the table. "Sit, Brandon. You, too, Nicholas."

"Yes, sir," Nicholas said, seating himself and glancing at me.

I sat across from him, my embarrassment resurfacing as my dad took his time weighing what he wanted to say. He clenched the back of one of the chairs with both hands -- his knuckles were white. He finally spoke; anger edged his words. "You boys have put me into a very difficult position. You do realize that."

"Yes, sir," Nicholas said. I could only nod.

"I'm out of my league with you two," he said. "If you were ... female, Nicholas, I'd be forced to call your parents. Tell them what happened. You're underage as it is --"

He raised one hand, stopping my dad. I winced. *Please, Nicholas, no* -- "Actually, I'm almost twenty. Sir." He flicked his gaze at me. "I look like sixteen, I know, but I'll be twenty next month."

"Dad --"

"Hush, Brandon."

I fell back into embarrassed silence, took a deep breath, tried to quell my nerves. I wished then I had the backbone that Adam did, the could-give-a-shit attitude Jonathan had. I wanted to tell my dad to leave us alone. I wanted to grab Nicholas by the hand and run away. But I knew I wouldn't. Dad knew it, too -- I was, after all, his spineless youngest son.

Mamma's boy. I'd heard him call me that once, talking over too many beers to a friend of his when he didn't think I was around.

Guess alcohol brought out his true feelings.

Any halting explanation I could try to make now, stuttering under his impatient glare, would only make it worse for me and Nicholas. I told myself it'd be easier to suffer in silence, get it over with.

But it was hard having Nicholas witness my humiliation.

Later, when I was older, I would understand how it was my dad made me feel this way. Later, I would realize my nervousness around him had roots in my own very real sense of failure borne on my dad's disappointment in me, starting with my decision to drop out of school when I was sixteen. Me being sick a lot, and unable to hold a job because of that, added to my dad's less than rosy view of me -- and now this.

I'd "turned gay" on him and, if that wasn't enough, brought my lover into his house, into my bed.

Not exactly a son to be proud of, I guess.

Even now, sitting here in this hospital room -- a millionaire many times over, having found success in several different venues -- I've never felt like I've really made him proud. Not after I came out, anyway.

It still hurts.

Then, though, the loathing in his eyes devastated me, silenced the words I longed to let spill.

"Dammit, Brandon." He made a sound of disgust. "You deliberately disobeyed me. I caught you in bed with another ... another *boy*, dammit. I really am out of my league." He pinched his nose. "I told you not to do this. I told both of you. But you went ahead and did what you wanted anyway, not respecting my wishes. My orders still stand -- I won't have ... I won't have it in my house."

"I understand," I said quietly.

"So, what are your plans? What do you two plan to do? Or have you even thought past the end of your cock?" I winced at that. Nick's eyes widened. "You haven't got a job. You didn't even finish high school. How do you expect to live? You're only nineteen, so weird all your friends are long gone. What makes you think people would want to listen to you? This music dream of yours is going nowhere. You're never going to amount to anything at the rate you're going, Brandon."

My face flushed hot in embarrassment. He might as well have said I was a fucking failure and shot me, put me out of my misery right then.

Was he that ashamed of me?

I couldn't look at Nicholas. My humiliation was complete. What he had to be thinking of me ... Tears stung my eyes, and that embarrassed me even more. I dug my fingers into my

thighs, welcoming the pain. I wanted to crawl under the table. My dad had ruined everything, but like he knew I would, I just sat there and took it.

Nicholas cleared his throat. "Uh, Mr. Ashwood, I think you're wrong. Sir."

"Excuse me?"

I looked up, panic racing through me. But Nicholas barreled on, his gaze softening at the fear in my eyes. "Brandon has to be one of the most talented musicians I've ever known. I've never heard anyone play piano like he does." I couldn't have looked away even if I'd wanted to. Which I didn't. I could have drowned in his eyes and died happy.

He smiled at me. "With your musical abilities and my singing, there'll be no stopping us. We're going to be famous one day; we're going to be rich, you and me. I know you believed it yesterday. Don't stop believing in us now."

I looked away from his raw assuredness. How I wished I could believe like he did.

Right then I believed in nothing.

My dad shattered the silence. "Pretty damn naïve, don't you think, Nicholas? You two have nothing. You practically live on the streets; *he* can't even get a job, and I'm damn well not going to pay for a roof over his head. There's hundreds of kids out there right now, saying the exact same thing as you, some of them with more talent than you'd ever dream of having. 'We're gonna be famous. We're gonna be rich.' You're no better than they are. What makes you think you have what it takes? I certainly don't see it in Brandon."

He looked at me, pointedly ignoring Nick's shock at his words. My chest had tightened at his cruelty. I blinked wonderingly -- did he think he was doing us a favor? Did he really believe he was right?

I had to bite the inside of my mouth to keep from crying, but he saw it -- saw it in my eyes. If anything, my weakness made him angrier.

"I will no longer support you, Brandon. If you're old enough to have a lover, you're damn well old enough to take care of yourself. I'll give you a week to find a job and a place to live. Adam sure as hell won't want you at his place. But Nicholas will have to leave today. I don't want to see him here again."

Then my dad left the house.

I dropped my head to my arms and buried my face. "Now what am I going to do?" I whispered, my face hot with shame. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was losing everything, just when I'd believed I'd found the gold of my dreams.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the embarrassment of tears. I heard Nicholas get up from his chair. I stiffened, waited for his footsteps to take him out of the kitchen and out of my life. But when his arms wrapped around me, I was so shocked, I tried to push him away. He wouldn't let me. He was stronger than he looked. His arms slid around my chest and locked tight. He hugged me from behind and kissed my neck.

"You okay?"

I could only shake my head. A sob escaped me, but I swallowed it. I would not cry. I refused to cry.

"Oh, Brandon, he's wrong. He's so wrong about you; he's wrong about me. I know you felt it yesterday, didn't you? At the piano? We're good. Better than good, you and me."

I sniffed. "Why does he hate me so much?" I whispered, barely able to get the words out through the tightness in my throat.

"I don't think he hates you, Brandon. He just doesn't understand you. Know what?"

He paused, waiting for me. Finally I said, "What?"

"I really believe we're going to make it. I believe we're going to be okay. I believe someday, you'll look back at this moment and realize your dad really *was* wrong. And he will, too. He's going to regret hurting you."

I hid my face in my hands. "It does hurt, Nicholas. It hurts so much."

"I know, babe. I know."

He ran his hands over my shoulders, squeezing them in reassurance. I sat up, leaning back against his warm chest, turning my head to the side and wiping my tears on his shirt. He chuckled softly, using his sleeve to wipe my other cheek.

"I've got friends who'll put us up for a little while, until we can find our feet, so to speak. We'll be okay, as long as we're together." He paused, adding quietly, "If that's what you want." Then, his voice raw and vulnerable, "Do you still want me, Brandon?"

He pulled away from me, but I stopped him by holding on to his hands, knowing which direction his mind was going. "Yes. Yes, I do. I want you, Nicholas. It's what I want, too. I'm sorry, Nicholas. My dad is --"

"Being damn unfair." He pulled one hand away from mine and ran it through my hair, tickling my scalp. It felt so good, the little shivers. "I guess you can't really blame him for freaking out, though, finding us like that. I mean, gosh, look at what we looked like -- me naked and you so sexy in my arms."

"I doubt that's what my dad saw," I said.

He chuckled at that. "My parents freaked out at first, too. Natural parental reaction. They got over it. Maybe he will, too."

I snorted. "My dad's pretty pissed."

"Yeah, but he's married to your mom. And she's cool. I imagine she'll get him to ease up."

I wanted to believe him, but what my dad had said hurt too bad. I didn't know if my mom could convince him of anything this time. "He's right about one thing, though. I dropped out of high school, Nicholas. Practically flunked out."

"So I figured." His body pressed, warm and soft, against my shoulders. His fingers gently explored where I'd hit my head, and then he kissed the spot. "Looks better than I thought it would. Still hurts?"

I nodded. "Some. You're not mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"You finished high school. You go to college. You're smart, talented; you hold not one job but two." I took a deep breath, unable to keep the sadness from my voice. "You could do a lot better than me."

His hands gripped my shoulders. "Whoa there, boyfriend. I meant what I told your dad." He moved from behind me and grabbed an empty chair, pulling it close. I looked at him from the corner of my eye. He pushed his bangs off his face, reached out and brushed mine back, too, then trailed his fingers down my cheek. I took a deep, shuddery breath, and he smiled, dipping his head to one side as he held my gaze with his own.

"He's really worked a number on you, hasn't he? I just don't understand why. You're an amazing musician. My gosh, Brandon. You play keyboards, piano, guitar, drums." He slapped one hand in the other's palm as he ticked each off. "Not only that, you write music."

"It's all gone, though."

"Yes, but you'll write other music. Better music." He touched his head. "You memorize whatever you see or hear. That is phenomenal. I think it's phenomenal. Besides, lots of serious musicians don't like school. I just happen to be one of the crazy ones who do. I'm the weird one here, not you."

"You're not weird," I said shyly, stunned by how he saw me.

He grinned happily. "Oh, yes, I am, and I revel in it."

I laughed and he darted forward, kissing me and sitting back again so quickly, I couldn't react with anything but a smile.

"That's better. That's my Brandon's beautiful smile. Why *did* you drop out, anyway?"

I licked my lips, tasting him still, wanting more. I shrugged. "I guess I was ashamed of what I thought I was. Of ... of being gay. I always felt like everyone was looking at me. I'm a loner, I -- I don't have any friends, Nicholas. He was right about that, too."

"You have your cousin Jenny."

I nodded at that. "Yeah. She's kept me sane the last couple of years."

"And that girl Melissa," he said, his voice teasing.

"Oh, please, don't remind me. She's been after me ever since we first met."

He laughed at that. "She *is* beautiful."

"And is missing a few important parts."

"And has a couple extras you're not interested in? What's wrong with you?" he said and flashed me a quick, knowing grin. He ran his hands down his chest. "Let me guess. You'd

rather have flat-chest-boy?" He looked at me through slitted eyes, doing a damn good job of looking silly yet sexy at the same time.

"Uh, yeah," I said, transfixed by what he was doing. "Nicholas, I don't think ..." Heat flashed in my groin, colored my face. I looked away, but was drawn right back again.

He dropped his hands, apparently pleased with my reaction, and leaned forward in his chair. "I don't care that you dropped out of school, Brandon. That you don't have a gazillion friends. Jenny adores you, and I think that counts for a lot. I've got plenty of friends who will like you, too. Who will accept you as you are. And today's Friday, right? I always go to Karen's on Fridays. She thought you were really nice, by the way."

"When did you talk to her?"

"I called her from work. She's my best girl, you know."

"Do you tell her everything?" I said warily.

"I don't kiss and tell. At least not details. She knows what you did for me, though."

I nodded. "She was nice. I'm glad she was there --" I looked up at him, Percy's face, his words, slamming back into my mind.

He nodded, a pained expression on his face. "Me, too." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, a bunch of people meet once a week there at the house. Most of them were at The Book Shed the other night, so you may recognize them." He grinned. "I know they'll recognize you."

"Oh, no," I said, shaking my head, feeling my face heat again. I swear, as much as I'd blushed the last two days, I should've had a sunburn. "I couldn't --"

"I want you to come with me."

"Nicholas, I just ... I don't know if I'm ready for that ..." All those people, knowing?

He jumped up and moved behind me again and squeezed my shoulders. He bent down and said, "Please? It would mean a lot to me." He nuzzled my neck, making me laugh despite myself. "Please please please, Brandon, come with me, please," he whispered in my ear, his breath hot against my skin.

"Nicholas --" I warned, but his lips had found their mark already. He sucked at my neck like he was a vampire. I cringed, batting him away and laughing.

He grabbed me, cupping my chin with one hand and tilting my head back. I let him, finding again how much I liked his control over me when we were alone. He nuzzled the cleft in my chin and blew on my eyes, making me close them. Then he kissed my eyelids, those incredible lips so soft, so delicate. A shudder coursed through me, and I licked my lips in anticipation of his brushing mine. When they did, I smiled against his mouth, opening my eyes.

"So you'll go?" he said eagerly. "Yes?"

I looked at him cross-eyed, making him laugh again. I grinned even wider, raising my head. My tenseness suddenly eased, the hurt my dad had dropped on me fading under Nick's adoration. "Do you always get your way, Nick?" I asked him.

"Yup, Brandon, pretty much."

"Okay. If you're sure you really want me to. I'm no prize, you know." Not like he was to me.

"Bull. Scoot back. Away from the table some."

I did so, puzzled, then yelped as he suddenly straddled me. "Hey, careful," I warned, grabbing hold of his thighs and trying to shift into a more comfortable position.

"Oops. Sorry to crush your dickie."

I smacked him on the thigh for that. "You don't look the least bit contrite."

"Because I'm really not. You know, I bet you're a hell of a lot smarter than you let on. You'll be fine with my friends." He draped his arms casually over my shoulders, letting his hands dangle behind me. His face neared mine, and I looked into those sapphire eyes of his. They reminded me of the ocean and the sky, where one melded into the other, clear and sparkling. Pretty, as was he.

"I'll try," I said.

"Good. That's all I ask." He looked into my eyes, peering at me from beneath his bangs. He pulled a mock-serious expression. "Let's see, what else could be so bad about Brandon Ashwood?"

I shook my head. "There's lots more."

"There's nothing you can tell me about yourself that will scare me away, Brandon."

"I cuss too much."

"Yes, I've realized that."

"Sorry. I'll try to stop. I like to smoke."

He tensed at that. "Really?"

I nodded, realizing I could use a cigarette right then, really bad. Wasn't going to happen, though. I rubbed my hands down his thighs and back again -- soft and warm. His muscles played beneath my touch as he kept some of his weight on his feet. Nice thighs with meat on them. Not like my own.

"And I like beer. I've been shit-faced more times than I can keep track of. I've been so drunk I didn't know my name."

"I don't drink or smoke."

I sighed. "Didn't think so." I drew my hands up to his hips, hooking my thumbs in his waistband. His weight on my lap was making me warm. I couldn't help myself -- I squirmed beneath his weight as my jeans got tighter again.

"So, what else is so terrible about you?" He looked into my eyes and shook his head. "There's nothing so far I can't live with." He cocked his head to one side. "You'll have to smoke outside, though. And brush your teeth before kissing me."

He cradled my head with his hands, taking care to not touch the side of my face where Percy's friend had beamed me, and pulled me so our foreheads touched. He really liked doing that.

Possession.

I tightened my hands on his hips, feeling the familiar surge of desire shudder through me. I pushed my hips up, craving his weight *right there*.

His hands reached underneath the bottom of my shirt. He bit his lip in mock concentration as he unbuttoned the top of my jeans, his questing fingers finding what they sought. I jerked at the sweet invasion, grabbing his shoulders, though whether it was really to stop him and not to simply hold on, I couldn't say.

"Nicholas," I whispered hoarsely. "We shouldn't."

Even though I wanted to, bad. Wanted to feel him on top of me again, wanted things from him I couldn't even name.

His mouth quirked into a grin. "We're alone, right?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "Dog's here somewhere."

"You have a dog?"

I nodded, pulled him tighter against me, tilting my head to kiss him. Once again, though, he took control away from me, and I felt the last of my shame and despair edge away at the touch of his mouth against mine, the expressive fingers of one hand caressing the back of my neck while he stroked my erection with the other. I squirmed now in earnest, almost whimpering as I pushed myself into his hand.

"Open for me," he whispered.

I hesitated, then groaned into his mouth, doing as he told me to. His tongue found mine. His hand stilled as he kissed me deeply, a surprisingly lazy kiss for a guy who traveled at light speed most of the time.

When it came to kissing, Nicholas liked it slow.

I put my hand over his on my erection, urging him to finish what he'd started. He chuckled, grinding his hips into me as his hand quickened. I moaned again, loving the pleasure-pain of his weight on me. I wanted to stay like this forever.

I wanted to explode.

"Come on, baby," he whispered against my lips. I could no longer respond to his kisses. I tilted my head back, gasping for breath as his thumb expertly caressed the head of my shaft and down again, squeezing and stroking. He kissed my neck, my jaw, gently bit my ear, his

hot breath fanning my skin. I could smell him, wanted to inhale him -- the mingled scents of Nicholas and sex.

The kitchen whirled around me, and all was forgotten as my entire world centered on Nick's hot hand on my throbbing dick and his mouth suckling my neck. I sank my fingers into his shoulders as a shudder ran through me and a cry tore from somewhere deep inside me. My body splintered into a thousand multicolored pieces as the release I craved detonated deep inside me and exploded into Nick's hand.

He held me as I came, stole the whimpers of relief that spilled from me and murmured his encouragement. I don't know what he said -- don't remember, don't care. He caught my lips with his, kissing me tenderly. He finally broke away, laughing in delight as I gasped at the loss of those lips. He laid his cheek against mine and petted the side of my face. He started to hum softly, a tune I didn't recognize.

"I like meat, too," I said breathlessly, making him chuckle.

"I like certain meats myself."

"So you're not a real vegetarian?" I asked. "What do you eat, fish?"

He laughed, throwing his head back. "Brandon, sweet Brandon." He grinned merrily. "I like *organ* meat."

I inhaled sharply, realized what he meant. "Oh. Damn." I winced. "I told you I was stupid."

"No, no, no, you're just terribly fun to tease." He tugged at my shirt -- it was pretty much a mess. Using it as a cloth, he wiped me clean. I watched, fascinated, simply marveling at the care he took tending to me. "So much for that shirt," he said, tossing it on the floor.

Then I remembered what he'd told me earlier. Feeling a little awkward -- I'd never actually done this before, after all -- I slipped my hands underneath *his* shirt. It was his turn now. I was rewarded with a hiss as I smoothed my hands up his sides, taking care not to press too hard against his bruises. Encouraged by his return to humming, I let my thumbs do the roving, seeking to do to him what he'd requested earlier. When the pads of my thumbs glided over his nipples, he arched his back and pushed his hips into mine, grinding into me.

"Oh, I warned you not to do that," he moaned, clenching his hands on his thighs.

I stilled, worried. "You want me to stop?"

He looked at me. "Of course I don't want you to stop, silly," he said, breathless. He reached for the hem of his shirt, yanked it off, and dropped it on the floor, then grabbed my hands and pressed them against his chest, capturing them there.

"Better," he said reverently.

My hands were bigger than his, my fingers longer, alien in their golden darkness, sandwiched as they were between the ethereal skin of his chest and hands.

I began to stroke him. I watched his face in fascination, marveling that the soft strokes and pinches on his nipples, encouraged and guided by his fingers, sent him into such wanton gyrations. He smiled at me through his passion, his eyes heated and boring into mine.

"I want inside you, Brandon," he whispered, capturing my face between his hands.

Stunned, I stared at him. "Nicholas, I don't know if I can --" But my protest died as he laid one finger on my lips, shaking his head.

"It's okay. We won't rush that, I promise." He quirked a smile at me. "Okay? But it's gonna happen. I just want you to know."

I nodded, stunned by his promise. My heart trip-hammered. I couldn't get enough air. Heat flooded my groin -- I was already getting hard again.

My breath quickened. Nick's chest rose and fell beneath my hands just as fast. What he suggested, what he wanted, I had barely dared think about.

He wanted inside me.

The back door slammed. Nicholas jerked back, but there was nowhere he could go -- we were caught. Fear tore through me. I yanked my hands off his chest and hurriedly refastened my pants. "Adam," I whispered.

"Oh, no," he said, panic in his voice. He started to rise.

"Hey, guys." Jonathan walked into the kitchen and stopped, his expression stunned. Then he laughed as Nicholas collapsed in relief onto me and I automatically wrapped my arms around him. "Shit. I was going to ask what's up, but I'm guessing you both are."

"Jonathan, dammit, what are you doing here?" I said, closing my eyes and resting my head on Nick's shoulder. I realized then just how hard I was breathing -- as was Nicholas.

Jonathan wasn't stupid. He saw it, too. I just hoped he didn't spy my wadded-up t-shirt on the floor.

"Hey, don't mind me. I won't keep you long. Just came by to talk to you about something." He smirked. "Figured I'd find you together, but not ... exactly like this."

Nicholas giggled, making me look at him in dismay. "Sorry," he said, looking chagrined.

Obviously thinking Nicholas was apologizing to him, Jonathan said, "No problem. I find it rather intriguing that my brother prefers dicks to chicks. Still can't believe you're fags, though, Brandon."

Anger flared. Nicholas pulled back, surprised as I nearly dumped him on the floor. "Dammit, Jonathan, would you fucking cut it out? And don't call me that. Or Nicholas, either."

I sat back again, only because of Nick's calming touch. "It's okay, Brandon."

"No, it's not. I won't have my brothers call you that. Even in jest."

Jonathan held up his hands. "Sorry. No offense meant. You'll have to school me on the correct vernacular." He picked up an apple from the fruit bowl and bit into it. "Fruit," he said and grinned. "Oops, guess that's not appropriate either. Don't want you to spank me."

Nicholas reached over and smacked Jonathan on the arm. "Be nice, or I'll spank you myself."

Jonathan threw his head back and laughed. When he could finally talk, he said, "You're okay, Nicholas. You're fucking okay."

I rubbed my forehead, wincing as the pounding in my head seemed to have returned. Still, my anger seeped away, replaced by fatigue. "What did you come by for, Jonathan? We're kinda busy."

What else could I do? Nicholas was still on my lap, it was damn obvious the state we were in, and I wanted my brother to get the heck out of the house.

"I was thinking about Nick's situation. Came to offer him a place to crash."

"Really?" Nicholas said, hope glinting his eyes.

"You'd want to stay with him?" I said in disbelief.

Nicholas shrugged. "Sure. Like he said, he's really all bark."

Jonathan grinned. "See? He likes me. My roommate won't mind if we have a gay guy or two hanging around the house." He looked at me, waggling his eyebrows. I gave up. "You don't cook, by any chance, do you, Nicholas?"

Nicholas grinned. "I make a killer veggie lasagna."

I just stared at him -- he could have been sitting on a park bench conversing with a stranger and he wouldn't have been any more comfortable than he was now.

Jonathan made a face. "I'll pass. You going back to Adam's, Brandon?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't want to, but I guess I have no choice, at least for now."

Nicholas looked down at me, then said to Jonathan, "Your dad's kinda kicked Brandon out."

"You're joking. Why?" He looked at me. "Brandon, he's not serious."

I nodded. "Dad gave me a week to get out and find a job."

"He caught us naked in bed together," Nicholas said with a shrug.

"Nicholas!" I said, mortified. He'd make me feel like that a lot over the coming years. Especially around Jonathan.

But Jonathan nodded in understanding. "Figured you couldn't keep your hands off my baby brother. He's so fucking adorable."

I closed my eyes. *I'm not here. I'm dreaming ...*

"Key's under the front mat. Rent's cheap, sixty a week. All's you'll need is a new bed. A big one." He clapped me on the back. "Coming, too, Brandon?"

I looked up at him in surprise. "You want me to?"

His expression sobered. "Yeah, I do. I don't think you should go to Adam's, and obviously staying here is out. This way I can keep an eye on you two. It pisses me off that Dad kicked you out. He did that to me once, too, you know."

"He did? When? Or should I say, because of who?"

He grinned lecherously at me. "Kimberly Stevens, that's who."

I remembered Kimberly. Oh, yeah, how could I forget one of the few women who almost succeeded in seducing me? I'd been fifteen. She'd seriously screwed with my brain, though she never got to screw with my body.

"Oh. I don't remember him kicking you out."

"Only 'cause I promised no more Kimberly. So, you guys come on, move your stuff in. I'll tell Ronnie so he won't freak if he sees you making out in the kitchen. Got to run, guys. You can get back to your grope session."

I grimaced. "Jonathan, wait, I'll walk you to your car." I smacked Nicholas on the leg to get up. I groaned dramatically as he did so, earning a frown from him and a snicker from Jonathan. Nicholas tossed his hair and trounced off, wagging his butt as he left us.

It made me think of the audition. My mouth went dry. I wanted nothing more right then than to tackle Nicholas to the floor, rip off his jeans, and --

My brother punched me in the arm, breaking into my fantasy. "Come on. Talk to me; then you can pounce."

"Jonathan, please, cut it out."

"Are you kidding? I haven't had this much fun since I hid your teddy bear when you were six."

I followed him out of the kitchen and outside. "You were the one who did that? I blamed Adam."

He leered over his shoulder. "I know."

"You bastard," I said, laughing. I lunged for him, but he ran away from me, stopping as he reached his car door. I grabbed for him and he laughed, wrapping his arms around me in a bear hug.

"Gotcha, baby bro." Then he tickled me until I couldn't breathe.

Right then I loved my brother more than I ever had in my life.

"Give?" he finally said, holding me down with ridiculous ease. No way I could break free. He outweighed me by at least fifty pounds and was stronger than an ox. He held me with one arm and knuckled my head -- fortunately not where I'd banged it. I didn't want to explain *that*.

"I give, I give," I said, laughing so hard I gasped, my legs buckling beneath me. He squeezed tight once more for good measure before he let me go, though he helped me stay standing.

"You're so fucking fragile, Brandon. Good thing you gave in. I might've snapped you in two."

I leaned against the car to catch my breath, patting my stomach. "Make more waffles. That ought to help."

He shook his head as he leaned on the car next to me. "You ate two, Brandon. Two waffles does not a fat man make."

I burst out laughing. "I ate way more than that." He jingled his keys in his hand and turned to me, his expression solemn. "What's wrong, Jon?" I asked, suddenly worried.

He glanced over my shoulder to make sure we were truly alone. "Nothing's wrong. You know something?" he said, leaning against me.

"What?"

"It isn't really that weird, you with him. I haven't seen you look this happy, laugh like that, in so long that it's kinda shocking. I'm glad you finally found him."

I smiled, maybe surprising us both by wrapping my arm around him and hugging him. I leaned my head on his shoulder and sighed. "Thanks, Jon. I'm glad I found him, too."

"Is he feeling okay? I could see those bruises. Who was the bastard who did that, anyway?" He hugged me back, then kissed me on the cheek. "Oops, better cut that out. Someone might think I'm gay, too."

I snorted. "I doubt that. The guy who attacked him was his old high school boyfriend. Been stalking him ever since."

"He hasn't told the police?"

"No. I plan to talk to him about it, though."

He chuckled me on the chin, and I released him. "You do that. He looks like he needs someone to watch out for him, and you're just the guy to do it. You really are kinda cute together, you know."

I smiled, pleased, running a hand over my face and crossing my arms over my bare chest. "I doubt Adam would see us that way."

He grimaced then. "No, and he's pretty pissed right now, too. Has he shown up here yet?"

"No."

"He will. I just talked to him, when he was about to leave for work. You know the guys want Nicholas."

I stared at him. "What?"

"Yeah. They like him." He opened up the car door and got inside, holding the door open and looking up at me. "They didn't like Adam's choice, obviously, so they want Nicholas. I listened to the tape and have to agree with you guys. Nick's got something special. And not just my baby brother."

"What did Adam say?"

"Besides 'shit fucking no fucking way,' you mean?"

I cringed. "Yeah."

"Said he'd think about it. If he goes for it, I think you should do it, Brandon. The experience you'd get would be good for Nicholas. For you, too."

I nodded. "Yeah, it would. Jonathan, the guys -- they don't know about me and Nicholas."

"Nope, and I don't think they should know. That's something Adam definitely agrees with. They kinda already pegged him for gay, but they liked his voice. You look straighter than I do, so I don't think they'll see it. I don't think they'll be able to figure it out. I don't know if it'll work out, so wait to tell Nicholas, okay? Adam's pretty much against your boyfriend. But at least he's thinking about it."

I nodded absently, knowing I wouldn't be able to keep it from Nicholas. "Thanks, Jonathan."

"See you later on, then? Amanda's making spaghetti at six, and there'll be plenty if you want to show up."

"Amanda?" I asked.

He grinned. "My latest conquest." Then he frowned. "Although I think she's the one doing the conquering. You'll like her, and she'll love Nicholas."

I sighed. "Girls do."

"And that, baby brother, is why he'll be a star while the rest of us fade to black."

He laughed and closed the car door, then drove away. I watched as his car disappeared around the corner, not comprehending then how prophetic his words would be.

Chapter Eleven

I went inside, searching for Nicholas. When I found him, disappointment skittered through me. He'd had another shower -- steam and the sweet scent of shampoo filled the room. He had Jonathan's jeans on and was pulling on another shirt, one of mine. It was a little tight.

"Hey, Nick, what're you doing?"

He grimaced. "Got to go to work."

"To work? At Charlie's?"

"No, the school."

I walked over to the bed and sat down, watching him as he ran a comb through his hair, brushing his bangs back into a semblance of a hairstyle any everyday normal guy on the street would wear. Not his usual. It amazed me what a difference simple changes could make in how he looked. Now he looked older, not so innocent and childlike.

Innocent and childlike except in bed. There, he was the master.

"What days do you work there?" I kept my disappointment over his leaving me out of my voice as best I could. Not sure I did too good of a job.

He put the comb down. "I'll have to write you up a schedule of what I do when. It's kinda nuts," he said, turning his gaze to the ceiling as he tapped off his list. "I have classes three mornings a week. Work at Charlie's three nights a week and all day Saturday. Do my poetry readings every Wednesday. Friday's my only evening off during the week. Sunday's my only day off from everything. I try to study and write most Sundays, call my parents. I work at the primary school every afternoon from two to five-thirty. After-school shift, when the munchkins are at their worst."

I grinned at that. "I'm sure you have no trouble. You probably climb into the sandbox with them."

He laughed as he pulled on his shoes. "Yeah, pretty much." He looked up at me. "Want to come with?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll just hang out here. Maybe do some packing."

He nodded as he tied his shoelaces and then stood in front of me, his expression sober. The teasing side of him had fallen behind a mask of sadness. "I'm sorry about all this, Brandon."

"It's not your fault," I said, reaching up and stroking his cheek. It amazed me, how comfortable I was around him when we were alone. How I could be the self I'd wanted to be for so long.

He leaned into my touch. "If I hadn't come to that audition --"

"I'd be dying of misery, Nicholas. I'm glad you came. I said no regrets, and I meant it."

He leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. "You should get more sleep. You look wiped out."

"I am. I think I will, thanks."

"After all, I'll be keeping you up all night. That's a promise." He touched my chin, his eyes not having lost any of their seriousness. "I don't break my promises, Brandon."

I flushed, thinking about that one promise he'd made; when he saw the flame in my eyes, he laughed and tried to step away. I lunged for his arm and caught it, pulling him to me so that he fell off balance and onto the bed -- onto me. He wiggled into the space between my legs and laid his head on my chest. A sigh of contentment escaped him. I stroked his hair and he nuzzled me, clutching at my shoulder with one hand.

"Do you have to go right away?"

"In a minute."

I closed my eyes. The bittersweet memory of our long night in the abandoned apartment surfaced in my mind. Just two days ago, it'd been, when I first held him like this. An outpouring of emotion flooded me. I kissed him on the forehead, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him close. "I'm going to miss you today."

"I'll miss you, too."

He wiggled his hips against mine. My breath quickened as my body responded to his warmth. "How do you do this to me?" I whispered, arching my back. "I'm a walking hard-on around you. You know that?"

"It's charm, babe. Pure charm." He kissed me on the chin, then touched the cleft there with his finger. "I've got to go."

I tried to keep my disappointment from showing as he pushed up so he could look at me. Not sure I succeeded. "I'm sorry about earlier. I mean, not letting you ... not getting you ..."

“Not getting me off?” He grinned wickedly at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you make it up to me.” He eased off me, leaving me feeling sad and bereft. He touched me on the knee, his expression stern as he saw the look on my face. “Don’t. Get some sleep.”

“What time do you want to go to your friend’s house?”

He beamed at me then. “About seven-thirty?”

“Cool. Jonathan told me his girlfriend’s going to cook supper for us. Around six or so.”

“Girlfriend. So he really is straight, then.”

I laughed. “Oh, yeah. As an arrow.”

“I like him, Brandon.”

I smiled and sat up on the bed. “Yeah, he’s a great guy. Most of the time, anyway,” I clarified.

I walked Nicholas out to my car. My parents’ neighbor Mrs. Blakely was out walking her dog, so I had to settle for a surreptitious touch of farewell to Nick’s hand. He grinned at me quirkily, sucking the inside of his cheek as he arched his eyebrows. I’d get to know that expression as a favorite of his when he was up to something.

“Bye,” he said, hesitating after opening the door. Mrs. Blakely was looking straight at us.

“Bye.”

“I want to kiss you,” he whispered, his eyes glinting.

I looked at him, knowing my agony ghosted my eyes. “I want to kiss you, too.”

“Then why shouldn’t we?” He dropped the keys. “Oh, darn, look what I did.”

Together we crouched down to pick up the keys. I grabbed them first. Well hidden from Mrs. Blakely by the car, he covered my mouth with his for a sweet kiss. We broke apart as we stood, and I handed Nicholas the keys. He dropped them again.

“Nick,” I admonished, this time letting him pick them up himself.

I should’ve bent down with him. He kissed me on the groin and grabbed my butt as he stood, making me yelp. Mrs. Blakely whipped her head around. I grinned sheepishly at her and waved. Nicholas slid into the car and closed the door before I could react further.

He opened the window. “Bye-bye, darling,” he said softly, batting his eyelashes at me. He started my car and backed out of the driveway. I watched as he took off, his hand waving in the air. Before disappearing around the corner, he closed his fist and made a pumping action. I grinned, hoping Mrs. Blakely hadn’t seen.

She had, of course. He would pay for that.

He probably counted on it.

Mrs. Blakely stared after him. “Who was that driving your car, Brandon?” she called out to me.

"My singer," I called back. "Nicholas Kilmain. Next time you see him, he's going to be famous. Bye, Mrs. Blakely."

I went back into the house before she could say anything else and headed for my bedroom. I walked through the living room, then paused as I spied the telephone directory on the coffee table.

Picking it up, I thumbed through the B's, finally stopping when I found what I wanted. I wrote the address and phone number down, then went back to my room and stuck it in my wallet. I planned to find out where Blevins lived, where he worked, what he did for fun besides torturing helpless boys.

It pissed me off, what he'd done to Nicholas. And what he'd promised to do to us both. I couldn't just sit back and wait for him to follow through, though I had no intention of telling Nicholas my plans to stalk Percy as he'd stalked Nicholas. There had to be a way to stop him, and I intended to find it. I also needed to find out who his buddy was.

It wasn't lost on me that they were probably trying to find out who I was, too.

Digging around in my closet, I found an old, battered suitcase. I didn't intend to take much with me now -- my clothes, most of which were at Adam's anyway, and a few other things. I reached for my bookshelf, taking out the book in which I'd hidden the pictures of Nicholas. I weighed it in my hand, smiling. I didn't think I ought to show him just how much a fixation he was for me. I tossed the book in my suitcase.

Next I picked up a wooden box I kept on my dresser. I opened it and peered inside. It was a typical box of boy junk, most of which ought to be thrown away. A pretty feather I'd found, some marbles, a bunch of guitar picks, a few old coins I'd found on the beach. A small black velvet case was nestled inside. I opened it, fingering the golden hoops it contained.

I'd gotten my ears pierced the year before. Jenny had gone with me, telling me lots of guys she knew had their ears pierced. It wasn't any big deal. She'd held my hand while the first hole was punched -- and then, feeling a bit crazy that day, I guess, I'd let the technician talk me into the second even though it hurt like hell.

My hair was longer then and I'd been able to hide them for a while. But eventually my dad noticed and went ballistic. He made me take them out. I grimaced, remembering Adam's reaction -- he'd been there when Dad first saw them. He called me a fag for the first time to my face then, telling me only queers wore earrings. Dad hadn't told him to shut up or anything.

Ashamed, I'd put the earrings away, thinking maybe someday I'd get to wear them again. Now seemed good to me.

I went into the bathroom and, realizing I pretty much still reeked of sex and Nicholas, decided to take a shower first. I put the earrings on the counter and turned on the hot water, stripping off my jeans and easing under the hot spray.

I smiled when I chose the same shampoo Nicholas had used -- we would match. I wondered what he'd think of my earrings. *If* I could get them in again. He hadn't even noticed the holes in my ears, and I worried they might be all closed up.

After scrubbing myself in the best shower I'd had in days, I got out and dried off, slipping on clean boxers, shorts, and a fresh t-shirt. I was about out of laundry. I hoped Jonathan had a washer and dryer at his new place.

It felt weird, tossing what little was left into that suitcase. The finality of it made me sad. I was truly leaving my parents' house for the last time. Leaving my mom. I didn't want to think about when she found out what had happened. Guilt ate at me for the row I feared she and Dad would have. I knew I should be here when she got home so I could tell her myself, but Fridays she went with some women friends of hers out to eat. She wouldn't find out I was gone until she came home after ten or so.

I wondered how Dad would tell her.

Sighing, I returned to the bathroom and picked up one of the loops. I grimaced at it and, with hands not too steady, tried to get it into my ear. Then I noticed something. I set the earring down and craned my neck, fingering the mark Nicholas had left.

Jonathan hadn't said a word -- yet. I groaned. And here I was meeting his new girlfriend. And Nick's friends. It'd be kinda obvious who'd put that mark there.

Great. It was too hot for a turtleneck.

I picked up the first earring again and sighed. There wasn't anything I could do about it now. Not that I regretted it. I'd liked the feel of Nicholas latched on to me like that.

The mere thought of his lips on me sent a rush of heat to my groin. I stared at myself in the mirror. "You've got it bad, Brandon Ashwood. Really bad."

The face in the mirror nodded in agreement.

It took fifteen minutes, some cussing, and a few threats to flush them both down the drain to get the earrings in. The holes had closed some; my right one kinda burned, and bled a little. At last, though, I stared at myself in the mirror, nodding in deep satisfaction at the hoops in my ears.

I hoped Nicholas liked them. I did. A small act of defiance on my part, snubbing my dad's wishes. Not that what he wanted me to do or not do mattered anymore. I was my own man and could do what I wanted now.

If only I had more than the forty dollars in my wallet to do it with.

Grabbing a box from my closet, I scooped up all the toiletries I had left in my bathroom, tossed the box into the suitcase, and closed it. That was that. Lugging the suitcase with me, I walked into the living room and set it down, then grabbed some fresh paper and the pen I'd used earlier to write Blevins's name down, and wrote my mom a letter.

I couldn't think what else to do -- I couldn't call her at work, and I wouldn't be here when she got home. I didn't say much, just that I loved her and was sorry. Told her where

Nicholas and I would be, and that we were okay. I signed it, sealed it in an envelope, and walked into her bedroom to tuck it under her pillow.

I stood for a moment in my parents' bedroom, feeling the sadness return, the realization hitting me hard that a major part of my life was now over. I was only nineteen, ill prepared to care for myself, but going to do it anyway. I had regrets aplenty, mostly that I hadn't tried harder.

But, I *was* only nineteen. And now I had Nicholas.

A door slammed. "Mom?" I called out, hoping it was her. I walked into the hallway -- and right into Adam. "Sorry," I said, immediately backing away.

He scowled at me. "What are you doing here still?" he asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

He pushed past me and went into the kitchen. I followed after him, filled with apprehension, and hope.

"Jonathan said you and your queer boy were moving in with him."

"His name is Nicholas."

Adam looked briefly at me and snorted. He opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk. In a habit that still disgusts me, he tipped the carton back and took a long drink before setting it back inside the refrigerator.

"You shouldn't do that, Adam."

"Why not? You do what you want. Or so I hear."

"Did you come to see me about anything?" I said icily. "I'm pretty busy right now."

He snorted. "Doing what? You don't do anything but sit around and play your guitar all day. By the way, I want your stuff out tomorrow, or I'll stick it on the curb. A friend of mine is going to move into your room."

I shook my head. "What's with you, Adam?"

"What's with *me*? You're the one going around fucking boys. I can't believe you, Brandon. You're pathetic."

"I don't go around *fucking* boys, Adam. Who I have in my bed is none of your business anyway."

"It is now. The band wants him. I can't fucking believe it."

I stilled myself, unable to keep the hope from my eyes. He noticed, of course -- Adam is observant -- and then he noticed the mark on my neck, and my earrings. He grabbed my chin and exposed my neck. I jerked away.

"Cut it out, Adam."

"You let him give you a hickey? What the fuck were you thinking? People are going to see that and know what you were doing with your boyfriend."

"He didn't sign his name to it, Adam."

He shook his head, pure disgust on his face. "Damn, Brandon. And do you have to wear those?" he said, flicking my ear. "I thought Dad told you that you couldn't."

"Dad has no more say over me. I'm not welcome in his house anymore."

Adam's eyes widened. Even he was surprised. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not."

"Because of ... because of Nicholas?"

"Yes."

"That'll piss Mom off, her baby boy sent packing."

"Shut up, Adam. I really don't need this."

He pulled his keys out of his pocket. "So that's why you're going to Jonathan's."

"It's either that or my car, and I don't want to live there."

He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I hate that you're gay, Brandon. In fact, it pisses me off. It grosses me out. But that sucks. I never thought Dad would do that." He paused. "Tell your boyfriend rehearsals start next Tuesday. I'll give him two weeks. If he can't handle the load, he's out."

His gaze bored into mine. I blinked; he looked so much like Jonathan, yet like anything but. Adam has a hardness around him, a defensive anger I've never understood. I knew it cost him to let Nicholas in on Ashwood, but I felt no warmth at his decision. Not like I would've if it'd happened when I wanted it to.

"I'll tell him."

Adam drew closer to me, his body coiled with suppressed anger, his hands clenched and green eyes flashing. "Tell him this, too. If anyone finds out you guys are *lovers* --" He said the word as if it were vile. "-- then you're both out. I won't let Ashwood be known as a fag band."

My own anger spiked, heating my face. But I controlled myself as best I could, knowing Jonathan was right -- Ashwood's connections, in reality Adam's, would be invaluable to Nicholas. Adam could get us venues no one else could, with the kinds of crowds I knew would love Nick's unique voice, his stage presence.

I nodded tersely. "No one will know."

"See that they don't." Then he left, slamming the door behind him.

I collapsed against the counter, elation warring with hatred for my brother, and for my father.

We *would* be rich. We *would* be famous, Nicholas and I. We'd show them. All of them.

Feeling nothing but exhaustion now, and with my head starting to hurt again, I went into my room, stripped the sheets and pillowcases, and dumped them into the washing machine. Belatedly I remembered the t-shirts, ran into the kitchen, and grabbed them.

Feeling a little weird but finding comfort in it anyway, I sniffed Nick's shirt, inhaling his scent. With a grin, I plunked the t-shirts into the wash and went into the living room to collapse onto the couch.

* * * * *

That's where Nicholas found me several hours later. This time, he threw a pillow at me to wake me up.

"Hey," I said blearily. I sat up and stared at the pillow that had fallen on the floor. "What was that for?"

He grinned. "I didn't want to risk a black eye."

I sat up against the back of the couch, my hands in my lap. "I'm sorry about that."

He touched his face. "You didn't hurt me. Feel any better?"

I nodded, realizing my headache was finally and truly gone. "Yeah, I do. I'm starving, too."

"Me, too. Think she put meat in the spaghetti sauce?"

"I don't know." I started to stand, and he held his hand out. I grasped it, grinning as he didn't let go but instead pulled me to him. I looped my hands around his waist and hugged him, my grin turning a bit misty as he threw his arms around me and squeezed tight.

"Can't believe how much I missed you. I couldn't wait for the last ankle-biter to go home."

"I missed you, too."

"You were asleep. How could you miss me?"

I pulled back. "Because I didn't fall asleep in your arms. I missed you then," I said shyly.

His gaze softened and he smiled, then kissed me. "I can't wait for tonight."

"Me, either."

"You owe me, remember?"

I pulled him closer, swaying on my feet. "I know. I owe you big. I've got news for you, though."

He released me; guess he heard something in my voice. "What? Did you hear on your keyboards?"

"No, not that, but I plan to pick them up Monday."

"Andy's a gem."

I frowned at him. "How'd you know about that, anyway?"

He grinned, pulling away from me and twirling in a circle. "Cause he called the record store last night, to make sure that we found each other. When I told him we had, he got all

excited and told me.” He paused, looking at me with sad eyes. “Too bad we’re kinda at an impasse right now.”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Oh?”

“Adam came by this afternoon. The guys want you, Nicholas.”

He froze for a moment, those blue eyes of his flashing with emotion. His shoulders sank. “The guys. The others, not him.”

I grasped his shoulders and grimaced. “He’s given us two weeks, to see if it works. Rehearsals start Tuesday.”

He dropped his gaze to the floor, lost in thought. “Two weeks. That’s not much time.” He looked up at me. “What time Tuesday?”

“We usually practice in the afternoons. Most of the guys work at night.”

He blanched. “Afternoons. I’ll have to quit my school job, then.” I started to protest, but he waved me away. “No, no, it’s okay. I said I’d do what I have to do. I can drop Wednesday night and see if Charlie will let me work then.”

“Are you sure?”

He grinned, but I still saw the worry in his eyes. “Of course I am. I’ll miss the rugrats, but it’ll be okay. I’m in the band!” He swooped me into his arms, picking me up and awkwardly twirling me more or less around.

I laughed with relief. “Let me down, silly.”

He plunked me unceremoniously onto my feet, then kissed me on the cheek. “This is great. I can’t believe he said yes.”

“He’s not too happy about it, but Jonathan and the other guys kinda ran over his protests.”

“Jonathan’s in the band?”

“Sort of. He plays bass guitar, but his job takes him away a lot. He just got back from England. He’s just in it for the fun of it anymore. He’ll be happy you’re in, though.”

“Are you happy I’m in?”

I smiled shyly at him. “Of course I am.” Then I remembered Adam’s warning. I sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Adam insists the guys in the band not know about us, Nicholas. You okay with that?”

He grabbed my hands, his expression sobering. “Yes. And no. Remember what I said the other night?”

I nodded. Every word he’d said burned in my memory. “Yeah.”

“We’ll still have our nights together. I promise. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Man of few words.”

I pulled him to me, kissing him. “But I feel them, Nicholas. Inside. And you’re going to help me bring them out.”

The blissful smile on his face filled me, consumed me, made me feel truly whole. I think that simple moment was one of the happiest I ever had with Nicholas.

Nicholas looked closely at me, then reached out and brushed my hair back. “Brandon Ashwood. What are those?”

I ducked my head, embarrassed -- but the good kind of embarrassed. “Earrings.”

He chortled, reaching up with his other hand and pushing my hair behind my ears. “I can see that, silly boy. I didn’t know your ears were pierced.”

I lifted my chin, feeling a wave of defiance course through me. “Got them done a year ago. Dad’s kicking me out, so I decided to put them back in.”

“He made you take them out?”

I nodded curtly. He sighed in sympathy, then took a step back, tilting his head to the side, his fingers resting on his chin as he evaluated my new look. I stood awkwardly before him -- I wasn’t used to such blatant attention.

“I like them. They’re you. Nice hickey, too. Think maybe I should get one?”

“You want me to give you a hickey?” I said, a little embarrassed at the thought of matching hickeys.

He laughed. “No, silly. I meant, should I get one of my ears pierced?” He tugged his left ear. “This one?”

“It hurts,” I warned.

He winced. “I hate pain. Maybe I should try a clip-on instead. Think?”

I laughed, then walked over and picked up my suitcase. “Come on. Jonathan’s waiting, and I want to stop by Adam’s and get the rest of my things. Don’t worry, he won’t be there.”

“Okay,” he said, jiggling my keys in his hand. “I want to run by the shelter, too, and get my box of stuff.”

“Sure. Let me see the keys a minute.”

He tossed them to me. I headed for the door, unclipping the house key from my chain. I felt Nick’s eyes on me as I veered toward my dad’s chair. I stood for a moment, staring down at it, feeling tears burn at the back of my eyes.

Fuck you, Dad. I set the key next to his remote control, but still stood there, despair warring with my anger. Nicholas came up behind me, resting one hand on my shoulder.

“Come on, Brandon. Let’s go.”

I nodded, letting him lead me out of my parents’ house, glancing at my piano for what I feared might be the last time.

Nicholas drove. I stared out the window, seeing only what was necessary to direct him to Adam's apartment. I took that key off, too, as we went inside. Nicholas waited in the living room, watching the TV while I threw my few possessions into a box. That's what I'd been reduced to -- a small suitcase and a box.

I took the box outside, stuffing it into the back seat before going back inside. Nicholas had turned off the TV, watching me as I walked over to the corner where my guitar leaned on its stand.

"I can't wait to hear you play that," Nicholas said.

I looked up at him and smiled. "I can't wait to play for you, either. Here." I handed it to him, walked back into the bedroom, and returned with another guitar, my acoustic. I handed that to him, too. "Not sure how I'm going to get all this stuff in," I said, unplugging my amp and hauling it out to the car, Nicholas following after me.

It took some doing. Finally Nicholas had to sit in the back, the amp and guitars up front. I locked the apartment door and closed it, realized I still had the key, and opened the door again to toss the key onto the kitchen counter. I took a last look around -- I'd only been there a few weeks and never made my mark on the meager rooms. Except for the missing guitars, there was really no sign I'd ever been there.

I locked the door and returned to Nicholas. "You okay?" I asked as I got in.

"Yeah. You know where the shelter is?"

"Yup."

We drove there in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. We arrived at last. The parking lot was pretty much empty. "That's my car," he said as we passed an old, rusted yellow car.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Dead. Simply dead. I'm going to have to have it hauled off."

"Mine's not much better."

"At least it runs."

I parked the Volkswagen. Nicholas had to practically climb over my seat to get out. He didn't say anything as I followed him into the shelter; I could sense his unease as we entered. We walked down a short corridor with institutional green floors so shiny I could see our reflections. I gave him his space, sensing a strange new aura around him.

I thought a shelter was supposed to be a haven. Now I wondered. Questions popped into my mind -- questions I hadn't had a chance to ask him. Where were his parents? Was he an only child? Why didn't he tell them he was stuck here?

"This way," he said softly. I could see him steel himself as he paused at a door, then turned the handle. I drew closer to him, soaking up his wariness. We entered a small room with six beds in it. There was no one inside.

His breath came out in a swoosh.

"You okay, Nicholas?"

He glanced at me, his blue eyes wide with discomfort. But he smiled gamely and nodded. "Yes. No one's here."

I touched his arm. "It's okay," I said. "I'm not going anywhere."

What had gone on here?

He walked to the farthest bed, one covered in a well-worn yellow and black quilt.

"Would you mind folding that?"

"Sure." I pulled the quilt off the bed and began to fold it. It was so soft, ancient. Hand-stitched by someone with patient care. My mom would've had a fit -- she'd hang a quilt like this on special hangers on the wall. "This is beautiful."

"My gran made it."

His gran. Another question to ask. I set the folded blanket on the end of the bed. He placed a single pillow on top of it. I stared at the small bed, barely more than a twin. What must it have been like, having to stay here? It looked like I imagined an orphanage would look. An orphanage for adults.

Nicholas knelt and reached beneath the bed to pull out a box. It was almost empty, just a few clothes neatly folded inside and a few envelopes with writing on the outside. He set the box on the bed, then opened the single drawer in the bedside table. A brush, a comb, toothbrush and toothpaste. He placed them in the box. "Okay, that's it."

The door opened. Nicholas whirled around, his eyes wide, his mouth open slightly as he stared at the newcomer.

I glanced at the man walking with heavy strides toward us. He was a big man -- muscles, not fat rippled beneath his faded black t-shirt. His hair was thinning on top, though he didn't look much older than Jonathan. He almost waddled as he walked, his legs were so muscular and bulging through worn jeans. His small, dark eyes took me in, dismissing me to focus on Nicholas.

"Where you been?"

"Wh-why are you here, Mack? You aren't supposed to come around here anymore." His gaze darted to me.

"Saw you come in. Thought I'd see you a sec. Somethin' wrong with that?"

"O-of course n-not."

"So what are you doing?"

Nicholas was trembling. I automatically place myself in front of him. The man frowned, then leaned against the bed and folded his arms across his chest. He flexed his biceps -- it would take both of mine to equal one of his. I pushed my nervousness aside, though. Nicholas didn't need me to freak out now.

"I'm leaving, Mack. That's all."

"You weren't going to tell me?"

Nick's face paled. "I-I wouldn't know where you were."

"You know where I work. Took the day off. So where you going?"

"He's going with me."

Mack looked at me, his nostrils flaring. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Nick's friend. Are we done here, Nicholas?"

"Y-yes ..."

I picked up the blanket and pillow, set them in the box, and picked it up. "Come on, then. My brother's waiting for us."

Mack eased from his position, staring down at me. His gaze hardened. "I asked Nicholas where he was going. Not you, little shit."

"And I answered for him. Let's go Nicholas. Now."

Balancing the box on my hip, I reached out and pulled at his arm. Nicholas gulped, but moved at my urging. I pulled him along with me, past Mack -- he didn't move. I felt his anger, barely in check, smelled his hatred for me as I passed. He fell into step behind us. I didn't loosen my grip on Nicholas, propelling him ahead of me.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. The muscles of his arm quivered beneath my hand.

Mack still followed, banging the door against the wall as he passed through it after us. Nicholas flinched.

"Don't stop moving, Nicholas," I said. "Don't look back at him."

We made it to the outer door. I pushed him through and followed him. Sweat trickled down my back, my own breath coming rapidly now. If the guy tried anything, the only weapon I had was a quilt and a box of clothes.

Not a very effective weapon, either one.

It took all my willpower not to run to the car, dragging Nicholas along with me. When we finally made it there, I could feel Mack's eyes boring into us. I quickly unlocked the door and all but shoved Nicholas into the back seat again, handing him the box. A quick glance proved my suspicions -- Mack was walking toward us, was practically at the back bumper. I did a trick Jenny had taught me -- placed the keys on my keychain between my fingers so they jutted out. An effective weapon.

Just hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

Nick's eyes were huge as he watched Mack come around to my side of the car.

"Who do you think you are?" Mack asked me.

"I'm Nick's friend. You aren't. Leave him alone."

He looked me up and down and burst out laughing. "You're nuts, you know that? Skinny bastard like you, I could toss you over the car if I wanted. Nick's my friend. Aren't you, Nicholas?" Mack leaned toward me, trying to look into the car. I refused to back down. I could smell the rancid smell of onions and smoke and sweat hovering around him. I felt nauseous. "He's my little buddy. Right, Nick?"

"Back away from the car," I said.

"I don't think so."

A car drove past us, then stopped. Mack stepped back, anger flashing in his eyes as an older woman hardly bigger than Jenn got out of the car. She put her hands on her hips and frowned at us, her glance taking in Nicholas, white-faced in the back seat.

"Mack, what's going on? Why are you here?"

"Nothing's going on, Miss J. Nick's leaving, and I was just saying goodbye. Can't a guy say goodbye to his friend?"

The woman looked at the keys in my fist, at Nicholas, and gestured with her chin. "Go on, you two. Now."

I hesitated. I didn't want to leave her alone with the brute. Then the other door of her car opened and a large African American man exited. Inside my car, Nicholas laid his head back on the seat. A tear streaked down his cheek.

"Problem, Jane?"

"No, Lex. I was just about to remind Mack he was no longer welcome here."

The man walked around until now it was the four of us standing outside my car. Miss J nodded at me again. "Go on. Get him out of here."

I nodded. "Thank you."

She glanced up at Mack -- the guy was fuming, but held himself in check. Lex had moved next to him. She leaned down to say something to Nicholas. I couldn't hear what she said, but I saw him nodding. I watched Mack, making sure he didn't try something even with the lady and her friend present.

She stood with a quick smile at me and squeezed my arm. "Take care of him. He's been through enough without this moose bothering him, too."

"I will."

I got into the car and started the engine, nearly gunning it just to get us the hell out of there. As we exited the parking lot, I decided to turn right instead of left -- I figured they'd keep Mack occupied for a few minutes so I could get Nicholas out of there, but didn't want to take any chances of him trying to follow.

Who the fuck was he, anyway?

Behind me I heard Nicholas let out his breath. I hated this, hated seeing him reduced to such helpless fear again. It wasn't right. He was so strong otherwise -- strong in ways I wasn't. I had to wonder if he'd been brutalized by the guy.

Of course he had.

I floored the car, anger making my foot heavy. I turned the next corner and headed for Jonathan's. I kept silent until we drove into the driveway, grateful it looped around to the back. I stopped the car and immediately got out, pulling the front seat forward. I took the box from Nicholas and set it on top of the car, then reached my hand in for Nick's. He took it and let me pull him out and into my arms.

He shook harder than he had the night Percy had come after him.

"It's okay, Nick," I whispered, holding him close. He grasped my neck, burying his face in my shoulder. Now it was my turn to soothe him. I leaned against the car, pulling him to me. I sensed my brother's presence, hovering a little ways away.

I looked around at him.

"Everything okay, Brandon?" he asked.

I nodded. "It will be now. We'll be inside in a minute."

He looked at an obviously upset Nicholas folded in my arms, and nodded. "Okay. But I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks, Jon."

"Dinner will be ready in a few."

Once Jonathan was gone, Nicholas pulled away from me, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be."

"I couldn't believe he was there. He wasn't supposed to come back."

"Who was he?"

He looked up to the sky, his blue eyes shimmering with tears. "Just another guy, just another fag chaser who thinks it's funny to force those smaller and weaker than him to do whatever he wants."

"Nicholas," I whispered, wiping the tears from one of his reddened cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

He smiled tremulously at me. "You were so brave. He's twice your size."

"I promised you I wouldn't let anyone hurt you again."

"I know."

"So I want to know who that was." I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice now. "I want to know if there's anyone else like that, hovering around in your past."

Nicholas pulled away from me, his cheeks red. Anger flashed in his eyes. "There's no one else. I didn't make it a habit of courting bastards who were into raping me, Brandon."

I inhaled deeply, letting it out slowly. "I didn't say you did. But there's already two guys after you. After *us*, Nicholas. Are there three? I need to know."

He pushed off from me and walked a few steps away, folding his arms across his chest. "Sorry to be such a bother to you, Brandon."

I stared at his back, the vulnerable hunching of his shoulders. With a sigh, I moved up behind him, wrapping my arms around him much as he had me earlier that day.

"You're not a bother. I'm just worried about you." I squeezed him. "I'm angry because, well, it pisses me off. If only I'd caught you after that play. Maybe things would have been different."

He relaxed in my arms. "There will always be 'if onlys,' Brandon. We can't live our lives wishing for things to happen or not to have happened."

"I know."

I breathed softly on his neck, kissed his ear. He smelled like graham crackers and Elmer's glue. He laid his head back against my shoulder and sighed. "Can we go in now?"

"After you answer my question."

He nodded and didn't move from my embrace, but turned around in my arms, bringing his hands up to play with the collar of my shirt. It was a weird thing, between Nicholas and me. The way we switched off on vulnerability. The way our strengths, and our weaknesses, were seemingly opposite. How we sought what was missing from the other, and found it.

When we were honest with each other, that is. We weren't always, me especially.

And that's how later he ended up so hurt. I knew I'd never get over that guilt.

He wouldn't look at me as he spoke. "Mack showed up about three months ago. To say he took a liking to me is an understatement." He snorted. "He's one of those guys who's straight but gets off on, as he put it, 'getting sucked off by queers.'" He shook his head. "The first time it happened, I was on kitchen duty. We all took turns helping the cook do chores around the place. Mack had only been there a few days. There was no one else around, thought I'd get an early start since I had to leave for work. He caught me in the closet."

"Nicholas, you don't have to say anything else --"

He patted my chest. "No, no, that's okay. He cornered me, grabbed me, and forced me to my knees. Grabbed me by the hair, made me --"

He stopped then. I could fill in the picture. I kissed him on the forehead. "You didn't tell anybody, did you?"

"Not at first. Not until one day I pissed him off and he slammed me into a stack of canned beans. Miss J caught him then -- I'd passed out. She sent him packing and warned him not to come back. I don't know why he was there today. He shouldn't have been."

"How long ago was this, Nicholas?"

He hesitated. "About two weeks."

I bit down hard on my anger. "He has no reason to try to find you, does he?"

"No. He was just one of those, the kind of guy that ... that fem guys like me seem to invite. That's why --" His breath hitched and he shook his head.

"That's why what?"

He looked up at me. "That's why being with you is so amazing to me. You're cute and kind and talented, and you make me feel safe. You let me be in control. No one ever has before."

I smiled at that. "I kinda like you being in control," I confessed.

He pulled me down to him, brushing his lips over mine as his hands sought my ass, his fingers grasping my butt cheeks, rubbing along the back seam of my jeans and hitting a spot that made me jerk in surprise. I'd never been touched by anyone there before, even through clothes, but a flood of longing flashed through me.

His promise seared through my mind.

"Nick," I said, my need for him clear in the single word.

He chuckled as he pressed himself against me, grinding his hips into mine as he captured my mouth again. Using his tongue, he forced my lips to part. I gave in willingly. He drew my tongue into his mouth, sucking gently on it, coaxing a sigh out of me before he would let me go.

"I know, Brandon, I know," he whispered, finally releasing me.

"What did I do to deserve you?" I whispered. That overwhelming rush of emotion engulfed me again. I didn't understand what it meant -- or tried to tell myself I didn't. But I did.

I loved him.

I really loved him, not the infatuated love I'd held on to for the past two years. This was the real deal. I knew at that moment I couldn't live without him in my life. But I was terrified to tell him -- he'd only just met me; he'd been through so much. So instead I kissed him, tried to show him how I felt with my lips, my body. This time he let me possess *him*. But that was short-lived.

The back door banged open and Jonathan emerged. "Come *on*, guys! Dinner's ready, if you would please pry yourselves apart. You coming? Wait, forget I said that."

"Yes, yes, we'll be right there," I said, laughing. "Thanks, Jonathan."

"Yeah, right." The door slammed shut.

I tugged on Nick's hand. "Come on. I want to meet this woman who has my brother so tied up in knots."

"Do I look okay?" He smoothed his shirt, then smoothed mine. "We're wrinkled now."

"We're fine. And you look fantastic." I smoothed his hair back from his face. It was obvious he'd been upset earlier, but the heightened color and glimmer in his eyes only magnified his beauty. At least, he was beautiful to me. I leaned over and kissed him.

He grinned merrily at me and grabbed my hand, whirling back into the man-child that made my head spin.

"Come on, then, Brandon. Hurry up. I want to check out our new room. Do you think it has a window? Think we have our own bathroom? I hope it has wooden floors. Maybe it has a big mirror. We could put a big mirror on one of the walls. That would be cool ..."

Laughing, I let myself be pulled after Nicholas and into our new home.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Hey, Brandon?"

I looked up from my laptop to find Tommy hovering beside me. I hit Save and closed it. I really didn't want any of the others to know what I was doing.

"What's up, Tommy?" I spoke quietly -- Nicholas was asleep, lunch and his surprise visitors having worn him out.

"Does Nicholas sleep this much all the time?" He cast an anxious glance at Nick. Sam dozed in the chair beside the bed; I didn't know where Marisa was. Probably making phone calls somewhere, arranging hotel accommodations until we could find us a place to live.

"He sleeps most of the day. His medications make him pretty tired."

"He nearly died, didn't he?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I picked up my laptop to ease it onto my tray. Tommy grabbed it and set it down for me. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"Want to go out in the lobby for a little while? I want to ask Nick's nurse when his doctor's going to come by. See when we can spring him."

"Sure." He bent down and picked up my crutches, handing them to me as I pushed myself up. "How's your foot?"

"Hurts, but I'm not complaining. The stitches in my back were worse."

I glanced at Nicholas sleeping peacefully in his bed. Sam snored, then snorted in his sleep before rearranging his limbs. I grinned at Tommy and he chuckled.

With a nod to Jeff, Tommy and I left the boys sleeping. We hadn't gotten halfway down the hall before Mutt fell into step behind us. Tommy looked at the stony-faced policeman warily, then back at me.

"Kinda creepy, don't you think?"

"Maybe a little, but he's a great guy to have around. Know what I could use now?" I said. "A smoke."

"Thought you gave that up."

"How'd you know that?"

He shrugged. "Just heard it."

"Damn. I guess I can't have one then, can I?"

"Actually? Nicholas told me to keep an eye on you and offer you a lollipop if you so much as looked at a cigarette."

I laughed. "He couldn't believe it when I told him I finally quit."

We reached the lobby and sat in the chairs. I sighed, closing my eyes. My fingers itched to do something. Anything. I slipped my ring off -- Nick's ring, actually, which I'd worn since finding him -- and twirled it in my fingers.

"Brandon, can I ask you something?"

"Sure." I wondered what this would be. With Tommy, you never knew. He was well known for his off-the-wall clothes and hair, and off-the-wall fascinations which had led him, and as a consequence the rest of us, to everything from Buddhism to feng shui.

That one especially had been a pain. For a while there, *he'd* been the diva, insisting on everything being arranged *just so*.

"How long? I mean, how long were you and Nicholas ..." He blushed, fidgeting in his chair. "... uh, together? I guess it's none of my business, but I'm just curious."

"From the beginning, when we first met."

He shook his head. "Amazing. I can't believe none of us saw it."

"I was very good at lying, Tommy. Especially to myself."

"Are you really happy with the announcement you guys made? Are you really sure about this, Brandon? I remember all the talks we used to have. You were really unhappy about being away from home." He ran his hand nervously through his hair. "Shit, I didn't listen very good to you, did I?"

"Don't blame yourself for anything, Tommy. Yeah, I was. But mostly because I was scared I'd never see it again. That something would happen ..." I fell silent.

"So you're good with this, then. I can't tell you how excited I am, to work with you guys again." He grinned. "Life's been pretty damn boring lately. Except for Sylvie, of course."

I took a deep breath, twiddling the ring around and around in my hand. "I'm a little nervous about it still, but yeah, I want to --" I stopped, took a deep breath. "It won't be the same. It can't be. But it can be good again."

"Different, but good."

"I'm glad you'll be with us on this."

He grinned happily. "Just say the word when. Sylvie was thrilled."

I stilled. "You told Sylvie?"

"Yeah, just talked to her a little while ago. She's saying all the reports on you guys are positive, by the way. At least that she's seen."

I nodded, though inside I flinched as the circle of knowledge of what had really happened ever expanded. I really couldn't wait to see the detective and tell him. He'd be pissed, I had a feeling. And rightly so.

Tommy grinned, reaching out and tapping the ring I twirled. "I know what you need, and it isn't a smoke." He stood. "Be right back. Sam and I brought you a present."

"Where are you going?"

"Just be patient. Gotta run to the car a sec." He slammed his hand on the elevator button. It opened right away for him, and he darted inside.

I smiled as he waved to me just before the doors closed. It was really good to be friends with him again. I'd missed Tommy terribly. And Sam. I couldn't wait to see Lee again, too. He, out of all the band, had known what was going on between me and Nicholas; he'd just never let on to the others, for which we were grateful.

A few minutes passed, and I stretched out, glad Mutt stood by the window, watching over me. This was the VIP wing -- we didn't get too much traffic as a result -- but his presence was still comforting to me. Especially after the Barkley incident, as we called what happened with Nick and the box.

I'd closed my eyes and was dozing off when it hit -- an explosion outside the building almost shook me out of my chair.

"What the hell?" I said, bewildered. I grabbed my crutches and stood, heading for the window to look outside.

But Mutt had other ideas. He literally scooped me up like I was a child, leaving my crutches on the floor, and hustled with me in his arms to Nick's room. I didn't have time to protest, or wonder what the hell had happened when a second explosion rocked us. Sam had bolted from his chair and now ran past us into the hallway. Mutt didn't stop him.

Stark terror rocketed through me as the panic in Sam's eyes registered.

It couldn't be. No. Oh, fuck, no ...

"Sam, no!" I cried out, but Mutt fought against my struggles and carried me over to Nick's bed.

"Brandon, what is it?" Nicholas said, reaching for me as Mutt deposited me next to him. The two cops had drawn their guns. Mutt nodded to Jeff, who followed after Sam.

Chapter Twelve

Someone had tried to kill Tommy.

What had happened down in the parking lot came to us piecemeal, delivered to me, Nicholas, and an almost inconsolable Sam in Nick's hospital room. Thank God for Nurse Goodall. She was there for Sam in a way neither Nicholas nor I could be, insisting he stop his mad pacing and making him take something to calm down. He eventually settled in the chair next to Nick's bed, but the fevered worry didn't leave his eyes.

Mutt watched over us all, arms crossed over his broad chest, his face rigid with anger. I figured he took what happened to Tommy personally, believed he should've gone down to the lot with him. Maybe then he would've detected the bomb in time, before Tommy could get hurt. But how could we have really known Tommy had been targeted, too? Especially since he'd been with us only a few hours. Who the fuck *was* this bastard messing with our lives? This was a game to him, and we his carefully maneuvered pawns. I no longer knew how to fight him, if I ever really had.

I'd fucked up so damn bad.

The first minutes after the explosion were pure hell. Waiting to just hear whether or not Tommy had survived was agony. Watching Sam nearly explode with fear and worry, tears streaming down his face, was torture. The two were close; Tommy was like a little brother to Sam. He always watched out for Tommy, made sure he was okay. They'd been friends longer than Nicholas and I had known each other. Now Tommy would need Sam's friendship even more -- if he survived. I hated watching Sam in his misery, and I hated waiting. It brought me back to the terror of Nick's kidnapping, threatened to bring me to my knees as the horrors I'd almost managed to push aside reasserted themselves in my mind. What happened? How badly was he hurt? Was he dead? Who'd done this to him? Would he survive what had been done to him? Would he want to?

I'd had hours, days, weeks of that while Nicholas was missing.

I knew already the agony of not knowing what was happening to someone I loved, and knowing in all likelihood it'd be a while before I did. I was intimately familiar with the relentless merry-go-round of useless questioning, the frantic search for explanation. *What did I not do that might've changed things? What can I do now? How could this have happened? What does he want with us?*

I'd lived in a whirlwind of delusion for so long, believing I was in control just because I'd done what our tormentor demanded. But I'd never been in control. Ever. I knew that now. It'd taken me a long time to accept that. I'd spent hours berating myself for my failure to keep Nicholas safe, but it was really out of my hands. Still, the evil voice inside of me chanted, *You failed him.*

Simple as that. Despite all my capitulation, our tormentor had ultimately gone ahead with his threatened plans, had likely always meant to, and I'd failed Nicholas. And Tommy, and Sam, too.

I still don't know how I'd made it through those endless days. The photos helped, even as they terrorized me. Each new disk that came in had proved Nicholas was still alive. But each new disk had also proved he was slowly dying. And now Tommy might be. Could already be. Yeah, I knew waiting. And I fucking hated it. The helplessness of it. I thought I'd never have to go through this again. But now here I was, again. Waiting. The only difference was, now I wasn't waiting alone.

"He'll be okay, Brandon," Nicholas said, his soft voice interrupting my thoughts. I flushed guiltily, wondering what he'd seen on my face to prompt his need to reassure me. "Don't worry yourself sick, all right?"

I nodded, trying to push back the memories from my eyes. I didn't want Nicholas to see, to *ever* know what I'd gone through while he'd been missing. But of course he knew me better than I knew myself. "I know you're right, Nicholas, but I can't stop thinking --"

I stopped and closed my eyes, my breath catching in my throat at the thought of Tommy and how quickly his life had been changed. Maybe even snuffed out. On another's whim, just like that. And I was responsible.

I felt Nick's fingers touch my cheek. Dazed, I looked down at him. He looked back at me, his expression stern. "Stop it. I can see what you're thinking. I can see all those little brain cells in your head, arguing with each other, trying to figure out what you did to cause this. *It's not your fault!* It's that bastard's fault." His voice softened and he smiled gently at me. "Tommy will be okay. We'll be here to help him, you hear? He's a pretty darn tough guy."

I slowly nodded. *Just like you were. So much stronger than me.* "I hope we hear something soon," I said, glad to hear my voice sound almost normal.

"I hope so, too. It can't be much longer."

He curled his fingers in mine and squeezed. I smiled wanly at him and squeezed back, careful not to hurt him. The strength of his grip wasn't nearly what it had once been. That only added to my worries. Jeff did finally come back to tell us Tommy had somehow survived the explosion. Only then did I really allow myself to hope. But he was hurt. Badly. Had gone straight into surgery. Jeff had no more information for us beyond that, and left again to meet with the cops downstairs.

We waited some more. Nick's doctor came by to see him, make sure he was okay, and to make sure, I thought, that he didn't need sedation. He insisted he didn't, though his face had taken on that ghostly paleness again, and bruises marred the skin beneath his eyes. I drew him closer to me once she was done examining him, as if by sheer will I could ward off the fingers of illness that insisted on keeping their talons hooked into him. I wondered if he'd ever get better again. If I'd ever see that crazy joyful bounce of his, watch him twirl as he loved to do with the sheer happiness of life. I had to believe I would, or it would drive me to madness.

The doctor told us what she knew, that Tommy was still in surgery, had sustained severe burns to his back and neck and had shrapnel in his backside, hip, and right calf. A broken kneecap where he'd hit the car with such force it had shattered. Likely some ribs busted. His shoulder had been dislocated as well, and he had a deep cheek laceration requiring stitches.

"But what about his hands?" Sam asked. "Are his hands okay?"

She'd understood. "They're a little scraped up, but they'll be fine."

Sam closed his eyes, exhaling a huge breath. "Thank you."

Break a guitarist's foot -- hell, both feet, take him out at the knees, whatever -- just don't injure his hands. I thanked God for sparing him that, at least. The doctor left us again, only somewhat satisfied Nicholas was okay, but promising to check back later. I knew we wouldn't be left alone long. I knew she was concerned about Nicholas. I was. She gave me a speculative look, too. I looked hurriedly away before she could see the disjointed fear in my eyes.

A little time passed, but soon enough we had our next visitor, and this one was Detective Anderson himself. He was not a happy man, and the next half-hour was spent listening to him tell us all about it. I was about getting sick of it, though I understood -- it could take days to piece together what had happened to Tommy. And they had to find out, as soon as possible. Other lives were at stake now, not just mine and Nick's.

The bastard had purposely hurt Tommy. Sweet, passionate, crazy, caring Tommy, who wouldn't knowingly hurt anybody. Who was engaged. Whose fiancée I'd had put on the first available plane to Colorado, not knowing if she'd get here and find the man she loved dead or alive, or horribly disfigured.

I watched Detective Anderson pace the length of the hospital room -- not a very large space in which to express his anger. Nicholas squeezed my hand tight, but raised his chin.

Put on a brave front, my Nicholas, though I knew he was terrified of what could happen next. I was terrified, too.

A witness had said she saw Tommy running away from the car right before it exploded, a guitar in his hand -- a guitar he'd brought for me. Even though he was still pissed at me, he'd brought me one of my damn guitars. A peace offering, I guessed, though it was me who was ultimately responsible for the necessity of it. The guitar had been taken, of course, by the cops. It was now evidence. Tommy had run hard, yelling at the witness to take cover, which she had. He'd undoubtedly saved her life. But the explosion had come quick, hurling Tommy off his feet, covering him with hot flames and flying bits of the car. If he'd had on his jacket, it would've been much better for him, but he'd only intended to dash outside into the cold and snow for a minute or two. When the first explosion hit, he'd slammed into the back of another car and rolled over it into a pile of snow, which probably saved his life when the second, far worse, explosion hit.

The witness had seen no one else around but Tommy. No lurking shadows, no gleeful evil being cackling over the success of his mission. But I knew he was there. Somewhere. Watching, proud of what he'd done ... Contemplating his next move.

Tommy had been in surgery for over two hours, and they wouldn't let us wait anywhere but in Nick's room, away from the crime scene, away from the surgical waiting suite -- where an eye could be kept on us all. I'd talked to Jenny on the phone, and she was fine but as worried as we were. A cop had been assigned to her and her husband. They would meet Sylvie at the airport when she arrived and bring her to Tommy. Marisa had gone after lunch to meet with the local lawyer we'd hired to take care of our affairs while we were here. I wasn't too fond of the idea of her having any control of my life again, but knew she would take good care of Nicholas. And, because he insisted, me. A cop was sent to keep an eye on her, too.

"Why, once again, Mr. Kilmain, did you feel compelled to share classified information with your friends?"

"I made a mistake. I didn't realize."

"You mean, you didn't think."

Nicholas blanched. "N-no, I guess I didn't. I'm sorry."

My temper rose. "Stop it, Detective. You're upsetting him. What's done is done. Nicholas told them, and now Tommy is seriously injured, may even die. Yelling at him isn't doing anybody any good." Nick's grip crushed me -- I felt his strength now. His face had faded to an otherworldly pale which emphasized the incredible blueness of his eyes.

"We've told you all we know. Surely it's enough."

"No, it's not enough. I hope you realize, Mr. Ashwood, you're all in even more danger than you were before," the detective said, his disgust with me evident. Guess he wasn't used to being talked back to.

"But you're acting like it's Nick's fault, and it isn't," I insisted. "It's not anybody's." *But mine*, I mentally added. "And I do understand we're in more danger than before. Believe me, I do. As soon as his doctor says he can travel, Nicholas and I are leaving, and we'll be out of your hair."

The detective shook his head. "No. I can't let you leave."

"What?" I said, incredulous. "Why?"

"You can't keep us here!" Nicholas said, panic edging his voice. He grabbed my hands. "Brandon, don't let him make me. *He knows where I am* --"

"Nicholas!" I snapped, surprise at his outburst making me grab his face and force him to look at me. His eyes, unfocused, proved just how haunted he remained by his ordeal. I didn't know yet exactly what had happened those long weeks he'd been held captive. He hadn't talked to me about it yet, though I'd of course seen where he'd been imprisoned. And, as I mentioned, I'd seen the pictures. It'd been bad. Very, very bad. I stroked the side of his face, kissing him gently in reassurance. "It's okay, Nick, I promise. Calm down, okay?"

His eyes focused on me at last, and he nodded. Damn. He'd scared me. I wanted to know where his doctor was -- I hadn't seen him lose it like that before. But he seemed to be getting a grip on himself, taking deep, practiced, calming breaths.

"I'm sorry. I'm okay." He smiled sheepishly. "I-I guess I lost it there. I'm sorry."

I shushed him. God, what a pair we made. What if we both freaked out at the same time? Who would take care of the both of us? How he'd kept himself mentally together through everything, I couldn't fathom. I know my own sanity had hung by a bare thread most of the time, and didn't feel much stronger now.

"It's understandable. Just gotta hang on, okay?" I pulled him to my shoulder and he gave in to me, wrapping his arm around my waist. I cradled his head with my hand and looked at the detective. "I want him out of here. It's not safe now, and what if someone else gets hurt?"

"My suggestion is that your friends and family return to California. That you and Mr. Kilmain let us set you up in a safe house here."

"Imprison us, you mean?"

The detective shook his head. "No, of course not. But I want you here, if at all possible, for a little while. Work with us, Mr. Ashwood. That would be best done with you easily accessible. Now that you've recovered somewhat, I want you to go through everything we have on the case again." He glanced at Nicholas. "And Mr. Kilmain, as well."

I stiffened. Nicholas looked up. "What?" he asked.

I smoothed his hair back, not taking my eyes off the detective. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"He could provide valuable insight. Important insight."

Nicholas pulled away from me and sat up, though he still leaned against my shoulder. "I want to help. I'll do whatever you want."

"Nick --"

But he cut me off. "No, Brandon. I'll be fine. I want this guy caught before someone else gets hurt." He worried his lip a moment, his eyes luminous as he looked at me. "Before you get hurt again. I think we should stay."

I hesitated. "Are you sure? We damn well can do what we please, Nicholas. He can't stop us."

"I know. But I don't want to be too far from Tommy until he can leave, too. I just want out of this hospital."

"All right, Nicholas, if that's what you want."

He looked at me, determination flaring in his eyes. "It's what I want."

Sam rose from the chair and stood next to us -- I'd stayed in the bed with Nicholas since Mutt's unceremonious dumping of me next to him. Sam put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm not leaving them, either. I'm not leaving Tommy. Sylvie will need all the help she can get."

I covered Sam's hand with my own and squeezed. He didn't pull away. I can't explain the incredible relief at that -- his acceptance of my role in Nick's life meant the world to me. Our first bandmates hadn't been so accepting. It'd been no small satisfaction to me later when two of them came back to us, begging for another chance -- a chance at our millions, Nicholas said -- but by then we had Sam and Tommy, and of course Lee, who had come on shortly before we split with my brother, and for both me and Nicholas it was too late for apologies.

"Thanks, Sam. I know Tommy and Sylvie both wouldn't have it any other way." I looked at the detective. "Tommy's fiancée is on her way here. My brother should arrive by tonight, and my other brother and his wife will be here as soon as they possibly can. She's Tommy's sister, and I know she'll want to be here for him and for Sylvie."

The detective sighed in exasperation. "Mr. Ashwood, the more people you add to your entourage, the more difficult this will be."

I nodded. "I understand, Detective. But they're coming. I'd appreciate help in setting up a place for us all to live awhile, but once Tommy is able, we're all leaving Durango."

"You people are going to drive me nuts. All right, Mr. Ashwood. Fine. Bring the whole posse. I suggest you hire professional bodyguards, though. At least for you and Mr. Kilmain."

"I want to hire Mutt and Jeff. They seem to care about us, and we both feel safer having them around." Nicholas nodded into my shoulder at that. "Would that be possible?" I glanced at Mutt. He looked at me in surprise, for once breaking his stolid demeanor.

Detective Anderson sighed. "It's not our usual procedure, but I'm sure something could be arranged ..."

"I'll pay them well for their trouble." I glanced at Mutt again.

He nodded his agreement. "I think Jeff would be interested," Mutt said. "I am."

"You'd be stuck with us for a couple of months, it looks like. If not longer."

"No problem."

"Good. I'll talk to him when he gets back."

The door opened and a uniformed officer came in. "Detective, the reporters are ready."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." The detective looked at his watch. "I'll send one of my officers to advise you on finding an appropriate place to stay. You sure you don't want to go to this with me?"

"I'm sure." The thought of getting up in front of reporters right now made me sick. "I wouldn't know what to say."

He nodded. "I'll just be giving a short statement. It'll have to suffice for now. I won't mention much past there was an explosion and Mr. Hubbard was injured, is in surgery, that neither of you were in any danger of being harmed."

"Thanks." I was glad he was handling the press conference, was willing to make our excuses. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry to put you to all this trouble on our account."

He grimaced. "I have a feeling it would've happened regardless of what Mr. Kilmain told anyone, Mr. Ashwood."

I feared he was right about that.

We were left alone then, under Mutt's watchful scrutiny. Sam sat down again, unseeing, staring at the bedrails. I shifted on the bed, laid my head back, and closed my eyes. This bed really sucked. I promised myself I would buy Nicholas the most beautiful, comfortable bed in all of Durango as soon as I possibly could.

"I really don't like that man," Nicholas muttered, then yawned.

"He's just doing his job, Nick."

"I know, but I still don't like him. He's bossy."

I chuckled. "Go to sleep while you can. I promise I'll wake you when there's word, okay?"

"You need sleep too, Brandon. You look exhausted."

"I am. I'll try and sleep, too."

"Good." He closed his eyes, reaching for and finding my hand, curling his fingers around mine. I rubbed the back of his hand with my thumb. The scratches were almost all healed now, but I could still feel them. Still agonize over them. I wished the rest of his body would heal. It'd only been a week since we'd arrived at the hospital, but I thought he should've been better than he was by now. I had a feeling his doctor wouldn't like it when I insisted we check out of the hospital as soon as possible. Before the weekend, I planned.

Weariness tugged at me, but I pushed it back. I was afraid, though, that my eyelids were going to win the battle. Nicholas curled up closer to me, the warmth of his body reassuring and seductive. I wanted nothing more than to curl up with him and block my worries with sleep. The door opened again, and through slit eyes I watched as Nurse Goodall came in. She smiled tenderly at Nicholas, then took his arm -- he gave it willingly -- and slipped a blood-pressure cuff on. Once she had the reading, she looked at me. "Are you boys okay?" she said, encompassing Sam in her query.

He nodded. "As well as can be expected. We haven't heard anything about Tommy, though."

"Can you find out anything for us?" Nicholas asked.

She smiled at him, then brushed his hair back from his eyes. Ah, Nicholas, always the charmer. Without even trying, he made people love him. Most people, that is.

"I'll go see what I can find out."

"Thank you, Nurse Goodall," he said, folding back against me.

I smiled gratefully over Nick's head. "Thanks."

"Try to get some rest. This could be a long wait." Her eyes showed her worry to me. I nodded. Then we were left alone, just the three of us and Mutt. I closed my eyes, felt my weariness take over, and, unable to fight it anymore, let sleep take me into her arms.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"It's about damn time you guys peeled yourselves apart. The pasta's almost overcooked," Jonathan said as Nicholas and I entered the kitchen. Jon stood at a red-topped table, setting it for four. Behind him, a pretty redhead turned around and smiled welcomingly at us both. She had skin as pale as Nick's, but with a liberal smattering of freckles. She wore jeans and a blue t-shirt I recognized as one of Jonathan's. With everyone borrowing his clothes, he must be almost out, I thought.

The girl good-naturedly popped Jonathan on the shoulder. "Hush, you. Now, didn't I tell you to behave when they came inside?"

"Uh, sorry. Forgive?"

The redhead smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile nervously back. I glanced at a chagrined Jonathan in surprise as she wrapped her arm around him and kissed him on the cheek. I envied her ease with my brother. I wished I could be the same with Nicholas in front of other people. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, keenly aware of Nick's presence right behind me.

"Forgiven. This time." She peeled herself from my brother and held out her hand, bright green eyes crinkled with good humor. "You must be Brandon. I'm Amanda Hubbard."

I took her hand, feeling awkward. "Hi."

She laughed, then pulled me into a hug. I gave her an awkward hug back. "Relax. I won't bite. Jonathan's told me all about you. I'm so glad you're here." Then she turned to Nicholas. "And you must be Brandon's boyfriend."

"Nicholas," he said, then grinned as she pulled him into a hug, too. But Nicholas being Nicholas, he wrapped her tight and squeezed, making her laugh. "Brandon's boyfriend. I like that," he said with a happy sigh, releasing her.

"Jonathan's told me about you, too. He says you have a beautiful voice."

Nicholas looked down at his feet, then glanced coyly up at her. "Thanks. He shouldn't have. But, yes, I do."

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "Not very modest, is he?"

"I think he's delightful," Amanda said.

I shook my head at my brother, watching with some exasperation as Nicholas kissed Amanda on the cheek. "Not at all modest," I said in answer to Jonathan's question.

"Diva in training, definitely."

"In training?" I said, grinning as Nicholas stuck his tongue out at me.

Amanda linked her arm through Nick's and pulled him away from me. "Ignore them. They're just jealous. Jonathan sounds like a frog when he sings. Brandon probably does, too."

"Hey," I protested. "No, I don't."

"No, *he* sounds like a goat," Jonathan said.

Amanda popped him so I didn't have to. Then she turned back to a still-grinning Nicholas. I was glad neither Amanda nor Jonathan had commented on his tear-puffed eyes and reddened cheeks. But he *had* cheered considerably since coming inside. I watched him gaze adoringly at Amanda and wondered if I should be jealous.

She touched him on the cheek. "I look forward to hearing you sing. But that can wait. You boys hungry?"

"Yes, I'm starved," Nicholas said as he looked down at the stove. "Smells wonderful. What's cooking?"

"Fresh bread, and I've got a big salad. And, of course, pasta." Amanda joined him. "Want to stir that sauce for me?"

He peered into one of the pots. "There's two -- oh! No meat in this one!"

"Nope, I'm a vegetarian --"

Nicholas squealed, giving her a quick hug of delight. "Get out of here! So am I!"

Amanda laughed, touching his arm with instant affection as he released her. "How long?"

"Just about two years. Decided one day I was tired of eating things that used to walk."

Amanda laughed at that. "Just a year for me. My brother and I both are, and that drives our parents nuts. I'm still learning how to cook so it tastes good."

"I have some killer recipes, you know. I miss cooking so much. I could show them to you, if you'd like."

"Would you? I'd love to learn how to cook something vegan this guy would actually eat."

Jonathan looked at me, pouting. "*But I like meat!*"

"I like it, too," I agreed, then blushed at Nick's way-too-obvious wicked smirk.

Damn perceptive brother of mine burst out laughing. "Yeah, I know whose meat you like."

"Fuck you, Jonathan," I said, horrified.

He skittered out of reach as I tried to grab him around the neck and pummel him. "Can't catch me," he said, escaping around the table and heading for the door. "You're so easy, Brandon. I love that about you. Come on, let's leave the girls to talk and go lift some boulders and slaughter some wildlife or something."

I glanced at Nicholas, hoping he wasn't offended by Jonathan, but he waved a spoon good-naturedly at me, shimmied his butt, and laughed. "Go on, boys. We'll holler when it's ready. Go do your manly-man stuff, and then wash your hands. We'll be fine."

I heard Amanda say as we left, "Jon tells me Brandon *loves* chocolate," followed by another squeal of delight from Nicholas.

"He does? You know what they say about --"

"I was afraid of this," Jonathan said as we headed outside.

"Afraid of what?"

"Nicholas and Amanda."

"I like her, Jonathan."

"Good thing. I doubt she'd let me leave her now, now that she's fallen for Nicholas." I looked askance at him, and he laughed. "Don't worry. I think Nick's already fallen for *you*."

Stunned, I followed after Jonathan. "Fallen for me? Really?" The thought made me grin.

Jonathan noticed and laughed, chucking me on the cheek. "Little brother, of course he has. He's told you, hasn't he?"

"Well, sort of, I guess. Not in so many words. It's only been a week since we met, you know." I'd had much longer to fall in love with Nicholas. But then, of course, I remembered -- I'd left that high school play in love with the guy. I grinned broader.

"Actions speak louder, so there you go, then. Come on, let's have a smoke first before we move your junk in."

Jonathan grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the desk next to the door and handed me one. I took it gratefully, if a little surprised. He lit his, then handed me a lighter. "Corrupting a minor again, I know," he said.

"I'm not a minor anymore."

He snorted. "Sure you are. Always will be to me. Take a seat. We'll empty your car in a sec."

I lit my cigarette and inhaled, closing my eyes gratefully. "That's heaven," I said, savoring the nicotine rush. "I haven't had one since before I got sick."

"You really shouldn't smoke, but I'm not your dad, so lecture over. Be wicked. See if I stop you."

I grimaced and joined Jonathan as he sat on the bottom step. "Well, Dad's not claiming me now anyway, so I guess I'm on my own."

"He'll come around. Don't worry."

"I don't know, Jonathan," I said softly. "This is probably it for me. I've fucked up my life now, as far as he's concerned. I might as well dig ditches for a living and die by thirty." I took another drag on the cigarette.

Jonathan clapped my knee with one hand. "You've still got me, baby bro. You know that. By the way, like the earrings. Sexy."

I grinned. "Thanks. Think so?"

He nodded. "Yeah, maybe I should get mine done."

"Amanda --"

"Would love it. Believe me."

I hesitated, then hugged him. "Thanks, Jon. For everything. Nicholas and I really appreciate all you're doing for us."

He held up one hand, stopping me. "Don't say another word. I might get a swelled head and it would burst, and then where would you be. Heard from Mom?"

I took another drag on my cigarette -- it kinda burned my throat. Really wasn't used to this at all. "No, but she's out with some friends tonight. I'll talk to her tomorrow, I guess." I grimaced. "Adam came to the house."

"Oh, he did? What did dear brother Adam have to say?"

I leaned back on the steps, took another puff, and looked up into the darkening sky. It looked heavier than usual, like we were going to maybe get some rain. A prophetic rumble echoed in the distance, followed by a flash of lightning. "Dear old Adam told me he'd give Nicholas, and me by default, two weeks to get up to speed. And, what's more, he placed another caveat on Nick's participation."

Jonathan snorted. "A caveat? Like what?"

We heard a voice call out from the kitchen, "You'd better not be smoking, Jonathan Ashwood --" Jonathan dropped his cigarette like a firecracker and stamped it out with his shoe.

"Uh, of course not, Amanda darling, why would you think I'd be doing something so vile, so gross, so nasty?"

"Gee, I can't imagine why."

"You love me anyway; I know it."

"That's beside the point. You guys need to hustle if you're going to get their stuff in before that storm hits."

Jonathan leaned toward me, whispering loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. "She loves me anyway, really. Can you fucking believe it?" He stood and held out his hand. "But she's right. There's a storm coming. Let's get your stuff in. I want to show you your room, too. Think you'll like it."

I let him pull me up. "Okay."

"So, what's this stipulation Adam came up with?" Jonathan asked as he and I dragged my guitars and the amp into the house.

I glanced toward the kitchen, following after Jon. No dark head emerged to check our progress. He set my guitars down in the living room. My eyes immediately rested on a blank corner. "Say, can I put my keyboards there?"

"What keyboards?"

"Andy's going to let me have some to use until I get stuff settled with the insurance company."

He grinned. "That Andy's such a trip. Sure, you can put them there. What did Adam say?"

We left the house again and walked back to the car and opened the other side, pulling the driver's seat back and grabbing Nick's box. "Oh, just that he'd better not hear that any of the guys know that ... that Nicholas and I, are, you know --"

"Banging each other?"

I slammed the box into his arms and started to snarl, but found myself nodding instead. "Basically. He doesn't want the other guys to know."

"Afraid of that fag band label. I know, he told me."

I grabbed my suitcase and followed after Jonathan. "How did he end up like this, so full of hate, Jonathan?" I said. "I don't understand it. Why does he hate gays so much?"

"I don't know, baby bro, but he does." He paused. "It's likely best this way. The other guys not knowing, I mean."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Although honestly?" he said, looking serious. "I'm not sure if Nicholas will be able to keep his hands off you. He's a touchy-feely kind of guy. That's not easy to hide."

I grimaced at that. "Yeah, I know."

"And you react to it. I can see it every time you look at him, and it's not just because I know what I'm seeing. You'd best be careful, Brandon, if you want to keep this under wraps. I don't think it'll be easy on you."

I thought about how a mere touch, a mere heated look, so easily sent me tumbling over the edge. I felt my dick stir from just *thinking* about it stirring. I gulped. "I know."

"Well, you don't have to worry about it here. Amanda's got a thing for gay guys and is excited about you being here. She'll love to see you draped all over each other. I could barely peel her away from the window earlier."

I blushed at that, frantically wondering what all she would've seen. I gulped, remembering how Nicholas had touched me -- "Shit."

"Don't worry, I don't think she saw anything. Much."

"Uh, does she live here, too?"

He grinned. "Let's just say she has her own side of the closet, her own drawers in my dresser, and her toothbrush has taken up semi-permanent residence."

"I like her, Jonathan. Going to marry her?"

He nodded. "I think so, baby bro. I think so. Come on. This way." We went up a flight of stairs to the second floor. "Bathroom's across from your room. Sorry about that. You'll have to do the mad dash. I have my own bathroom, though, so at least it'll just be for you guys."

"That's okay."

"My room's across the way. Ronnie's is downstairs. He's hardly ever home, though. Has his own bathroom, too. Careful of the banister, by the way. It's a little rickety."

Jonathan pushed open the door to what was to be our bedroom. I followed after him, my surprise growing as I took in what was to be my and Nick's first home together. "Wow," I said.

Jonathan grinned. "Thought you'd like it."

I did. And Nicholas would *love* it. In the middle of the room -- taking up most of the space -- was a giant four-poster bed. A soft white coverlet graced the mattress, with a bunch of pillows in lacy pillowcases placed at the head. Yeah, the bed was scratched a bit, and the mattress looked somewhat lumpy, but it was a beautiful bed.

"It's Ronnie's mom's old bed. He just brought it home today."

"For us?" I said, incredulous.

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, she was getting a new one, and Ronnie jumped on taking this one. I hope you appreciate us, boy. It was a bitch dragging this up here. All he asks is that you don't do too many sexual gymnastics on it. He'd like it back someday."

I was too amazed at the rest of the room to blush at that. The room itself was small. Blue-flowered wallpaper covered the walls, peeling here and there, but not too badly.

White curtains covered the windows. There was one bedside table and a dresser with brass handles, a single desk, a single closet. Neither of us had that much, though, so that didn't matter. Pictures hung on the walls, and a nice gentleman's toilet set graced the dresser. A thick rug lay across the wooden floor that simply invited me to kick off my shoes and sink my feet into it.

"Hey, guys? Where are you?"

"Up here," I called out. "Come see this, Nicholas."

I heard the sound of footsteps running up the stairs -- two sets.

"Like it then?" Jonathan said as the other two approached. He darted for the closet and opened it.

"Hey, Brandon, taste this -- Oh, wow! This is *our* room?"

"Yes, I do like it ..." My voice trailed off as Jonathan pulled something out of the closet and set it on the bed. I set my box down. "Jonathan," I said, shock making my voice crack.

"Oh, wow," Nicholas said again, but now his gaze was focused on what mine was focused on. Jonathan stood beside the bed, grinning.

Amanda came into the room, bearing a spoon with chocolate on it. But I was too embarrassed by her presence and what I could see inside the basket to do more than yelp and leap for it, scooping it behind my back so she couldn't see.

Jonathan burst out laughing. "Uh, Brandon, Amanda was with me when I bought that stuff. It's a housewarming gift from us both, you know."

"Jonathan!" I moaned, melting in embarrassment right on the spot.

"Let me see," Nicholas said, pulling the basket from my frozen fingers and jumping on the bed. "Sit down on our bed, Brandon! I can't believe it! It's beautiful! Isn't this fantastic? I can't wait to try it out, can you?"

I shook my head, giving up as he flopped himself back onto the mattress, arms and legs flung wide. He sighed happily. And I had to smile, too, remembering the crappy bed he'd had at the shelter. He sat up again, grabbing the basket and digging into its contents. I blushed as he held up a book, flipped through it, and tossed it aside again. I think the cover said *Gay Sex Tips*, or something like that. I shoved my hands in my pockets and looked askance at my brother. I was going to kill him.

"Taste this, Brandon," Amanda said with an understanding grin, offering me her spoon. I looked from her to Nicholas, but he was concentrating on the basket's goods. "I don't know --"

He looked up. "Go on, babe. You'll love it. It's chocolate mousse, just for you. And stop blushing. This is *Amanda* we're talking about. Don't be so embarrassed." Obviously not embarrassed himself, he dug into the basket again, pulling out a package of condoms. He held them up. "Wonderful! My favorites!"

Of course he said that right as Amanda made me take a taste from the spoon. I sucked the chocolate in wrong and started to cough.

She beat on my back. "You okay, Brandon?"

I waved her away. "Yeah, yeah, I'm okay." I wiped the chocolate from my mouth, half-dead with embarrassment. "Nicholas, please. Look at that stuff later."

Jonathan snickered. "We'll go put the dishes on the table, leave you boys to check out your room in peace. Come on down in a minute, though." He wagged his eyebrows at me. "Don't go trying any of the goodies on for size just yet. Supper will get cold."

I dropped my chin to my chest as my brother and Amanda left, closing the door behind them. I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. I was mortified. I couldn't believe he ... that she ...

Nicholas patted the bed next to him. "Come on, look with me. I can't believe they did this." He noticed I hadn't moved. "Brandon? You okay?" He pushed up from the bed and stood in front of me, lifted my chin up, then smiled gently at me. "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

My face felt on fire. "I -- I'm just not used to this yet, Nicholas."

"I know. And I'm really sorry. Forgiven?" His blue eyes danced expectantly, and that was it for me.

I nodded. "Forgiven," I said. "I can't resist those baby blues of yours, you know," I said sheepishly.

"And I can't resist those, uh, mossy greens of yours." He kissed me, then -- but when I didn't respond right away, he threw his arms around my shoulders and gave me a look I'd seen enough of already to know he meant business.

"Kiss me, Brandon. Now. A *real* kiss." With a groan, I obeyed. Why that tone of voice, that look, melted me into submission, I didn't know. His lips met mine -- soft, supple, grinning with triumph. I think he got off on ordering me about as much as I got off being ordered about. I slid my hands around his hips, memorizing the feel of him encircled within my grasp. My embarrassment started to melt away until it was all but forgotten. I slid my hand under his shirt to feel the silky soft skin beneath and ran my hands up his spine. He sighed, falling against me, almost purring with his pleasure -- a strangely erotic mixture of sex kitten and commando. That was my Nicholas, back then. I deepened the kiss and he stole it from me, nipping my mouth. To keep me in line, I guess. I backed off, letting him lead, responding to each foray of his tongue into my mouth, each tender brush of his lips on my now aching ones. Always following. Kissing Nicholas was everything I'd hoped for -- and

better, as my body rocked in response to everything about him -- his scent, his touch, his kiss.

"Better?" I murmured, breaking away.

He nodded, pleased. "Much better. But you smoked outside, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Sorry. Toothbrush isn't unpacked yet."

He sighed. "I'll suffer in silence, then. I do think we'll need even more practice, though."

"With what? Kissing? I thought that was pretty good."

"It was, of course. But there's always room for improvement." He kissed me on the cheek. "Don't worry, I'll help you. I promise." His face brightened. "And hey, guess what else is in the basket, speaking of promises," he said, kissing the corner of my mouth with a casual nonchalance.

Jonathan was right. I didn't know how Nicholas would keep his distance from me when we were around other people. I hated that he would have to, too. I didn't think our secret could last very long at all.

He kissed me again, then pulled my head down so he could whisper in my ear, his warm breath fanning gently against my neck. "They bought us some lube, too. I haven't forgotten my promise. Have you?"

* * * * *

All during supper, all I could think about was that damn basket. What it contained. Condoms enough to last at least a month. And the lube -- not one tube, no. Not my brother. He had to get *three*. "Variety!" Nicholas had said. "Very thoughtful."

I'd thrown a condom at him for that. He'd just grinned suggestively and stuck it in his pocket.

His promise flared in my mind, heating my body as I sat across the table from him and tried to eat. The food really was good, but the sauce almost burned my tongue. Nicholas winked at me and blew me a kiss, his sloe-eyed gaze traveling with deliberate strokes down my chest. "Hot, Brandon?"

"Nicholas," I warned.

He smiled sweetly at me. "I was talking about the sauce."

Jonathan and Amanda exchanged a knowing grin. I about died. I'd glared at Jonathan when we'd come to the table, but he'd just smiled and passed me the spaghetti sauce. "Ours is with *meat*," he'd said, smirking. He nearly got it in his face.

Finally dinner was done, and after Jonathan and I cleaned the kitchen (something we hadn't bargained on -- Nicholas and Amanda disappeared into the living room to talk), Nicholas and I changed clothes, brushed our teeth, and left for his friend Karen's house, lightning chasing after us the whole way.

Chapter Thirteen

As we headed for the neighborhood where Nick's friend Karen lived with her grandfather, my apprehension grew. Our drive was taking us further and further away from my comfort zone -- until I turned twelve, I'd rarely traveled out of my own neighborhood. I'd never had a strong urge to travel beyond the boundaries of my parents' world. Everything I needed was right there in Murrieta.

Why go anywhere else? Once we formed Ashwood, I'd realized that was a pretty limited point of view. There was a lot to see outside of Murrieta, even outside of California, and I knew by hooking up with Nicholas, I'd likely see some of the world (okay, a hell of a lot of it) before all was said and done.

Didn't mean I would ever be completely comfortable with it. And back then, I was *very* uncomfortable with it. But I didn't want Nicholas to know, so I kept my apprehension to myself.

The wind buffeted my little car and sent the limbs of the trees that graced the streets whipping about as if they had minds of their own. We were in for quite a storm. Not that I minded -- I liked them. Liked sitting by an open window where I could enjoy the smell of fresh rain, accompanying the thunder and lightning with strums from my guitar, letting nature's fury become my melody.

Tonight, though, I really wished the storms would hold off until we were back home, together, in our new four-poster bed. I was just as excited to try it out as Nicholas, though I hadn't told him. I wondered if I did tell him, if he'd be willing to go back now. I glanced at him. He had opened his window and held his hand out to catch the cooling wind. He grinned at me and blew me a kiss. I gave him a brief smile before turning my attention back to the road.

When it came right down to it, what really bothered me was a simple thing. I wasn't looking forward to being seen at first glance as a gay man. It felt too new, too raw. I felt too ... exposed. And I had a feeling from Nick's excited expression that I was letting myself in for an evening of, well, observation. I wasn't fond of being looked at by strangers, except with the band. Though even then it kinda gave me the creeps.

I sighed. The more I thought about it, the more I realized his friends would probably be more than just a little curious about me. Some of them had been at the bookstore -- it embarrassed me now, how openly reactive I'd been to him. Would they expect the same of me tonight?

Would Nicholas?

He glanced at me, grinning happily. Reaching over to me, he laid one hand on my thigh. I tensed, the flash of heat his touch caused fueling my nervousness.

"You okay, Brandon?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm okay."

He ran his fingers down my leg and back again; when he neared my crotch, his fingers paused before returning to my knee. Just the threat of his touch *there* made my dick respond. I laid my hand on his as it neared my crotch again. "Don't."

He grinned. "Sorry." He didn't move his hand.

I smiled wanly at him. "Like hell you are."

He burst out laughing. "Can't help it. You're so irresistible in that shirt, even if you do look a little stiff. So preppy." He snickered at that, not cowed by my glare. He leaned over and undid the top button, loosening my collar. "There. That's better. Look, Brandon, don't be nervous. Everyone's going to love you. Seriously. Just give them a chance, okay?"

But what if I didn't want to be loved? Nicholas was all I needed, all I wanted.

That was yet another fundamental difference between us, I realized some months later -- Nicholas needed as much love and attention as he could get. He craved it. Had to have it to be happy. I didn't need the crowds. I didn't need the constant reassurance in order to be fulfilled.

But he did.

It took all my willpower not to yank the steering wheel, turn the car around, and floor it back to the house. But I didn't. I couldn't. Not with such a look of peace on Nick's face. He was happier now than he'd been since I first met him, and I wouldn't spoil it with my own silly fears.

"I just hope they like me well enough."

"They will. Turn here. Go down about six houses; it's the last one on the right. The big white one."

"Where all the cars are?" I swallowed.

He nodded. "Yeah. Small and intimate group tonight."

Great. If this was small and intimate to Nicholas, what was a crowd?

I pulled into the driveway. There was one space empty in the circular drive. "What does Karen's grandfather do?" I asked as I parked the car in front of the massive white, two-story mini-mansion.

"He's a psychiatrist. Believe me, I fascinated the man. He tried his best to 'cure' me, before deciding since I was so happy, being gay must be all right," he said in obvious amusement. "Said I blew away forty years of his theories about men, and he was a better doctor for it."

"You get along all right with him?"

Nicholas grinned. "Oh, yes, he adores me."

I shook my head in amusement. There were few who didn't. Lights blazed against the darkened sky and flooded the wraparound porch. The house's windows were open, the double front door painted bright red and inviting.

The door leading to hell, though I immediately pushed the thought aside. These were Nick's friends. Somehow, somehow, he fit in here -- a boy who'd spent who knows how long living in a shelter, whose family was who-knew-where.

I still didn't know a great deal about Nicholas, I realized. Was he from someplace like this? Had he grown up in a house like this, too? And if so, how had it all gone so wrong? I wanted to ask him and meant to before the weekend was over.

But not now.

I killed the engine. Nicholas leapt out of the car and smoothed his pants, then his hair. He wore dark slacks, a sports jacket, a dark shirt and belt, nice shoes. He looked great. More of Jonathan's clothes -- I was beginning to realize my brother was a clotheshorse. Me, I felt a little on the too-casual side in my jeans, a blue button-down, and boots.

I buttoned my shirt back up.

Nicholas started to walk toward the house, but stopped, realizing I hadn't gotten out of the car yet. He whirled around and headed for my side of the car. I took a deep breath and opened the door, emerging as he reached me. I closed the car door just as he slid an arm around my waist and kissed me.

"Come on, Brandon, I'll take care of you in there. I promise."

I smoothed my hair back, realized my palms were sweaty. I looked over the car at the house, blinking against the bright lights that flooded across our faces. "Maybe you should go by yourself, Nicholas. I -- I don't think I can handle this. I'll wait."

He squeezed my waist, then stood in front of me, his face etched with concern. "Hey, babe, I won't make you go in if you really don't want to. You know that, right?"

I nodded, then took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm sorry I'm such a wreck."

He smiled, tilted his face up, and brushed his lips across mine. I closed my eyes and dipped my head to his, welcoming his reassuring kiss. I broke away and laid my head on his shoulder. His hand came up and massaged the back of my neck. It felt so good.

"I'm such a pain," I whispered.

"No, you aren't. You're just shy. We can leave if you really want. It would mean a lot to me, though, if you came with me. I promise you, I wouldn't ask you if I thought anyone would treat you badly in there."

My desire to please Nicholas warred with my need for privacy. Walking into a group of strangers while so obviously partnered with Nicholas was, like I said, damn frightening. I struggled a moment, trying to put into words why I held back.

"It's not -- I don't fear that, Nicholas. It's just that this will be the first time for me. The first time I publicly acknowledge that I'm ... uh ..."

"Gay? My lover?" he said with a grin.

I searched his face. There wasn't anger to be found there, only compassion, understanding. I nodded.

"Oh, Brandon," he said, laying his hand on my cheek and looking at me with such unabashed adoration, I would've given him anything right then. "This is probably the only place, except for with Jonathan and Amanda, that we *can* be seen as lovers. Remember what we talked about? And what we promised Adam?" His expression darkened at that. "I'm ready to do that for us, for the good of our future. But here, tonight -- please, be with me."

I slowly nodded, unable to resist him. "Okay. I'll try." He beamed at me and kissed me on the cheek. I took a deep breath, pulling away from him. But he grasped my hand, entwining his fingers with mine.

"Let's go in, then."

"Okay," I mumbled, my breath catching as my chest tightened with apprehension. He gave my hand a reassuring squeeze, and we walked up the sidewalk toward that red door (which was standing open now), me holding on to Nicholas as if he were my lifeline.

Which, of course, he was.

Nicholas paused at the bottom of the stairs, standing one step up from me. He was a little taller than me, then. I liked looking up to him. "We should get you a stool," I said.

He raised an eyebrow at that. "Really. That could be fun, actually. Come on. One more kiss for Nicholas before we go in," he demanded, drawing close to me.

I sucked in my breath and glanced around his shoulder. I could see people milling about the entryway. But he stole away my unspoken complaint with a squeeze of his hand and the capturing of my mouth. I sank into him -- I couldn't help myself. He kissed me again and again, teasing my lips with possessive nibbles. His kisses made me drunk with the need for more, and my body responded to his nearness, as he knew damn well it would.

He broke away. "Brandon," he whispered, his voice rough. "The way you respond to me ..." He dipped his head to mine again, pulling me close. I met his lips with my own, gently sucking on that exquisite bottom lip. He pulled back and captured my mouth again, his tongue caressing mine. A low groan rose up in him. I wrapped my arms around him; he did the same to me, one hand splayed over my butt and pulling me closer, the other on the small of my back. He pulled back a little and brushed my lips with his. "Tonight, Brandon. Tonight."

I nodded, mashing my body against his. We kissed again, and I lost myself in him, a shiver running through me at his soft, melodic moans.

"Nicholas! Quit fondling your boyfriend and get in here. You guys are late."

I yanked back with a yelp. Nicholas whipped his head around in annoyance, not releasing me. I glanced over his shoulder, my face heating. The intruder, the butt-slapper from the bookstore, stood at the top of the steps, his hands on his hips in mock annoyance. "We're waiting for you, you know. Come on inside before it starts to rain."

"We'll be inside in a second. Need to tell Brandon something." Nicholas looked at me, opening his mouth to say something else, when several more people spilled out of the house, calling Nick's name. He shrugged at me. "Guess it'll have to wait."

What? I nearly said, but Nicholas had already started up the stairs, dragging me after him. I didn't have a chance to wonder what he was going to say, then. His hand firmly gripping mine, Nicholas dragged me into the house.

Cold shivers raced through me as he released me to accept hugs and kisses of welcome. I hung back, a feeling of displacement folding over me as I watched him move from person to person, laughing, teasing, joking with his friends, male and female alike.

"You guys waited for me? You shouldn't have -- but it's a good thing you did."

"Wouldn't want you to have a tantrum, Nicholas," said one of them, an incredibly good-looking guy with a shock of red hair.

"Not a pretty sight, you're right about that," Nicholas said as his friends enfolded him into their embrace. I stepped back, nearly stumbling against a vase on a pedestal. I caught it, then moved away from it, not wanting to cause it to fall.

I watched Nicholas. Happiness brightened his face, made his eyes dance as he took what I realized was his place amongst his friends -- the centerpiece, the king and the court entertainer all in one. The bright shining star that pulled all others to him. And come they did.

There were a lot more people here than he'd let on there'd be -- as I'd seen from the cars outside. And they all seemed to know him, to want to hug and touch and greet him, and I watched him, feeling some envy, some frustration, and an awful lot of loneliness as I was pulled by the others into the living room, yet pulled farther away from him.

This was the first time I'd feel like a hanger-on around Nicholas -- but it wouldn't be the last. In fact, I didn't know it then, but it would soon become the norm for me. Where Nicholas appeared with people who loved him, he was the center of the world, and everyone else was just a secondary part. Necessary to him, maybe, but still secondary.

Including me.

I felt a presence next to me. "Something else, isn't he?" I looked down in surprise at the woman next to me. "Remember me?" she said.

I nodded, feeling some relief at the familiar face. "I do remember you. Karen. Yes, he is."

She smiled with affection as Nicholas squealed a greeting to someone he apparently hadn't seen in a while. "You'll get used to it. He just has that effect on people."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just nodded and crossed my arms across my chest. I knew when I'd first seen him, up on that stage, and again at the bookstore, that he had this very quality about him. I knew then, even as young and inexperienced as I was, that it was important he have this. This charisma. That this was what made him special, what would draw people to him, be instrumental to his, and my, future success.

But right then, it *hurt*. He'd said he wouldn't leave me alone, and almost immediately he had done so.

I kept waiting for him to come back, but he didn't, as person after person captured his attention. As the minutes wore on, I got more and more uncomfortable. The stares cast my way made my face heat, the back of my neck prickle. Everywhere I looked, I saw people looking at me, some with knowing grins, others with open curiosity. Those with knowing grins were whispering to the others. I wanted to bolt as they stripped me bare with their eyes and smiling mouths. I could no longer see Nicholas, his friends having taken him somewhere inside the house.

I turned away, headed for the door. I had to get out of there. I didn't belong there. I shouldn't have come at all, and felt an almost unbelievable sense of sadness at the realization. Maybe a little overdramatic, but I guess I was in that kind of mood anyway.

As I stepped out on the front porch again, I paused and breathed in the night air, glad no one else was outside. I left the porch and went down the steps. A single cold plop of water hit me in the face, then another, and another. It'd finally started to rain. I lifted my face up, welcoming the drops on my already moist face. I shoved my hands in my pockets and then started to head for the car before it could really start to pour. I'd wait for Nicholas out there.

It would be a long wait, I figured.

I heard light footsteps coming after me, then felt a hand on my arm, stopping me. "Hey, Brandon, wait. Nicholas asked that I keep an eye on you, and here I go nearly letting you slip away. You okay?"

I turned and looked down at Karen and away again, hoping she didn't realize the wet on my face was more than rain. "No, not really."

She squeezed my arm, then linked hers through mine and dragged me back toward the porch. "Come on back inside before you get soaked."

"I really don't want to."

"Hey, come on. You don't want him to go looking for you and find you gone, do you? It'd break his heart if you left."

I grimaced. "That's not playing fair, Karen. He left me."

"I know he did, and of course it isn't playing fair. But it's true. It would break his heart, Nicholas being Nicholas. Sometimes he just doesn't realize things. It's not out of meanness."

"Just Nicholas being Nicholas, huh." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I guess in a way it does explain it."

She tugged on my arm. "There you go. Would you like something to drink?" She smiled at me. "It'd probably help."

I paused. "I don't really --"

"Corona?"

I blinked, shaking my head. "You're not going to let me go, are you?"

"Nope. I promised Nicholas, remember? Why were you leaving? Really, I mean."

I gestured helplessly to the house. "I don't do so well in crowds sometimes. I just wanted some air."

"It looked like you were heading for your car."

I hesitated. "I was just going to wait for Nicholas out there."

She shook her head. "He's probably looking for you right now. Come on, it's really okay. You'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say," I muttered beneath my breath, but she pulled me back inside anyway.

"Go on in the living room. I'll find you."

I hesitated, but then nodded and pushed my way through several people holding drinks and talking. I felt their gazes on me. My face heated and I dipped my head so they couldn't see, hurrying to the far side of the room. The room was a big one, with lots of chairs and couches sitting about and tall, feathery plants in huge vases big enough to fit inside. I imagined crawling into one, hiding. Very tempting -- and very childish.

I spied a chair in the corner and headed for it, nodding to a couple of girls who looked at me with more than passing interest. One winked. Great. Guess the word hadn't gotten out to everybody yet that I was taken.

I stood next to the chair and watched the crowd, praying those girls wouldn't come over to try to talk to me, my gaze occasionally flickering over the strangers in a futile search

for a certain familiar face. I glanced at my watch -- it'd been twenty-five minutes since our arrival.

I hadn't seen him in twenty. I was about ready to forget it and just leave, when he finally appeared, talking to a girl I thought I'd seen at the bookstore. Two others trailed behind him. His expression was anxious. He was shaking his head, scanning the crowd. I didn't move, didn't try to attract his attention -- wondered if he was even looking for me.

His gaze swiveled to me at last, and our eyes met. I didn't want him to see the hurt. I turned away, though I knew he'd seen it, was coming straight for me. I felt his touch on my arm. I looked down at him; concern darkened his eyes.

"Where were you? I was looking everywhere." He ran his hand over my shirt, frowning at the darkened splotches.

"I went outside for a minute."

"Where's Karen? I asked her to look out for you."

I forced a smile on my face. "She is," I said, spying her. She caught my eye and gave me a sympathetic shrug, hurrying over to us. "She's getting me a drink. There she is."

"Why'd you go out in the rain?" he said as Karen joined us, Corona in hand. She handed me my drink.

"Here you go, Brandon. Shoot, Nicholas, you did abandon the guy. What else was he supposed to do?"

"I didn't think he'd go stand in the rain." Nicholas smiled sheepishly.

"Well, that's where I found him, and he wasn't too happy, either. Gotta run, guys -- gotta go play hostess." She pointed a finger at Nicholas. "Apologize."

Once we were alone, Nicholas slipped his hands around my waist. "I'm sorry, Brandon. I really didn't mean to abandon you. I just got kinda overwhelmed. Haven't seen a lot of my friends in a while."

"I know you didn't mean to," I said quietly. "It's okay."

"Was I really gone that long?"

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Really."

"I won't leave you again. I promise. Everyone wants to meet you. Please?"

I shrugged again. "I guess." I took a long swallow of the Corona, draining it (ignoring Nick's frown of disapproval), my head spinning a little from the quick buzz. I then let Nicholas drag me after him, although the hurt still burned pitifully in my stomach. He glanced worriedly at me, and I just kept my poker face going. Couldn't help myself. I wanted him to know he'd really hurt my feelings. A little petty, but there you go. Sometimes I'm like that.

I think he understood. This time, he didn't let go as he rejoined his friends.

"Hey, everybody, this is my Brandon," he said, looking proudly at me and pulling me close.

My Brandon. I blushed at that. From then on, he didn't leave my side, keeping his arm tight around my waist or his hand in mine as he introduced me to his friends. I did my best to relax, quickly draining another Corona or two along the way and enjoying the resulting buzz.

It really wasn't as bad as I'd feared. Occasionally someone would mention they'd been there at the bookstore and were happy to see us together. The curious stares didn't end, but by the time Nicholas led me to one of the empty couches and pulled me down next to him, it no longer felt so strange. Could've been the Coronas, but whatever, it felt good. As if Nick's actions were some sort of signal, a group of his friends began to drift toward us, settling in the empty spaces to continue their conversations.

Nicholas grinned at me, then startled me by jumping up, pushing one of my legs over, and settling himself between them. He grabbed my arm and lifted it so he could settle against my chest. I shifted on the couch into the corner to make it more comfortable for us both. Our actions didn't raise an eyebrow, even when he tilted his head up and kissed me under my chin.

"Now what do we do?" I asked, feeling my breath quicken in embarrassment as he arched his back against me and all but purred. He grinned at me, those amazing eyes of his flashing with wickedness. I groaned to myself -- he was up to something.

"We talk," he said, all innocent.

"About what?"

"About anything and everything."

As if on signal, two more of his friends joined us, one sitting on the floor at our feet. Neither batted an eyelash at the position in which Nicholas and I sat. I fought to calm myself, even my breathing. I didn't want them to know how Nick's sheer presence affected me.

The girl on the floor said, "Hey, Nicholas, did you catch Felsman's lecture on Wednesday?"

Nicholas nodded. "Yes, it was fantastic ..."

They talked. I listened. More or less. More joined us, some joining the girl on the floor at our feet. I set my empty Corona down, only to find Karen handing me another. She ruffled my hair and kissed me on the top of my head. I smiled gratefully up at her as Nicholas went on with one of the others about imagery and pacing and things I didn't know much about but wished I did.

A lyricist, that's what I was holding in my arms, I reminded myself. This was his language. I closed my eyes, laying my head back against the couch and listening to his voice drone excitedly on. I guess it was the beer buzzing in my brain, but I began to relax to the

vibration of Nick's voice as he lay against me, stopped fighting my body's response. I was beginning to enjoy myself, I realized. How could I not? Everyone here obviously wanted Nicholas in some form or fashion -- but I was the one who held him. He was mine.

The conversation ebbed and flowed over the next hour. Some got up and left, to be replaced by others, nodding at me and my silent, buzzing self. Richie, the butt-slapper, plunked down next to us, asking Nicholas what had happened to him Friday. So comfortable Nicholas was as he held court, as if he always did so while nestled in his lover's arms. I smiled goofily at that and drew him closer to me, splaying my hand possessively across his stomach. He covered my hand with his own and tilted his head up at me, smiling and brushing his lips across my neck.

"Nicholas, not now. Later," I growled, shifting on the couch. I rubbed my hand up his chest and hugged him to take the sting out of my words.

Richie laughed. "You're going to make your boyfriend horny if you're not careful, Nicholas."

"Make him? He's already horny," Nicholas said in all seriousness.

I responded by nipping Nick's ear, making him squeal. "Behave," I said.

He half-turned in my arms, draping his leg over mine, and reached up, drawing my head down. "Never," he whispered huskily to me.

That was the only way I can explain what I did next. It had to be the three (or four?) Corona's in quick succession. And perhaps simply the intoxication of Nick's voice, his lips against my neck. And the very real need to connect with him in the most basic of fashions.

I wanted him so bad right then and didn't care who knew it.

So I kissed him, right there in front of Richie and Karen and everybody else who happened to be around. All those strangers saw me. When he deepened the kiss, drawing my tongue into his mouth like I'd discovered he enjoyed, I let him, lost, hopelessly lost in his power. I'm not sure how long it went on, but my body heated, then broke into flames. He squirmed against me, against my undeniable hard-on. My hand dropped on his stomach. It was all I could do not to reach for and undo his waistband, sink my hand inside the warm depths.

I moaned into his mouth; my hand sank lower. Yup, I was losing it. Losing all control. I knew he was hard -- he had to be -- and the desire to hold him in my hand rolled over me like a hurricane. I slipped my thumb inside his waistband, finding at least the tip of what I sought.

He arched his hips into my hand. He was like granite.

"Nicholas? Brandon? Um, hey, guys, there's plenty of rooms upstairs if you need one," Karen said, her amused voice breaking through the whirling winds of desire in my mind.

I pulled back with a gasp, and Nicholas chuckled. His eyes danced merrily as he blew in my face. "Breathe, Brandon," he teased.

I buried my face in his shoulder, taking deep breaths to try to calm myself. "Sorry," I murmured, stunned as always by his amazing self-control and lack of embarrassment, and his effect on me. "I guess I've had too much to drink." I realized then that I had, in fact, had too much and needed to go visit the boy's room.

"Hey, I didn't mind. You okay?"

I shook my head and whispered in his ear, "I need to go find the bathroom."

He frowned at me. "You're not going to --"

"No!" I glanced at his friends, but Richie and the others had either decided to ignore us, or were pretending to. "No. I've just had too many beers, is all."

He grinned. "Okay, but you have to promise to come back. This is fun." He stood, letting me out.

"I'll be right back," I said, stepping over one of the girls.

She laughed. "You guys coming back anytime soon?"

Nicholas plopped back down, grabbing a pillow and holding it on his lap. "I'm not going anywhere. Brandon will be right back."

I made my escape quickly, figuring everyone who saw us kiss on the couch damn well knew exactly what state I was in and it was no use hiding it. I found a bathroom and gratefully closed the door, for the second time in one week realizing how difficult it is to pee while hard. This time, though, I thought it was kinda funny.

Too many beers, for sure.

Finally, after finding success on that front and washing my hands, I emerged from the bathroom. Time for a soda, I decided, and headed for the kitchen. I'd seen someone else drinking one and hoped there were more. If I had another Corona, I was afraid of what trouble I'd get in. I might jump Nicholas right there in front of everyone and give them a real show.

The kitchen was empty when I walked in. I looked in the refrigerator, and sure enough, there were several bottles of Dr Pepper. I popped the top to one and closed the fridge, then leaned against the counter, glad my dick had, uh, relaxed. A couple guys I'd seen earlier walked in. They looked at each other, their expressions surprised at seeing me.

One of them smirked at me. "Hey, you're Brandon Ashwood, aren't you?" He was a tall guy, built, brown hair that spiked up. Tight shirt and tight jeans. The other was short and slim, baggy-clothed. They could've been brothers except for the difference in their size and dress. "You're Nick's new boyfriend, right?"

I blushed. "Yeah, that's right."

The two guys eyed each other again and grinned like they knew some joke that I didn't. "You're the guy from the bookstore," Spike-hair said, gesturing with his beer. "We were there the other night."

His friend winked. "That was quite a show. Could tell you had the hots for Nicholas. Where'd you go afterwards? Nicholas thought you'd bugged out."

I shrugged. "Just to the bathroom. I caught up with him later."

Spike said, "So where'd you meet? School?"

I hesitated, wanting to make my escape, but not wanting to be rude if these were friends of Nick's. "No, I don't go to university."

"Did you go to the same high school?"

"No." I took a drink of my Dr Pepper and pushed away from the counter. "I'd best be getting back."

"Wait, I'll figure it out. What year did you graduate? Or have you yet? You don't look that old."

"Nick's robbing the cradle?" the short guy said, covering his mouth in amusement.

I hesitated, then shrugged. "I didn't graduate."

"Shit," Spike said. "You didn't? Jesus, what the fuck would someone like Nicholas want with a flunkie like you??"

"I didn't flunk. I quit," I said, feeling the familiar shame rise up.

"You must be damn good in bed or something then," the short guy said. "You a good fuck?"

I was too shocked to do more than stare at him.

Spike punched the other on the arm, saying, "That wouldn't matter. Nick's always sopped over pretty, stupid guys. You know that."

"Yeah, he don't care how they look. Even did me once."

"Shut the fuck up. Really?"

The short guy snickered. "Yeah, anything with a hard dick is good enough for Nicholas. He'd probably'd even take on you, except you might have to wait a turn after pretty little boy here."

He eyed me speculatively. I clenched my soda -- it was all I could do not to shatter it against the wall. Embarrassment flushed my skin all over, and an edge of panic made my stomach clench. What were these guys saying? What if they were telling the truth? I was just drunk enough to question. What I'd thought earlier pushed into my mind -- I didn't know Nicholas that well. Who he'd been with. Every time I turned around, there was another one. Now this short guy was claiming to have been with him, too?

I had to bite my lip as tears threatened. I tried to push past them, but Spike blocked me with his chest.

"Why you crying, little boy? What are you, sixteen? Seventeen? Not old enough to keep up with the big boys, I reckon."

"Yeah, maybe you should go home to mamma and leave Nicholas to Chad. He'll take *real* good care of him."

"Yeah, he must've felt sorry for you or something."

"Mercy fuck."

They broke into laughter, well pleased with humiliating me.

Definitely too much beer. I slammed my drink down and pushed the short guy against the refrigerator, my blood boiling with anger. "Shut the fuck up, you little creep."

He threw his hands up and laughed. *He laughed.* "Oh, you gonna hurt me? I doubt you could hurt a bug, you're such a skinny boy. Delicate-like."

Spike looked me up and down and snorted. "Jake's right. How do you two decide who's top? Draw straws?"

When I looked at him, puzzled, Spike and his buddy burst out laughing. I learned later what he meant, but right then I had no idea. There was a hell of a lot I had yet to learn, but I did know that I was embarrassed and humiliated, and all the fun and enjoyment I'd found in the evening totally left me, thanks to them.

I pushed my way past them, their laughter following me down the hallway. I passed Karen. She had her hands full of empty bottles.

"Brandon, what's wrong?"

I didn't answer, just hurried down the hallway. I wanted nothing more than to forget everything. What I'd feared would now happen. Now Spike -- Chad -- and his scrawny friend would tell everyone that Nick's new boy toy was a dropout, a failure.

Mercy fuck.

I couldn't go back to Nicholas. Not until I calmed down. I almost ran down a hallway I didn't recognize, my breath coming in gasps. I hesitated, glancing from left to right, then for some reason felt myself pulled down the hallway, away from the party, away from my humiliation. Double-doors leading to a closed-off room beckoned to me. Curious, I opened them, and with a gasp spied the one thing guaranteed to make me feel better: a piano. I brushed the tears off my face and went inside.

I approached it, ran my fingers over the keys, did a one-handed scale, then caressed the keys again. Beautiful. This was a piano to rival the one I'd played as a child, at my parents' friends' house on the coast so long ago. The room wasn't nearly as magnificent, but the instrument itself was, bathed as it was in light from a single lamp next to a chair.

And in that chair sat an elderly gentleman, watching me.

"Oh, sorry," I said, jerking my hand away. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

He set down the paper he'd been reading and smiled. He wore a smoking jacket. I'd only seen them in movies, but the silver-patterned black satin leant him an elegance I found

fascinating. He had an unlit pipe clenched between his teeth. When he realized my gaze had settled on it, he removed it with a sigh.

“Not the same, not lit. But my granddaughter would have my hide if she caught me smoking. So I pretend.”

I found a smile. “Karen?”

“The same. You’re a friend of hers?”

I hesitated. “Actually, a friend of a friend.”

“I know all her friends. Which one?”

“Nicholas Kilmain.”

The man eyed me, then slowly nodded. If he noticed my upset state, he didn’t let on. “Brandon Ashwood, you’d be, then. Karen’s told me about you. You like to play?”

I turned my head and looked at the piano, clenching my hands into fists, wondering what exactly Karen had told him, remembering what Nicholas had said about him. This guy was a psychiatrist, of all people to encounter. “Any time I can.”

“Please do. Treat an old man. These old hands simply won’t cooperate for me anymore.”

“You play ... played, sir?”

“Until arthritis set in. Take care of your hands, son. There’s much I could’ve done to keep on playing, and I didn’t do it.”

I nodded, then walked over to the piano and lifted its lid to let the sound out better. I sat on the bench, pushed it back a little, and trailed my fingers down the keys, closing my eyes as I did a simple warm-up scale with my right hand. I moved my left hand onto the keys to join in, letting the familiar scales acquaint me with the tone, the pitch, the feel of the keys. I smiled in appreciation.

“Nice, isn’t it?” the old man said.

I nodded, then bent over the keys and began to play.

As always, the music immediately began to lift my spirits. The man’s presence didn’t bother me -- it was kinda nice, playing for someone who so enjoyed music. The last effects of the Corona whisked away, and the embarrassment over the encounter in the kitchen tempered as I lost myself in what I was doing.

I played songs I thought my audience of one would enjoy, a little classical, show tunes from the thirties and forties, some ragtime, choosing pieces with an upbeat tempo. I couldn’t do melancholy right then. At some point I sensed rather than heard someone else come into the room, and then another followed by other silent, whispery bodies. But by then, I was so entranced and involved with what I was doing that I didn’t bother to look up.

I broke into an old favorite, a haunting piece that my mom once told me moved her to tears the first time she heard me play it. I poured everything I could into that song -- the hurt, the anguish, the sadness I'd experienced all evening.

My longing for Nicholas.

Not until I felt familiar hands on my shoulders did I look up and realize just how many people had come into the room, drawn by the music, I guessed. I twisted my head, took in Nick's smile as he gazed down at me, and overwhelmed by what I saw in his eyes, closed my own. I didn't want to think about all those eyes watching us, so I let myself be drawn back into the song until I played the final note.

Then I stopped, head bowed, my hands resting on my thighs, nervousness immediately coming back in a rush until the impromptu audience broke into enthusiastic applause. Nicholas squeezed my shoulders. I dared look at them then, at the smiling, surprised, and even shocked faces. Chad and his scrawny companion were there, gaping at me. And Karen stood behind them, a grim smile of satisfaction on her face.

I guess she'd made sure they knew Nick's boyfriend wasn't just a pretty fuck after all.

I started to stand, but Nick's hands held me in place.

"No, wait." He caressed the back of my neck. As he had in my parents' house, he tilted my head back and kissed me on my eyes, then full on my mouth. My body instantly responded to him -- I couldn't help myself.

"Nick," I all but whimpered.

He chuckled, cradling my face, pressing his body against my back as he whispered in my ear, "You are so unbelievably beautiful when you play, when you think no one's watching. I'd take you right now if I could. And I will. Tonight. Promise."

I imagine the whole room heard him, and I didn't care. I nodded.

Then he kissed me again, capturing my gasp of inflamed shock, making his possession of me clear to everyone watching as he calmly ran his hand down my chest. I arched against his touch, losing myself in the sensation of Nicholas. How he could stay so in control, I couldn't fathom. How he could send me so out of control, I didn't care.

"Go, Nicholas!" one of his friends yelled, and laughter broke out.

I broke away from him, buried my flushed face in the warmth of his chest, and closed my eyes, my breath hard, my heart pounding. He bent his head down and breathed softly into my ear.

"Let's show them what we're really all about," he said. I knew what he meant. I pulled away from him, reluctantly, and began to play the intro, a thrill running through me as Nicholas placed one hand on my shoulder, pressing himself against my back as his voice joined my piano. I watched Nick's face as he sang, enraptured by the sheer beauty of his spirit as the words rose up inside him and glimmered into the room. I couldn't take my gaze off him.

He moved about the piano, gesturing to the audience, eliciting murmurs from the crowd. But always with every glance to them, he'd come back to me, our gazes locking with an intimacy that I knew everyone in the now-packed room had to be experiencing along with us. I found myself unable to stop smiling at him, at the magic he wrought on me and on everyone else. I poured all I had into my part, bringing the keys to life as Nicholas did the melody, melding my music to his until perfect harmony was the only possible result.

He looked at me with such tenderness, I felt my eyes well. I blinked and fought against the drowning. He didn't falter, just walked up to me and brushed the falling tears from my cheeks.

He swooped down and kissed me, breaking the rhythm to whisper in my ear, "I love you, Brandon Ashwood." I gasped, faltering, but he sang on, pulling away from me to face the audience again. I couldn't see their faces except out of the corner of my eye. But I didn't care about them. All I could see was Nicholas.

He loved me.

When the last note faded into silence, not a further sound was heard, until a single voice said, "Oh, my God, that was fucking unbelievable!"

And then they began to clap. Roar. Shouts of approval. I looked at them, dazed. The room was full; they spilled out into the hallway, and I drank it all in. As did Nicholas. I looked at him, the triumph on his face as he accepted his due accolades until the clapping wound down at last -- then he froze, his eyes widening on something across the room.

Something was wrong.

"Nicholas?" I said, getting up and moving quickly to him. "What is it?" I put my hand on his shoulder. At my touch, he shook himself and smiled at me, though his eyes remained clouded.

"Nothing. I just thought I saw someone --" He shook his head. "I was mistaken."

I glanced where he'd been looking, but saw nothing strange, nothing wrong. "You sure?"

He nodded then and threw his arms around me and kissed me as his friends gathered around us. Whatever had stopped him, he was over it. I laughed as his excitement returned and he twirled away from me again. This time it didn't hurt, watching his friends take their little pieces of him.

Little by little the room emptied as our audience returned to wherever they'd drifted away from, several lingering to talk to him and give him a few extra hugs. I even got one or two, though I sure didn't have the art of hugging down like Nicholas did. Left alone at last, I closed the piano's lid and put the seat back. As Nicholas was finally released from the last hug, he danced over to me again and wrapped his arms happily around me from behind.

"Remember what I told your dad, Brandon?" he said in my ear.

I grinned, wrapping my hands over his. "I remember."

“Well, it’s going to happen. We’ve already got groupies! Have groupies and that’s half the battle!”

I laughed at that. “Good point, Nicholas.”

“Well, count me in then. You fellows are phenomenal together,” Karen’s grandfather said, pushing up from his chair, where I’d completely forgotten about him.

“Uh, thanks.” My face heated -- what had he thought of Nick’s kiss? The way he held me now? I glanced worriedly at him, but he winked in reassurance.

Nicholas must’ve sensed my sudden embarrassment. “Don’t worry, Brandon. Dr. Hart and I go a long way back.”

Dr. Hart nodded, a genuine smile of pleasure making his eyes dance. “I’ve known Nicholas and his family since he was a toddler. I’m glad you came by, Brandon. I enjoyed your playing very much, especially with Duckie.”

“Duckie?” I said, pulling away from Nicholas so I could see his face.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “I’ll explain later.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” I said. “Thank you for letting me use your piano, Dr. Hart,” I said, taking his offered hand and shaking it.

“Any time. I’d love to hear more. What other songs do you boys know?”

“Give us a few weeks and we’ll show you,” I said, drifting off as the two guys from the kitchen walked up, Karen behind them. I stepped away; Nicholas noticed, a puzzled look coming to his face.

“Go on,” Karen said angrily, poking Chad.

He grimaced and looked pleadingly at Karen before glancing not at me but at Karen’s grandfather. She frowned pointedly. “Go on, Chad, Jake. What do you have to say to Brandon?”

Chad stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I came to apologize to you for what I said in the kitchen.”

“And me, too,” the other, Jake, said.

Nick frowned. “What happened?” he said flatly, linking his hand in mine.

“Seems the boys here didn’t think Brandon good enough for you and decided they’d try to rope me into their little cause to make sure he was miserable.”

“What did you say to him?” Nicholas demanded, his face reddening as he grabbed Chad by the collar. He backed him against the piano bench and made him sit with a yelp.

“I said I was sorry,” Chad said, as shocked as I was by Nick’s sudden anger. He splayed his hands back against the piano.

“Nicholas, they didn’t hurt me ...”

He turned to me, his hand still fisted in Chad’s collar, his eyes glimmering. “What did he say to you, Brandon?”

“Nothing --”

“Bull. Did he touch you?”

“No --”

“Take it easy, Nicholas,” Karen said. “He’s trying to apologize.” She pulled him away from Chad. He didn’t make it easy. He reached for me and pulled me almost roughly into his arms. I could feel him trembling with anger. Why was he so mad at his guy? He was ready to punch his eyes out. For me.

Where was this anger when *he* was the one being attacked?

Chad glanced worriedly from me to Nicholas.

“Go on, then,” Nicholas said. “Say what you have to say.”

Chad bit his lip, then faced me. “I hope ... I hope you’ll accept my apology. I didn’t realize what all you’ve done for Nicholas. What you mean to him. I didn’t realize --” He shook his head. “You guys are amazing. I’m sorry I said that, those things about you.”

“I am, too,” Jake said. “You’re definitely more than a pretty face. You’re pretty damn awesome.”

“I accept,” I said softly. The two nodded; then Chad looked desperately at Karen.

“I think you guys should leave,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “Now.”

They nodded and slunk out.

Nicholas watched them go, but didn’t relinquish his hold on me. In fact, he tightened it. “What did they say to you, Brandon?”

“It wasn’t important.”

“Yes, it was. It upset you enough that I found you in here,” he said. “They hurt you, and I want to know what they said, why you didn’t come back to me.”

I knew he wouldn’t leave it alone. “They found out I dropped out of high school.”

Karen barreled on. “So, they figured the only reason you were with him was because of his, uh, pretty face.” She turned and patted me on the cheek. “And you are pretty, but there’s a heck of a lot more to you. I had no idea you played so beautifully.”

I gave Karen a grateful look. I had a feeling she knew exactly what they’d said to me, figured Nicholas didn’t need to know the details. I felt Nicholas relax against me. He smiled up at me, a playful light finally returning to his eyes.

“See, Brandon? I told you I didn’t tell her *everything*.” He looked at her. “But I did tell you he was good.”

“Me, good? You were fantastic,” I said.

He beamed. “Only because of you. You bring out the best in me.”

“And you in me,” I said softly, remembering his words. *I love you.*

He licked those beautiful lips of his and looked at me with half-hooded, sensuous eyes. "I want to bring even more out of you. Ready to go now?"

I swallowed, nodded, unable to tear my gaze away from him. "Okay."

He released me. "I'll go get my jacket. Meet me out at your car?"

I nodded. After saying goodbye and thank you again to Karen's grandfather, I followed Nicholas out of the room. He took off for wherever his jacket was stored, and I wove my way through the now friendly crowd (my own perception of Nick's friends had changed considerably), accepting amazed congratulations with a shy nod of my head.

I didn't want to stop and talk to anyone, didn't want them to know just how turned on I was, how my body thrummed as the next stage of the evening was about to unfold.

I escaped out the front door, breathing in the rain-soaked air. It'd stopped sometime while we were inside, but water still dripped from the house, from the trees. I grinned as I looked out at my car -- somehow Nicholas had beat me and stood on the far side, waiting. I jumped off the steps, but as I ran around the car, shoving my hand in my pockets for my keys, I slammed to a stop as I realized it wasn't Nicholas.

Now I knew what -- or, rather, who -- Nicholas had seen that had made that panicked look come to his face back in the house.

It was Percy's buddy. And he was waiting for me.

Chapter Fourteen

Colorado -- Present Day

I glanced up from my usual spot in Nick's hospital room, pausing with my hands over my laptop's keyboard as Katie pulled up a chair and sat next to me. I'd run into her downstairs at the snack bar, sans her little sister this time (Stacey was at school), and invited both her and her mom up to meet Nicholas.

I'd not had the chance to visit as I'd promised, but Katie of course had heard about Tommy and had understood. She'd taken me up on my offer and fetched her mom, and Nicholas had hugged them both, then cannily asked if they might be interested in helping out, just a little, with his fan mail? Both, of course, had said yes.

It was hard to say no to Nick.

Now we all sat in comfortable companionship -- me with my laptop; Nicholas, Katie and her mom Beth, Sam, and Jenny sorting through the mail -- whiling away the afternoon. If not for worries over Tommy forefront in my mind, I'd have to say I was actually enjoying myself.

"What are you working on?" Katie asked me now, propping her chin in her hand.

I hit Save, but before I could respond, Nicholas said, "Brandon's writing his memoirs."

"Really? That's cool."

"*Our* memoirs, actually," I said.

"Can I read it?" Katie said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"He won't even let me read it yet," Nicholas said, then held up his hand to stop me as I was about to protest. "I know, 'Not until it's done, Nick,'" he said, in what I thought was a sorry attempt at imitating me.

"I don't sound like that."

Sam and Jenny looked up. "Oh, yes, you do," they said in unison.

I eyed them all with mock disgust, turning it full on Nicholas where he sat cross-legged on his bed, a box of fan mail in front of him. He smirked triumphantly at me, then began to dig through the box, pretending to ignore me.

I chuckled. I wasn't fooled, of course, but I took advantage of the opportunity to admire how much better he looked. He'd put on a rather elegant set of black satin pajamas a fan from Spain had sent, and for the first time in almost two weeks he looked less like a patient and more like the diva he was.

I'd have to thank that fan myself, I thought, imagining the material slick beneath my hands as I ran them down Nick's chest. He looked up at me then, smiling quizzically. "What are you looking at now?"

"Just you, Nick. That's all."

His cheeks flushed. "Oh. Well, I guess that's okay, then." He turned his attention back to his task. Three additional boxes, also all full, sat on the floor. Jenny sat in the chair next to Nicholas, a notepad on her lap, pen poised.

"What's the next one, Nicholas?" she asked. "We'll never get through this box before your naptime if you don't hurry."

"Fine, fine, sorry, mum. Wouldn't want to miss my nappy." Nicholas glanced at me, catching my gaze. The look in his eye did *not* equate naptime with sleeptime. He winked. My face heated. I glanced nervously at the others, but no one was watching us. Except Jenny, of course. But she was used to us and just shook her head, then with a smile bent her head back to her task.

Nick definitely felt better today.

Still looking at me, he ran his tongue inside his cheek, then bit his lower lip, slowly releasing it. Tease. I laid my head back on the chair, half-closed my eyes, and just looked at him, letting my hunger for him show. His eyes widened with surprise and his mouth opened, the corner turning up into a smile. Then he blew me a kiss.

Jenny popped his leg without looking up from her list. "Cut it out, Nicholas. Get back to work."

I laughed. *Caught*, I mouthed.

He shrugged, then cleared his throat. "Um, right. Where were we now?" He held up an opened letter and frowned at it. "Hard to read. Someone named ... Meglemnon from Pottsbergh? Pittsburgh? Meg L-whatever from Pittsburgh, I guess. What kind of writing is this? My preschoolers wrote better than this." He tossed it into the box and took out another.

Katie grinned at me, and I rolled my eyes. "It's going to take you six months to answer all those, Nicholas."

"Six months or six years, I don't care. I'm answering every last one of them."

"What about the ones you can't read?" I asked.

He smiled sweetly at me, laying his hand on the box he'd tossed the last letter into. "You get to answer those. This is the Brandon Box."

"Great," I muttered, glancing at Katie.

She laughed. "I'll help you, if you'd like."

I eyed the young woman. "That would be appreciated. The job is yours."

"Seriously?"

I nodded. "I've been wanting to ask you anyway. I could use some help while we're here. Answering letters, helping me shop, stuff like that. Having someone who knows Durango will make things a lot easier. You can drive, I take it?"

She looked at me, clearly stunned. "Uh, yeah, of course. I'm almost twenty. My car kinda sucks, though. Heater doesn't work too well."

"No need to worry about that; I've asked Marisa to get me a new car. Would you be interested?"

She glanced wide-eyed at her mom, who hadn't heard what was going on -- she was instead smiling over something Sam said. The two had hit it off, but it was hardly surprising. Sam knew how to wield his charm as effectively as Nicholas, when he wanted to.

Katie looked back at me. "Uh, yes, of course. I could do that, whatever you need, when Mom doesn't need me."

I nodded. "Good. I'll talk to Nicholas about it later, and we'll figure out pay and all that. Okay?"

"You don't have to pay me. I'd be happy to just help out."

I shook my head. "Of course you'll get paid. All my PAs do." I paused. "Actually, you'll be my first."

"PA?"

"Personal assistant. Why don't you go check out what Nick's tossed into that box? I'm almost afraid to look."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

I laughed. "I'm warning you, you'll be saying that a lot from now on."

Katie grinned and all but floated over to Nick's bed to look at "my" box, shaking her head as she picked up a handful of letters. She dropped them back in, then took the box over to the table. Sam scooted over to make room for her between him and her mom.

Beth dumped the box and began to sort through it. I watched Katie as she drew her mom's blankets tighter around her, then sat down to join her. After a moment, Beth handed her daughter a large card. Katie opened it, pulled out a photograph, stared at it, and burst out laughing. She set the card down and covered her face, laughing so hard she nearly fell off her chair.

"What is it? What's so funny?" Nicholas demanded. "Tell us."

"I don't think I want to know," I said, glaring at Jenny, who was smirking gleefully at me. I had a sneaking suspicion she'd seen that particular card already.

Katie said, "You don't want to see this one, Brandon. Honest." She set that card aside.

"Wait, I want to know; I want to see it," Nicholas piped up.

Sam leaned over and snatched the card up. "Well, this is interesting." He winked at Katie. She grinned, still blushing. I raised an eyebrow at the nonverbal exchange between the two -- *that* was interesting.

"Come on, Sam, tell me what it says," Nicholas said.

"Let's see," Sam said. "It's basically an offer to 'service Brandon's needs' until Nicholas is, um, capable."

My face burned. "You're not serious."

Sam smiled. "Oh, yes. And its signed ... Sergio and Frank."

"Sergio *and* Frank?"

Katie nodded. "And they sent a picture, although it doesn't say which is which." Then she held up the photograph -- a glossy of two drag queens, complete with tiaras. The words *For Our Darling Brandon* were written across the top of the pic -- in gold pen.

"Uh," I said, in a painfully squeaky voice. "Do we *have* to answer that one?"

Nicholas laughed. "Yes, yes, every single one, that one included. You gonna take them up on their offer, Brandon boy?"

"No, Nicholas, I'm not. Besides, you're well worth waiting for."

He paused at that, the teasing expression fading from his face, to be replaced by a beaming smile. "That's the most beautiful thing you've ever said to me, Brandon."

"I mean it, too," I said, unable to keep the note of longing from my voice. The others in the room exchanged those meaningful looks they thought we didn't notice.

Nicholas smiled shyly and picked up the next card, fanning himself with it. "Okay, then. Well, let's get back to work everyone, shall we?"

I smiled at him and pulled up my story again, keenly aware of the little glances Nicholas cast my way. I pretended not to notice, though of course he knew I did.

"What's the next one, Nicholas?" Jenny said, and with that we all got back to work.

I ran my hand over my chin before getting back to my writing -- really needed to shave, though I enjoyed Nick's complaints whenever I kissed him. I'd forgotten how fun it was to aggravate him. My gaze fell back on Katie. She looked up at me and I smiled back, glad she'd taken me up my offhand offer. She'd told me earlier she'd had to drop out of high school to help her mom. I hadn't liked hearing that, and knew I had to do something to help. The idea to hire her had popped into my head then.

I liked Katie and her little sister, who wanted to go on to college someday to study music. I smiled to myself -- maybe there was something I could do about that, too. Help them both -- all three, though I knew from Katie her mom's prognosis was pretty grim.

My thoughts then turned to Tommy. He'd come out of surgery fine, but two days later was still in ICU, so doped up from the pain meds he hardly knew anyone was there. We saw him in shifts, making sure one of us was there for him whenever he did wake up. So far, he'd been asleep every time I'd dropped by.

Sylvie was with him now. She'd been pale and shaking, but determined when she'd arrived at the hospital earlier in the morning with Jenny, coming over the minute she hit Durango's airport.

Marisa walked into the room then, all businesslike, briefcase in her hand. I shut my laptop. I wasn't going to work on it while she was around, though she'd actually been pretty civil with me since Nick's disappearance. I guess having a kid had tempered her quite a bit. That, and we'd both been so terrified Nicholas would never be found, we'd formed a tentative sort of bond. A truce, if you will, that I'd just as soon lasted.

I hoped she and Katie would get along all right.

"Hey, guys, good news. Everything's a go," she said, walking over to Nicholas.

Jenny stood and scooped the last of the letters off Nick's bed. It looked like he'd had enough anyway. He lay back and stretched out, covering himself with a blanket.

"The house is ours?" Nicholas asked.

Marisa nodded and set her briefcase on the bed. I pushed up from my chair, grabbed my crutches, and joined them as Marisa opened the briefcase and began to pull out papers. I sat on the edge of the bed, feeling a thrill as his hand rested on my sweatpants-clad thigh. I grinned at Marisa's pause as Nick's thumb absently stroked my leg.

She cleared her throat. "Six month lease, fully furnished. Owner's out of the country until August and is thrilled to have you guys. Brandon, what we talked about is okay with him."

I smiled. "Good."

Nicholas looked from me to Marisa. "What? What did you talk about?"

Marisa shook her head. "None of your business, Nicholas."

"It's a surprise, Nick," I said, kissing him on the cheek. He glared at me, pouting, and I held up a finger. "Now, now," I said as he opened his mouth to protest, "don't ask any more questions, or you won't get your surprise."

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked up at the ceiling. "Fine. Be that way. Don't tell me anything. I can take it."

I stood over him, balancing on my good foot, grabbed him gently by the chin, and kissed him. "Hush, boy wonder. You'll find out tomorrow."

He sighed into my mouth and kissed me back. I pulled away, grinning at him as he grinned at me. He reached up and pulled me back to him, crushing his lips against mine before playfully pushing me away. "You'd better, or there will be no more of *that*."

I laughed and sat down. "Message received."

"Good. So, when do I get out of here? When when when?"

"Tomorrow, if your doctor says it's okay," I said.

Nicholas smiled at me as he settled back against his pillows. He looked content, but was a little pale against the white sheets. Tired, too tired. I shouldn't have let him work with Jenny for so long. But his sigh was happy as he pulled the blankets up to his chest. It'd gotten a little chillier in the room, I noticed.

"Tomorrow. That sounds wonderful." He yawned.

"If the doctor says it's okay, Nicholas," I said, tucking the blanket under his chin.

He rubbed his cheek against my hand and then kissed it. "She will. And I'll bribe her if she doesn't."

I had no doubt he would.

Marisa cleared her throat. "Okay, guys. There's a front gate, so no one will be able to come up to the house without authorization. A security company will be out to set that up. Six bedrooms -- the master and one other bedroom downstairs, the rest upstairs. Here's the plans." She handed me an outline of the floor plan. "Two dining areas, a game room, living room, and media room downstairs. There's another smaller room off a hallway by the kitchen." She grinned. "Maid's quarters, but I swear they're bigger than my last apartment. Perfect for Sylvie, and Tommy when he gets out."

I nodded, eyeing the master bedroom. Our bedroom. Mine and Nick's, at least for a little while. I glanced at him, then handed the plans to him. Sam, Adam, and Jonathan would stay upstairs. Jenny and her husband weren't planning on going home for another couple of weeks, so they could take the second room downstairs. Yes, things were falling into place.

"You did good, Marisa. Thanks."

She looked at me in brief surprise, but nodded. "You're welcome. There's a pool house out back, where your bodyguards can stay. It's a full apartment, very comfortable."

"What about you, Marisa?" Nicholas asked. "Where are you staying?"

She hesitated, glancing at me. "I'll be going home."

"You're not staying?" he said. "Why not?"

"I need to get back home, Nicholas. I miss my son, you know."

Nicholas winced. "Of course you do. I'm sorry --"

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Don't worry about it. There was no question that I'd come until I was sure you'd be okay. I'll fly back out here whenever

necessary.” She put everything back into the briefcase, closed it, and then handed it to me. “Your local lawyer will meet with you guys in the morning to sign the papers.”

“Thanks. I --”

The door opened. I watched Nick’s eyes widen in wariness. Then he broke into a grin as a dark brown and tan object hurled itself into the room. “Barkley!”

I laughed, moving over as the spaniel sprang onto the bed and into Nick’s arms, covering his face with doggy kisses. Barkley zoomed off the bed, whirled around the room, to everyone’s amusement, and back onto the bed again, where Nicholas captured him.

“Surprise!” a voice said at the door.

I moved away from the bed as my brother walked into the room, looking tired but well pleased with himself.

“Adam,” I said, hobbling over to him.

He grabbed me in a hug, holding me tight. “Little brother, damn, it’s good to see you.” He pushed me back, shaking his head at me, then chucking me on the chin. “Didn’t know you had it in you, tough guy. You are fucking amazing, doing what you did.” He surprised me by wiping a tear from his eye. He looked away, embarrassed. “Sorry. Said I wasn’t going to do that. It’s just damn good to see you. You feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Hey, Adam,” Sam said, waving at my brother.

“Sam, damn good to see you again.”

Adam went over and shook his hand, met Katie and her mom, hugged both Marisa and Jenny, and nodded at Nicholas. Nicholas looked at me, hugging his dog. I could sense his tenseness, could see his fight to not let it show. I could tell, though. Adam simply wasn’t, nor ever would be, one of his favorite people. Not like Jonathan, who would be here before nightfall. I hoped so, anyway.

Adam motioned to me with his head toward my chair. I followed him, gratefully sinking back into my usual spot. Adam pulled up an empty chair and sat next to me.

He glanced back at Nicholas before facing me. “And how’s your little diva *really* doing?”

Nicholas was playing kissy-face with his dog, scratching him behind the ears. He glanced at me, his face expressionless. I looked at Adam. “Better, now that Barkley’s here.”

“He looks like hell.”

“You would, too, if you’d gone through what he did.”

Adam studied his hands and nodded. “Yeah, I know. It’s amazing he survived at all.”

I didn’t want to talk about what might have been. “How was the drive?”

“A bitch. Barkley likes cars even less than I like planes, I think. How’s Tommy doing?” he asked.

I gave him a half-shrug. "Hanging in there. Still mostly out of it."

"What do the docs say?"

"It's going to take a long time. He'll have to have more surgery on his knee. The burns were bad. They've already started skin grafts."

"Ouch. Already?"

I nodded. "Could've been worse if it hadn't happened right here."

"And wouldn't have happened at all if he hadn't been here."

I took a deep breath, but nodded. "Yeah. True." I looked pointedly at him. "You be damn careful, Adam. Whoever did this to Tommy is still out there. Might try something else. All of us are in danger now."

"I'll be careful. They took my rental, parked it in a special spot. Any idea what's going on yet? Who's doing this shit?"

"No." I closed my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose before looking tiredly at my brother. "Fuck no."

I felt Adam's hand on my arm. "Sorry, little bro. If there's anything I can do to help, I will."

"Bringing Barkley for Nicholas, that helps." I'd already told Adam on the phone all that had happened. About the tape, that Blevins was in jail in Los Angeles, that we had no idea who was really behind all this. "The detective's said he'd like to talk to you. He'd like to ask you some questions."

"No problem. Don't know that I can be of much help, but I'll be happy to try. I'd like to talk to Tommy, too."

"He's not said much yet, but I know he'd appreciate it, knowing you dropped by."

Adam ran a hand through his hair, then glanced at Nicholas. "Well, I'll look in on him as soon as I can. So, tell me. Why'd you guys do it?"

I frowned at him. "Do what?"

He glanced at Nicholas and back at me again, a glint of ... something ... showing in his eye so quickly I almost missed it. But then, this was Adam. When it came right down to it, I knew he'd be upset with our decision, no matter how close we'd gotten over the past few years.

"Come out. Tell the whole fucking world you guys are ... you know."

"Lovers?"

"Geesh, Brandon, did you have to do that? I mean, aren't you guys having enough trouble as it is without inviting more? I'd think you would've wanted to keep what should be private, private. Especially what with everything that's going on."

I shook my head, grimacing. "We're sick of hiding. Hiding is what got us into this mess in the first place. If you're not comfortable with it, sorry."

He took a deep breath, then let it out, spreading his hands. "No, no, I'm fine with it. Might as well be, huh?"

He stood and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Well, guess I'd better go say goodbye to your boyfriend, then take Barkley back to the hotel before he gets caught. I had to smuggle him up the back stairs, then bribe Lurch outside to let him in here, you know."

I smiled. "His name is Jeff. He and Mutt," I said, indicating the other man, "are our bodyguards."

"Bodyguards. Really." He grinned. "Mutt and Jeff, for real?"

"For real. I have no idea what Mutt's real name is, though."

"So why now? Been trying to get you to hire professional guards for years."

"After everything's that happened, we thought it necessary. They'll stay with us until we leave Durango."

"Smart move. Got a place to stay?"

"Leased a house today. There's room for you, if you want."

He nodded, weighing my sincerity, I guess. "I'd like that, little bro, but I've got a hotel. I'll drop by, though. If you're sure you want me around."

I hesitated. "I'd like you to come, but only if you're comfortable around me and Nicholas. I won't have him upset."

"I know, I know, you're no longer hiding anything. Does that mean I could come to the kitchen for a beer and find you two kissing each other?"

I nodded, visions of doing just that flitting through my mind. "It's possible. Highly probable, even."

He pressed his lips together, then shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll live with it, then. Who all's going to be there?"

"Me and Nicholas, Jonathan, Sam, Sylvie, Jenny and Rex, and hopefully as soon as possible, Tommy."

"And Mutt and Jeff. And the dog."

I nodded. "Yes."

"One big happy family. What, no Marisa?"

"She's going back home. Kid's waiting and all that."

"Damn. You actually got rid of her. There may be hope for you guys after all. Who's the chick with Sam? Her name is Katie?"

I glanced at the table. "My new assistant. That's her mom, Beth, a patient here. Met Katie and her sister downstairs and had lunch with them the other day."

"And let me guess, you felt sorry for them and have taken them in, too. Damn, boy, you collect people like Barkley collects fleas."

I laughed. "Yeah, well, thanks for bringing Barkley to us. I know that was asking a lot."

"I told you, it was no problem. Least I can do for all the hell I gave Nicholas all those years." He grinned at that, though when it came down to it, I failed to see his amusement. He glanced away from me, sensing my displeasure. "Now, I'd better go say my goodbyes and sneak the mutt out of here. I'll call you later."

"Okay. Thanks, Adam."

He headed for Nicholas. Yeah, it *was* the least he could do. I watched as he approached Nicholas, the way Nicholas held Barkley close as he looked up at Adam. Adam pulled a leash out of his pocket and clipped it to Barkley's collar. He leaned down and whispered something into Nick's ear that actually made him grin. I sat back in my chair, relieved. They'd never gotten along, Nicholas and Adam, but bringing Barkley had helped. At least Adam was trying, though his comments still rankled.

As Adam took Barkley out of the room, waving to me as he did so, Marisa also took her leave, followed by Jenny, who looked just as tired as Nicholas. Katie stood, taking "my" box with her, and, after promising to come back in the morning, wheeled her mom away. It didn't escape me how Sam's gaze followed Katie out.

"Guess I'll go talk with Sylvie for a while, let you guys have a rest," Sam said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Check on Tommy."

"Tell him I'll be by later," I said.

"No problem."

"Sam, come here a sec," Nicholas said. Sam went over to him and bent down. Nicholas whispered something in his ear. Sam blushed, but nodded. Then he, too, left the room, pausing at the door to speak with Mutt a moment.

"I'll be outside," Mutt said, and then Nicholas and I were alone.

He lay back in the bed and flipped open his covers, patting the mattress in invitation. "Coming?" he asked.

I hesitated. "You should get some rest, Nicholas. You're exhausted."

"I am, but I want you with me. Come here, Brandon. And take off your shirt."

"Nicholas --"

His face set, determined. "Brandon, now."

"All right, boss." A familiar but long-missed thrill ran through me. I did as he told me to. I pulled off my shirt, then hopped on my good foot over to him. He grinned as I sat on the bed, catching my breath. "A little chilly to be without a shirt," I said. "It's getting colder in here."

"Stop complaining. I'll warm you up."

"Oh, you will, will you?"

He nodded, grabbing the waistband of my sweats. "Take off the rest of your clothes and lie down next to me. Face me."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"But --"

He grinned slyly. "Don't worry. Mutt has orders to keep anyone from disturbing us until we say so. Now, are you going to take off your clothes so I can see you naked, or what?" He looked at me, those incredible blue eyes of his half-closed, heated. "It's been too long, Brandon," he whispered. "Too long."

I swallowed hard and nodded. He knew I wouldn't resist him. Couldn't.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pulled off my sweats, grimacing as I pulled the one leg over my cast. "Damn thing," I muttered, wincing. I closed my eyes against the tiny but persistent cartwheels of pain.

Nick's hand touched my back, and the pain was soothed away by a wave of pleasure as he ran his hand up my spine, carefully avoiding my still-healing scar.

"You okay, babe? Still hurts?"

"Yeah. But not too bad." After a moment, I stood on my good foot and folded my clothes, setting them on the chair.

"You've put on a lot of weight. For you, I mean," he added with a laugh. "How much?"

"About twenty-five pounds or so. A little more."

"I probably weigh less than you do, for once." He nodded. "It looks damn good on you." He reached out and swatted my behind.

"Hey, watch it," I said, hopping about so he couldn't smack me again. Of course, I just gave him something else to look at.

"Chilly?" he asked, eyeing my groin with amusement.

I growled and pounced on him. "Told you it was too cold to run around naked in here. Now, scoot over."

He did as I said, turning on his side so we were face to face. He reached for the control to the bed and pressed the button that made the bed lie flat. He pulled the blankets over us both so we were cocooned together. Then he reached up and turned off the light. It was mid-afternoon, close to four, and the brief hours of sunshine were drawing to a close. The room was already fairly dark. But I could still see his face.

It had snowed some again that morning, cloaking the hospital in a fresh blanket of white. It *was* cold, but as I lay next to Nicholas, snuggled against his satin-clad warmth, I felt all my chills fade away. He began to hum softly as he gazed into my eyes. He reached out from under the covers and ran his fingers over my eyebrows, tracing them, stroking the side of my face and tickling my chin.

"You didn't shave today."

"Nope. Lazy."

I reached up and did the same to him, stroking his eyebrows, trailing down his face, touching the scar across his cheek. A sudden wave of fear washed over me. It must've flashed in my eyes, since a look of concern crossed his. He cradled my face and brushed my lips with his own. "Shh, Brandon, it's okay now." He rested his forehead against mine.

I swallowed, but shook my head. "It's not okay, Nick." I took a deep breath, shuddering as I let it out. "If anything else happens to you, I don't know how I could bear it."

"Nothing's going to happen to me. I worry more about *you*."

"Me? Why?"

He ran his hand down my face, trailing his fingers to the back of my neck. He pulled me close, pressing his lips to mine, pulling back and smiling as a small groan escaped me at the too-brief touch.

"Because you've been so strong. Held up so long." He shook his head. "Always so brave, so amazing. There for everybody, for me, for your family and mine. I'm worried it'll hit you all at once, what you've had to go through. I'm worried I won't be there for you when that happens."

I gave a miserable attempt at a half-laugh, but it faded as I realized he was serious. I swallowed hard against the edge of fear that now always seemed to hover at the edges of my consciousness. "Nothing's going to happen to me, Nick. I'm okay."

He smiled sadly. "I know you are. *Okay*."

He lay on his back, pulling me to him. I stretched along his length, loving the feel of my bare skin against satin, the feel of his hand on my back. I laid my hand on his stomach, taking care not to touch his scar -- my own on my back was still a little uncomfortable, but most of the time I hardly noticed it anymore. But his still hurt, bad, and would for some time. Nicholas yawned. I could feel his exhaustion seeping through to me.

"You need to sleep," I said.

"I know, but I sure would like to make love to you."

I looked up at him, unable to hide my pleasure. "It might be a while before you can do that, Nick."

"Not if we switch."

"What?"

He chuckled. "You should see your face. Don't look so shocked. You *have* been top before, haven't you? I mean, I know not with me, but surely ..."

I looked away as I stiffened against him, feeling unaccountable guilt.

"Nicholas, I --" I stopped, at a loss. Shame rolled over me as the memories of too many late nights with too many faceless partners flashed through my mind. Desperate, grasping attempts to forget the past and numb the present and obliterate the future.

None of it had worked.

Yeah, I'd been top, been bottom, been with two guys, three guys, even four, I think -- I don't really remember much about that -- all nameless, faceless, some recognizing me, most not giving a damn even if they did. Numbed by grief and alcohol, I'd done all sorts of things, all in the vain attempt to forget the bad times and my role in them. Thank God I hadn't slipped into drugs, hadn't contracted HIV despite several very stupid times I'd been so drunk I'd barebacked, only realizing what I'd done the following morning.

My guardian angel had truly watched over me during that time in my life. I'd done all this crap, risked my life, in an attempt to forget. The only thing was, it hadn't worked, and I'd only succeeded in scarring the memories of the good times, too.

"Brandon. Look at me."

When I didn't, he lifted my chin and forced me to. I blinked against the disgrace I felt. I felt small and so ...

"Brandon. I love you. You know that, right?"

I nodded, licking my lips nervously. "I love you, too."

"All that matters is *now*. And what we make of the future. Okay?"

"But I --"

He placed a finger across my lips, shaking his head. "No. I don't want to know." He smiled softly at me. "We did what we had to do, you and me, before we found each other again. All right?"

Oh, but the things I'd done. I wanted to tell him, right then, but I didn't. I couldn't. My throat was tight, and it was all I could do just to force myself to nod.

He kissed me, releasing my chin. "No problem, then. You'll do fine."

"You sure? I mean, about me ... um ..."

He laughed. "Brandon, I swear, sometimes you make me think you're nineteen again. I always wanted you to, you know."

"You did?" I said, startled. "But why didn't you tell me then?"

He captured my mouth with his again. "Because you were so damn sexy in your innocence. So shy. So new to everything, and I loved seeing you that way." He ran his fingers underneath the covers down my chest, circling my nipple and tweaking it gently with his fingers. I arched my head back, pushing my erection against him and closing my eyes as waves of pleasure made me gasp. "And because of that."

I opened my eyes, my breath catching. "What?"

"The way you respond to me. I loved making you respond to me. And I guess I never wanted to give that up."

"You wouldn't have had to."

He slid his hand down my side. "I know that now. But it wasn't only that, I guess. You made me feel powerful, where I never had before. But I don't have to feel that way anymore to be happy." He looked up at the ceiling, captured his bottom lip in his teeth, and shook his head. "Now, I can ... I can be vulnerable, and not be afraid."

"You were afraid of me?"

He shrugged. "Not afraid of you, per se, but afraid of what you made me feel. I loved you so much, Brandon. Too much, I think sometimes. And when you started to pull away, I didn't understand, and so I got afraid and grabbed hold of the only thing I could control, and that was it."

He laid his forehead against mine as we shared the pain of what we'd gone through. More words weren't necessary -- not anymore. "I'm sorry, Nicholas," I whispered.

"I'm sorry, too."

"We really fucked things up."

"No, no, we didn't. Else we wouldn't be together now." He sighed and pulled me closer to him, his hand returning to my shoulder. "I'm so tired. I can't believe how exhausted I am."

I set aside my disappointment as I stroked his face. Too pale, and circles underneath his eyes. "You pushed yourself too much today. This can wait."

"But I want you inside me, Brandon. I want to know what it feels like, for me to be possessed by you."

His words nearly undid me. But I shook my head. "After you take a nap."

He hesitated, but at my stern look, his shoulders sank in defeat. "I'm sorry."

"No problem. I'm not going anywhere. You rest awhile. Then we'll fuck."

He laughed at that. "That's what I love about you, Brandon. So simply eloquent."

"Works, doesn't it?"

He yawned and covered his mouth. "Sorry. Yes, it does. All right. I'm not sure I can stay awake much longer anyway. Wouldn't want to fall asleep on you. You sure it's okay? You're kinda stiff down there."

"Of course it's okay," I hastened to say. "I'm fine."

He nodded, then snuggled against me. When he spoke again, his voice was soft with weariness. "Remember our first time? First time I took you? That was one heck of a weekend, wasn't it?"

"Yes, how could I forget?" No way I could forget that weekend -- the beginning of the most wonderful and most terrible time of my life.

He smoothed his hand down my side and spread his hand over my backside. He yawned again, half turned to me, and cradled my face with his hand while he kissed me, a chaste, sweet kiss. I could feel his exhaustion, just through his kiss alone.

"This will be like our first again."

"I hope it goes better this time," I said wryly.

He chuckled and brushed my nose with his lips. "It will."

"But not right now, Nicholas. You seriously need some sleep."

He nodded, closed his eyes, and leaned his forehead against mine. Within seconds, he'd fallen asleep. I shifted position, taking care not to wake him as I moved my broken foot where he couldn't kick it on accident -- he can be a rather violent sleeper.

It felt so amazing, lying naked against him when he wasn't, feeling his chest rise and fall steadily beneath my palm. His hand, still and warm, on my bare backside.

I couldn't sleep, though. My mind wouldn't stop thinking about what he'd said about him wanting me to make love to him. He wasn't near ready for such hijinks yet, I didn't think; though when I slid my hand down to his groin, he was semi-erect. He pushed against my hand in his sleep, and it was all I could do to not respond.

My mind drifted back to that weekend, the weekend of our first time. A wave of gloom washed over me, and I pulled Nicholas tighter to me. It was an odd thing, being at this very point in writing my memoirs, as Nicholas called them, to have him mention our first time together beyond a mutual jerk-off.

How difficult that weekend had been, for both of us. It had all begun with the party, of course. The party had started out so shitty, then turned into something so beautiful as Nicholas and I experienced for the first time the incredible power of our partnership over an audience.

But that joy had been short-lived. Seth Miller had seen to that.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

I was so startled, I didn't see his foot coming for me until it impacted my stomach. I fell forward, dizzy and in shock over the pain. I sensed rather than saw him draw back -- then his fists crashed across my shoulders. I fell to the ground in a heap, gasping for breath, desperate for air ...

I couldn't breathe, couldn't catch my breath. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck Nicholas please don't come out please oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck ...*

Hands grabbed me and hauled me to my feet. "Come on, little fucker." I tried to fight, but that just earned a hard slap across my face. My head whirled; I saw stars were there

weren't any, felt blackness stealing over me as Percy's buddy threw me onto my back behind a car.

I gasped for breath, trying to steel myself for whatever was about to come. I couldn't move. It was as if my arms were frozen, my legs pinned to the ground. My attacker straddled my hips and leaned over me, grinning as he pushed my arms over my head.

Then, he kissed me.

I fought back as his tongue invaded my mouth, but he pulled back and slapped me across the face again. He wore a ring, I numbly realized as it cut me.

"Lay still, lover boy," he said, his voice low and ominous. He fished in my pockets, pulled out my keys, and hurled them away. Then he pulled out my wallet and opened it, grinding his butt into my hips and laughing as I continued to lie still, defeated.

"Forty fucking dollars. Is that all, lover boy? That's not nearly enough." He tossed my wallet aside and leaned over me again, pinning my arms down once more. "You and me, we need to talk. Or rather, I'll do all the talking. You'll listen."

And that's when I heard Nicholas calling for me. Panicking, I tried to buck my captor off -- I had to warn Nicholas and tried to call his name -- but that was the wrong thing to do.

He hit me in the face again.

"Do that again, and I'll shove my fist up your ass. Or maybe you'd like that." He leered at me. "You and pretty boy fisted each other yet?" He drew closer to me, so his face was only inches from mine. I glared at him, refusing to yield -- at least in my mind. My body wasn't cooperating too well as I struggled to catch my breath, struggled against the pain. He grabbed my hair with one hand and wrenched my head to the side, exposing my throat and the mark Nicholas had made there. He latched onto it, sucking hard, laughing as he pulled back and admired his handiwork.

"Now I've branded you, Brandon."

I stared wild-eyed at him, and he laughed.

"That's right, Brandon. Brandon Ashwood. That's why I came tonight, to find out who the fuck you were. You little bastard." He bent close to me again; his eyes were filled with anger, but it was calculating, cruel. Fear lanced through me, and he grinned, seeing it reflected in my eyes.

"You put Percy in the hospital, you know that? The police are very interested in knowing what happened to him. And I, of course, told them. Some little dick-tease Percy had fucked attacked him with a board, leaving him for dead. He -- *you* -- left something else, too."

He leered at me. Using his knees, he pinned my arms down and cradled my face with his hands. His breath was hot and fetid as it brushed against my face. I still fought for breath, but coughed, not wanting to breathe in with him in my face. Tears filled my eyes as I choked. I drew my legs up against the pain he caused as he pushed down on my chest.

"You left your t-shirt, remember?" I stared at him in horror, remembering. He grinned. "Yes, you do remember, don't you? Now that t-shirt is evidence. All it would take is little ol' me handing over your name, having those forensic guys tie that shirt to you. And they would, you know. All it would take is a stray hair, a stray thread -- and wham!" He kissed me again, forcing his tongue into my mouth. I choked against the invasion, tears of humiliation and fear cascading down the side of my face.

The t-shirt. Oh, my God --

"Brandon, where are you?"

Nicholas!

I bucked against my captor, and he pulled back with a soft laugh. "Of course, I could say it's Nick's."

I stilled then, panic making my heart trip-hammer in my chest.

"No. No, please ..."

He sat up and grinned, patting me on the cheek. I winced -- it hurt. "Good boy. You said the magic words." He stood, then hauled me to my feet and pulled me against him, his arm in a chokehold, taking care to keep in the shadows so no one could see us.

"Look out there, Brandon."

My legs were like jelly, my head whirling, but I looked. And saw Nicholas.

He stood in Karen's grandfather's front yard, talking with two other people. He was gesturing; it was clear he was upset. What was he thinking, that I'd skipped out on him? I struggled again, but it was useless; my captor had a firm grip. He damn well knew what he was doing.

"He's your lover, isn't he?" When I didn't respond, he reached down and grabbed my crotch. "You've fucked him, haven't you?"

I nodded -- it was all I could do.

"Good boy."

He released the pressure on my groin, but didn't let go of me. "He's quite beautiful, isn't he? Percy always thought so. Beautiful, but not my type." He kissed my neck. He towered over me, outweighed me by a good thirty pounds, I figured. I'd had the advantage of surprise over him before -- now he had it over me. I was helpless, pressed as I was against his chest.

"You're more to my liking, Brandon. Know that? Tell me, what would you be willing to do, I wonder, to keep me from telling the cops that t-shirt is yours? Or, better yet, is Nick's?" He laughed in my ear. The stench of him made me nauseous; the heat of his body against mine made me gag. "I'm a fair man, Brandon Ashwood. I'm gonna give you time to think about it. Think about what you'd be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe."

He released me then. I dropped onto the ground, hitting my cheek against the asphalt. He knelt beside me and brushed my hair back from my face. "Think about it. I'll find you, and then we can discuss our little arrangement. I'm sure we can come up with something satisfactory ..." He stroked my groin, making me flinch. "... to us both. Nicholas will never have to know. That's what you want, isn't it? To keep your boyfriend safe? Nod your head, Brandon." I did so, hating myself, terrified to do anything else.

"Good boy. Tell you what, you're gonna give me about five minutes to disappear. If you don't, I may change my mind and forget our deal. It might be fun to finish with Nicholas what you stopped the other night."

And then he was gone.

I lay still as he told me to. Couldn't do anything but. I could see them, the people at the party -- Nick's friends -- beyond the underbelly of the car. Finally I pulled myself up, tried to stand -- and fell against the car as everything around me started to whirl. I heard rather than saw someone running toward me, and I collapsed, crying out as someone caught me.

I fought against them as terror tightened its grip.

"Brandon, Brandon, stop it. It's me, Richie. Oh, shit! Oh, fuck! What happened to you?" He pulled me to him. "Over here! I found him!" More footsteps running toward us. I clutched Richie's shirt, and he wrapped me in his arms, rocking me.

"Oh, shit, what happened to him?"

"Was he mugged?"

"Brandon!" *Nicholas*. "Oh, God, Brandon, what happened? Babe, it's me."

I tried to say something, tell him I was okay, but fear stilled me. What if *he* was still around? Watching?

"We need to get him inside, Nicholas."

I lay limp as strong arms slid under my legs and shoulders. I felt myself hefted up.

"Easy, Chad."

"I've got him."

"Brandon --"

"Let me get him inside, Nicholas."

Chad. That bastard carrying me like I was a child. What the fuck was he doing here? Humiliation cascaded over me as we moved up the steps and inside.

"This way, put him in here." Karen.

"What's going on here?" Dr. Hart's voice. "Oh, my, what happened to the boy?"

"He was mugged, I think," Richie said.

"I found his wallet. It's empty."

Nicholas ...

Chad laid me down on the bed, and I winced. The blackness was starting to clear, my breath easing as I lay flat on the soft bed. Gentle hands examined my face. It burned, scraped from the ring and from falling onto the ground and from being slapped over and over again.

"Get everyone out, Karen. Richie, get some ice for his face."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm staying," Nicholas said.

"Of course you are, son. Help me get his shirt off."

I opened my eyes, gasping as my shirt was taken off. "Nicholas --"

He grabbed my hand -- he'd climbed onto the bed next to me. "I'm right here. Did you see who attacked you?"

I didn't hesitate. "No. No. He took my money."

Tears shimmered in Nick's eyes. He kissed my hand and brought it to his cheek. "It doesn't matter. Just be okay."

Dr. Hart gently examined my ribs. I breathed in sharply. He glanced at me. "Hurt?"

I nodded, clenching Nick's hand, hard. "Yes." I laid my other hand across my eyes, trying to block out the image of my attacker, and his words.

Think about what you'd be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe.

"Nicholas," I said. "Don't leave me. Please. Don't go outside."

"I'm not. Don't worry."

"Nothing's broken," Dr. Hart said. "But you're well and goodly bruised. Feeling dizzy?"

I nodded. "Yes, a little." I took a deep breath. "But it's better already."

"Good. Got a nice scrape on your face, a bit bruised and sore, but you'll be okay. You boys plan on staying here tonight, all right?" I closed my eyes and nodded. There was no way I could move -- it hurt too bad to do so.

At least the room had stopped spinning, though my heart still raced.

"Thanks, Dr. Hart."

"You're welcome, Nicholas. I'll check on him a little later."

Then he was gone, closing the door after him. Karen walked out of the bathroom, a bowl and washcloth in her hands. She sat on the bed and rung out the washcloth. With such gentleness that I stared at her in amazement, she wiped off my face, smiling at me as she did so. She noticed the mark on my neck then; I felt my face heat, but she ignored it.

I just prayed Nicholas would do the same, think that it was the mark he had made.

"There you go," she said gently as she ran the washcloth down my arm, ending at my fingers. She washed my hand and laid it on my stomach, then took my other from Nicholas, wiping off the dirt that had accumulated during my struggle with my attacker.

"You want anything else?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

"Thanks, Karen," Nicholas said, leaning over me to kiss her. "You're the best."

"Anything for you. You know that."

Richie came back in. "I found an ice pack," he said, handing Karen a towel-wrapped bag.

"Thanks," I said.

He grimaced. "No problem, but man, I am so sorry about that. Had a hell of a night, haven't you?"

"Thanks, Richie," Nicholas said, the note of dismissal in his voice clear.

Richie rubbed his hands together and grinned at me. "Guess you're in the best hands. I'll see you boys later. Bye, Karen."

"Bye, Richie, and thanks." She waited until Richie had left, and then she looked at me and touched my cheek with the back of her hand. "You guys get some sleep, okay? You sure you didn't see anything, Brandon?"

I held her gaze with my own. "No. It happened too fast."

"You were missing a long time."

"I must've blacked out or something. Maybe."

She grimaced at that -- I could tell she didn't believe me. "We'll talk more about it tomorrow. I'll leave you guys alone." She kissed me on the cheek that wasn't hurt. "Sleep. I'm going to go send everyone home."

Then she was gone, and we were alone.

Nicholas got off the bed and slowly, his back to me, kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks and pants, then his shirt. He had on a white t-shirt and boxers. He turned to me, his expression thoughtful. He started to say something, then hesitated.

"What is it?" I asked.

He sat on the bed and pulled off my shoes and socks. He reached for my jeans -- I unbuttoned them myself, but winced as I tried to push them down. He knelt on the bed and pulled them off for me, folding them and putting them with his own clothes.

"Was it Percy, Brandon?"

"No. It wasn't him, I promise."

"You don't know who it was?"

At that time I still didn't know his name. "No."

He closed his eyes. I could see him trembling. He ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head.

"Nicholas, I'm okay. It was just forty dollars. It was nothing."

"And you got beat up, Brandon. I don't call that *nothing*."

“No. No, of course not.” I closed my eyes. I couldn’t think, didn’t want to move. And I was getting chilly.

I heard Nicholas move away from the bed, then return. A soft blanket unfurled over my body. Nicholas crawled into the bed, snuggling against me. I lifted my arm, grateful when he curled against me -- and asked no more questions. We lay still for a long time until gradually I felt him relax, fall asleep. Sleep didn’t come so easily to me, but finally it came, pushing against the fear my encounter with Percy’s buddy had instilled in my heart.

Think about what you’d be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe.

I knew what I would do. I would do anything, *anything* I had to, to keep Nicholas safe.

Chapter Fifteen

Colorado -- Present Day

I yawned and tried to stretch. Damn, I was cramped. And cold. Hardly surprising -- my dear companion had once again nearly pushed me off the way-too-small bed. Saved only by the guard-rail, again. And he'd stolen almost all the covers, leaving my backside bare to the freezing room.

Damn, it was cold. And dark. I had to wonder if the heat was even on. Didn't feel like it.

The wind blew hard against the windows, making a sad, moaning sound. Maybe another blizzard had hit and that was why Jonathan wasn't there yet. I'd hardly looked outside all day. Snow could be up to the windows, for all I knew. Or cared. Right then all I wanted was to be warm. I inched closer to the sole source of heat in the room and tugged at the blankets, trying to no avail to cover myself.

His hand reached over me and pulled and tucked the blanket tighter around my back, but not before he took a wicked liberty and rubbed my bare backside with one warm hand. Still half-asleep, I chuckled, nuzzling his shoulder and sinking deeper into the covers with a happy sigh.

The bed was hard, somewhat lumpy, and terribly narrow -- clearly not meant for two grown men -- but it really didn't matter right then. Its other occupant was warm, and safe, and alive.

How beautiful, the simple things.

I could hardly wait for tomorrow, though, and our own big bed with plenty of warm covers and plenty of room for Nicholas to stretch out without knocking me onto the floor.

He was going to love it. *I* planned to enjoy it as much as possible, too. Preferably romping in it with him.

Marisa had thought me a bit nuts, I supposed, when I'd demanded we have a brand-new four poster and mattress delivered to the fully furnished house we'd leased -- along with all new bed linens (which she'd promised to have laundered first) -- but I hadn't cared what she'd thought. I was past all that nonsense with Marisa. Guess she saw that in my eyes.

When I'd seen the bed in a catalog she'd brought from Fraley's, a local department store, I'd known it was ours, a near (but more opulent) cousin to the first bed Nicholas and I had shared so long ago. It seemed right, that bed. Our bed. I didn't explain that to her -- it was none of her business -- just told her to get it and not tell Nicholas. She'd looked at me with a grimace, no doubt trying hard *not* to imagine what I planned to do with "her" Nicholas in it. But she'd done as I'd asked.

And that was that.

I sighed against Nicholas. I guessed he'd been awake for a while. He'd turned the light on to its lowest setting, and he held a magazine, though it lay unread against his chest. The light barely illuminated the room, but it was enough for me to see the wicked grin on his face.

"Hey," I said, looking up at him.

"Hey, hey, yourself. About time you woke up."

I stretched again, wincing a little at a small catch in my back along my scar.

"Sorry. Guess I was more tired than I thought. What are you reading?" I asked, pulling myself up a bit and resting my cheek on his shoulder.

He tossed the magazine aside. "Another article on the press conference."

"What did it say?" My gaze followed the magazine's flutter to the floor. I'd still not looked at any of the articles beyond the one. Didn't really want to. Not out of denial, this time. Just because I really didn't care what people thought.

"Same as the others, I guess. Couldn't concentrate, so I've actually been watching you sleep."

"Move over a bit more. I'm about to fall out, and my butt is still freezing."

"Complain, complain. You could've slept in your own bed, you know."

I snorted. "As if you'd let me. You just need to learn to share. Move it."

He grinned, doing as I asked, his expression sly. He turned to face me. I pulled the covers back over us, snuggling into his warmth. He slid a hand over my butt and then rubbed it briskly again, making me squirm.

"Cut that out," I said, laughing as I slid my hand under the cover and tried to bat his hand away. The boy proved amazingly strong. After a brief struggle, I gave up. He crowed in

victory, but pulled my hips closer to his, slid one leg between mine, and ran his hand down my thigh. I pushed my growing erection against him.

"You really *are* cold, Brandon. Except for maybe this one place, that is." He reached between us then and grasped my dick with one hot hand. "You're so hard," he said. "Were you dreaming of me?"

"Of course I was, silly. You're always in my dreams. You *are* my dream."

"Brandon. Wow. Thanks."

I grinned at his wonder. He rubbed his thumb lightly over me, gently stroking back my foreskin, making me groan at his deliberately teasing touch. "You sure you want to do that?" I whispered, pushing myself into his grasp. "I might lose all my amazing, iron-willed control."

He smirked. "Oh, I'm sure, all right. I love it when you throw out your inhibitions. You don't do it enough, not nearly enough."

"I will from now on. Promise."

I nuzzled his neck, making him giggle. I loved it when he did that. His fingers found my balls, cupping them, squeezing gently as he rolled them in his hand. The temperature beneath the covers rose by fifty degrees, at least.

I lifted my leg, hooking it -- cast and all -- over him, and covered his smaller hand with my own, my fingers resting lightly on his. I loved the feel of his hand moving beneath mine as he took his time exploring me. Stroking me. Learning me, again.

I sighed in contentment and kissed his neck, pushing his collar back, getting teasingly close to one of his satin-covered nipples.

I loved being played with, feeling his nimble fingers on me. For Nicholas, it was his nipples. I could drive him wild just kissing them, bare or not, and did so now, suckling one through the satin and making him yelp. His hand convulsed on me, making me gasp. I nuzzled him on the neck again, pulled his hand away, entwined his fingers with my own, and grasped them tight.

I pushed him onto his back. His eyes widened, face flushed. He held my shoulders with his hands, tilted his head to the side in suspicion. "What do you think you're doing, Brandon?"

"Proving it to you."

He looked at me, puzzled. "Proving what?"

"That it's more fun to share," I whispered into his ear, teasing it with my tongue. "Especially with me."

Before he could protest, I carefully slid between his legs and covered his mouth with my own. So hot. So sweet. I couldn't stop moving against him, building the friction between us though he was only semi-erect through his satin pajama bottoms.

"You're so hard," he murmured. "Hungry?"

"Mm-hmm. For you."

"Sorry I'm not --"

I silenced him with a kiss. "Don't worry, we'll get you there."

My heart swelled at his shy smile. He cupped my face between his hands, that look of wonder back on his face.

"Love you, Brandon."

"Love you, too, Nicholas. Very much. More than you know."

"It's so beautiful, hearing you say that. So unafraid."

I gave him a half-smile. "This, I'm not afraid of anymore."

I suddenly had the wild urge to plunge into him and rock him hard until I exploded deep inside him. But I couldn't do that, at least not yet. I knew I'd need to be patient with him -- his injuries had been horrible, had nearly taken him from me. He needed more time; his body needed a little more persuasion to respond.

Fine with me.

Yet now he returned my kisses eagerly, hungry as I was to reconnect at last. "I've waited ... so long ... for this," he said between kisses, his voice soft with longing.

"I know, I know. Me, too," I said, the now-familiar pang of regret rising in me. I pushed it aside, though -- Nicholas was too astute by far, and I didn't want him to know how much it pained me, knowing how much I'd hurt him even though he'd said he'd forgiven me.

Guess I hadn't forgiven myself yet, didn't know if I ever could.

I reached back and adjusted the covers over us both, then slowly slid my hand up his uninjured side, making him flinch and sigh all at once. I could feel him flex his toes as he squeezed me between his thighs. Heat flushed his face, his neck, his chest. It'd always fascinated me, how Nicholas flushed all over like that.

How I was the one who made him do it. Could still make him do it.

I gently bit his lower lip and brushed across his rough cheeks, loving the burn. Talk about needing a shave. His hands crawled up my back, along my spine, grasping my upper arms and squeezing. Holding on.

I grinned as he tilted his head back to expose his throat, and I happily complied with his silent request, playfully nudging and kissing his neck beneath his ear and along his jaw line before returning to his lips. I pulled back, grinding my hips into him, and looked into his eyes -- so blue, so happy as he looked at me, so filled with passion.

He'd swelled beneath me at last.

"Now look who's hard," I said.

"Me?" he said, grinning.

"Yeah." I bit my lip, shaking my head as I leaned on one hand and brushed his hair back with the other. "You need a haircut."

He giggled, shaking his head like Barkley. "I look like a mop."

"Huh. So do I."

He reached up, running his fingers through my hair. "I don't know, I kinda like it long like this. You look nineteen again." He twisted his fingers in my hair and smiled. I searched his face, drenching myself in the dazzling power of Nicholas.

I leaned my forehead against his. "Definitely not nineteen anymore. Thank God. Are you sure you're ready for this? We could wait --"

He pressed a finger against my lips and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure."

I sighed as his hands, so warm and smooth, slid beneath the covers and down my bare back to cup my butt cheeks again. He squeezed, pulling me harder against him. I ground my hips into his, my dick into his, making him press one cheek against the pillows and groan with the pleasure-pain of it.

"Brandon ..."

His body was so hot. "Yeah?" I said, kissing his cheek.

"What time is it?"

I pulled back, a laugh escaping me. "I, um ..." I glanced at the clock. "It's almost seven. Why?" And why now? I studied his face as he looked at me, the slight edge of worry shadowing his eyes -- and I realized he was nervous. My Nicholas, nervous about sex? I tensed, worried. "Am I pushing you too fast, Nicholas?"

"No, no. It's just that we missed dinner."

Mmm, yeah. He was nervous, all right. And for once, I wasn't -- big switch, that. Always before, it'd been me who was the anxious one. "Big loss."

He ran his hands up to my waist and down again. "Yes, you're getting kinda plump anyway. You need to go about forgetting to eat again. What are you, up to a 34-inch waist?"

"Uh, yeah, as a matter of fact."

Nicholas rolled his eyes. "Whoa. Big boy. I won't even tell you what I was wearing before ... before I was kidnapped. Not that I'd recommend six weeks of bread and water just to lose twenty, thirty pounds."

"Nicholas," I whispered. I propped myself on one elbow, stroking his hair back and cradling his face, willing the brief spate of horror away from his eyes. I brushed his eyebrows with my thumb. "Don't think about it. Not right now."

"I-I'll try not to."

How I wished he *would* forget. But then, I was the prince of worries myself, so I couldn't blame him for his fears.

I kissed him again -- I would never get enough of those lips -- and reached for the top button of his pajama top. I undid the first one and slid my fingers beneath to touch his slightly furred chest. He'd gotten a little hairier since we'd been apart, though they'd shaved a bunch of it off for the surgery.

He was getting kinda prickly in places. I cupped one of his pecs, flicking his nipple with my thumb. He drew in his breath and twisted his head to the side, closing his eyes. His breath quickened. So easy.

I undid the next button, pushed the fabric away, and kissed him on his exposed pale skin. I wasn't so tan anymore myself, but still, compared to me his skin was almost bluish-white. He sighed, twisting his head back to look at me. I unbuttoned the last of the buttons.

"Why did you think of that now, Nicholas? Here, let's get this shirt off."

"It just hits at the weirdest times." He drew his arms out of his sleeves and let me pull the shirt away. I tossed it aside. "I just get real sad and scared all of a sudden."

I knew all about that. "I don't want you to be sad right now, okay?"

He grinned at me, but I saw his chin tremble despite his best effort. "I'm behaving like a little girl," he said.

"No, you aren't. Not after what you went through, what you had to go through to survive."

He wiped a hand over his face, then pulled me to him, kissing me, our bare chests pressed together, though I tried not to push on him too hard. Still, damn, he felt good. I yielded to him, the force of his lips on mine, the deep plunging into my mouth -- exorcising his demons with a kiss. I hoped it worked for him. Wished it would for me. My demons were too darn stubborn.

Not that I would tell him about that.

I finally broke away, needing desperately to breathe.

"Whoa." I smiled at him. "You always do that, steal my breath away."

He blew on my face. "Breathe, Brandon," he said with a smile, echoing the countless times he'd had to tell me that in the past when I'd been a little more out of control than I was now.

I tapped him on the chest, then trailed my fingers down to his waistband and tugged on it. "You know, we should've stripped you naked before we fell asleep," I said as I pushed myself awkwardly to my knees. It was kind of hard with a cast and all.

"You're the nudist, not me."

"I've never known you to complain about my lack of attire in bed."

His gaze raked over me. "Are you kidding? Why would I?"

With a grin, I swooped down and kissed his satin-clad erection, making him gasp, then pulled down his pajama bottoms (he hardly assisted me at all, the brat, just watched me struggle in amusement) and tossed them onto the floor, too.

“What, you’re not going to fold them?” he teased.

I placed my hands on his thighs. “Yeah, right. Spread ’em, boy.”

His breath caught, and mine did, too. The vulnerability in his eyes as he did as I’d told him to -- opened himself to me -- sent shivers through me that couldn’t be blamed on the chill in the room.

He slid his hands up under his pillows, his lips slightly parted as he waited for me to do whatever I planned next. I’d never seen him like this, and it excited me, his eager submission. I brushed my fingers in those shadow places, memorizing the feel and the sight of him, marrying the two sensations so that later I could take out the memory and savor it.

I ran my hands up and down his thighs, cupping his balls with one hand, gently massaging them. I bent down a bit awkwardly -- darn cast and narrow bed and freezing besides -- and took him in my mouth, making him cry out in shock. He hadn’t expected that.

His head thrashed from side to side, his toes curling as I mouthed him, swirling my tongue around the silky, soft tip, pushing against the head -- unlike me, he was cut -- sucking gently on him as I reached up with my free hand, seeking and finding his left nipple.

I tweaked it with my fingers while continuing my assault on his nether region, a surge of desire rocketing through me as he bucked beneath me, pushing his dick deeper into my mouth.

“Brandon, fuck,” he moaned, sinking his fingers into my hair.

“Working on it,” I said, kissing his shaft down to the base.

“You gotta stop, or I’ll explode. Please.”

I looked up, captured his gaze with my own, and, with a grin, took my place between his legs again. But this time, bare skin met bare skin.

Oh, how he belonged to me.

I lay against him for a moment, just feeling him, wishing it wasn’t so blasted cold. Drinking in his scent of warm skin and the baby lotion the hospital supplied that he’d fallen in love with. Stealing his warmth.

Remembering.

He stroked my hair, caressing my cheek, playing with my earrings. He’d stopped wearing his -- I wasn’t even sure when. I’d have to get him a new earring, and soon.

With a grin I sat up again, patting his legs to make him put them together so I could straddle him. I had to stick my leg with the cast out to the side, sort of, finally giving up and letting it hang over the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing?” he said with a confused laugh, rubbing his hands on my thighs.

"Hold on." I took the gold hoop out of my right ear and looked down at Nicholas. Understanding glowed in his eyes. I held it out to him. "Nicholas, would you wear my ring?"

His grin lit up the room. "Yes, I would. Will you put it in? I hope it doesn't hurt. It's been a while since I've worn one."

Leaning over, I slid the hoop into the single hole in his left earlobe. Despite the way he winced, it went in easily. Once I got it fastened, we grinned at each other and I laid my head on his chest, cuddling against him. He stroked my hair and ran his hand down my back. I wiggled my hips, thrusting my dick against his. He laughed, then kissed me on my forehead.

"Thank you, Brandon. I'll never take it out, I promise. I'll get you another one, okay?"

"Okay. I'd like that."

"How about a diamond?"

I chuckled against his chest. "Another hoop would be fine."

"Oh, all right," he muttered in disappointment. "What about an emerald? To match your eyes --"

"My eyes aren't that green, Nicholas. No."

"Fine, fine. A gold hoop, to match the one you gave to me."

"Perfect." I pressed my lips against his neck and suckled him in a spot only a turtleneck could hide. He tilted his head to the side and continued stroking my back, his fingers dipping around my butt and rimming me with his fingers, making me gasp against his neck. He didn't stop. I thrust gently against him as I made my mark on him, losing myself for long minutes in the intimacy we were creating.

"You know something? I never thought I'd do this with you again, Brandon." His breath came in small gasps; his heart pounded in his chest. I worried this was too much for him.

I pulled away from his neck and kissed him. "I know. Me, either."

"It feels good, doesn't it?" I heard the faint hint of worry in his voice, feeling a bit of sadness. Did he still doubt, even just a little, how I felt about him?

"Yes, yes, Nicholas, it feels good," I whispered, kissing the hollow of his throat. He hissed as I scooted back on him, trailing kisses down his chest. He groaned, seizing me by the arms when my mouth sought and found one of his nipples.

I stroked it with my tongue until it hardened again, biting it gently, then following with another soothing lick. Not to be neglectful, I tended to his other one as well, making him flinch. I chuckled to myself as he sank his fingers into my bare shoulders.

"God, Brandon," he said. "That feels so good. I love it when you --" He gasped as I attacked his nipple again. "Brandon! You know I like that?"

"Of course I know you like it, silly."

Nicholas arched his back beneath me, exposing his scarred side to the dim light. I kissed it, so damn sad that the perfection of his body was marred. Not that I cared -- no scar could change how I wanted him.

But I was keenly aware of just how fragile he was, despite the wanton way he squirmed beneath me, the way he whimpered as I took him in my hand. Thinking about how much time had passed since we were together like this last, and how different it was now, how preciously submissive he was, I just about cried.

"Brandon," he ground out as I captured his mouth with mine, not wanting him to see suspicious tears. I pushed my way between his legs again, grinding my dick into his groin, an incredible thrill filling me as he pulled his legs up and, with a mock snarl, pushed the covers off and wrapped his legs around my waist.

His hands reached down to my backside as he pulled his legs up higher. I knew what he wanted. "I'm ready."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Brandon, wait. We don't have any condoms," he said in horror.

I froze. We stared at each other. "Fuck," I said, closing my eyes in defeat.

"They tested us when we got here. We're both negative."

A shudder ran through me. "Nicholas, it's not right --"

"But it'll be okay. This is you and me. Let's do it. Please," he added softly.

Logic warred with desire -- I'd had so many partners over the last year, I'd lost count. But not in the last three months. But did that really matter? Was that enough time to be sure?

I didn't want to take chances, not yet. Not with Nicholas.

"No. I don't think it's a good idea, Nick."

"But ... but I want you. I want you inside me. I can't wait any longer --"

Then the door opened slightly. I yelped, grabbing the covers over us as a hand -- and thank heavens that's all -- slid inside the doorway. Mutt's hand. A hand that held a condom packet. I looked at Nicholas. Now he was grinning.

"Better than a Scout, our Mutt."

Mutt chuckled from the other side of the door. "I'm here to serve in any way I can, Mr. Kilmain."

Heat seared my cheeks. I laid my head on Nick's chest, but he burst out laughing. "Bring it on in, Mutt."

"Nicholas!" I said, yanking my head up. Heat burned my face.

Nicholas patted my cheek. "If he heard that, then he's obviously heard every word we've said. Haven't you, Mutt?"

"Your secrets are safe with me, Mr. Kilmain."

"See? Told you, Brandon. He's the perfect bodyguard. Come on in, Mutt. We're decent. Sort of."

I groaned in disbelief as Mutt stepped in, his gaze more or less averted from the sight of me lying quite cozily beneath the covers on top of Nicholas (guess that told him who the condom was for), far enough to toss the condom toward Nicholas. He caught it and expertly ripped the package open with his teeth. Mutt sidled out and closed the door again.

"Thanks, Mutt," Nicholas called out.

"Welcome."

I glared at Nicholas. "Dammit, Nicholas, he can hear *everything!*" I whispered hotly. "Much less what he just saw --"

"He won't tell anyone what's going on." He snickered. "Not that they don't already know. Will you, Mutt?" he called out again.

"No need to worry, Mr. Kilmain."

"Ah, heck, call me Nicholas."

Another chuckle. "No need to worry, Nicholas."

I started to protest. This was nuts. We'd be in our own place tomorrow. Then we could do whatever we wanted to, as long as we wanted to, and with no audience.

"Nicholas, I don't think --"

My words died at the pleading look in his eyes, the flush of his cheeks. Dammit, I knew how it excited him, touched on that wild exhibitionistic side of his. After all, I was no stranger to his penchant for fucking in the most public places possible without getting caught (not that he cared on the few occasions when he did get caught). From a bathroom in a museum, to next to a room full of reporters waiting to interview us (did they wonder, any of them, why sometimes Nicholas came in so breathless yet higher than a kite, me so subdued, plain worn out by my lover and his frantic coupling, barely able to walk, much less talk?), to a subway station, an open park, in a theatre, even backstage right before a show. Or a break during.

Oh, yeah, how he'd loved *that*.

"Please, Brandon. I need you."

I rested my forehead on his chest. Could I do this? Knowing that everyone -- the nurses, Mutt, Jeff, who knew who else -- knew what we were doing now, and that Mutt would hear everything? No way he'd step away from that door, and I didn't want him to, of course, even though Nicholas could be quite, um, vocal, as I recalled.

I looked at Nicholas, at the hope in his eyes.

"What the hell," I muttered.

"Yeah!" he said. He pressed the condom into my hand.

"Try to keep it down, though, at least a little?"

"I promise I'll *try* --"

I stretched up and brushed my lips across his, my excitement mounting as I crushed against him, plunging my tongue into his mouth. He gasped, then clasped my face with both hands, kissing me quickly, savagely, and desperately.

"Brandon," he moaned as I covered his face with more kisses, loving the harshness of his cheeks on my lips -- I wanted to feel him hours later, everywhere and everyway that I could.

I pushed myself up again and put the condom on.

He watched, a smile on his face. "Perfect fit."

"Yeah, right." I wiggled my hips, making my dick bounce and making him laugh, then lay between his legs again.

"Go for it, Brandon. I'm ready."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Good to go. No prep necessary. Not for me, anyway."

"Look at me, Nicholas," I said. Our gazes locked. I started to moisten my fingers, but he grabbed me and guided them into his mouth. I moaned, startling us both as he sucked on my fingers, his tongue stroking them until they were good and wet. He released me with a smile.

I gave him a look that made him grin widely. Then I reached down and stroked the wetness he'd given me onto my dick. Eyes still locked with his, I entered him with my fingers. He gasped at the abrupt invasion, biting his lip as I pushed inside him.

"Now. I want you, Brandon. I'm ready."

I pulled my fingers out and guided myself to his opening, not taking my eyes off his. I couldn't believe how calm he was now -- it was all I could do not to immediately plunge into him. I trembled with the effort of holding back, my heart pounded in my chest, and despite the cold in the room, sweat moistened my skin.

I'm not a very patient man at times, and this was just about killing me.

But I would be patient. He'd never been anything else with me -- not after that first time -- always uncomplaining, making sure I was prepared, ready to accept him. He'd told me once he didn't need the time I did to be ready, but until now I'd not tested his assertion.

"Are you ready?" At his nod, I pushed my dick into him a little ways, pausing as he gasped. Hot, so hot and tight inside. I groaned with the effort of holding back, closing my eyes to the incredible pressure as he squeezed me, then slowly relaxed.

"Tell me when --"

"Go on," he said.

I did so, pushing harder into him, holding his legs up as I, using all the patience I could find within me, ever so slowly thrust my way in. He clutched at my shoulders; I paused,

catching my breath, searching his face to make sure he was okay. He was a little pale, his skin a little damp, as was mine, but he smiled.

“Deeper,” he said, clutching my butt now, pulling me tighter into him. He cried out. “Can’t ...” He groaned, loud, excited, words bursting from him. “Brandon! Oh, God, yes, that feels so good, baby. *Don’t stop!*”

Mutt surely heard *that*.

And probably every nurse on the floor.

Ah, hell.

I smoothed his hair back from his face as I pushed myself in as far as I could. I couldn’t believe how incredible it felt, being inside Nicholas. Being on top of him. So hot and tight and slick, him totally open to me, so vulnerable, so strange, and so beautiful. And vocal. It excited me, I realized. *I* made him cry out like that.

Incredible.

I thrust into him, being as gentle as I could, but then I heard his breath catch. I stopped. “You okay?” I asked.

“Hurts a little, but I’m fine.”

I searched his face. He’d paled, his breath coming in too-quick gasps. “No, you’re not.”

“I’m fine --”

“No, Nicholas. I won’t risk hurting you. I’ll do it from behind.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but slowly nodded. That was one promise we’d made to each other, after the first time he took me, that we never broke -- if one of us was hurting, we’d stop. I pulled out, then gently turned him over onto his stomach, shifting in the narrow bed to give him room. He looked over his shoulder at me as, my hand on his hip, I positioned myself behind him and threaded my bottom arm underneath his head.

“I’ve got a big butt, don’t I?” he said. “Big head, big butt, compared to you.”

I rolled my eyes at him. Talk about random “It’s all perfect. *You’re* perfect. Hush now,” I admonished when he opened his mouth to say something else. His butt *was* perfect, to me.

“Big dick, too.”

I laughed and smacked him on said big butt. “I said hush. You talk too much.” I pulled his leg up, found his opening again with my fingers, making him gasp, and then pushed my dick in. He reared his head back against my shoulder, panting with the effort of accepting my invasion into his body, but taking me in one steady push.

“Brandon, I’m not sure -- I can’t --”

“Shh, try to relax,” I whispered.

I held still, kissing his neck, then stroked his side in encouragement. I sought and found one of his hands, curling my fingers into his. He pressed his face against my arm,

taking deep breaths to calm himself, but just as I feared he couldn't take it this way either and I'd have to pull out again, he began to move against me.

I arched my hips into his backside, pushing in that slow, deliberate rhythm we'd found countless times in the past. But never, ever, had it been so sweet, because this was the first time I'd ever done it like this with Nicholas.

I liked it. A lot.

I covered his dick with my hand, my fingers grazing over his leaking head and swirling around the moisture. Then I gripped him firmly, stroking him into my pace. He groaned into the pillow, shuddering at my touch, but not losing his rhythm. We moved slowly like that for an eternity, yet for far too short of a time.

"I don't want this ever to end," I said.

"I don't ... either. Brandon?"

I chuckled. "Yes?"

"Should've done this ..." He sighed, closed his eyes. "... long ago." He gasped, his eyes shooting open. "Oh, no, not yet," he whispered. "Damn."

And then he came in my hand, his inner muscles contracting on me so hard I had no choice but to join him. I buried my face against his damp neck, shuddering as the last convulsive waves rolled through us both. I released him, then stroked my hand, sticky with his seed, up his chest and pulled him tighter against my own. I couldn't move for a moment, didn't want to, ever, but slowly awareness came back to me when Nicholas shivered and I realized my arm was trying to go to sleep.

With a sigh I eased out of him. He didn't move, just clutched his pillow and pulled it under his head when I slipped my arm out from beneath him. I disposed of the condom, vowing soon, real soon, we'd do it raw, and I'd fall asleep inside him. I smiled to myself. I reached for the covers and pulled them over him, kissing him tenderly on the shoulder, making him smile.

I pulled back. He looked at me, eyes wide. "Where you going?"

"Just want to grab a towel. Be right back, 'kay? You hungry?"

He nodded. "Starved."

"I imagine. I'll see what we can do about that. Mutt?" I called out, earning a giggle from Nicholas.

From the other side of the door, "Yes, Mr. Ashwood?"

"Just Brandon's fine. Do you think you could get someone to bring us something to eat?" I looked at Nicholas expectantly.

"Bowl of soup? Tomato, and Fritos?" he said. "And an apple."

I cleared my throat. "Get that, Mutt?"

"No problem."

"I'll just have a ham sandwich."

"And some cookies," Nicholas said. "And a Diet Coke."

I laughed. "You *are* hungry." Nicholas shrugged.

Mutt said, "I'll see to it. Your brother called up here at the desk a few minutes ago, Brandon. Said he'd be here shortly."

I grinned at Nicholas. "Which brother was it?"

"Claimed he was the, uh, taller, smarter, more handsome one."

Jonathan. "He's also a bald-faced liar. He's short, dumb, and ugly." That earned me a slap on the butt from Nicholas. "Did you give him the secret password?"

A pause. "Um, no. I wasn't informed we had one."

Nicholas grinned. I knew he'd been looking forward to Jonathan's arrival, even more so than that of his own brother, who was due to arrive at the end of the week. "You'd best frisk him when he gets here, then, Mutt. Just in case it's an imposter."

A chuckle. "I'll take care of it."

"There's the man," Nicholas said, sinking back into the bed.

"Back in a sec," I told him. I grabbed my sweats and threw them over my shoulder, snagged my crutches, and swung into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I turned the hot water on and washed my hands and face.

I looked at myself in the mirror, turning to the side to see my scar. Lovely shades of pink, like a narrow snake twisting up my back. Not nearly as bad as Nick's, though. And it hadn't almost killed me. Had just hurt like hell.

I faced the mirror again and ran my hand down my chest, then cupped my rapidly softening dick. Yes, it'd been good, so good, taking Nicholas. Our first time. So different than the first time Nicholas took me.

That I'd never in my wildest dreams believed it could happen between us again, especially during those long, horrible weeks he was lost to us all, wasn't lost on me. It'd taken a miracle, and him nearly dying, to make it happen.

But it had. He was mine again, and I was his -- but for how long? It wasn't over, the madness. The attack on Tommy was proof of that.

I stared at my reflection and grimaced. I should've told him, should've gotten help from the beginning. Maybe then things would've been different for us. Probably would've been. We'd still be the superstars Nicholas had dreamed of being, I imagined, maybe well into our fourth album by now, our fourth tour. Living and loving on the road. All those months of heartache and loss, the pain I'd caused, would never have happened.

But would we have been as successful as we so briefly became, I wondered, if not for my actions? If not for the way the pain I'd caused Nicholas made him push so hard to succeed?

I didn't know the answer to that question, and never would. But it didn't keep me from wondering. And it didn't keep the tears of frustration and self-hate from springing to my eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

I couldn't face Nicholas yet. Not after my crying fest. I called out to him that I was going to take a shower, then did so, welcoming the pounding heat on my chilled skin. I just couldn't seem to get warm anymore, but the shower helped.

After I got out, I slipped on my sweats, wishing I had some clean clothes, but they were all back in my hospital room. I tossed a clean towel over my shoulder and opened the bathroom door -- to find our dinner had arrived, and a strange man was in bed with Nicholas. They were wrapped in each other's arms, earnestly talking to each other, punctuating their words with laughter.

My heart seized -- Jonathan. I hadn't seen him in months. Even though I'd known he was coming, seeing them together now punched me in the gut. I didn't know how to play this. What to do.

Jonathan and I had rarely spoken since the blowup between Nicholas and me. He'd sided with Nicholas -- something I'd been unable to blame him for. I'd missed Jonathan, though I had grown a little closer to Adam during that time.

But Adam was nothing like Jonathan. No one's like Jonathan, and I'd missed him so much over the last couple of years that I'd literally cried over the loss. A lot. He wouldn't forgive me for abandoning Nicholas, though once I'd drunkenly begged him to. Think that was the only time I'd ever seen true disgust in Jon's eyes directed toward me.

It didn't stop me from drinking, though. Or hating myself.

Even when Nicholas was kidnapped and I first called Jonathan and told him what had happened, he blamed me for that, too, and would barely speak to me. And again, I blamed me, too, so I hadn't fought any of it. I deserved no less.

We'd talked on the phone a couple of times in the last few days, Jonathan choosing polite conversation though I'd easily sensed the edge of anger in his voice. Jonathan wasn't the kind to get angry easily, but once he did, he found it doubly hard to let that anger go.

I didn't know where I stood with him, what Nicholas had told him while I was in the shower. But Nicholas knew how much the estrangement between my brother and me still hurt me, and by the glance Jonathan cast my way now, I knew Nicholas had told him so.

I swung into the room and, not knowing what else to do, resorted to thwacking Jon on the butt.

"Hey, he's taken."

"What? Who was that? Hear something, sweetie?" he said, staring wildly around the room as Nicholas chuckled.

I thwacked my brother again and growled. "It's me, and I'm not exactly invisible. Get out of that bed. You know he's naked under there, don't you?"

Jonathan screeched, leaping off the bed and away from Nicholas in mock horror. "Naked! How dare you, you hussy! I'm not that kind of boy!"

Nicholas laughed as he pulled his legs up under the covers and wrapped his arms around his knees. "Looky who's here, Brandon."

"Your other boyfriend?" I said in mock anger.

"Yup, that's me. Nick's boy toy," Jonathan said. Then he leapt for me, grabbing me up in his arms. My crutches went flying as he twirled me around, planting a wet, sloppy kiss on my cheek. "I missed you!"

"Jonathan!" I cried out, laughing as he plunked me on the end of the bed. But my shocked relief couldn't be faked. He looked at me and, with a grin, bent down to kiss me on the forehead.

"I really have, you know. Missed you."

I cast my gaze down, not wanting him to see the hurt I couldn't easily hide. "I'm sorry, Jonathan --"

"No, no, no, it's okay. I'm sorry, too."

"I should have explained. I wanted to, but ..." I covered my face with my hands. Damn, I'd thought I'd shed enough tears in the bathroom, but more threatened to spill. What was wrong with me?

Jonathan put his hands on my shoulders. "Brandon, stop. Please." He squeezed me gently. "Hey, hey, Nicholas was just telling me everything. It's okay." He pulled my hands away from my face and chucked my chin, making me look up at him. My throat hurt from the clog of tears I refused to let go.

"I love you, little brother. Always will. I could strangle you for everything --"

Nicholas cleared his throat. Jon's gaze slid to Nick, as did mine. Nick leaned back in the bed, his eyes shining, but with a clear look of warning unmistakably in them.

Jonathan looked back at me and squeezed my shoulders again. "I missed you," he said simply.

I nodded, struggling to find my voice. "I missed --" I couldn't say anything more. I looked down at the floor and started to shake. I felt sick. And scared. Why was I shaking?

"Oh, fuck, hey. Come here, Brandon," my big brother said, pulling on me.

I stood, awkwardly pushing up from the bed. He took me in his arms and folded me into a big bear hug. I hesitated, but Nicholas cleared his throat again, and I found myself hugging Jonathan back. Clinging to him. I couldn't believe he was there, wasn't mad at me anymore. We stood like that for a long time, holding on to each other, me biting my lip so I wouldn't cry.

But I couldn't stop shaking. I buried my face in his neck, gripping him hard as all the grief and longing I'd felt over the alienation I'd created roiled through me.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I choked out, over and over again.

"Shh, Brandon, it's okay. It's okay." Jonathan smoothed my hair back, soothing me with his hands. "We're all right now, okay?" He held me for a long moment, rocking me like I was a little boy again.

Slowly my shaking stopped, and I sighed against him.

"You're not getting snot on my shirt, are you?"

I sniffed, then brushed the tears from my eyes, a choked laugh escaping me as Nicholas pushed a bunch of Kleenex into my hand. I pulled away from Jonathan and blew my nose, but then he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, his eyes darkening with what I could only think of as loving frustration.

"Don't ever do that again, though, you hear me? Tell me everything; that's what I'm here for. You understand? I could've helped you, Brandon --" He broke off, his eyes glistening. He wiped his own tears angrily away. "Do you have any idea how it makes me feel, knowing the hell you were going through, right under my nose? I love you guys. If anything had -- If Nicholas had died --"

He yanked me to him and kissed me on the forehead, cradling my face and pressing his forehead against mine, just like Nicholas so often did. "Promise me, if anything else comes up, if there's anything you need to talk about, get off your chest, whatever the fuck it is, you'll come to me. Hear me?"

"I -- I promise," I said, overwhelmed by my brother's vehemence. He patted me on the cheek, then released me, nodding in satisfaction.

"Good. Good." Then he whirled on Nicholas, whose face was splotchy -- shit, I'd made him cry, too. He dabbed a Kleenex to his eyes and grinned sheepishly at Jonathan. But Jonathan shook his finger sternly at him, obviously not through with his lecture. "You, too,

Mr. Kilmain. Neither one of you is allowed to *ever* put me through this again. You hear me? I'm getting too old for this. Promise me, Nicholas."

Nick's gaze settled on mine. He tilted his head to the side, smiling gently, lovingly at me. "I promise, Jonathan. I love him too much to let anything like this happen again."

I stared at him, overwhelmed by what I saw in his eyes. My body ached to touch him, so I did, all but falling into the bed to wrap my arms around him. He held me tight, and I felt the tears threaten again, but this time I pushed them back. I covered his lips with my own, kissing him almost frantically before pulling back.

"I love you, too, Nicholas."

"I know you do." He grinned, his blue eyes dancing. "But I like hearing it. Tell me again."

"I love you."

"And I love you. Even more."

I laughed, wiping my eyes. "No, no, no, I love *you* more."

"I love you more infinity. Ha!"

Jonathan groaned. "You guys are too much. Okay, good, good you both love each other. Enough of the gushy stuff, then. What's next? You guys getting out of here tomorrow?"

I nodded and took a deep breath as I finally managed to push my emotions back under control. "Tomorrow afternoon. 'Fraid it's going to be a spectacle, with reporters and everything."

"Why? I'd think you'd want to keep everything all hush-hush."

Nicholas shook his head. "Nope. The detective on our case wants everything we do while we're here to be wide-open. He figures the more it's obvious we're under constant watch, in the public eye, the safer we'll be."

"He's taking other measures to make sure we're safe, too, but a lot of good it did Tommy," I said. "So we also hired some help."

Jonathan grimaced. "That's why beef-o boy out there."

"That's Mutt. His partner is Jeff, and Jeff has a couple others working for him, too," Nicholas said.

"He does?" I asked in surprise.

Nicholas nodded. "Watching Tommy and Sam."

"Oh, okay. Good. How'd you persuade Mutt to let you in anyway, Jon? You didn't have the password."

Jonathan took the place next to Nicholas, wrapping his arm around Nick's bare shoulders, pulling him close and kissing him on the head before grinning mischievously at me. "It wasn't easy. I tried explaining to Mutt that I was Nick's best bud and was here for a play date."

Using my crutch, I swept up my t-shirt, then pulled it on. All the heat from my shower was gone and I was freezing again. "And that worked?" I said a little warily.

He sighed in exasperation. "Nope. Your Mutt is good. He just gave me that stare thing he's obviously got perfected. Nicholas heard me crying out in the hallway, though. Said I could come in if I'd keep him company while he ate and you were taking a shower." Jonathan rubbed Nick's bare arm briskly. "You're getting cold, sweetheart. What are you doing in here naked anyway? You should be dressed in warm flannel nighties." He looked at me, his eyes widening in mock horror, then slapped his head. "Oh, I get it. *That's* what you were up to, when Mutt said you two were *busy*. That you couldn't *come* to the phone 'cause you were too busy coming ..."

"Jonathan --" I warned.

But okay, I admit it. I loved hearing him tease us again.

And he knew it. He nodded his head, grinning. "Was it good? Was it fun? Was that the first time, since, you know ..." He sniffed the air, then bent over and snuffled against Nick's neck, making him giggle. Dammit, *I* was the only one allowed to make him do that. "Uh-huh, yeah, smells like it. And what's this? Nicholas! Something bit you -- Oh, it's a hickey!" He grinned at me. "You little vampire, you. Always did have a thing for giving Nicholas hickies, didn't you?" He grinned. "Then again, I like giving them, too. Must run in the family or something. Of course, I'd rather be the one getting one ..."

Nicholas shook his head as he pushed my brother away. "I really wonder about you sometimes, Jonathan."

"Don't worry. So does my wife. And here I'm considered the normal one in the family."

I hopped off the bed and swept up Nick's satin pajamas, handing him the top. "Put this back on, at least." Nicholas took it and shook it out, grimacing.

"Can I have something else? *Someone* didn't fold it properly, and it's all wrinkled."

I snatched the shirt from Nicholas. "What wrinkles?" It looked fine to me.

"I'll get you something," Jonathan said, standing. "Brandon wears clothes until they can walk by themselves."

I threw the shirt at Jonathan. "Liar."

"Top drawer," Nicholas said to Jonathan. "There's some black sweats in there. I'll wear those."

"Do you wear anything but black these days?" Jonathan asked.

"There's some baby-blue sweats in there that match my eyes," Nicholas said, batting his eyelashes at my brother.

I groaned. "Get the black ones. And some socks. He needs to go for his walk."

"Bossy. I want to finish my dinner first. Push it back over here."

I obliged him with a smirk, “Yes, dear.” He grinned as he opened his package of cookies and took a sip of his Diet Coke. The soup and Fritos were already gone.

He pointed at the tray. “And you, eat your sandwich.”

I picked it up and frowned, putting it back. It looked rather limp. “I’m not hungry.”

Jonathan poked at my sandwich. “If you don’t want it, I’ll eat it.”

“No, Brandon needs to.” Nicholas looked at me sternly. “At least part of it. Brandon’s already lost too much weight, being here. He won’t eat anything unless it comes from the deli downstairs.”

“Mr. Finicky. Why are you guys eating so late, anyway?” He smacked his head. “Oh, yeah, right, you guys were, um, too busy eating each other --”

Nicholas hurled a pillow at Jonathan, hitting him square in the face. “Behave, Jonathan. Or we’ll stick you outside in the snow.”

“Fine, fine, be that way. Drop everything I’m doing for you, and this is the treatment I get.” He turned his back on us and dug in the drawers.

“Get some boxers for him, too,” I said.

“And one of those white t-shirts. There’s a brand new pack in there.”

“Yes, yes, I can handle it. It’s not like I haven’t dressed you before, Nicholas.”

I gave Nicholas a stern look. He shrugged. Then I remembered -- if not for Jonathan, Nicholas would’ve gone naked when we first moved in together.

While my brother was occupied, I stole back my place next to Nicholas. He curled against me, then reached up and turned my face to him. He grinned, nodding toward Jonathan.

“Hasn’t changed much, has he?”

I shrugged. “I guess not.”

He frowned. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” At his skeptical look, I grinned, but I knew he saw right through it. “I’m just ready to get out of here. Get back to normal.”

“Get back home, you mean.”

I hesitated. We hadn’t talked about it, but I couldn’t deny it -- I missed home. But it felt differently now, thinking of home. What it was. I really wasn’t sure I knew anymore. I kissed him on the forehead.

“I miss it, but I just want to be out of here, with you. Somewhere safe. Anywhere. I’m sick of worrying about every little thing.”

“Me, too. At least we’ll be out of here tomorrow.”

“Tommy won’t, though.”

Nicholas sighed, taking my hand in his. "No. He won't. We just have to believe he'll get out soon, too."

Jonathan finally found what he was looking for and handed Nicholas the sweats. I helped Nicholas with the top, then, with Jonathan's back turned (of course, he gleefully kept threatening to peek -- I was really starting to wonder about him, too), helped Nicholas stand by the bed so he could don the boxers and sweatpants. He couldn't bend very far without pain, and he wouldn't stop laughing as I tried to pull up his pants.

"You know, Brandon, you're far better at taking clothes off me than putting them on," he said while I tried to tie the strings on his pants.

"Stop wiggling. There."

He giggled as I tucked the strings inside his waistband and pulled his top down. He thrust his hips at me. I reached around and smacked him on the butt, but grinned and kissed him lightly on the lips. It was damn good to see him being playful again.

"Behave, or I'm going to have to stick you back in a hospital gown."

His eyes glinted as he placed his hands on my hips and pulled me close. "There's a thought. Easy access and all that."

I rolled my eyes and pulled back before he could get me heated up again. "Okay, you can turn around, Jon," I said to my brother and tossed the socks at him while Nicholas climbed back on the bed. I sat next to him. "You can help him with those."

"My pleasure."

Nicholas sighed with contentment as he settled against me, then held still while Jonathan put his socks on.

"Where's Amanda?" I asked.

Jonathan's gaze shifted from me to Nicholas. "Seeing Tommy."

"Did you talk to him?" Nicholas asked, and Jonathan nodded. "I haven't been up there yet."

"For a little while. He can't stay awake for long. She's going to stay with him for a bit. He really looks terrible. Gonna scar, bad, Sylvie said."

Guilt swept over me. Nick's fingers entwined with mine. "Cut it out, Brandon."

"Cut out what?" Jonathan said. I looked at him, and he grimaced. He knew me pretty well, my brother. "Nick's right. It wasn't your fault."

"I try to tell myself that, but it isn't easy."

"It's whoever's doing this --"

Someone knocked on the door and opened it. Nurse Goodall stuck her head in. "Everyone decent? Now?"

My face heated; Nicholas burst out laughing. "We're quite decent. Come on in. Jonathan, this is the most wonderful, best nurse in the whole wide world, and I'm gonna take

her with me when we go, whether she likes it or not. Nurse Goodall, this is Jonathan, Brandon's oldest brother."

She entered the room. "Good to meet you, Mr. Ashwood."

"Jonathan's fine."

"Mr. Kilmain," she said, putting on her nurse face. "My chart tells me you've not walked enough today."

"I know, I know. I was kind of ..." He glanced at me. "... busy."

"It's late, but if you're going to get out of here tomorrow, I have to put on your chart that you walked as instructed. Now, get going. I expect to see you pass the nurse's station in five minutes, or else ..." She paused meaningfully.

His eyes widened. "Not the dick monster."

"Dick monster?" Jonathan said, looking perplexed. Nurse Goodall laughed.

"Don't ask," I said.

"All right. Two laps around the floor. I'll be back to check your blood pressure." Then she slipped out of the room, nodding to Mutt as she did so.

I wondered if he was bored, now that the entertainment was over.

Nicholas slowly got out of the bed, Jonathan hovering next to him as he put on his slippers. My brother glanced at me. It wasn't really evident how weak Nicholas still was until he got up from the bed. Jonathan couldn't hide his shock as Nicholas had to grip the bedrail a minute to catch his breath.

"You okay?" Jonathan asked.

"Whew. Yeah, I'm okay. Just got dizzy a moment there." Nicholas motioned toward the door. "Hey, want to come with me? I could use someone to lean on." He glanced at me.

I waved at them. "Go on, you two. Crip boy here's just a hindrance."

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asked.

I nodded toward my laptop. "Yeah, think I'll write a little while. You guys go catch up. You don't need me."

"You -- You don't want to come and be with me?" Nicholas looked away, but not before I saw the worry in his eyes, the doubt.

I pushed up from the bed and reached for him, pulling him to me. Jonathan let go of Nicholas, but he wouldn't look at me. I admit I was a little perplexed. What had upset him now? Balancing on my good foot, I wrapped my arm around him and lifted his chin until he looked at me. "Of course I want to be with you, Nick. What's wrong?"

He shrugged. "I don't want you to be mad about my being with --" He stopped, shaking his head. "I'm being silly. Of course you don't mind if I'm with Jonathan."

I grinned. "Yes, you're being silly. I really am fine. I'm tired and don't really feel like hobbling all over the place right now. I'm going to write a little while, and then you'll be back -- and then we'll send Jonathan away and go to sleep."

He grinned slyly at me. "Sleep?"

I nodded sternly. "Sleep."

He sighed. "All right, I --"

My kiss stopped his words. I saw Jonathan grinning at us, then closed my eyes as Nicholas sank into me, deepening our kiss. We hadn't stood together like this and kissed yet, and it felt damn good, his warm, sweats-clad and cuddly (but still oh-so-painfully thin) body pressed against mine. I didn't even care that Jonathan was right there. It felt so good, so right. He could turn his back if he didn't like it.

I slid one hand under the warmth of Nick's sweat top, caressing his back, up his spine, wincing privately to myself at his thinness. I could feel his ribs beneath my fingertips, his hipbones jutting into mine. But he was oblivious to my momentary worries over him, clearly enjoying himself.

He moaned into my mouth, and my body responded as it always did when he did that. Enthusiastically. He squirmed against me. A thrill ran through me as I felt him begin to harden against me. I couldn't contain my excitement.

Better, better, he really was getting better.

"Uh, guys, want me to step outside a bit?"

I pulled reluctantly away from Nicholas and took a deep breath. "No, no, sorry. Nurse Goodall's going to come after us if Nicholas doesn't get out there."

Nicholas chuckled as he pulled away. He grabbed his crotch and winked at me. "This can wait."

"Nicholas!" I said.

"Come on, Jonny boy. Escort me." Nicholas reached for Jonathan's arm -- my brother actually looked a little embarrassed, for once -- and waved as they headed for the door. "I'll be back. To sleep," he said with a mischievous grin.

Yeah, right.

Once they were gone, I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, enjoying the thrum of my arousal. I'd just about decided to slip my hand into my sweats, when the door opened again. I sat up guiltily, then breathed a sigh of relief when Nurse Goodall came in. She was carrying a tray with a steaming bowl of soup on it, a small loaf of bread with butter and a glass of tea.

It smelled like heaven.

"What's this for?" I asked as she set the tray down and moved it over the bed.

"Mr. Kilmain told me you don't eat enough. He's worried about you, you know."

"He shouldn't be. I'm fine." I looked down at the soup. It looked homemade. "This isn't hospital soup."

"No, I made it. There's more, if you want any."

I smiled at her, touched. "You made this for me?"

"Indeed I did, young man." She walked over to my laptop and brought it to me, setting it on the bed. "You'll need your strength. Need I remind you that you were hurt, too, that you've been through a great deal over this?" She looked at me sternly. "Perhaps more than you've told him?" She tapped the computer.

I reached for the spoon and artfully avoided answering her by eating a spoonful of the soup. It really was good. "This is delicious."

"Mr. Ashwood. Brandon," she said, laying a hand on my arm.

I looked up at her, panicking a little at the worry in her eyes. "Yes?" I said warily.

"Son, I've come to care a great deal about the two of you these past two weeks."

"We like you, too, Nurse Goodall."

She laughed. "I don't think I've ever had patients so polite as you boys. My name is Noreen." Her expression sobered. "But I worry about you. I know there's much you haven't told him yet, told your doctor. Don't keep it inside, Brandon."

I started to protest -- I wasn't hiding anything -- but she held up her hand.

"Just listen. I know some of what happened to you, and though I'm no head doctor, I know it's just a matter of time before it all hits you." She squeezed my arm. "Just remember. That boy loves you more than life itself. I've never seen any couple like you two, gay or straight. But he's worried sick about you. He truly loves you. Would do anything to help you."

Heat raced through me; my breath caught. I licked my lips nervously and looked away. "I know he would."

"Then talk to him. Tell him what's eating you inside."

I glanced at my laptop. "I -- I'm trying." I gestured helplessly, felt those damnable tears back in my eyes. "I'm not even sure I know what it is, Noreen."

She nodded. "Knowing something exists in you that isn't right, even if you can't examine it yet -- that's part of the battle."

I fought to speak again, swallowing against the fear rising in my throat. "It ... it scares me sometimes --" I cut off, shaking my head. She reached out and stroked my hair back from my face, nodding in understanding. She made me think of my mom. I missed her so much, wished I hadn't insisted she not make the long trip to see me just yet.

"You've been through a great deal. Give yourself a chance to heal. It will take time." When I nodded, she said, "Eat your soup now. He'll be back before you know it, and you'll be out of here tomorrow."

"I'll miss you, Noreen."

"I'll miss you boys, too. I don't want you to leave Durango without saying goodbye, you hear?"

"I promise."

"And promise you'll talk to him. As soon as you can."

"I promise," I said softly, toying with the soup. My appetite had deserted me again, but I dipped the spoon in anyway.

"Good. I'll check on you later. That's my bowl, so don't let anyone run off with it. And I expect you to empty it. You hear?"

"Okay."

She left, and I finished the soup, concentrating on simply eating, not thinking. I did feel better after I was done, much to my surprise. The bread was also delicious, hot and fresh. I wondered where she'd gotten it. Probably made it.

Finally I pushed the tray aside. Nicholas and Jonathan weren't back yet. I hoped they'd stopped to see Tommy, as Nicholas hadn't had the chance yet to talk to him.

I hadn't, either, but for different reasons, choosing times I knew he'd be asleep. I was afraid to see his eyes -- afraid of what I'd see. How he couldn't hate me for this, I didn't know. No matter what Nicholas and Jonathan thought, it was my fault he, too, was in the hospital. If he hadn't gone for that guitar ...

I reached for my laptop and turned it on, then let my memories take me back. At least those demons I knew.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

When I woke up the next morning, Nicholas was gone. I looked at the clock on the bedside table -- half-past six. With a groan I sat up. And remembered.

Percy's friend had paid me a visit at the party and left me with a few bruises to remember him by.

I pushed the coverlet back and swung my feet to the floor, grimacing at the pain in my side. I'd already taken enough serious beatings that week to last me a lifetime. I thought of the threat my attacker had made, but I pushed it aside. I couldn't think about it. Not now. All I wanted to do was find my keys -- they were still out there in the grass somewhere -- and find Nicholas and go home.

After washing my face in the bathroom, I got dressed, put on my shoes, and went to look for Nicholas. I wondered if Sprout were home. Hopefully she could help me figure out exactly who Percy's little friend was while Nicholas was at work.

I wandered through the house. Already, several maids were vacuuming and cleaning up the night's mess. I stopped one of them. "Excuse me, I'm looking for Nicholas Kilmain. He's a friend of --"

The woman smiled. "Nick's in the kitchen with Karen, hon. Did we wake you?"

I shook my head. "No." I glance toward the front door. "I need to go outside a sec."

"Go on. Door's open."

"Thanks."

I walked out of the house and headed for my car, my steps slowing as I approached the scene of attack.

Think about what you'd be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe.

I remembered then how he'd kissed me, touched me. The insinuations. Nausea gripped me. I whirled around, fearing and just *knowing* he was behind me.

But there wasn't anyone on the street, no one behind me, no one watching.

I felt sick. I had to find my keys. I had to get us out of there, go home, lock the door. Stay safe, stay safe, keep Nicholas safe ...

Almost frantic now, I searched the ground for my keys, finally finding them. Placed on a rock, the keys fanned out just so.

He'd put them there, I knew.

Mocking me.

I swallowed, hard. I couldn't do this. I couldn't deal with this. I had to tell someone --

The shirt. He had the shirt -- and Percy was in the hospital. I couldn't tell anyone, or he'd give the cops the shirt, maybe even tell them it was Nick's, and they'd find hairs on it or something, enough to put Nicholas there.

I screwed my eyes shut, like I was a little kid and that would make all the evil demons go away. I took a deep breath. It was going to be okay; it had to be. It had to be. All I had to do was ...

I opened my eyes and stared at the keys.

All I had to do was give him myself.

It was what he wanted, after all. I remembered his hand on my groin and shoved the memory away. Pushed the remembered touch out of my mind. I wouldn't think about it, not now. *No, no, no.*

I bent down and picked up the keys, then stuffed them in my pocket. I walked back toward the house, up the steps, pushed open the front door. And when I did so, I pushed my decision into the back of my mind, where Nicholas couldn't see.

Where no one could see.

I closed the front door and stood in the entranceway, taking a deep breath. And another. Live for now. For right now. I had Nicholas, and ... and ...

"Are you all right?"

I looked up, startled, at the maid who I'd talked to earlier. I nodded. "Thanks, um, yeah." I smiled sheepishly and took a few steps toward the kitchen. "I'm going to find Nicholas now."

She nodded and turned back to her cleaning.

I headed for the kitchen, my steps soundless on the thick carpeting. Voices carried to me, Karen and Nicholas, talking about something. I paused outside the doorway where they couldn't see me.

"... tell him, Nicholas. It's not fair to him."

"I'm going to. I -- I just haven't had a chance to, that's all. We just met, Karen."

"Yeah, Nicholas, more than a week ago. If that's time enough to fall in love with him, it's time enough to tell him the truth."

"It was on my resume --"

"Which he obviously never saw. He got sick, remember? He had to look for you with those flyers, remember?"

I heard a chair scrape back, the refrigerator opening, ice dropping into a glass. "Want some juice?"

"You're avoiding talking about this, Nicholas. You like him, don't you?"

"I love him," he said, his voice barely more than a breathless whisper.

My heart soared.

But Karen sighed. "You'd fall in love with a toad if it batted its eyes at you."

"Toads turn into princes. And anyway, he's no toad. He's a real prince, and I love him."

I grinned, feeling a too-brief moment of incredible warmth. Of happiness.

In the next instant it shattered.

"Stop joking around. You have to tell him we're married, Nicholas. He deserves to know."

I took a step back and stumbled into the wall. Chairs scraped back, and I heard an "Oh, shit" as Karen moved into my line of sight and saw me. I stepped forward, into the doorway, disbelief over what I'd heard momentarily stealing my breath away.

"Brandon --" Karen began.

Nicholas whirled around to face me, his face as white as I knew mine must be.

Married. He was *married*.

"What did you just say, Karen?" I demanded.

She looked from me to Nicholas. He licked his lips. Nervous. He'd damn well better be.

"Uh, she said -- um, we're married."

"Married," I repeated, looking from Nicholas to Karen. She glared at him, but I ignored her. Anger surged through me, and I took a step toward him, making him flinch. "What the fuck do you mean, you're married?"

Nicholas nodded, his eyes wide with panic. "It's true, but it's not what you think --"

I cut him off. "When were you going to tell me, Nicholas?" I slammed my hand against the doorjamb, not caring that it hurt like hell and scared Nicholas. He shrank back and Karen jumped, but I didn't care. I was humiliated. An idiot. Tricked and betrayed. It showed on my face, I knew -- I could see it reflected in Nick's eyes.

Then it dawned on me. "Last night, everyone knew. They knew, didn't they, Nicholas?"

He slowly nodded.

"My God," I whispered. "You let me ... You led me on, right in front of everybody." I clenched my jaw, turning away from him, the blackness of overwhelming despair and terrible anguish nearly knocking me flat. I had to brace myself against the wall. Nicholas took a step toward me but stopped.

"Brandon, I'm sorry, I was going to tell you --"

"When, Nicholas? Did you think it wasn't important? That I wouldn't --" I choked on the words. "That I wouldn't care? Well, you were wrong." My words dripped with ice. He reached for me, but I pushed him away, turned on my heel, and ran from the kitchen.

"Brandon, wait, I can explain!"

But I didn't stop. My side hurt, my head hurt, and now my heart hurt. Blinded by tears, I nearly ran into one of the maids. I hurried past her, yanked open the front door, and pelted down the front steps, ignoring Nick's call after me as I ran for my car. I pulled out my keys and got inside, slamming the door shut when he crossed the driveway. I started the car as he pounded on the passenger-side door. Tears poured down his face, but I didn't care.

No, I cared too much. Way too much.

With a sob, I put the car in gear and drove off and, I thought with gut-wrenching fear, out of Nicholas Kilmain's life. The *married* Nicholas Kilmain's life.

I drove aimlessly for the next few hours, not caring where I went, what time it was. It was over. I didn't understand. What kind of game was he playing? He said he loved me -- but he was married.

And Karen had done it, too. Had *encouraged* him. Practically pushed me toward him. What did they think -- that I'd eventually agree to a threesome? No fucking way.

I didn't understand.

So I kept driving. Eventually, I had to stop and eat something, but when I did so, I realized all my money was gone. My attacker had taken it. So I found myself driving to the

one place I knew I could go. I couldn't go home -- my dad hated me. I couldn't go to Adam's -- now he'd really hate me, for screwing up Ashwood.

I couldn't go to Jonathan's. I couldn't bear going there, where the bed Nicholas and I hadn't even had a chance to try out waited in an empty, soulless room.

I loved him so much.

I found myself pulled up in Sprout's driveway, relieved to find her car parked around back. I got out and walked up to the back door -- she stood just inside, her expression concerned as she saw me.

"I heard your car pull up. What happened?" she said, letting me in. "You look terrible, Bean. What's wrong? What happened to your face?"

"Nothing."

She didn't push it. "I was just getting ready to go to work, but come on in."

I headed for her room, not answering until she closed the door behind her. I stared at her bed, then flopped down on it, burying my face in her stuffed animals. But I couldn't cry. I had no tears left.

"Bean?"

I rolled over and stared at the ceiling. She sat next to me, touching me on the face.

"You've been crying." I nodded. "Is it Nicholas?" I nodded again. "Tell me what's wrong --"

"He's married."

She bolted from the bed. "What?"

"He's married."

"Oh, my gosh, Brandon, no. No way."

I nodded and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Can I stay here for a little bit? I -- I just want to be alone for a while."

"Oh, Brandon, I'm so sorry. Maybe there's a reason --"

"He's gay, Jenn. He's gay, but he's married. What kind of reason could there be?" I turned over again, burying my face.

She stroked the back of my head. I clenched my fists. "Did he explain himself?"

I shook my head.

"Did you give him the chance?"

I shook my head again.

She sighed. "You should've let him explain."

I looked up and glared at her. "Who's side are you on?"

"Nobody's. Both of yours. You love him; I know it."

I rested my cheek against a duck and closed my eyes. "He told me last night he loved me, too." I couldn't see her face, but I knew she was grinning. "Stop it."

"I can't help it. He loves you, Brandon! You need to give him a chance to explain. You met his ... his wife?"

"Karen."

"The girl at the bookstore? Okay, now I know there's something up. She told you where to find him, right?" The front doorbell rang, saving me from answering. "Geesh, I'm gonna be late to work," she muttered. "Be right back."

I sighed as she left. Then I looked at the clock and bit back a yelp of surprise. It was almost two. Nicholas worked until six, he'd told me.

I wondered what he was doing. If he was okay.

I pushed those thoughts from my mind. It didn't matter. He was married. It was over between us.

But Percy's buddy wouldn't think so.

I glanced at the door, straining to hear Sprout, if she was coming back. Not yet. I got up from her bed and looked at her bookshelf. Ever organized, my Sprout. I found her annual from when she was a freshman, and flipped through the seniors' section, looking for a familiar face.

I found Nick's first, and I bit my lower lip to keep the damn sobs roiling deep inside me from spilling out. I stroked his face, smiling despite myself at the curly blond hair.

My whole body ached for him, and one sob escaped.

I flipped the pages, looking for Percy's freak mate. And found him, finally, under "M."

Seth Miller. I stared at the page, at the handsome -- yeah, he was, the fucker -- face looking at the camera. Handsome, but the eyes -- the eyes were pure evil.

I bit the inside of my lip and tasted blood.

"Brandon?"

I slammed the annual shut and shoved it back on the shelf, then fell onto my back on Sprout's bed.

The door opened, but it wasn't Sprout who filled the doorway. To my shock, it was Karen. I scrambled to sit up.

"How did you find me," I demanded.

"Jonathan told me you might be here."

I was going to kill him. I pushed off of the bed, cursing the obvious wince. I still hurt, and she saw it. "I don't have anything to say to you."

But she surprised me -- she walked right up to me and pushed me back down onto the bed. "Oh, yes, you do, Brandon Ashwood. Now, sit there and be quiet and listen to me."

"Why should I? He as good as lied to me, Karen. I can't ... I mean ... You guys are *married*."

She sighed as she sat next to me on the bed. "I know." She rolled her eyes. "Of course I know. How to explain this ..." She paused a moment, worrying her bottom lip. "Okay. Nicholas was wrong not to tell you --"

"You bet he was."

"Let me talk." I clenched my jaw, but nodded. "Good. Nicholas has a bad habit of thinking that if something is avoided long enough, it won't come back and bite him. But it always does." She looked at me pointedly. "I think you know that." I nodded, thinking of the multiple encounters with less-than-savory types he'd had. "He was scared to tell you, that you'd react just like you did."

"What did he expect? I find out everything I know about him piecemeal. Never from him. There's a whole hell of a lot I don't know about him, Karen. I mean, I didn't know about you. I don't know anything about his family. How he ended up in the shelter or ... or anything."

She smiled, touching me on my cheek. "You know he loves you, right?"

"How can he love me if he loves you?" I said miserably.

"Oh, Brandon, of course he loves you. He wants you. He loves me, but not like *that*. Nicholas married me to help me. Last year, I was dating this guy my parents didn't approve of. I got pregnant, and they were, well, less than thrilled." I looked away, feeling bad for her, but wondering furtively where her kid was. She answered that with her next words. "I lost the baby, but not until after Nicholas and I got married. My boyfriend was kind of rough on me. No, he *was* rough on me. He hit me. Nicholas found out about it. We've been friends since we were little, and he's always kind of seen himself as my big brother. He told Ace --"

"Ace?"

She rolled her eyes. "Classic bad boy. Black leather jacket, tattoos, and a motorcycle. My parents were so right, but I refused to listen. Anyway, Nicholas told him to leave me alone, and then Nicholas being Nicholas, he proposed to me. I knew he was gay, of course, but I also think he would have made a fantastic dad."

I nodded, smiling at that thought despite my still-simmering anger.

"Nicholas said we could get a divorce whenever I wanted to, but there didn't seem to be a reason. All our friends do know we're married, but they also know why. It has nothing to do with you, Brandon. He really cares for you, and he's embarrassed and feels really, really bad about what he did."

"He should," I said, then winced at the childish tone of my voice. I looked away from her knowing look. "Kinda petty, that." But I was calming down now. I couldn't really be mad at him. It was like Nicholas -- at least, as far as I knew him -- to help out someone he cared about like that. And it had nothing to do with me. "I still wish he had told me before."

She laid her hand on my shoulder. "I know. And believe me, he does, too. Are you still mad at him?" She cocked her head to the side and smiled at me.

I couldn't help it -- I grinned back. "I don't guess so. But still, you guys are married. It isn't right, him and me -- I mean, it's not fair to you. Is it?"

"Why not? I love Nicholas. He's my best friend. *Friend*. I'm thrilled you guys found each other, because he deserves the best. And you are the best."

I stared at her. "I'm nothing special."

She narrowed her gaze at me. "I think Nicholas would argue with that assumption."

"Would he? He thinks it's over between us. I got really mad at him. I -- I think I scared him."

Karen patted me on the cheek. "You had every right to be mad, Brandon. And yeah, you scared him a little bit, I think. But it scared him more that you ran away. He's at the store right now, convinced you'll never listen to him now, no matter what. Probably going through box after box of Kleenex."

I dropped my head in my hands, then looked up at Karen. "I really fucked up, didn't I?"

"I don't think so. I think if you go talk to him, you can still fix things. He may pout a little and play hard to get, but he loves you, remember? Don't forget that for a minute."

"I won't." I stood, checking my watch. "When does he get off work? Six?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to pick him up, take him by your place to get his things."

"No. He's not going anywhere."

"I was hoping you'd say that." She stood, then squeezed my arm. "He doesn't know I'm here, but he knows me pretty well and I think he's probably figured out I'd try to talk to you. Probably counting on it. Please, listen to him. I know he's exasperating sometimes, tends to act and then think about things, which gets him into trouble ..."

Oh, how I knew that.

"... but a more loving, caring person, you'll never meet. And it kind of floors me, but he really does love you. Make him tell you everything. Answer all your questions. Make him grovel a bit -- it won't hurt him any. Maybe he'll *think* next time," she said, tapping her head. "But please, give him another chance?"

I looked down at her and found myself nodding. "I will. I promise."

"Good. I've got to go." Then she rose up on her tiptoes and kissed me. "I like you, too, you know."

Hell. I hugged her. "Thanks, Karen. I'm glad you hunted me down. I'm still gonna kill Jonathan, though."

She laughed. "I think he kind of expects it."

When she left, I collapsed back onto Sprout's bed. Minutes later, she came in and looked down at me, shaking her head.

“Well, if you’re going to win him back, you sure can’t go looking like that,” she said. “Come on. I think it’s time you let me dress you, for a change.”

“I thought you had to go to work.”

She grabbed her stomach and doubled over. “Oh, my gosh, I just got the flu! And you were the brat who gave it to me!” She straightened and grinned. “I called in sick.”

I laughed. “You didn’t.”

“Yup. Come on, we don’t have much time. I guarantee he’s not gonna recognize you by the time I’m done with you.” Grabbing my hand, she hauled me to my feet.

“Sprout?” I said as she pulled me through the house and out to her car.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

She stopped, took me by my shoulders, and kissed me. “I love you, too, Bean. Now, come on. Let’s go make you pretty for Nicholas.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Wow. Now, that’s definitely better. Just look at you,” Jenn said. She peered over my shoulder, grinning as I stared wide-eyed with amazement at myself in my bathroom mirror. “You’re beautiful! Nick’s going to freak when he sees you!”

“Miracles do exist,” Jonathan said, shaking his head as he eyed me. “Though this took a fucking big one.” I glared at him, but he simply grinned at me, holding his hands up. “Hey, I’d take you out myself if we weren’t brothers, but, sigh, I’m just not into incest.” He grinned and leered playfully at my scowl. “But it is tempting.” He pinched my cheek. “You’re such a pretty boy, even with that cut on your face.” Then he smacked me on the butt.

“Hey, cut it out,” I said, dodging him with a laugh.

Amanda walked into the bathroom. “Behave, Jonathan, you’ll mess his clothes up,” she said automatically, then ran a hand down my sleeve, smoothing it. Jonathan looked up at the ceiling with fake contriteness. She ignored him and handed me the belt she’d found. “This is one of Jonathan’s. I don’t think he ever wore it.” She grimaced at my brother. “What possessed you to buy such a small size in the first place?”

“Hey, it fit when I got it. For about five minutes.” He patted his tummy. “How was I to know you’d come along and fatten me up?”

She eyed his stomach. “You definitely didn’t get your brother’s genes.”

He batted his eyelashes at her. “You sure about that, sweetling? They say the tendency toward limp wrists runs in families --”

“My wrist is not limp,” I said in annoyance.

“Oh, that’s right, you play the straight guy. Nick’s the --”

“Jonathan,” I warned.

“Hey, and I was wondering something. Which one’s the top? I figured at first probably you were, but now I’m not so sure --”

“Jonathan!” I said, glancing nervously at Sprout. Her red cheeks matched mine, but she was grinning. “Cut it out.”

Amanda popped him on the shoulder. “Shut up. That’s not what I was talking about and you know it. Ignore the pest and put it on, Brandon.”

“Sorry, I was just wondering.”

“Well, you can keep on wondering,” I said. Like I’d tell him anything like that. Especially since I didn’t even know the answer myself. I didn’t dare look at Sprout again. I couldn’t believe he’d said that in front of her. And Amanda.

I yanked the belt through my belt loops, then fastened it. I definitely didn’t see Jonathan ever fitting this belt, though I felt like trying it around his neck.

“What shoes do you have?” Amanda said.

“I have my brown loafers.”

“How scuffed are they?” Sprout asked from where she’d hopped up onto the counter.

“They’re new. I haven’t worn them but a couple of times. They should be in the white box in our ...” I faltered a little, cleared my throat. Grimaced at the sympathetic look Amanda and Sprout gave me. “In our closet.”

“I’ll get them.” Sprout left to go forage in the boxes. The shoes would be the perfect finish. I was almost ready to get Nicholas back, thanks to Sprout and Amanda.

Sprout had been true to her word. Four hours after dragging me out of her house (okay, so I didn’t exactly kick and scream over it) and after a round to the barber (okay, her favorite beauty salon), shopping, and a shower, I was a changed boy.

Man, I corrected myself. Cleaned-up, I didn’t look that bad at all. Even with the mess Seth Miller had made of my face. I pushed thoughts of him aside. I refused to think about ... about all that.

I cleared my throat. “I do look pretty good. Don’t I?”

“I think you look quite handsome,” Amanda said, adjusting my collar. “Nicholas won’t be able to resist you.”

“I hope you’re right, Amanda. I really fucked up bad.”

“Well, you weren’t the only one. He did, too,” she said. “I could strangle him.”

“If I hadn’t lost my temper --”

“If he hadn’t kept the truth from you.”

I licked my lips and cast my gaze down to stare at my nails. They hadn’t ever looked this good. I’d had fun convincing the manicurist to leave them a little long -- easier to play the guitar. “I know. But what’s done is done. I’ve got to get him back. I’ve got to --”

“Grovel?” Jonathan said.

I cast him a sideways look and frowned. Amanda punched him on the shoulder again. He winced, grabbing his arm. "You could give him pointers on that, now couldn't you, Jon Jon? The direction you're headed, you'll get more practice tonight. Unless you want to sleep on the couch. Again."

I laughed at my brother's flushed face. It wasn't often I saw him embarrassed.

"I think I'd rather handle this on my own anyway," I said.

"You sure you don't want me to tag along?" Jon asked. "Your own personal cheering section?"

"Uh, no. Thanks. I think I've had enough of you for one night."

He gave a wounded sigh. "Fine, then. Here --" He slipped his hands into his pocket and pulled out a twenty. "-- take this, just in case you guys want to catch a movie. You can pay me back later," he said as I started to thank him. Then he pulled out a set of keys. "And please, take my car. Somehow, driving off into the sunset in a beat-up Volkswagen just doesn't paint the right picture. Hot guys need hot cars."

I took the keys, surprised. He'd never let me drive his car before. "Thanks, Jonathan. I appreciate this. I, uh ..." I hesitated, my face heating. "Can I ask another favor of you guys?"

Amanda grinned and hugged my shoulders. "Don't worry; I won't subject you boys to him when he's in this kind of mood. I'm taking him to my place tonight. You'll have the house to yourselves."

"If he comes home with me," I said softly.

Jonathan looked me up and down and then growled. "He'll come." He winked at me. "In more ways than one, I reckon."

"Jonathan!" Amanda said, grabbing his hand. "That's it. Come on and leave your poor brother alone. I need help with the lasagna anyway."

"But --"

She yanked on him and dragged him out of the bathroom, leaving me alone.

Panic rocketed through me. I didn't want to be alone. Couldn't stand the thought of being alone, without Nicholas. What if he didn't want to listen to what I had to say? What if I'd really messed things up so bad he didn't want me anymore?

The thought made me sick. My life would be one big, black, empty hole without Nicholas in it.

I wanted him so much.

He was everything to me. The past two years I'd barely hung on, my belief that I'd find him around the next corner, down the next aisle, the one thing that kept me going. It sounds silly and irrational now, but back then I felt I would die without Nicholas. This was my only chance to get him back. If I fucked this up, I would be nothing.

Nothing.

I reeled from that realization, but fought to hide my anguish. I was glad Sprout was still in the other room. She'd see right through my phony, wavering smile.

I took a deep breath and assessed myself, tried to see myself as Nicholas would. Would he like what he saw? Would he listen to what I had to say? I wasn't nearly as good with words as he was. I'd probably stutter, say the wrong thing ... I closed my eyes and did a nice mental yelling at myself.

Stop it, stop it, Brandon! It'll be okay.

It had to be.

I hadn't forgotten anything, I hoped. Thanks to Jenn. I looked at my nails and shook my head. Manicured -- Jenn had insisted. Freaking *buffed*. I'd drawn the line at a pedicure, but she'd won other arguments. I had four inches less hair now with, unbelievably, *highlights*. Another Jenn idea. I kinda liked it, though, since I hadn't been out in the sun much lately -- and now I could see my earrings since they were no longer hidden by my usual wild mop of hair.

I hoped he would like my hair.

I'd had a fresh shave and put on a new pale yellow button-down that made the remnants of my tan glow (Jenn's words, geesh), and dark brown cords. It was a little chilly out, so I'd pulled out my best jacket, which, fortunately, didn't hang too much on me when I slipped it on. It actually matched the rest of my outfit.

I really did look damn good.

"Okay, I found them," Jenn said, walking into the bathroom. She dropped my shoes on the floor and I slipped them on, then straightened and looked up. "You ready?" she asked.

I glanced at myself one more time in the mirror. "Yes. I'm ready."

Jenn hugged me. "Go get him, tiger. It's going to be okay."

"I hope so, Jenn. I hope so." I looked at our reflections in the mirror and caught her gaze. "But if things don't go well --"

She smiled at me. "I'll be there for you, Brandon. I always will."

* * * * *

The drive to Charlie's didn't take long -- probably a good thing since the closer I got, the more nervous I got. I glanced at my watch. Five-thirty. I was early. I parked the car a little way from the entrance, as I didn't want Nicholas to see it. Although, since I was in Jonathan's Camaro, I doubted he'd recognize me as the driver.

I killed the engine and got out, pocketing the keys. On the way, I'd stopped at a flower shop and bought a single lavender-colored rose. Its sweet scent tickled my nose. Now I twirled it nervously in my fingers as I walked up to Charlie's glass-fronted entrance.

It looked busy inside. Several guys about my age huddled around the rock section, and a nice-looking couple were trying to look at CDs while their two blond hellions ran up and down the aisle. A few odd sorts listened to headphones at a sound wall.

I saw Nicholas at the counter, helping a customer. He looked pale, his eyes red-rimmed. As if he'd been crying. Which, of course, he had been, thanks to me.

I watched him hand the customer her change, and as she turned away to leave, he grabbed a Kleenex and blew his nose. No one else came up to him. He braced himself with one hand and stared at a stand full of necklaces hanging next to the cash register. He reached out with a finger and caressed one, a little boomerang.

How I envied that boomerang.

Another customer walked up, and he snatched his hand back, giving the customer his patented smile. But I wasn't fooled -- he hurt, worse than me. Karen had been right about that.

He still wanted me; I knew it.

My heart leapt into my throat, pounding ferociously as my groin heated, ached, thrummed. I tried to calm myself; the rose's stem nearly slipped from my fingers. I turned away -- I couldn't look at him, had to fight to calm myself.

I sure as hell couldn't go into Charlie's with a woody. An almost hysterical burst of laughter escaped me. I slapped my hand over my mouth. The door opened behind me and I yelped, stepping aside with a heated face as two girls exited. They stopped talking and looked at me, grinning.

"Sorry," I said, grabbing the door and holding it for them.

"Hey, there," the shorter one said, giving me a look of appraisal not unlike Jon had. I was glad I'd worn the jacket, since my dick was making my trousers poke out. Her gaze fell on the rose. "Who's the rose for?"

"I, uh ..." I stammered. "For my roommate." I groaned. "I -- I mean -- my friend, he works here --"

The taller girl looked inside. "You mean Nicholas?"

The shorter one scowled at me. "All the cute ones really *are* gay. Come on, Mel." She sauntered off.

The taller girl grinned. "Don't mind her. She just thought you were cute. And she's got a crush on Nicholas." She laughed. "Oh, well. Good luck. He looks like he could use something to smile about."

"Um, thanks," I said as she walked off.

I still held the door, so with no other choice, I went inside.

Nicholas had disappeared. Grateful, I walked over to the only empty section and turned my back to the register. From there I could see the back wall's reflection in the windows. It

was getting darker outside, so that made it easier. I was getting more and more nervous for the moment he realized it was me, not Karen, who had come to get him.

Where was he?

I glanced at my watch -- almost six. I started to flip through the CDs, groaning to myself as I realized I'd landed in the country music section. I didn't know shit about country. I heard Nick's voice behind me, talking to someone. I glanced up at the reflection and saw him discussing something earnestly with a man about my dad's age.

Nicholas was shaking his head, looked upset again. He pushed his hair behind both ears, then crossed his arms over his stomach, shaking his head once more. The other man clapped him on the back and shoved him from behind the counter -- and I realized he'd pointed him my way.

Damn.

I looked down at the CD under my fingertips, my heart pounding in my chest. Licking my lips nervously, I glanced up at the window as Nicholas walked purposefully toward me, his expression neutral. And then he saw the reflection, too, and stopped. He shook himself, then, with slower steps, continued walking. I looked at him as he drew next to me, saw the disbelief and ... and ... dammit, the fear in his eyes. He noticed the rose in my hand and gasped, then recovered, his gaze flicking to the CD in my hand.

"You like country? I -- I didn't know that."

I took a stilling breath and set the CD down. "Not particularly. I just ..." I held out the rose. "I brought this for you."

He glanced over his shoulder to see if his boss was watching, I guess. He wasn't. Nicholas took a step closer to me, then reached out and took the rose, being careful not to touch me. He brought it to his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled. I watched him, fascinated by the tiny flare of his nostrils. He had such a cute nose, I noticed. I'd only paid attention to his lips before, but now I realized I loved his nose.

A small smile quavered across his lips. "It's lovely," he whispered, not looking at me.

My heart ached. "Nicholas, I'm sorry."

He looked up at me, his eyes brimming. With an embarrassed grin, he pulled a Kleenex out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. "Sorry. I've been kind of an emotional wreck today."

"So have I."

"Oh, Brandon, I'm sorry I didn't tell you about ... about me and Karen. I'll tell you everything, if you'll just give me a chance --"

"She already did."

He gaped at me in surprise. I nodded, smiling down at him.

"Nicholas, you helping that customer?" Charlie called.

He sucked in his breath and hid the rose. "Yes, I am. I'll be right there, Charlie."

"All right, then. It's almost closing time."

"Yes, sir."

Nicholas drew closer to me and laid one hand on the rack of CDs. His shoulder brushed mine, making me squirm. "This is a nice one," he said, holding one up. I reached for it blindly, my fingers covering his. He gasped, but I ignored him, trailing my fingers up his hand, marveling at the paleness of his skin beneath my own. I curled my fingers around his wrist and felt his racing pulse. It matched mine.

"I lost my temper. I shouldn't have done that."

"You had every right."

"But I scared you. I -- I don't want to scare you, Nicholas. Ever."

He smiled, pressing his shoulder against mine and tilting his head toward me. "Karen said I deserved it."

"She's a neat girl. I can see why you love her."

His eyes widened at that. "You don't mind?"

I took the CD from him and held his hand in mine, rubbing my thumb back and forth across his smooth skin. "I mind. A lot. But I'll handle it." I shrugged. "Besides, I like her."

"She likes you, too."

"Will you get a divorce now?"

He nodded. "Yes. I wish I could marry you."

Nicholas. "I just want you to come home. Please."

He looked up at me. "You want me to?"

"Of course I do." *I want you so bad.*

"I'd like that. You look so beautiful, Brandon. When I first realized it was you, my heart stopped beating, I swear it." He reached up and touched my hair with the rose. "I like it."

"Sprout's idea," I said sheepishly.

"And the rest of it?" he said, touching my buffed nails and running his other hand down my chest.

"Yes. She and Amanda and Jonathan kinda pinned me down and said I'd never get you back looking like a slob."

"Get me back," he echoed softly. "Oh, Brandon, you didn't lose me. I thought I'd lost *you*."

I looked over his shoulder -- no one was watching us. Charlie had disappeared. I reached up and touched his face, stroking his lower lip with my thumb. He blinked, his eyes wide as if he couldn't believe I was touching him like this.

"I want to kiss you, Nicholas. Can I?" *Please.*

"Is anybody watching?" His eyes shone.

"No."

"So then kiss me," he demanded.

With another quick glance, I made sure none of the few customers left were paying attention -- and then I tilted my head down and kissed him. A small groan escaped me as my lips touched his. He wrapped his hand around my hip, pushing against me, chortling happily as our hard-ons met.

"Oh, yes," he said, breaking away. "Oh, Brandon."

"How long before you're free?" I asked, unable -- and not wanting -- to keep the need from my voice. I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck under his hair and stroked his ear with my thumb. He leaned his face into my hand, then turned his head and kissed my wrist. Tiny shockwaves cartwheeled straight to my groin. He grinned at my reaction. I dropped my hand -- if he kissed me there again, I'd lose it.

"Just have to close."

"Good. I've got Jon's car, and he and Amanda are staying at her place tonight. She cooked us supper. Spinach lasagna."

He smiled coyly at me, touching my sleeve, then sniffed the rose again. "A rose, you all spiffed up, a romantic dinner for two? All for me?"

"Yes. All for you," I said softly.

The happiness in his eyes nearly undid me. I kissed him again, but this time I forgot to check. After a long moment, I heard a throat clear. I jerked back and looked behind Nicholas, wincing. His boss stood right behind him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't --"

Nicholas whirled around. "Charlie! We ... I ..."

But Charlie burst out laughing and clapped Nicholas on the back. "So this must be the one you've been moping over all day."

Nicholas grinned sheepishly. "Uh, yeah. This is him. Brandon, this is my boss, Greg. But everyone calls him Charlie. Don't ask why." He paused. "Even I don't know why."

I looked at him and smiled shyly, embarrassed. Charlie stuck his hand out. I took it, relieved to see he really wasn't angry.

"I'm sorry about that," I said as he released me.

"Don't worry about it. You boys kissed and made up now, I hope?"

Nicholas looked at me expectantly, hopefully. "I -- I think so."

"We're working on it," I said. "We've got some talking to do first," I said, remembering Karen's suggestion.

Nicholas blushed. "I know. Let me finish up here and we'll go."

"Don't worry about it. I'll close up tonight," Charlie said.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't mind waiting," I said.

The door chimed. I looked up. It took me a moment to react, and when I did, I was stunned. "Adam --"

"What?" Nicholas whirled around. "What's he doing here?"

"Is there a problem?" Charlie said, frowning.

"No, no, Adam's Brandon's brother," Nicholas said, heading for him. He still carried the rose.

Charlie glanced at me. "It was nice to meet you, Brandon."

"Nice to meet you, too, sir."

Charlie chuckled. "Just take care of that boy. He's like a son to me," he said, eyeing me. He glanced at Adam and frowned.

"I will. Thanks."

Charlie nodded, then walked off, leaving me alone. Nicholas was talking to Adam. I walked up to them.

"What are you doing here?" Adam said to me. He scowled as he took in the fact that I wasn't looking like his scruffy little brother for a change.

"Surfing," I said sarcastically. "I'm here to pick up Nicholas. What does it look like?"

Adam snorted. His gaze flicked to the CD in my hand. "Always knew country music was for queers."

Punching Adam would've felt damn good about then. But I did nothing, said nothing, at Nick's warning look. Adam took a folder from under his arm and shoved it at Nicholas. "Here. Learn these by Tuesday."

Nicholas took the folder and opened it, flipping through the music. "Good songs. But there's at least twenty here. That's an awful lot to learn by Tuesday."

"What, you can't handle it?"

He looked squarely at Adam. "Of course I can. But I won't sing this song."

"Why the fuck not? It's a popular song. People want to hear it."

"I won't sing it."

"And I say you will."

"I don't sing songs about war. Especially not that one."

Adam threw his hands up. "Oh, my God. Of all the stupid -- You're such a fucking queer boy, Nicholas. Afraid of what mommy will think? Does she know you're a fag? What does she think about that?"

Nick's face paled. "Leave my mom out of this. I'll sing the other songs, but not that one. If you don't like it, find another singer."

"There's plenty of songs. It won't be missed, Adam. Just drop it."

Adam sneered at me. "Fine, defend your fuck buddy over your own brother." Charlie looked up at that, and the last customer stared at us. But Adam was oblivious even as Nicholas blushed in anger and humiliation.

He reached for the rose, but Nicholas jerked it away. "Brandon give you that? Aw, how sweet."

"Cut it out, Adam," I warned.

"You *girls* make me sick." Adam pushed past Nicholas and headed for the door, then turned around and pointed at Nicholas. "You'd better have every song perfect, or you're out." Then he left.

Charlie walked up to us. I put my arm around Nicholas; the three of us watched Adam as he high-fived some guy I didn't recognize and got into his car and left.

"Are you sure you two are related?" Charlie asked.

I swallowed. "I wonder sometimes. You don't have to sing anything you don't want to, Nicholas."

"I won't sing that song."

"You won't have to. I promise."

Charlie cleared his throat. "Well, I've got to help this last customer, then close up. See you Monday, Nicholas."

"Okay, Charlie, thanks."

I knew that a real problem had sprung up between my brother and Nicholas. Adam had backed down for now, but this would come up again. And again, Adam insisting Nicholas sing that one damn song until one of them exploded. Or worse.

Sometimes I hated my brother.

I refused to let him ruin our evening, though. I reached out and touched the flower's petals. "Hey, forget about him, okay? Let's go --" I stopped, unable to finish as I looked into Nick's troubled eyes. "Nicholas?"

He smiled wanly at me. "I'm sorry. You were saying something?"

"Yes. I was saying let's go home."

"Home?"

I nodded, then grasped him by his shoulders and pulled him to me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Charlie lock the front door after the last customer, then tiptoe past us and disappear into the back, leaving us alone.

I moved my hands from Nick's shoulders to cradle his face. I leaned in to him, brushing my lips across his, tasting him, willing away the last of his frustrated anger. He sighed into my mouth and shook himself once, like a dog would. He sighed again, then melted against

me, and I wrapped my hands around his waist. His tongue slid into my mouth, and I answered back his gentle questing with my own.

The world fell away from us. His arms reached around me -- he still held the rose and the folder -- and pulled me close. A soft sob escaped him, and I pulled back and kissed the single tear that glistened on his cheek.

"Don't cry, Nicholas," I whispered.

"I thought I'd lost you."

"You didn't."

"It's been a terrible day."

"Has for me, too."

That wasn't the half of it. I kissed his eyes, whisking away the salty moisture of his tears. I explored his face with my lips as he panted softly in my ear. He squirmed against me, groaning softly as our dicks met through the restricting layers of clothes. I wished I could snap my fingers and we'd both be naked, alone in our room.

The ride home was going to kill us both.

"I want you so bad, Brandon," he said.

"I want you, too," I said, kissing along his slightly bristly jaw, smiling at the puffs of his breath on my face. They gave me shivers.

"I'm sorry for everything."

"Me, too."

"I'll tell you everything from now on."

I chuckled. "You'd better."

He nuzzled my ear. "Complete honesty. No matter what. I'll start with this. I want inside you. Right now. Here. I want to throw you down on the floor, rip your pants off, and slam into you hard and fast until you scream my name."

"I-I don't think Charlie would appreciate that," I said, stammering as an edge of nervousness crept into me.

He leaned his cheek against mine, swaying a little on his feet. "No, no, he wouldn't. Dammit. It would be fun, though."

He pulled back, releasing me. Then, just as quickly, he threw himself into my arms again, his lips capturing mine. Turning on the heat. Turning into the little wildcat lover I'd come to be familiar with. But right then, alarm raced up my back as the fears I'd thought I'd vanquished about my own inadequacies resurfaced, multiplied, and partied across my skin.

"Easy, Nicholas," I said with a nervous laugh. "Not here. Let's go home."

He pulled away and, with a grin, darted for the back. "Wait for me in the car," he called to me as he disappeared behind the sound wall, leaving me reeling.

It took me a second to come to my senses. I patted my pockets. Keys. Where were my keys? I found them, pulled them out, and walked to the front door. It was locked. I fumbled for a second, not sure which way to turn the bolt. My hands were shaking.

I finally got it open and pushed my way outside, grateful for the cool night air. As the door closed behind me, I took great gulping breaths, willing myself to calm down. No way I could drive in this condition.

I wished I'd brought my Volkswagen.

"Okay, Brandon, calm down, calm down," I muttered to myself as I headed for Jonathan's car. I unlocked it and sat inside, leaving the door open, and waited for Nicholas to leave the store. He waved to Charlie as he did so; then he jogged across the parking lot for the car. I leaned over and unlocked it for him, and he popped inside, laying the folder on the floorboard. He still held my rose, and the scent of it filled the car.

Jonathan was going to love that.

Nicholas slammed the door shut, locked it, and looked at me, his expression so happy I couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Ready?" he said.

I nodded and, after a few seconds fumbling, started the car, then began to drive into the street.

"Uh, Brandon, close the door --"

I yelped, then yanked the door closed just in time -- I nearly hit a pole. I slammed my head back against the seat and groaned. Jonathan *really* would've killed me.

Nicholas burst into giggles. "Nervous, babe?"

I smiled at him. "A little."

He grinned a Cheshire-cat grin. "I'm not. I can hardly wait."

Oh, my God.

The drive home seemed endless, yet not long enough. I kept sneaking looks at Nicholas, who fairly bounced in his seat. He'd catch me looking at him and he'd grin.

"Can I touch you?"

"No!" I yelped. "I'll wreck the car!"

He laughed at that, then flipped on the radio. Some song I didn't recognize came on, but he sure knew it -- the car filled with his voice as he sang along. I smiled as he broke into the chorus, drowning out the singer's voice.

My Nicholas.

We pulled up to the house and I turned off the car. Before I could get out, he pushed his door open and came running around to me. I got out and closed the door, and then he was in my arms again, pressing me against the car.

"Nicholas, hold on," I warned.

But his hands had already started to undo the buttons on my shirt. "Why? You said they were gone. And it's pretty darn dark out here. No one can see anything."

He was right; only the back porch light illuminated us. But I could see his face clearly, so I figured any snoopy neighbors could, too. "Yeah, but supper's waiting."

He yanked my shirt out of my pants. "I'm not hungry." He looked up at me. "Except for you." He slid his hands under my shirt and splayed them over my ribs. I gasped, and he took advantage of my momentary distractedness to cover my mouth with his.

I responded, of course. How could I not?

He growled into my mouth as I reached around and grabbed his backside, slamming his hips against mine. My arousal was back in full, and so was his. He kissed me, hard. Over and over again, barely letting me catch my breath. Not letting me catch my breath. His hands sought my belt, undid that, undid the top of my pants. He sank one hand beneath my waistband and grabbed hold of me.

"Nicholas!" I gasped, but didn't fight him. Oh, no, screw the neighbors. I pushed myself into his hand, pulling my zipper down myself. He released me, then made me cry out as he yanked my pants and boxers down past my hips, releasing my dick. He crouched down in front of me and took me into his mouth. I fell back against the car, gasping, sinking my hands into his hair as I fought to stay standing.

His mouth devoured me, pulling on my dick with incredible suction. Our first gentle stab at pleasuring each other had been nothing compared to this. His tongue rasped catlike up my shaft. He nuzzled his face into my crotch and, with a giggle, pulled one of my balls into his mouth.

Oh, neighbors, can you see this?

"Nicholas, don't -- Not here --"

He released me, leaving me reeling. "Let's go inside," he said.

I nodded. He took hold of my hand and yanked me after him. I had to grab at my pants to hold them up so I wouldn't trip on them. "Nicholas, slow down," I said as he neared the oak tree.

He stopped, making me stumble. Then, with surprising strength, he had me backed against the tree and was kissing me hard all over again. Wild, crazed, and delicious panic flew through me, igniting every nerve in my entire body. How could I keep up with this?

How could I not?

He grabbed me by the hips and ground himself into me and me into the tree. It hurt -- sweet pain -- and I didn't care. So what if I had tree bark digging into my skin?

I had Nicholas digging into me.

But before I could even begin to catch my breath again, he'd once more seized my hand. "Come on!"

"You're nuts," I said, following him up the stairs, but he just laughed. He took the keys from me, fumbling with them in his excitement. He was dancing on his toes, jumping up and down like a kid. Finally he got the right key and jammed it into the doorknob.

"Victory!" he cried as he pushed the door open. He pulled me inside and slammed the door shut, and once again I found myself up against something, this time the wall, his mouth on mine, his tongue dueling with mine, his hand pulling at my pants.

Our lips locked together. I kicked off my loafers, pushed my pants the rest of the way down, and within seconds I had nothing on but a half-buttoned shirt and my socks.

He, on the other hand, was still fully clothed.

He took a sudden step back, and I splayed against the wall, it being the only thing keeping me standing. I noticed the smell of lasagna.

To hell with the lasagna. It could wait.

"Oh, Brandon, you're so beautiful," he said as he stared at me. For a moment, the wildness was gone, replaced by pure lust. He stepped up to me, his movements slow as he reached up and undid the last of my buttons. "Take off your shirt."

I did as he told me to, then let my shirt drop on the floor next to my boxers and my pants.

"Take off your socks."

I did so.

"Lean against the wall again."

I stood naked before him, the thrill of it making my dick pulse hot and heavy. His gaze drank me in. My body ached to be touched. Why wouldn't he touch me? I tried to move to him, but he held up a hand and shook his head. "No. Don't move."

I whimpered, falling against the wall again. He moved up to me and ran one finger down my nose, down my cheek, not stopping there -- the feathery touch made me groan, which made him smile -- down my neck and stopped. "I have something for you," he said, reaching into his pocket.

I watched, too excited to do more than tremble as he pulled a necklace out. The boomerang. He indicated I should dip my head, and I did so, allowing him to fasten it around my neck. Once done, he took it in his mouth, then let it go again. I felt the moisture against my neck.

"A boomerang. Because you came back to me," he whispered, stroking my chest with his hands. I hissed at the brush of his breath against my neck, the roughness of his clothes against my bare skin. I wanted to reach for him, but crazily enough didn't dare.

He'd told me not to move.

He nodded in satisfaction and took my hand. "Come, Brandon. Let's go upstairs, okay?"

I nodded, then trailed after him like a child -- albeit a rather tall, naked one. We passed through the kitchen. Neither one of us looked at the oven. He pulled me through the house, then slowly up the stairs. At the top landing he stopped and turned, looking down at me.

"My Brandon," he said, then reached down and pulled off his shirt. He grasped me by the back of my head and directed me toward one of his nipples, which, given our positions on the stairs, was at exactly the correct height.

I took it into my mouth, twirling my tongue around the softness until it hardened. I nipped gently, making him gasp and throw his head back.

"Brandon, oh, wow," he said, claspings me by the shoulders. I grasped his hips, holding him still -- we didn't really need a fall down the stairs, me naked and him half-dressed and both with hard-ons. Explain that one to the paramedics. "The other one, the other one!" he begged.

I obliged him. He writhed beneath my mouth but didn't pull back, though he cried out as I nipped and licked him. He wasn't kidding about being so sensitive there.

"Stop, stop."

I pulled away and looked expectantly at him. He took several deep breaths and then smiled down at me.

"Good, that was really good."

"Thanks," I said sheepishly. "I'd never done that before I met you."

He laughed. "Come on, first-timer."

I let him grab me by the hand again and pull me around the banister toward our room. My heart beat wildly in my chest as the reality of what we were about to do sank in. He closed the door behind us, turned on the overhead light, and whirled me around, capturing me against the wall again. His being shorter than me made no difference, no difference at all. He commanded, and I obeyed. It excited me, that. And he knew it.

He pushed his still-clothed thigh between my legs, rubbing against my dick as his tongue plundered my mouth again. I couldn't breathe and couldn't care less.

"Nicholas," I whimpered as his hand sought my balls, rolled them, pushed them aside, his fingers questing for ... for ...

Oh, damn.

He released me almost the second he brushed against my opening. I nearly collapsed on the floor. "Go to the bed."

I looked at him like he was crazy. "I can't walk," I said.

He laughed at that, then pulled me toward the bed and gently pushed me onto it. I fell back, pushed my way up the mattress, and watched him as he hurriedly took the rest of his clothes off. He kicked aside his shoes and pants, snagged a condom, a towel, and one of the

lubes my oh-so-thoughtful brother and his girlfriend had provided us, and climbed onto the bed, straddling me. I rested my hands on his thighs and looked up at him.

My heart hammered against my chest. His dick lay poised against mine. He looked down and pressed them together. The visual effect was dizzying, much less the physical. I felt like I was in system overload. He gently tweaked the head of my penis between his fingers. I slammed my head back, arching against his body. He chuckled and rubbed his thumb up and down my shaft. I was going to lose it any second, and I knew it. I laid my hand on his. He stopped, but didn't move his hand away.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take. Every inch of his skin that was in contact with mine burned like fire -- his buttocks against my thighs, his legs grasping mine, his dick, hot and heavy and so beautiful, against mine. He peered down where our bodies met, scooting back so he could study our dicks.

"What are you doing?" I said with a gasp.

"Comparing."

I burst out laughing at that. "What? Why?" Then I looked. "Mine's longer."

"Ahh, but mine's thicker. The better to fuck you with."

Then he looked at me, his face flushed, his excitement mottling the skin across his chest. He handed me the condom. I hesitated. "Go on, open it. Put it on me."

I nodded, then ripped it open. I pulled the condom out and looked at it. Nicholas scooted up, arching his back so his dick pointed straight at me. I reached out and touched the moisture escaping from the slit, then swirled it around the head. He hissed, squirming against me. "You wicked boy. Cloak it quick before it shoots you in the eye."

I did as he told me to. I'd never put a condom on another guy before, but I didn't fumble too much. I smoothed it over his dick, wishing we could do it without a condom. I wanted to feel him inside me. But he seemed sure of himself, that this was how it was supposed to be, so I said nothing.

Without hesitating, he scooted off me and pushed my legs apart. I didn't know what to do, but didn't want to be an idiot, so I let him even as he forced them almost wider than I could stand. I'd never been so exposed to anyone before, and I felt vulnerable, maybe even a little afraid.

But this is Nicholas, I thought.

He opened the lube, squeezing some out onto his fingers. He rose up on his knees and slathered his dick with it, catching my eye as he did so. He handed me the tube.

"Want to?"

I nodded, taking it. I squeezed some more out and handed the tube back to him, then rubbed my lube-slick hand over his sheathed dick. He sighed happily. I coated it thoroughly, biting my lip in concentration.

After a minute he laughed. "It's okay, Brandon. I think that's enough."

"I -- Okay."

Then he squirted some more out and, with a reassuring smile, touched me where I'd never been touched before. I gasped as his finger circled my opening. "Relax, baby. I don't want this to hurt."

"Could it?" I asked, feeling my nervousness come back in droves.

"Just relax."

I tried. His fingers continued exploring me down there, letting me get used to the feel, but the more he touched me, the more nervous I got. He never took his eyes off mine as he told me what he would do next. "I'm going to push one finger in. I'll stop if it hurts, okay?"

I nodded, whimpering as, for the first time, I felt the invasion of another man's fingers inside of me. I gasped as he slowly encroached past the barriers of my own nervousness and my body's attempts to keep the invasion out. I panted, wincing as the pleasure-pain coursed through me. Sweat broke out on my skin. He moved his finger gently in and out of me, joining another finger with the first one. It hurt a little, but I couldn't stop wanting it. I pushed down on him, knowing instinctively that there had to be more than this.

"Nicholas, please," I begged.

"You ready? Are you sure?"

I didn't know. I wasn't sure. But I nodded. He withdrew his fingers and wiped them off on the towel, then leaned over me, pulling my legs up over his shoulders. I gasped at the strange position, but said nothing as he pushed against me, guided himself into me.

Just far enough to make me panic.

I clenched around him. He cried out in pleasure as the force of my inner muscles tightened on him. "Brandon! Oh, my God ..."

And I screamed inside. *It hurts it hurts it hurts it wasn't supposed to be like this I didn't think it was supposed to be like this --*

"Brandon!"

I grabbed his shoulders to stop him, but he didn't understand -- he pushed himself into me. I cried out as he split me in two. "Nicholas, stop, please --"

But it was as if he didn't hear me. Maybe he couldn't, I don't know -- I'm not even sure I really cried out for him to stop. I didn't want to disappoint him, but it hurt so damn fucking bad. I arched my hips up, tried to relieve the pressure -- and as he surged into me, I felt a wild shock of pleasure burst through me.

I'd never felt anything like it. I cried out like an animal as whatever he was doing hit that spot again and again. Pleasure cascaded through me and I groaned, finally calling out his name. Nicholas laughed in delight as he bent his head down and kissed me.

But then he shifted somehow, and this time when he plunged into me again, the overwhelming pain was back. But he didn't see it, didn't know. I cried out as he pushed harder into me. The brief spate of pleasure was gone, obliterated in blinding flashes of pain.

"I'm gonna come already. Oh, no, Brandon, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He fell against me as his body was caught in the unrelenting throes of what it wanted most -- release. He pounded against me, once, twice, three times. Only three times -- but tears ran down my cheeks as a sob tore from my throat.

"Too fast, too fast," Nicholas cried out. "Oh, shoot, Brandon, I'm coming."

I said nothing. I couldn't. I sank my fingers into his skin -- he'd have the bruises for days. Waves of agony pulsed through me as he pumped into me. I gritted my teeth, enduring his onslaught. A red haze enveloped my ass and set fire to my insides even as my own arousal fell limp.

He collapsed against me, his skin slick with sweat, his breath coming in hard gasps, as was mine. I wanted him *out*. I pushed against him, forcing him off me. He fell back, nearly off the bed, but I didn't care. I curled up, fetal position, the rippling agony refusing to subside. Pain throbbed deep inside me. It was as if the split-second of sweetness I'd felt had never existed.

Nicholas groaned next to me. I choked out another sob, screwing my eyes shut. The bed moved as Nicholas knelt over me. "Brandon, oh, baby, I'm so sorry. I came too fast. I can't believe I did that. Are you okay?"

I couldn't answer him. I felt his hands on me, patting me, stroking my legs and back. "Brandon?"

"Leave me alone, please," I said, stumbling off the bed. I yanked open our door and staggered to the bathroom.

"Brandon, wait --"

I slammed the bathroom door and locked it. He followed me; his hand jiggled the doorknob. "Let me in. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I choked out. I turned to the sink, didn't dare look up at myself in the mirror. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Are -- are you sure?"

Go away. "Yes, I'm sure."

Silence. A snuffle. "I'm sorry. I got carried away, Brandon. It's ... it's never like that for me. I didn't know it'd be like that for you. Why didn't you tell me? Did I hurt you?"

Guilt lanced through me. I should've told him, but I'd been too ... too stupid. I covered my face with my hands. "No."

"But --"

"Just go to bed, Nicholas," I choked out. "Please."

Silence again. I turned on the faucet and splashed my face with cold water, then covered it with a towel. After a moment, I stuck the towel under the water and held it against my backside, welcoming the cool against my heated skin.

Fuck fuck fuck. I threw the towel aside.

Had he left? I held still, then slowly opened the door. Nicholas was gone, our bedroom door closed. I walked up to it, wincing as I did so. I was confused, embarrassed. Why had it hurt so much? I didn't understand. For a moment there, it had felt so good, so completely incredible. But then just as quickly it was gone. Why?

What if I couldn't do this?

The thought of being unable to give Nicholas what he wanted crushed me. I reached the door and leaned against it, tears escaping down my cheeks. I'd disappointed him so badly. I pressed my ear to the door and closed my eyes against my misery -- my butt hurt nowhere near as bad as my heart when I heard the soft sounds of Nicholas sobbing.

I'd started to open the door, when I smelled something ... something burning.

Shit! The lasagna!

Ignoring the pain in my butt, I bolted down the stairs and into the kitchen, coughing at the smoke pouring from the stove. With a yelp, I turned it off, cussing as I yanked the door open. I jumped back, grabbed two oven mitts, and pulled the lasagna out, dumping it in the sink. The cheese had cooked to a blackened crust. I turned on the water, sprayed the lasagna, then ran to the window and yanked it open. I turned the ceiling fan on high and leaned against one of the kitchen chairs, staring at the lasagna in disbelief.

I could've burned the house down.

Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed a six-pack of Corona from the refrigerator and left the mess in the kitchen. Amanda would kill me. The whole house stank of burnt lasagna. I scooped up my boxers from the floor in the entryway, slipped them on, and opened the front door. Hopefully the draft would get the worst of the smoke out.

I walked out onto the front porch; it was chilly, but the cold felt good against my heated skin. I moved to the front porch swing and sat gingerly on the cushion, popped open a Corona, and took a long drink. All I needed was a cigarette, but that looked like a no-go.

Just like the lasagna.

And just like making love with Nicholas.

I tipped the Corona back and drained it, then reached for another, praying the buzz would come quickly and deaden the pain in my butt, and in my heart.

Chapter Eighteen

Almost three Coronas later, I was literally feeling no pain. I sat, miserable and alone and slightly drunk, on the porch swing, my heart aching.

So, I guess that means I did feel pain. Just not in my ass anymore.

A chill ran through me, and I looked out into the street as a car passed by. It slowed as it drew even to me. I suppose the driver wondered why a half-naked boy was sitting outside on a miserable night like this.

'Cause I'm one big fuck-up, okay? Got it? Good. Now get the hell out of here.

The car sped on.

It'd gotten colder, kinda damp; a drizzle had started to fall. I hadn't even realized it was supposed to rain. I knew I should get up, go back in the house. Trudge upstairs and tell Nicholas I was sorry, that maybe we could at least work together musically -- though I would surely die inside if that was all I could have -- that I was sorry I'd failed him, made him upset with me. Made him cry.

Sorry that I was drunk, sorry that I was such a sorry-assed fool ...

"I'm so sorry," I choked out, directing my beer-sodden words to the room overhead, the bed overhead, the boy I wanted so bad to want me overhead.

I dropped my head to my chest, cursed myself, and shivered. I was cold. I hadn't eaten, and I was tired, and hurting, and so damn sorry ... and nothing made sense in my mind or in my heart, but I knew one thing -- I'd screwed up again, and Nicholas couldn't possibly want someone like me.

I rubbed my face with my hands, snickering at the way my face felt sorta numb, like my bum. I folded over, a sob escaping me. Dammit, how could I have fucked up so bad? Again? I'd managed to fix things from my last act of stupidity, only to go and screw it up again.

The thought that I'd been wrong about myself all along ran through me. That maybe I couldn't do this. That I wasn't really gay. Not that I was heterosexual -- hell, that hadn't worked for me either. Maybe I should become a monk. Friar Ashwood. Sounded good to me. They got to sing, I thought. But then, as Jonathan had said, I sounded like a goat when I sang. Maybe I could take my guitar ...

Nicholas would make a beautiful singing monk. I giggled at the thought of him walking about in a rough, brown friar's robe (naked underneath?), his hands pressed together in prayer, his beautiful pale cheeks flushed with passion, his voice lifting up to the heavens ... praying for the sinners like me. Sinners who wondered if he wore anything underneath that rough, brown friar's robe.

He could pull it off. I sure as hell couldn't.

I took another swig of my beer, aiding the ridiculous bent to my imagination and sending it around the corner, then quashing it. That's what had started this all -- my imagination. Infatuation. Misguided infatuation. A lonely boy's dream that should never have become reality, because the reality was, the boy couldn't handle it.

Maybe Dad was right. I was too young to know what I wanted.

No. No. I wanted Nicholas. I wanted him so bad. But I'd disappointed him. Why else would he be lying upstairs like that? Alone, without me? So, maybe it didn't matter anyway. Maybe what I wanted or believed or dreamed of or ... Hell.

Maybe I didn't matter at all.

Seth Miller wants me.

I pushed that out of my mind in a hurry. I wouldn't think about it, wouldn't think about it, wouldn't think about the terror at the edge of my consciousness, the worry that *that* was why I'd screwed up so bad. I drained my beer and folded my arms over my stomach, wincing at the throb in my temple where Miller had messed me up.

I popped the top off another Corona, tipped it up, and drank half of it without stopping. A thousand buzzing bees filled my brain, dulling my senses. I laid my head back, my eyes closed as false warmth pooled in my belly and descended into my groin. It was cool outside, but I didn't really feel it now, except in my feet where they rested on the cold wooden porch.

I drank the rest of the bottle and let it join its mates sitting empty at my feet.

I opened another, took a sip, and then realized, hey, I was really getting drunk. I stumbled inside, took a piss in Ronnie the Invisible Roommate's bathroom, went into the kitchen -- which still stank -- and grabbed another six-pack of Corona. Guess I'd have to use Jonathan's twenty to buy him more beer. I stumbled back out to the porch again. The swing had gotten damp and cold without me to keep it warm and dry, and I grimaced as I sank back onto the cushion, fresh beer in hand.

Maybe that was the thing to do -- just stay wasted, keep the pain and terror at bay that way. Of course, that wasn't the only time I thought that idea was the solution -- later, when I *really* lost Nicholas, I tried to drown myself in alcohol. Burn up my memories in a liquor-bathed haze. Dull the pain, numb the agony, retch up the bitterness, only to start the madness over again.

It hadn't worked then, either.

I sighed and shifted on the seat. Okay, it still hurt a little down there, even with the dulling of my senses (except for my damn dick -- why was it getting hard now? Fucking alcohol). I'd imagined it countless times, making love to Nicholas. Me taking him, him taking me, not really understanding what the reality was. Hell, I'd had no one to ask, no way of knowing what it *really* meant, having sex with another guy. I mean, I couldn't exactly ask my brothers. Imagine asking Adam, "Hey, bro, do you know anything about how two guys fuck?" He would've punched me in the mouth.

He sure wouldn't have known how damn good it felt. And for a few moments there, it had. Nicholas had filled me; that thick, beautiful cock of his had filled me so completely I'd felt as if we were one creature, two parts of a whole. So corny-sounding, but there it was. Corny's good. Tears blurred my eyes, and I wiped them angrily away. For those few wonderful moments, Nicholas inside me had felt so beautiful, so good, so right. But then something had gone wrong. I didn't understand it. I didn't even know why it had felt good when it had felt good.

No, Adam wouldn't have known why.

Jonathan, though ... I grimaced and took another swig of Corona Number Four. Or was it five? Six? I squeezed my eyes shut. Things were getting a little sloppy in my brain. He'd bought us a booklet -- why the hell I hadn't looked at it? Hadn't I looked at it? My words were jumbling in my brain, starting to not make much sense. I took another long pull from the bottle and then stared at it. It was empty.

Who the hell had emptied it? A giggle escaped me, followed by a loud burp.

"You're so stupid, Brandon," I said out loud. "You did, you dickhead."

Shit. Damn. Fuck.

I was getting drunk.

Good.

I picked up number five, six, whatever, popped the top, and drank that one down, too. Amazing how fast that could happen. Pop, zoom, swig it down, and that was that, bottle empty ... Yeah yeah yeah. Who loves you, baby? Corona does. The Corona people *love* you, Brandon Ashwood, you drunken bastard, you.

My dad would kill me for getting drunk, but then, he didn't give a shit about me anyway now that I was gay, so what did it matter? I wondered what he'd told my mom.

I missed my mom.

Tears welled in my eyes. For a second, I thought about stumbling back inside and getting my keys and going to see her or maybe calling her, but what would I say? I'd just cry, and then she'd feel sad, and I didn't want to make someone else I loved sad. Couldn't bear it. Shit.

I chucked the bottle into the bushes and folded over, running my hands through my hair and gripping hard. I sank my fingernails into my scalp, welcoming the pain. I bit my lip against the drunken despair rolling through me. Everything was so messed up, and it was because of me. Me me me me.

"Brandon?"

I looked up to see two Nicholases standing in the doorway, clutching blankets to their chests. No, just one. One Nicholas, one blanket. Okay. I looked down again, not wanting him to see the tears on my face. And that I was drunk. *Oh, shit, why did he have to come out here now?* The porch boards creaked as he walked up to me. He draped the blanket -- his blanket -- around my shoulders.

It smelled like Nicholas.

"Thanks," I whispered and cowered beneath the folds.

The swing moved as Nicholas sat next to me. "Are you okay?" He reached down to pick up one of the empty bottles. I watched his hand set it back down again, heard his sigh. "I guess you're not. Had a few, babe?"

"I -- I'm okay."

"Uh-huh, and so is that lasagna."

A wild giggle burst out of me at that. "It burned."

"Yes, I can tell. Amanda's going to have our hides for that." He sighed. "Oh, Brandon, did you drink all of these?"

I sniffled, feeling an overwhelming desire to cry again. All I could do was nod, but hot tears coursed down my cheeks. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He'd pulled on his jeans, but otherwise wore nothing else, his pale skin luminescent in the faint porch light. I wanted to reach out and touch him, stroke his smooth skin -- but I didn't dare. I didn't know what to say.

He caught me looking and smiled. But his eyes were as red-rimmed as mine, his face pale as the moon. He reached out to touch me, then let his hand drop. He looked away and stood.

"Well, it's kind of chilly out here. I guess I'll go back inside. I -- I'll sleep on the couch, if that's okay with you. I think you should go upstairs now, get some sleep."

Wild panic shot through me. "No!" He turned back and looked down at me. "Don't leave me, Nick," I said. I opened the blanket, praying he would understand. Praying he would want to -- I knew he didn't like beer. And now I was pretty stinky with it.

With only a moment's hesitation, he came back to the swing and let me fold the blanket over us both. I pulled him tight to me, wincing as a soft sob escaped him. My dick hummed with anticipation, I swear it. A renewed flush warmed my whole body at the feel of his cool skin against my own.

"Are you drinking because of me?"

I sniffled again. "Yes. I mean no. I don't know."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't --"

He pulled away then, his expression angry. "No, stop it, Brandon. I hurt you. I'm not an idiot. I really thought you were doing okay there, and so I just went and banged away at you like you were a ... a ... meatloaf or something. I shouldn't have done that."

"A meatloaf?" I said with a sloppy grin.

He shrugged, but a laugh escaped him. "It's what came to my mind." He shifted on the seat so he could look at me. "The point is, I lost control." He shook his head, his gaze fixed on the blanket. "I thought you were liking it, that you were okay."

"I ... I did for a minute. It felt --" I broke off, feeling my face heat. "It was the best thing I'd ever felt in my life. But I ... I guess I didn't realize what it would be like."

"You hadn't ever really done that before, had you? You've never been with anyone? For real?"

"No."

He slapped his forehead. "And you told me that. I am a fool ..." Nicholas dwindled off, shaking his head. He reached for my hand. "I should've remembered."

"I should've maybe told you again." I reached for another beer, but he pulled me back.

"I shouldn't have gotten so carried away."

I flushed, and this time it wasn't from the beer. "I -- I kinda liked it." I hiccupped. "I mean, seeing you like that, before we -- In the driveway, against the tree --" I gulped. "I need another drink, I think."

"Don't you think you've had enough?"

"Mmm." I stared longingly at the bottles left and found myself leaning over, falling against Nicholas. With a sigh, he wrapped his arms around me and held me, kinda awkward given our positions on the not-too-comfortable swing.

"Yes, I think you've had enough," he said with a soft chuckle.

"My butt hurts, Nicholas." I buried my face in his shoulder.

He hugged me tight. "I shouldn't have let my lust for you get out of control."

"You lusted me?"

He chuckled. "Of course I do, babe. Does it hurt bad?"

"I don't know. I'm kinda numb right now." I reached for my backside and touched the offended area. "Yeah, it still hurts a bit."

"I'm so sorry."

I closed my eyes, but everything started to swim around me. I felt nauseous, so I opened my eyes again and took a deep breath. I couldn't sit like this anymore. Not because of my sore backside, but because my limbs felt like jelly and I was afraid I'd fall off. I slid down so my head was in his jean-clad lap, then pulled my legs up onto the swing. I felt the soft cushiness of his dick and turned my head to nuzzle it, making him giggle and squirm.

"Cut that out."

"Ha. Made you squirm."

He laughed. "Yes, you did, silly."

He shifted position and started to stroke my hair. It felt so good, so sweet. My brain was muddled, but not so much my fears didn't resurface. I was so scared -- but I had to ask him. I didn't have anyone else to ask and I should've asked, but ... *Oh, shit, Brandon, just blurt it out.* I could always claim later it was the alcohol ... Unless it really *was* the alcohol.

"Nicholas?"

"Yeah, babe?"

I looked up at him. The porch light illuminated his face. "What if ... what if I can't do it?"

Nick's eyes widened at that, and he burst out laughing. "Oh, baby, it'll get better, I promise. You did just fine. It was me, not you. We just need to go slower, that's all. *I* need to go slower." He touched me on the chest. "Fucking your brains out can come later. I shouldn't have gone crazy on you just yet."

I smiled at that. "You did kinda get crazy."

He smiled shyly at me. "Only because I want you so bad, Brandon."

I bit my lip, looked away. "You really still want me?"

"Of course I do. Granted, I think maybe we'll have to do things a bit differently, but that's okay. Maybe you should be top."

"No!" I said, nearly barking out the word. "No, no."

"It'd probably be simpler. I'm so easy. All I have to do is drop my pants and I'm ready."

"Nicholas!"

"No, really. You sure you don't want to try?"

"N-no," I stuttered, my face heating. No, that wasn't supposed to be how it should be. I couldn't -- I didn't want -- I groped for his hand, the one stroking my hair. I gripped it, tight, unable to say what I wanted to. The alcohol had loosened my inhibitions but had frozen my brain. I sat up and leaned against him, my head pressed against his neck. He pulled the blanket tighter around us.

“Why not? It’s fun being top, I promise you.”

“I couldn’t do that, Nicholas. I ... I need you to -- I like it when you make me --” I cut myself off, groaning in embarrassment. “I don’t know what I mean,” I whispered.

“I think I do.” He kissed me on the cheek, then suckled my neck just beneath my ear. Cascading shivers raced from where he’d kissed me, down to my groin. He chuckled and released my hand to place his own over my arousal. His fingers kneaded me, stroking my shaft through my boxers as I hardened beneath his touch.

“You know what I mean even though I don’t know what I mean?” I said, breathless.

Oh, man. I parted my legs, arching my back so he could do with me what he wanted to. And, oh, I wanted him to. To do anything. The Coronas had dulled my senses, but not my desire, that was for sure.

Nicholas breathed against my hair, hot and moist. I gasped as he gently sank his teeth into my earlobe, then nuzzled my neck. He ran his hand possessively up and down my chest, tweaking my nipples, spreading his warmth across my stomach just above my waistband. Tease. I dropped my head back against his arm, helpless to move as his mouth slowly and surely explored my neck. His hand slipped inside my boxers, and I gasped, pushing into his fingers.

He kneaded me. I covered his hand with my own, thrilling as he manipulated me. The world spun around me, yet I felt still and calm as he claimed me with his hand. He reached deeper. I drew one leg up onto the swing, giving him better access, and he took advantage of it. His probing fingers brushed against my sore opening, and all I do was push against his fingers, my body instinctively craving what it had felt during those brief moments of utter bliss, pain be damned.

I sure hoped that car didn’t come back by.

“You need me to do this for you,” he whispered. “So you know it’s okay, what you’re feeling. There’s a part of you that no one suspects, no one knows except for me. Only me. The part of you that needs to be dominated, possessed. To be taken and commanded.” He chuckled. “Okay, maybe everyone at Karen’s party who watched you play piano while I sang might suspect. And maybe at the bookstore. But they don’t know the half of it. Do they?”

“No,” I whispered. “They don’t. They won’t.”

I looked with wonder into his eyes; my head was still thrown back onto his arm, my neck exposed to him. He really did understand what I barely understood myself. Looking at us, even those who knew we were intimate with each other, most would assume pretty diva Nicholas was the feminine one of us, the one who was cosseted, dominated, possessed by the other. But that wasn’t so. It was me. I was the one who craved it, had to have it, to feel complete. I needed the safety that Nicholas gave me, his calm assurance, his private strength. That he understood brought tears to my eyes.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He touched my boomerang necklace. "You're welcome, baby."

My head reeled from too much alcohol and the overwhelming emotions that simple endearment brought me. He pulled the blanket over me, hiding my lower half. Not that anybody driving by wouldn't know exactly what we were doing, but by then I couldn't have cared less.

I groaned as he brushed his lips against mine, and his tongue explored my mouth as he continued stroking me, rimming me with his fingers while I leaned helpless and passive (and helplessly responsive) in his arms. I'd soon become addicted to him doing that to me. His mark of possession -- touching me where no one else was ever allowed to touch me. At least not like that.

His hand's movement quickened, and I found myself panting, groaning, thrashing my head from side to side, craving more despite the dull ache that warned against intrusion just yet. He moved his hand to my shaft, stroking and pulling on me and rubbing my weeping head, chuckling softly into my ear as I pumped shamelessly. The whirling tingle of impending explosion filled me, and I cried out as I spilled, hot and hard, into his hand, clutching his thigh with one hand, the blanket with the other.

He continued to kiss me as I slowly came down from the heights he'd taken me to, until I broke free, still panting, and collapsed against him. I nuzzled his shoulder and kissed his neck. He still held my dick, caressing it with his fingers. I gave a few half-hearted pumps into his hand, and he finally released me.

"I messed up my boxers," I said, still panting. I couldn't catch my breath, and everything was getting kinda whirly on me.

"Yes, you did." He kissed me again, resting his sticky hand on my chest and rubbing the moisture I had given him into my skin. Anointing me with myself. I wanted to anoint him the same way and did so, rubbing my essence into the soft fuzziness of his chest.

"I -- I love you, Nick."

"I love you, too."

"I'm drunk, Nick."

He chuckled. "I know, babe."

"Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Think the neighbors saw all that?"

"No, they're probably all asleep. Don't worry about it."

"Okay. It's crazy, but I really don't. Worry about it, that is."

"You *are* drunk. Let's go inside. Back upstairs. You need to go to sleep."

"I don't think I can make it upstairs." I laid my hand over my eyes. "I think I'm drunk."

"I thought we established that already. Come on, let Nicholas take care of you." He hauled me to my feet, then pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

"I love it when you take care of me."

"I know. I love it when you take care of me, too."

I grasped his face unsteadily with both hands -- the damn porch wouldn't stop swaying -- and brushed my lips across his. I looked into his eyes, and he returned my gaze without wavering. "I love taking care of you, too. We take care of each other, don't we?"

"Yes, Brandon, we do. Come on, let's get you to bed." He led the way upstairs, tugging me gently after him. He looked over his shoulder and smiled in encouragement at me -- those stairs seemed awfully tall, I swear taller than they'd been earlier -- until finally we were in our room at last.

"Hold on. Let me fix the bed." I watched the two Nicholases -- man, I really was drunk -- as they fixed the bed. Then one (thank God just one) walked over to me, a gentle smile on his face, and took me by the hand. "Let's lie down, okay?"

I nodded. "Okey dokey."

He laughed at that. "You're a silly drunk."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said softly, then pushed me gently onto the bed.

"Nicholas! The bed's whirling!" I cried out, flinging my hands to the sides and opening my eyes as wide as I could.

"It's all right, Brandon. Here." He pushed my feet up onto the bed. I tried to help him, I really did, but my body felt loose, like one big vat of jelly, rolling and undulating over the whirling bed. After a few minutes, during which the ceiling finally stopped its mad rotations, Nicholas touched me on the cheek and said, "Are you going to be sick?"

"No, no, I'm okay," I said, realizing it was true. All I felt now was an incredible need to succumb to sleep. I tried to push my boxers off, but they wouldn't cooperate. They were sticky, puzzling me; then I remembered why and sighed happily. "Help me?" I turned my face to Nicholas and grinned up at him.

"What? Oh, right, you sleep in the nude. And these *are* a mess, aren't they now?" He took a deep breath, then let out a shuddering, "Wonderful."

I wondered what he'd meant by that, but couldn't summon any energy to ask. I gave up my fight with my boxers, allowing Nicholas to pull them down and off. He bent down and kissed me on the nose. I made a half-hearted attempt to grab for him, but my jelly-arm wouldn't cooperate, and he pulled away and off the bed.

"Had too many," I mumbled.

"Yes, you did."

He turned off the light. I heard his jeans fall to the floor and felt him slide in next to me. I turned onto my side, and he curled against my back -- just like we'd been when my dad found us, a few short days ago. "Bed still whirling?"

I patted the hand that he'd brought up to my chest. "No, not anymore, my little anchor boy. It's stopped." I scooted down so I felt his dick against the cleft of my backside and closed my eyes, content. My own body still thrummed from Nick's attentions, and my butt still stung, but I was happy. I was in Nick's arms.

Chapter Nineteen

Colorado -- Present Day

"I am *so* not going to miss the smell of hospitals," Nicholas said.

I looked up from my computer. "What's that?"

He smiled at me from his wheelchair, where he sat by the window, hugging a pillow to his stomach. He had on the baby-blues sweats Jonathan and I had teased him about, but he looked fresh, excited, his eyes dancing with anticipation.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "I said, I'm not going to miss the smell of this place."

"There's a lot I'm not going to miss about this place," I said. I glanced at the clock on the wall and grinned at him. "We've got less than an hour left. But we could stay another day or two ..."

"No!" Nicholas said, tossing the pillow at me. I grabbed it, laughing. "You can stay if you want, but I'm not." He laid his head back and closed his eyes. "All I can think about is a real bath in a real tub in a real house, then a real fuck in a real bed --"

"Nicholas!" I admonished, laughing as, naturally, Jenn walked in at that moment.

But she hadn't heard. Or, wisely, chose to pretend she hadn't. I'm thinking the latter.

"Hey, the reporter from *Rolling Stone* just showed up." She walked over to Nicholas and kissed him on the forehead. He grinned and grabbed for her and made her kiss him again, this time on the lips. I shook my head as she broke away from him and patted him on the head.

"Behave yourself, Mr. Kilmain. They'll have the camera rolling the whole time, you know."

He grinned at her. "I know. That's what I'm counting on."

"Clown," I said beneath my breath and turned back to my computer.

"I heard that, brat."

"Diva."

"Hot stuff."

"Babycakes."

"Horny boy."

"Yup."

"Oh, Brandon, really?"

I nodded. "Always. For you."

With a squeal, he rose surprisingly quickly out of his chair and kissed me, biting my lip in promise. "I love you. I want you. I need you."

"Likewise," I said, then kissed him again. "Now sit down. You promised Nurse Goodall you'd behave."

He sat gingerly, grabbing the pillow up and holding it to his stomach again, but his blue eyes danced with mischief. "I did, I did, but only until we're out of here. Once we're through those doors, anything goes."

"You guys are too much," Jenn said, then headed for the door. "Anyway, I just checked on Tommy. He's feeling better." She looked pointedly at me. "He asked about you, Brandon. I told him I was sure you'd drop by before you go."

"I -- I will."

She opened the door. "The caravan leaves in thirty. You guys be ready, okay? Kemma's downstairs already, with Jeff and Katie. I warn you -- there's a huge crowd of fans out there waiting."

Nicholas beamed at that. "That's terrific! Thanks, Jenn. Tell Kemma we'll be down shortly."

"Okay. See you guys in a bit."

She left us alone. I closed my laptop and put it in my case, keenly aware of Nick's gaze boring into me, watching me closely.

Finally he pushed his wheelchair over to me and touched my hand. "Go see him. He doesn't blame you for this. For any of it."

"He should," I said, rubbing my hands over my face.

"Why? You weren't the one who planted that bomb. You're no more to blame for that than what happened to me."

I stared at Nicholas, disbelief coursing through me. I could barely breathe. I shook my head at him, unable to fathom how he still didn't see it. "But I *am* to blame. All this is my fault. I'm the one who --"

Nicholas slapped the arm of my chair. "Brandon! Cut it out!" Anger pinkened his face and I swallowed.

"Don't get upset, Nick."

"I'll get upset if I want to. Dammit, how many times do I have to tell you, all of this was out of your hands?"

"I should've been able to stop this. If I'd just --"

"There was plenty I could've done, too, but didn't. Who's to say if I'd insisted you talk to me, instead of just ... just giving in and letting you have your way ..." His eyes teared, and guilt had its usual way with me.

"Nicholas --" I reached for his hand, but he jerked it back.

"No. Let me finish. It's over, Brandon; the past is over and done with. Please, I want to go forward now. Please?"

This time when I reached for his hand, he let me take it. The cuts and scrapes were all but faded away now, his hand soft and Nicholas-pale, not deathly-pale, as it had been for so long. I couldn't bear the thought of it looking that way again. I nodded, vowing to myself right then that I would never bring it up again, would never insist again that everything that had happened was all my fault. Even though, of course, it was.

"Okay. Forward only."

"Promise me you'll stop blaming yourself for all this. What's done is done; water under the bridge; the past can't be remade; all that rot."

I smiled. "I promise, Nick."

He nodded once, tersely. "Now, go talk to Tommy," he insisted.

"All right. I'll go talk to him. Then let's get out of here, okay?"

He gave me a wavering smile, then leaned over, and I met him halfway. The kiss he gave me was sweet and gentle -- and I could tell he wasn't fooled by my charade.

* * * * *

Tommy was asleep when I got to his room. He'd been moved out of ICU at last and into a private suite. He lay on his stomach so as not to put pressure on his burns. Pillows bolstered him into place. His leg was in a cast up to his hip. I felt sick -- I could smell him, smell the burned flesh. Maybe it was my imagination, but I smelled it. Felt it. How must it have felt to have the skin of his back peeled off? The agony ... I couldn't comprehend it.

As our rooms had been, his was now full of flowers, cards, gifts. Tommy Hubbard had plenty of fans himself, and I was glad of that. Sylvie was nowhere in sight; it was just him and me. Sam had flown back home that morning to tend to some business matters. He would be back in a day or two. I was glad he was gone. I didn't think I could stand the censure I was sure I'd see in his eyes.

I leaned against the doorjamb, balanced on my crutches -- I'd been given, finally, a walking boot that morning, but I was still too sore to put much weight on my foot, not ready to give up both crutches just yet. Mutt stood outside the doorway, talking quietly to Andy, the guard assigned to Tommy. I was about to turn and tell Mutt "let's leave," when Tommy cleared his throat.

"Hey, Brandon, come in here where I can see you."

I hesitated. "I don't want to bother you --"

He laughed softly. "I'm not exactly doing anything. Come on in, dude."

I hobbled over to him and pulled up a chair. He moved in the bed, his face paling with pain as he looked at me. He smiled. How he could smile, I just couldn't comprehend.

"Jenn tells me you're trying to claim responsibility for this."

Dammit, Jenn. "If you hadn't gone down there --"

"Someone else would've, and they could've been dead. Sam. You know he's not as fast as me. Or Sylvie. What if it'd been Sylvie?" He closed his eyes. "I'll be okay. It hurts like shit, but in a few days I'll be out of here." He smiled, eyes still closed. "I'm tougher than I look." He opened his eyes then. "So are you."

I didn't know what to say, so I did what I usually do in such situations -- I stared at my hands. When he reached out to grab one of them, I jumped. He chuckled, held on to my hand, and sighed when I clasped him tight. "That's nice. I can see why Nicholas likes you so much."

"I'm really sorry about it all, Tommy."

"I know, man. I know." He squeezed my hand and let it go. "I still can't believe you guys. I about killed Amanda. I mean, my own sister never told me you and Nicholas were fucking each other." My face heated and he laughed. "Hell, doesn't bother me. Not anymore. Just promise me something, okay?"

"Sure. Whatever you want, Tommy."

His expression sobered. "Don't hurt him again, Brandon. I may not look able to right now, but I promise you I'll kick your ass if you hurt him like that again."

"You and Jonathan both," I said wryly.

"Smart man, Jonathan. I want that promise. Now."

Touched and amused -- I *had* been Tommy's boss for several years, after all -- I nodded. The loyalty everyone, including Tommy, showed Nicholas didn't surprise me. But at least I no longer felt like the enemy. Okay, maybe around Marisa, but hopefully that would get better. And now I had Katie. "I promise."

"Good. Go back to your boyfriend, and get out of this place, and let me sleep."

I stood, relieved. "Thanks, Tommy. I --"

"If you say you're sorry again, I really *will* get up and kick you in the ass." He smiled. "Remember, when I get out of here, I want a room with a view. You hear?"

"I hear you."

"Now get. Your boyfriend is waiting; your fans are waiting. I swear I can hear them screaming from here. Go on so they'll shut up."

He closed his eyes. I watched him for a moment, realizing he'd fallen asleep. Then I left.

* * * * *

"It's a freaking madhouse! I love it!"

I laughed, feeling immensely better after my visit with Tommy. We sat in our wheelchairs -- hospital policy wouldn't let me walk out on my own, though I'd wanted to -- right inside the back door. Nurse Goodall had come to see us off, though it wasn't her regular shift. She gave me a hug.

"Remember what we talked about, son."

Guilt made me look away. "I know. Thanks for everything, Nurse Goodall."

She chuckled. "If I see you in the grocery store, are you going to call me that?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Probably."

"Good. I'm going to miss it."

She turned to Nicholas and hugged him, then said something to him. I watched, a little mystified at the sudden darkening of his expression. He nodded, his eyes downcast. Then he looked at me, saw me watching, and smiled brightly. Nurse Goodall took her leave of us, giving me a last, piercing look. I turned away.

Katie stood beside me, holding a briefcase and a representative bundle of flowers and Nick's koala bear, and Mutt and Jeff stood behind us. Jenn and her husband were going to meet us at the house later, and Kemma and her cameraman were busy filming away as finally the doors were thrown open. Sucked out on a blast of cold, crisp air, we left the hospital without a backward glance.

The fans went nuts.

If I'd worried about negative feedback over our announcement that we were lovers, I shouldn't have. As we rolled out, the fans screamed and waved, took pictures, called out encouragement as a smiling Nicholas was helped out of his wheelchair and into the black Lexus I'd had Jeff buy for us.

I heard a few of the kids call Katie's name. She blushed as she glanced at me. "Friends of mine. I don't think they believed until now that I'm really your assistant."

"Assist me then, assistant, so there'll be no doubt."

I took the flowers and bear from her and handed them in to Nicholas. He'd rolled down the window, of course, and was calling out to some of the fans, waving to the other TV cameras -- we'd be on the news again -- and in general was being his usual charming self. And damn that was good to see. How could I have taken that for granted for so long?

Letting Katie help me out of my wheelchair, I waved to the crowd as I eased into the car. When she would've walked away, I grabbed her hand.

"Nope, come with us."

Her eyes widened, but she got in. To my amusement, when she closed the door she looked out the window at her dumbfounded friends and waved. For good measure, I put my arm around her and hugged her. Their faces were priceless. She grinned and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thanks. That totally makes up for not getting to go to the prom."

I laughed and released her, then looped my arm around Nicholas. He cuddled next to me. The fans that could see us through the window got an eyeful when he reached up with one hand and turned my face to kiss him. And I did. Full of relief and joy that we were leaving the hospital at last, I gave him a good one.

Katie muttered, "Cameras, guys, cameras."

Nicholas giggled. "We're not gonna have to call you Marisa Junior now, are we, Katie?"

She huffed beneath her breath, but grinned, pulling her briefcase onto her lap. "Depends on how well you behave. I'm in charge of you now, you know."

Nicholas groaned. "Oh, my GOD! She is! She *is* Marisa incarnate!"

"Don't worry, baby, she's not nearly as bad," I said. "She loves both of us."

Katie blushed at that, and Nicholas fell silent. I maybe shouldn't have said that.

Mutt and Jeff got in the car, and we took off, fans screaming, cameras rolling, and away from the hospital.

Far, far away.

Thank God.

The drive to the house Marisa had rented for us was quiet. Katie pulled some papers out of her briefcase and began to puzzle over them. I relaxed into the soft leather interior and smiled as Nicholas hooked one leg over mine, snaked his hand up my chest, and nuzzled my neck.

"I've always wanted to do this," he murmured into my ear.

"What's that?" A shiver ran down my spine. "That tickles, Nicholas."

"I know." Then he kissed my ear. "I've always wanted to neck with you in the back seat of a car as we drove away from a concert."

"Marisa always made us go in separate cars."

"Silly, huh. Never again. Kiss me."

"Nicholas," I said, glancing at Katie and the backs of Jeff's and Mutt's heads. "We're not exactly alone, you know."

"Doesn't bother me," Katie said. Then, "Dang it, this is crazy."

Glad of the distraction -- though Nicholas still nuzzled my neck, and now his hand rested on my thigh dangerously close to exactly where it didn't need to be, not when I was smashed up next to Katie -- I said, "What's crazy?"

Katie thumped the notebook in her hand. "This schedule Marisa's set up for you guys." She shook her head and pulled out a cell phone, punching one of the numbers. "This is crazy. I'm not going to put up with this."

I glanced at Nicholas. He shrugged and whispered in my ear, "You've created a monster, think?"

I wasn't sure what to think.

"Hello, Marisa? It's Katie. Hi, yes, we've just left."

Nicholas snickered. I watched my new PA with admiration, and it just grew as the conversation continued.

"This schedule you have for Brandon and Nicholas?" Oh, I liked that, Brandon *before* Nicholas. He pouted at me, having noticed as well. "It's impossible. No ... I know the new CD comes out next Tuesday but ... Marisa, listen, will you? I know you're in charge of Nicholas, but I'm in charge of Brandon, and whatever affects Nicholas affects Brandon, and this is not good. The boy's exhausted ... Yes, Nicholas. He's high as a kite now, but it's all adrenaline, believe me."

She looped her hair back over her ear. I grinned, watching her. Yes, I'd picked myself a tiger, all right.

"He needs at least forty-eight hours without any press, except for Kemma. She won't intrude ... Well, I'm the one here, and I see it. Nicholas needs to go straight to bed. And Brandon, too." Katie grinned and looked at us, covering the phone. "That freaked her out," she whispered to us, then turned back to the phone. "Yup, Monday morning. I'll handle it. Bye."

She flipped the phone shut and grinned. "I bought you guys until Monday. She had, get this, twenty phone interviews set up between now and then! As if you'd be forgotten between today and Tuesday, Nicholas. Geesh."

"Katie?" he said, grinning.

"Yes?"

"I love you. Thanks for that. Not many can get Marisa to listen to reason other than her own."

Katie folded her arms across her chest. "She's met her match, then."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Oh, my goodness, you're not even full grown yet." Nicholas moaned. "What will you be like in ten years?"

"Still keeping you in line, I hope."

"Me, too," I murmured against Nick's hair. He turned his face to me, met my lips with his, and sighed into my mouth. "Love you," I whispered.

"Likewise," he said breathlessly. His hand moved higher on my thigh. Damn, I was getting horny. And he knew it. "Wanna hold my pillow?" he whispered.

I snarled at him, but took it. Katie peered harder at her notes, making Nicholas giggle.

"Hey, bosses, there it is," Mutt said. We'd pulled up to a gate with a guard. He took our names, staring at us with avid interest before waving us on.

"Gated community, helps keep the weirdos out," Jeff said.

"And crazed fans," Nicholas added. He'd paled a little. I grabbed his hand and held it. He squeezed my fingers and brought my hand up to his lips.

I smiled at him. "It'll be good."

"I hope so."

We'd pulled onto a fir-lined street, past quite nice house after quite nice house -- definitely upscale, this area, and close to the city. Nice. Nicholas was silent beside me. "What do you think?"

He looked out the window and shrugged. "It's kind of crowded, all the houses close together like this, don't you think?"

"Real estate's expensive here. The detective thought this neighborhood was a plus. And all the neighbors know we're here, to keep a lookout. There's regular patrols, and ..." I fell silent. Jonathan stood in the driveway, his expression *not* one of greeting and happiness to see us.

Mutt stopped the car as Jonathan walked up to it. Mutt got out, and Nicholas opened the car door on his side. Kemma and her crew pulled up behind us. Jonathan looked at them, his distress clear. Nicholas got out and I followed.

"Jonathan, what's wrong?" Nicholas asked.

Jonathan held up his hands. "Cops are on the way. You can't go in there, guys."

"What's wrong?"

"The place has been trashed."

"How? When?" I demanded, pushing past him. I hobbled up to the house, Jeff on my heels.

"Brandon, wait!" Jonathan ran after me and grabbed me. "Stop. Wait."

"Where's Barkley?" Nicholas said. I turned to him. He had his arm around Katie.

"Barkley's fine. He's still with Adam."

"Dammit, Jonathan, what happened?" I said.

He took a deep breath. "Sometime this morning, the house was broken in to --"

"What about the alarm?"

"Hadn't been activated yet. In fact, I realized what had happened when I met the alarm people here. They just left. I sent them away."

I looked from him to Nicholas. "Show me."

Jeff shook his head. "Not a good idea, Brandon --"

But I pushed past him. I couldn't believe it. Anger surged through me. Some bastard had broken into our house. I hobbled into the foyer and felt bile rise in my throat. I stared in disbelief at the walls, the floor.

Someone had spray-painted the walls of the foyer. Words like "fags" and "cocksuckers" and "queers" and other generally harmless words that nonetheless menaced me were painted in red, black, and gray. Red paint had been spilled over the walls and furniture and floor. I looked at it, went around it into the living room. Anger danced with fear as I stared at the continuation of the bastard's attack on our home. Furniture had been slashed, knocked over, torn apart. Glass from pictures that had once been on the walls lay shattered on the floor.

How had this happened? Why?

"Brandon, stop --"

I ignored Jon and moved through the living room and kitchen -- all destroyed, everything destroyed -- past a small bedroom and bathroom and then headed for the master bedroom -- our bedroom -- drawn to it, though fear and horror had replaced the anger. I couldn't stop myself. Then I realized the stench ... oh, my God.

"Brandon, don't go in there --"

I stood in the doorway and stared in disbelief. Blackness edged my vision as a swath of red filmed my eyes.

"Brandon!"

Nick's voice, pleading with me. I couldn't move. All I could do was stare at the mess, the blood -- it was blood I smelled. I knew blood. I knew that metallic taste, could feel it in my mouth, clogging my throat. And that wasn't the worst of it. There was more -- a dead something, a deer maybe, on our bed. My bed. The bed I'd bought just for me and Nicholas. The deer's sightless eyes stared at me on its bed of congealing blood.

Blood on the walls, on the floor. The deer sliced open, guts spilling out ... I wavered where I stood, dizziness filling my mind as the deer blended into Nicholas, and it was Nicholas I saw there, Nicholas split open, Nick's guts spilling out ...

"Brandon!"

I backed away, my throat burning. With a moan, I stumbled into Jeff -- I think it was Jeff. I didn't know anymore. I couldn't see.

I stumbled down the hallway and found the small bathroom, my stomach heaving. I hurled into the bathtub, retching, retching until I couldn't see and blackness swirled around in my eyes. I couldn't stop; it kept coming, wave after wave of nausea. I shuddered, cold seeping into my skin, into my bones. I collapsed to my knees. Arms wrapped around me. A cloth wiped across my face.

"Get him out of here," Jonathan said.

I was lifted into strong arms, familiar arms, Mutt's. I stared numbly up at the ceiling -- I couldn't look down, didn't dare. I heard Nick's soft, worried murmurs as I was taken outside. The blast of cold air hit my face, shocking me. A shudder wracked me, and the shivers took hold of me then. I moaned, thrashing against my captor's arms, but he held me tight, and I gave up the fight.

I was eased into the car, not sure, no longer sure of what was happening.

That deer, a deer ... Why had they done that? Why did I see Nicholas -- *Nicholas!*

"Nicholas!" I choked out.

"I'm here, Brandon. Oh, baby, I'm here. You're okay. It's okay."

I clutched at him, gasping as the damp cloth wiped over my face again. The car was moving. I was stretched out on the back seat, cradled in Nick's arms. I squeezed my eyes shut, terror rocketing through me. What had happened?

"I -- I -- I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Hush now, nothing to be sorry about."

I looked up, then reached up to touch his face. He *was* okay. I burst into tears, shame gripping me as I buried my face in his neck. He sucked in his breath, and I eased up -- I was hurting him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Hush, Brandon, I'm okay." His hand soothed me, running up and down my arm, over my back. Slowly the shuddering eased.

"Where do you want me to take you?" Jeff.

"Just drive. Anywhere," Nicholas said.

I heard Katie's voice, urgent. "Hotel ... reservation ... private suite ..."

"Katie's taking care of us," Nick whispered. "She's good, she's good." He stroked the hair back from my face. I took a deep breath, clutching the blanket he'd pulled up over us. "Close your eyes and just breathe deep, Brandon. It's okay now."

"They got into our house. I can't ... I can't go back there."

"You won't, don't worry. We'll find another house. A better house."

I was vaguely aware of him talking to me like I was a child, but I didn't care. Nicholas was taking care of it. He was taking care of me. I didn't have to worry.

The car moved on, time moved on, and I guess I dozed for a bit. Nick's thumb stroking my cheek brought me back to awareness. I looked up at him. His eyes were darkened with worry, his face pale.

"You feeling better, baby?" he asked me.

I forced myself to smile, though I didn't feel like it. *He's here. He's okay.* "You're the baby, not me," I said, my throat raw.

He hugged me. "Hm, right. Think you could sit up? Want to show you something."

Only then did I realize the car had stopped. I sat up, wincing a little at my stomach; the burn in my throat made me grimace. Nasty. Katie turned around and handed me a roll of mints.

"Thanks," I said, feeling sheepish. I popped a mint into my mouth, welcoming the fresh taste. "Sorry about all that."

"Don't worry about it. Mom gets sick a lot. I can handle it."

"Look, Brandon," Nicholas said, pointing through the window.

My eyes widened as I looked out at what had captured Nick's attention. It was a house. And not just any house.

Mutt had stopped the car at the base of a small hill. On top of said hill stood the most unique redwood house I'd ever seen. Towering cathedral windows glistened in the early afternoon sun. The back of the house was made up of several different levels, stretched out to encompass the magnificent view. There wasn't another house for miles around, just mountains, a stream, snow-crustrated meadows. A small grove of giant firs did nothing to obscure the view. A barn sat away from the house; whitewashed fencing stretched around it and disappeared down the back of the hill.

And there was a For Sale sign in front of it.

"Welcome home," Nicholas said, beaming. "I just bought that house."

"You what?" I said, dumbfounded.

He grinned. "Well, sort of. One very excited realtor is on her way. There she is." A blue Mercedes drove past us and stopped at the house. "This is it, Brandon. I've always wanted a house in the mountains, and this is perfect."

"You haven't even been inside," I said, but my own excitement was mounting.

"I don't care. I want it. Mutt, go ahead and drive on up."

We drove up to the house. By the time we got there, the realtor, a woman in her fifties who reminded me vaguely of Nurse Goodall, stood beaming in the driveway. We got out of the car, and she walked up to us, her gaze darting from one of us to the other.

Nicholas took mercy on her. "Ms. Allen? I'm Nicholas Kilmain."

Her eyes lit up, and she took his offered hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Kilmain. Magnificent, isn't it?"

Nicholas looked up and nodded. "It is beautiful. Can we see inside? Did you bring the papers?"

She held up her briefcase. "I admit I was a little taken aback, but the owners are thrilled. Come on in." I began to wonder just how long I'd been out of it.

"Great. I'll be moving a bit slow, just got out of the hospital."

"I saw it all on television. Just take your time."

Nicholas motioned for Katie and looped his arm around her shoulders as they went slowly up the front stairs. He cast me a questioning look.

"I'm okay," I said. Mutt and Jeff glanced at each other and moved to either side of me. I wanted to whine about that -- I really was fine -- but Nick's relieved look stilled me. I was a good boy and let them help me up the stairs.

We went inside, and I knew immediately Nicholas was right.

We were home.

The cathedral windows showcased a large, white-carpeted living room. A giant fireplace dominated one side, and the other was the perfect place for a piano. In between was plenty of space for couches and a dining room set. My gaze was drawn back to where my piano would sit. Nicholas glanced at me, saw where I was looking, and grinned.

"Concert grand?"

I nodded. He laughed.

Everything in the house breathed light and air and spaciousness. Nick's grin showed me how well pleased he was, too. We went through the kitchen and checked out the rooms. Up one level, down another, but nothing too hard to negotiate.

Plenty of bedrooms, five in all. A second living area that simply screamed home studio. My excitement was building, my earlier terror all but forgotten as we soaked in our new home. Our new, very empty home.

Then we came to the master bedroom. Nicholas reached it first. He turned to me, his eyes shining, and held out his hand. Glancing briefly at the realtor -- her eyes opened a bit wider, but she didn't seem repulsed -- I slipped into Nick's arms and held him tight. There were windows here, too, vaulted ceilings, pure white walls and white carpet. A fireplace and, in a bay of windows that looked down into the valley below, a hot tub big enough for at least four. Or more. Perfect for two men, in any case.

Nicholas wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed his body into mine. He couldn't stop smiling, and I had to, too. "You like it, baby?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Yes! Please, Brandon, let me buy it."

Let him? Ha. He had tons more money than I did. And his new album -- a year later we would still be dumbfounded by how much money that brought him. But right then, I loved being asked.

"How much?" I asked the realtor.

"Four and a half."

"We'll take it," I said.

"That's million."

I laughed. "I imagined so. Take credit cards?"

The realtor opened her mouth wide. "I, um, well, usually these things take some time ... But I have a feeling that won't be a problem with you two. Who's name will it be in?"

"Both of ours," Nicholas said before I could say "Nick's."

I looked down at him, at the loving, incredibly warm human being in my arms, and felt tears well up in my eyes. "You're sure?" I asked.

"Positive." Then his lips met mine, and the deal was sealed.

Over the next few days, Katie proved yet again what a miracle worker she was. Nicholas got the honor of furnishing the place, and I approved of his choices -- simple, classic lines, muted whites and beiges with splashes of color here and there. And lots of plants. Completely different than anything either of us had ever had in our homes.

The store where I'd bought the first bed bent over backwards, supplying us with everything we needed to furnish the entire house. The first thing to arrive, of course, was the bed, a beautiful cherry sleigh bed, king-size, which Nicholas insisted be placed right in the middle of the bedroom so we'd wake up and look out the windows and see mountains first thing in the morning.

Katie took charge of getting things organized, yanking her still-stunned friends into service to do everything from organize the kitchen to wash and fold towels and take directions from Nicholas on how to rearrange furniture. I'd never seen so much enthusiasm in my life over rearranging furniture. I think he had them move it several different times, acting the pure diva, just to give them something to talk about.

People milled in and out. Barkley went nuts, having been delivered by Adam at some point. I dreaded dog paws on white carpet, but we'd deal with that. Katie called a local pet store, and before Barkley could bark three times, a new dog run with all-weather -- and mudless -- flooring had been added to the back, along with a special private entrance so he could go in and out at his leisure.

Nicholas also bought him snow boots. And rain boots. And sweaters. And coats. I said nothing, just shook my head.

Jonathan chose one of the upper terrace bedrooms for himself and Amanda, and Jenn and her husband one of the lower. Adam decided to stay in town, as he planned to leave soon. We prepared a room for Sylvie and Tommy, who would, much to our relief, get to leave the hospital in just a few more days' time.

I tried to get Katie to move in with us, too, but she insisted she couldn't leave her mom and sister alone just yet. I understood.

Nicholas ordered me a piano, insisting on a white one. "Got to stay with the theme," he said. I'd just smiled, settling onto one of our new couches, trying to stay out of the way. Kemma and her cameraman hovered throughout all the goings-on, interviewing everyone in the house, following Nicholas when he took a short trip to the store (in a wheelchair, I insisted) to buy groceries, escorted by Mutt, and then she interviewed me as I sat outside on the back porch with a new guitar.

Finally, at long last, everything was in place; everyone was gone except for my brother and his wife, Jenn and her husband, and Nicholas and me. Mention of what had happened at the other house had been avoided, at least around me. The owners were compensated and then some, but the guilt I felt over their house and possessions entrusted to us never left me. Detective Anderson had come and gone, thankfully finding Jonathan enough help in the investigation of what had happened.

There were no clues. Jon had been the last one to be in the house the night before, and the first to arrive. None of the neighbors had seen anything suspicious, nor had the gatekeeper. Nothing.

I didn't want to examine too closely my reaction to the deer in the bed.

I was frightened.

It sat there at the edge of my consciousness, the realization that I'd truly freaked out. I'd totally lost control. I pushed aside Nick's gentle questioning, and he said nothing more to me, just pulled me onto the couch and stroked my hair as he'd done in the car.

He, at least, was thriving. Now free of the hospital and the fear that had gripped him there, he seemed to grow stronger every minute of every hour. My joy in that I couldn't deny; we were going to be hard-put to keep him settled down long enough to truly heal. And, with his new album coming out, I figured I'd have to tie him to the bed to keep him calm. Normally, he would've been on the road already, creating a buzz for his new album, getting the talk going.

Ironical that his kidnapping and everything that had followed was the best publicity he could have ever hoped for. His first single would hit the airwaves in just two more days, and the energy that flowed through him was palpable.

Yet I felt wrung out, drained.

I lay on the couch under a blanket, Nicholas stroking my head as he watched *Star Wars* -- Katie had hit Blockbuster for us earlier that day. It was getting late. Jonathan threw another log on the fire and looked down at me.

"You okay, bud?" he asked.

He'd asked me that about fifty times in the last two days. I nodded. "Tired."

"Maybe you guys should go on to bed, then. Busy day tomorrow."

I nodded. "Good idea." I stood and grabbed my crutch.

"You go ahead, babe. I'll be there in a second."

“Okay.” I headed for the bedroom, hoping he wouldn’t be long. I smiled to myself -- after all, this was our first real night. I glanced at our bed, as yet unslept in. I felt my groin swell at the thought of Nicholas lying next to me in our bed in our room in our house. I could hardly wait until my cast was off so we could take advantage of the hot tub. I flipped off the light and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. By the time I was done, I realized I’d forgotten to take my meds for the night and had left them in the kitchen, alongside Nick’s.

I headed back for the living room, but stopped when I heard Jon and Nicholas talking in low, urgent voices. “I know, I’m very worried, too.”

“He won’t talk about it?”

Won’t talk about what?

Nicholas sighed. “No. Nurse Goodall told me to be patient, but I’m really worried. He’s not been eating good again. It was bad in the hospital, but did you see? He only ate about five bites of supper tonight. I watched.”

“Maybe his stomach still hurts.”

“That was days ago. I don’t know, Jon. I’m scared for him. He -- he still blames himself for everything.”

“I know. You’d best go to him. Want me to talk to him?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know what would be best.”

“Just be there for him, like you have been. That’s all you can probably do for now. Go on to bed. I’ll clean up here.”

“Thanks. And Jon?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being here. I know how mad you were at him.”

“Yeah, well, I probably still am a little, but now it’s mostly I’m mad at him for not talking to me.”

“And he’s not talking again. I’m not even sure if he realizes it.”

A pause. “I know. And that’s what worries me.”

I went back to our bedroom and, leaving the lights off, peeled off my clothes and slipped into bed. I stared at the blank wall, trying to control the guilt that so loved to eat away at me. I wasn’t doing a good enough job. They knew something was wrong, knew that I was ... I was ...

Nicholas walked into the room, closed the door, and locked it. I sighed and let my hand drift to my groin. I was half-erect, but just listening to him as he took care of his nightly ablutions brought me to full mast. He crawled into the bed, his weight making me roll a little toward him. I, of course, was naked, but when I felt his bare skin spoon against mine, I shuddered with longing.

"You awake?" he asked, kissing my shoulder.

"Been waiting on you."

He chuckled, sliding a warm hand around my hip to find my hand where I toyed with my dick. He pushed my fingers away. "That's my job."

"Mm," I said, stretching back and kissing him over my shoulder. "Get to it, then, boy."

He giggled and thumbed my foreskin. "I'm so jealous of you, you know."

"Why?"

"Wish I wasn't cut. Yours is so much prettier than mine."

I chuckled. "You have a beautiful dick, Nicholas."

"Do I? Why, thank you."

"I miss it," I said softly.

He sucked in his breath. "Can I?"

"Are you up to it?"

He giggled again and pushed his quite aroused self against my backside. "That answer your question?"

"I don't know. Being hard's one thing --"

He smacked me on the butt, then said, "Where's the lube?"

"My brother very thoughtfully put a tube in your bedside drawer." He rolled over, and I heard him fumble with the drawer before he turned back to me.

"He's still dying to know which of us is top, isn't he?" he said.

"You never told him, did you?"

"Nope. And now it's a moot point anyway. I want you to take me again, you know."

"I'd like that. But not tonight."

He breathed onto my neck. "No, not tonight. Move your leg up a little. There you go."

I relaxed as I felt Nick's fingers brush against my opening. It was so much easier now, I realized as he slipped one finger inside me. I gasped a little at the invasion, but his soft murmurs in my ear quickly had me easing back down again. His free hand slipped under my head. I grasped his fingers and held on as he furthered his invasion.

"Hey, you must've been thinking about me. You're so --"

"I want you, Nicholas."

"Brandon," he said, my name a rough whisper. His fingers left me, and I felt him -- raw, he was raw -- push gently into me.

"Nicholas," I whispered hoarsely, clenching. "Condom."

"No. We're both clean. I checked with the hospital before we left."

"You what?"

He chuckled, still barely inside me. The little shocks as he moved just within me made me moan. He ran a hand up my side and kissed me on my back. "I talked with Nurse Goodall. She said not to worry, we're both fine. And I for one don't intend to have to worry about that status changing." His unspoken question hovered in the air, but the answer to that was simple, and heartfelt.

"Me, either."

He smothered my neck with kisses. I grinned in the darkness -- as if there was any doubt. I pushed the last vestiges of fear out of my mind. I would rather have waited a little while longer, but desire won out. I wanted him bareback, forever.

"I hate condoms," I said.

"I know."

"Take me," I whispered, then kissed his hand.

With a gentleness that showed he had not forgotten the Brandon of old, he pushed his way inside me. I arched back against the blissful invasion, gasping as he found and nudged against my prostate. I moaned as he relentlessly pushed himself up to the hilt inside me until I was impaled. His hand found my dick, and so began the slowest, gentlest, most loving fuck I'd ever shared with Nicholas.

When at last we both came, holding on to each other as the gentle but earth-shattering waves of pleasure overtook us, I knew heaven had found us at last.

For a long time we lay together, the heat from our bodies cloaking us with a feeling of safety and love I thought I'd never feel again. Nicholas nuzzled against my neck, breathing, "I love you," into my ear, over and over again until he finally quieted, his breath evened out, and he fell asleep cradling me in his arms, our bodies still connected as I held him tight inside of me.

I was glad he fell asleep. He never noticed my tears.

Chapter Twenty

I woke early the next morning, my stomach bothering me a little. Since the deer incident, as Nicholas called it, it'd been a bit sore, though the meds our doctor had prescribed helped. Then I remembered I hadn't taken them the night before. Maybe that was why I was so sore.

I looked out the open windows and to the snow-covered mountains in the distance. At least the sun was out. Though the air in the room was kind of on the cold side, it looked like it would be a beautiful day. I turned on my side and smiled in pleasure. Nicholas lay next to me, still sound asleep. He faced away, hugging a pillow -- I knew he still hurt a bit, though he never said so, and hugging the pillow helped. He'd pushed the covers down, so I pulled them back up to his chin. Last thing he needed was to catch a chill.

His mouth was slightly open, his full lips pouting. I grinned, then reached out to touch his bottom lip, smiling as he brought one hand up in his sleep and batted me away. His eyelids flickered and then opened. As always, those devastatingly blue eyes of his floored me. How eyes could be so purely blue, I couldn't fathom. It was a privilege to look into them, a privilege to have their owner in my bed.

My groin stirred. He smiled softly at me. "You okay now?" he whispered.

I frowned at him, puzzled. Of course I was fine. "Go back to sleep. It's early yet."

He closed his eyes again, and back to sleep he drifted. *Sleep on, lazy boy. You deserve it.* I pushed myself up on my elbow and, placing my hand on his hip, leaned over him, breathing deeply of his scent. He smelled faintly of sex and sweat and the shampoo he'd bought during his trip to store. I kissed him on his rough cheek. He smiled.

Still half asleep, he pulled me possessively to him and, with a low growl, murmured in my ear, "Your turn."

Grinning, I grabbed the lube off the bedside table where he'd left it and slicked myself up. He sighed and rolled onto his back, eyes still closed, stretched his arms over his head, and opened himself to me. I slid between his legs, pulling the covers up over us. He lifted his legs up, and I guided myself into him. He took me with an ease I envied. He barely groaned at my sudden intrusion, the brat.

Burying my face in his neck, I slowly pumped into him, chuckling as he came moments later without my even touching his dick. Had to have been dreaming about me, the horny bastard. His arms came around my back and grabbed my butt as my own orgasm seized me. Such bliss, such utter bliss, taking him raw like this, filling him like this with such simple gentleness, and just because I could.

Sated once more, he drifted back to sleep; whereas now I was wide awake.

After a little while, I peeled myself out of and off him. He didn't move. I got out of bed, feeling faintly odd walking naked in front of the huge picture window. Not like anyone could see us, though I guessed if someone tried really hard to climb one of the nearer ridges and had a good telescope, they might see me walking around my bedroom naked and see Nicholas in my bed. I really didn't worry about it.

I felt safe here.

It was an odd thing, I thought as I took my shower, how at home I felt in this house. It was blasted cold in the mountains; I'd vowed I hated snow. But I couldn't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. Not New York, certainly not California. Though much bad stuff had happened in Colorado, I liked it anyway. The people were genuine and caring and had made us feel incredibly welcome. The mountains were beautiful. And as I dressed and put on my coat and finally forewent my crutch as I ventured outside onto the back porch, I felt at peace.

In the back of my mind was the knowledge that I was doing a snow job on myself, but I ignored it. Yes, someone was still after us. Very much so. But right here, right now, with Nicholas safe and sated in our bed, my brother and Mutt and Jeff here to watch over us, Jenn to keep an eye on us -- not to mention Katie -- and Tommy and Sylvie soon to join us, I realized I really didn't want to leave.

I was glad Nicholas and I had bought this house. Very glad. I'd skied some in the past; maybe once my leg was completely healed, I'd buy some skis. Maybe even convince Nicholas to give it one more try, though *that* thought made me laugh.

"Hey, bud, how you doing?"

I looked up as Jonathan joined me outside. "It's cold out. You need a jacket," I said.

"I'm fine. Want some coffee?" He set a mug down on the table next to me. Barkley walked out on the porch, wagging his tail. I automatically reached down and petted him. He licked my hand.

"Thanks."

Jonathan took the other chair and sighed. "I could get used to this. Never seen such a pretty view. Sleep good last night?"

"Yes, very good. Nick's pretty tired, though."

"Guess you boys found the lube."

My face heated. I grabbed my mug, nearly sloshing coffee out on my hand. "Uh, yeah, we did, thanks."

"No more condoms, eh?"

"Jonathan," I said. "Do you mind?"

"Guess that means you guys are really committed to each other. Right?"

I sighed in exasperation. "Yes, Jon, I love Nicholas. He loves me. We fuck only each other; we don't want to fuck anyone else. All right?"

He grinned sweetly at me. "In that case, you really shouldn't wear the boy out so soon. He's still recovering, you know. Surprised the doc didn't put a moratorium on sex until Nicholas could at least walk across the room without having to rest. Of course, he does just lie there and take it, right?"

Flash of Nicholas on his back, half-asleep, beneath me. "Would you shut up? Good grief. We're not teenagers for you to pester anymore."

"Oh, I imagine you're far more creative than that now, in your old age."

Another flash, this time of our hospital-bed adventure. "You have no idea," I said beneath my breath.

He snickered, then burst into a full-blown laugh. "I've missed this, you know. Oh, how I've missed giving you hell. Got lots of time to make up for, baby bro."

I snarled at him and he laughed.

"That's my Brandy." He reached over and patted me on the cheek. "I'm happy for you." He sobered, then let his hand drop to my shoulder and squeezed. "This is the way it should be. I've always said it, you know. That you and Nicholas were good together. That it seemed right somehow. Damned if I know why, you both being guys and all. But this is the way it should be."

I stared into my mug, at the swirl of cream as it slowly blended with the coffee. "Yeah, it is. I just wish we did have more time. Before Monday, I mean. I'm worried he'll push himself too quickly. Marisa's already planning on sending him out on the road as soon as possible."

He sat back in his chair. "He'll be fine. He's far over the worst and can handle whatever comes. I'm not so sure about you, though."

I stiffened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You reacted pretty strongly to that dead deer. Any idea why?"

I set my mug down and started to stand, but his hand shot out and stopped me.

"Talk to me, Brandon. Please. Nick's worried about you. I'm worried about you."

"I know. I heard you guys talking about me last night." I didn't bother to keep the irritation from my voice.

He dropped his hand. "Then you know our concerns."

I hesitated, then sat down again. I ran a hand over my beard -- I hadn't bothered to shave the last few days -- and clenched my teeth against the terror drumming into me. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him, waiting. I closed my eyes, unable to stop the burning tears. I turned away, but Jonathan startled me by getting up from his chair and crouching in front of me, cradling my face, forcing me to look at him.

"What's wrong? You've got to tell me. Please."

I shook my head. "I -- I don't know what you're talking about."

"Brandon. This is me. You can't pull the wool over my eyes."

"Please don't ..." I blinked furiously, embarrassed. "I'm fine."

He sighed. "No, you really aren't. I think you're still in shock over what happened. You went through an awful lot. Most men wouldn't have handled what you did with nearly as much grace."

Words clogged in my throat, and I dropped my face into my hands. Jon's arms came around me, pulling me close. "Oh, wow, hey. Easy, big guy," he said. "It's going to be okay. We'll get you through this."

I let him hold me. His arms felt so good, so wonderful. I'd missed him so damn much. But I couldn't give him answers I didn't know myself. Finally I pulled back and looked up at the sky, my tears hot on my face.

"I feel so --" I couldn't continue. Couldn't finish what I was going to say. *I feel so broken inside. I don't know what to do about it. I should be happy. I have Nicholas. He didn't die. He's going to be okay, but I'm scared I'm not.* I looked at my brother. He'd dropped his hands to my knees to balance himself. The cold had flushed his face, and he shivered as a small gust of icy wind blew across us. "You're cold. You should go inside," I said.

"Don't change the subject. If you can't tell me, I want you to talk to someone, Brandon. A professional."

I snorted. "A shrink? No, thanks."

"What about Jenn?"

"She doesn't need me unloading on her. Not with her baby due anytime now."

He stared at me. "That's a cop-out and you know it. You've always been able to turn to her, and she's no fragile flower."

I dropped my gaze to my hands, but he wasn't done with me. "Nicholas thinks you should talk to someone, too. Frankly, I think you both should, after what you went through. You guys aren't supermen, you know, despite what Marisa thinks."

Oh, no. I wasn't about to let someone else in my head. But I knew Jonathan wouldn't leave it alone until I at least agreed to think about it. So I said, "I'll think about it."

He smacked me on my knee and stood, then held out his hand. "Good enough, for now. Come on inside. It's too cold out here for you, too. Besides, I'm making waffles. You love my waffles, don't you?"

I let him guide me back inside and help me off with my coat. "You know I do. I'm going to check on Nicholas, see if he wants any." I made my escape, but felt Jon's eyes boring into my back.

Talk to a shrink. No way. I'd talk to Jenn, but I didn't know what to say. I'd tried to tell everyone it was all my fault, but they kept insisting it wasn't, so I didn't know what else to say. Better to just keep quiet about everything.

When I went back into our bedroom, Nicholas was still sound asleep, but had once again kicked the covers off. Maniac. Katie had been right on the adrenaline thing, I supposed. He'd used every bit of it up the last few days. I pulled the comforter to his chin and kissed him. He still didn't move.

Crash and burn, baby, I thought. I could think of no better place for him to do that than in our bed. I grinned and kissed his latest erection through the covers, chuckling softly as he squirmed, though he didn't wake. Definitely out of it. The Nicholas I'd had before would've jumped out of bed and tackled me to the floor and taken me on the spot.

But I preferred this Nicholas, the older, wiser, more cautious, and more worldly Nicholas. Though he sure still had his silly moments, I loved the man he'd become. I hoped he felt the same about me, what I was trying to be for him. I just worried I wasn't as good at all this as he was.

I felt terribly inept.

I left him to his sweet dreams, scooping up my computer where it sat by the door. There wasn't anything to do today, just hang out at the house and wait around for the next day and the release of Nick's single, so I thought I might as well write some. We'd been so busy the last few days that I hadn't had time to write anything else down, and now my fingers had the familiar itch, the need to get the words out.

I'd had Nicholas order me a nice table and comfortable chair to work at. They sat in the corner between the fireplace and the windows, where I could be warm but still look outside. I plugged in my laptop and opened it, a smile coming to me as I thought about those early days, the happy days, the before-hell days. From that next morning after our first-time fiasco and the sweet make-up on the porch, things had moved quickly. Good times, beautiful times, as we explored each other and our gifts for music.

Later, during the darkest times, when we were apart, I yearned so badly for the simplicity of those months we spent in Jonathan's house, followed by our time in Los Angeles. Even though half the time we were starving and barely had two dollars between us, we'd been happy in our little one-bedroom flat, tumbling in our bed two and three times a day, taking our music to new heights, watching in disbelief as, one by one, our dreams came true.

I'd purposely forgotten the tough parts, the bitter fights with my father, the near-violent fights with Adam, our split with him on the heels of Nick's final refusal to sing that blasted song.

That, of course, was the best thing that ever happened to us, though at the time, it'd been bad. Really bad.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"What the fuck you mean, you won't sing this song?"

"I've told you before, I won't sing it."

That's what I walked into, after a run to the store for some more herbal tea for Nicholas. Ever since we'd started playing in smoke-filled venues, he'd fought a constant sore throat. The weekends we played two nights in a row were the worst -- and this was one of those weekends. In fact, it'd been occurring more and more as word traveled around Murrieta about Nicholas, about his remarkable voice, about our band.

It'd been rough at first. Adam had been convinced Nicholas would totally screw up, that first rehearsal. But Nicholas and I had worked all that Sunday and Monday on the songs Adam had thrust at him, so that by Tuesday's rehearsal, our first, he totally blew even Adam's socks off.

In a way, that pissed my brother off, I think.

It'd been close, though, so damn close. Nick's such the showman, automatically playing up to me as he sang, and partway into that first rehearsal Adam had stomped off in a fit. Confused, we'd just stared after him. With a grimace, Jonathan, who had been watching, pulled us aside. Concerned, Nicholas had leaned into me as we stood off by Jonathan where the other band members couldn't hear us.

"Um, guys, I don't know how to tell you this ..."

I could see the worry in Nick's eyes as it magnified. He reached for my hand.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked. "It doesn't sound good? I've only had a couple of days to practice, and I know I'm kind of raw --"

"No, no, you're doing great. It's that." Jonathan nodded toward our entwined fingers. Nicholas guiltily snatched his hand away. "You guys, I don't know what you're going to do about it, but you two scream 'we fuck each other' so loudly, you might as well get t-shirts saying it's the band's motto. The only reason I'm the only one besides Adam seeing it is because you're in front of everyone else, with your backs to them."

My face heated. I folded my arms over my chest. "But we don't do anything. I don't even touch him."

Jonathan sighed, putting his hands on our shoulders. "You don't have to. The way Nicholas looks at you, Brandon, and the way you respond to him --"

"I can't stop that, Jon. That's just -- I just lose myself when I sing, and all I can think about is, well, singing to Brandon," Nicholas said. He shrugged, dropped his gaze.

Jonathan sighed again. "I don't know what to tell you. Maybe if Brandon didn't grin so goofily every time you got near him --"

"I don't do that."

"Yes, you do, baby bro."

"I can stop."

A slow smile crossed his face, but he didn't seem to hear me. Just stroked his chin. "Yeah, Nick's so campy anyway, and you're such the straight guy ..." He grinned at us. "Don't think it hurts to keep the audience guessing. You think you can play it straight to him, Brandon?"

I shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

Nicholas grinned. "This could be fun. No one has to know you have a hard-on behind your guitar, Brandon."

"*Nicholas*," I warned.

Jonathan clapped me on the arm. "Just try it. Let Nicholas do his jumping around and whatever he wants, but you play it cool, like it's nothing. Really, it'll drive the audience wild, wondering about you two."

"What about the rest of the band?"

Jonathan cast them a glance. "As long as they don't know the truth either, and Nicholas sings like he is today, I wouldn't worry about them. Even Adam can't deny Nick's something special."

So, that's what we did. My straight guy to Nick's shtick. He loved it, of course, and Adam had begrudgingly admitted it worked. The audiences ate it up. Word grew about Nicholas -- as I'd known it would. His voice was phenomenal, even without any experience to back it up. The experience came.

Our bandmates didn't clue in, just took Nick's campiness as part of the act, and my long-suffering attitude as well. They felt sorry for me, laughing about it as if they were

commiserating with me whenever Nicholas was out of earshot. And I played the role, too -- the "yeah, I'm such a tolerant guy" role, the "geesh, what else can I do, he's such a diva and we have to keep him happy" role. It was great. Everyone loved it. Everyone.

Except me.

By the time each night ended, whether it was a practice session or an actual gig, I was exhausted from the sheer effort it took to pretend I didn't give a flying fuck that Nicholas was using me as his humping post. I felt uptight all the time and found my temper heating at the littlest things, though I kept it bottled inside, not wanting to give Adam an excuse to jump on me for anything that might screw up what we had going.

And I didn't want to disappoint Nicholas. He was working too hard, devoting every spare moment of his time and pouring every ounce of his energy into his singing.

All while holding down two jobs. And I didn't work at all.

So I took up jogging, thinking that would help release some of the tension, though whenever I'd run however many miles I felt like running that day, I'd return to the house oddly beat. Usually, I barely remembered my run, where I'd been, for how long I was gone.

When Nicholas would ask how far I'd run, I'd just tell him, "To that house by the lake, the one with the blue door." I showed it to him once; it was about four miles from our place. He'd been impressed. Jogging was never his thing, though he offered to get a bike and accompany me. I'd politely refused; jogging time was for me.

The months passed, and Ashwood's popularity grew. Nick's popularity grew, too -- that's who the crowd came for, though Adam wouldn't admit it. We got more and more gigs, and all the fears I'd harbored about what had happened in that alley and over Seth Miller's threats never materialized.

We lost our bassist to another band, and found a new one. Lee kept to himself outside of work, but he and Nicholas hit it off right away, and soon Nicholas played up to him, too. Lee took it all in stride, finding it funny. That took the pressure off me some, much to my relief. I no longer worried our bandmates or anyone else would figure out that Nicholas and I were lovers.

And boy, were we. With a lot of patience, Nicholas and I figured out how to make sex work for us, and it was good. Damn good. I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. I didn't realize, though, that the constant limits set on Nicholas were about to make him explode. At least not until that day when I went for tea and, while I was gone, Adam ordered him to sing a song Nicholas hated, and Nicholas refused.

"Sing it, or you're out."

Adam spied me then, still holding the bag with Nick's tea. "Brandon, tell your boyfriend that he's out if he doesn't sing what I tell him to."

Our drummer walked up to us, staring first at me, then at Nicholas. I bit back a curse at Adam's horrified expression -- guess he'd thought he and Nicholas were alone.

“What did you just say? You guys are fags?”

Nicholas lifted his chin and looked at them all. “Why, would that matter to you?”

“You’re fucking kidding me. I don’t work for no fags; I don’t care how good you are. I quit.”

One by one our bandmates looked at us in disgust -- all except Lee. He sat down and watched as the others argued amongst themselves as to what to do. Nicholas held my gaze, and I held his, met the challenge in his eyes. We’d talked about this, of course, what would happen if they found out. What we would do.

What we *could* do.

So even though Adam started to jump around, tried to deny what he’d said, cover up what we weren’t denying, tried to make everyone stay, Nicholas and I were smiling at each other. It was over. We were free.

I felt nothing but enormous relief.

Finally they were gone. Even Adam, who had thrown a chair or two in his anger before screaming at us for ruining everything. Only Lee remained, sitting quietly in his chair.

When Adam slammed the door behind him, Nicholas and I still stood face to face. He brought a hand to his mouth and covered the laugh that escaped. “Oh, my God, can you believe it finally happened?”

I reached for him, spanning my hands over his hips. “It’s about damn time,” I said.

He kissed me, threading his arms over my shoulders. He pulled me tight against him -- the damn boy was hard. Hell, so was I. His tongue pushed into my mouth, and I drank him in, letting my whimpers of need free as I ground against him. His hand sought my butt, slipping under my belt. I yelped -- his fingers were freaking cold.

“Uh, guys, I’m still around, you know. Need a bassist?”

I jumped. With a giggle, Nicholas pulled back, but kept his hand where it was. He grinned up at me. “Will we still need a bassist?”

“Of course we will.”

Nicholas smiled, then looked at Lee, laying his head on my shoulder as he did so. “Um, Lee, yeah, we will. It might be a while yet, though. No more covers except on special occasions. We’re writing our own songs from now on.”

Lee stood and walked over to us, slinging his bass guitar case over his shoulder. I watched him, looking for any sign of disgust, but it simply wasn’t there. “No problem. You guys know where to find me, right?”

Nicholas said, “Yes.”

Lee nodded. “Good. Take your time. It’ll be worth the wait.”

We watched giddily as he walked away. It would be more than a year before we were able to call Lee back, but when we did, he merely said, “Okay, I’ll be right there.”

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

“Hey, you feeling better?”

I sputtered as Nick’s arms circled around my shoulders. I slammed the computer shut. “When did you wake up?” I asked, reaching up and hugging his head. I turned and kissed his smooth cheek, trying to hide how jumpy I was. I hadn’t heard him walk up to me. “Mm, shower and a shave, and I’m all skuzzy.”

“You look beautiful to me.”

“Flatterer. Let me go.”

He released me and I stood, pulling him away from the computer. I didn’t want him near it. He laughed as I collapsed onto a couch and tugged him after me. He just had on sweat bottoms and a t-shirt, and his hair was still damp. He nuzzled my neck, making me grin.

“You’re wet. Cut that out, Nick!”

But he didn’t listen. He pushed me down on my back, then, with impressive agility, considering he was still so sore, scooted himself between my legs and lay on top of me. I moved my legs around him and wrapped my arms around his back. Damn, I loved this, the constant reversal of our roles. A heated thrill ran up my spine as he adjusted his body, holding himself up so he could look down at me. Then he shook his head, sending water droplets all over me -- and all over the new couch.

I laughed and pushed my groin into his. Damned if the man wasn’t getting me hard again. But the look in his eye wasn’t what I expected to see. He sighed and leaned his face against the back of the couch, more or less propping himself up on one elbow so he wouldn’t smash me.

“What’s wrong?” I said, feeling an edge of wariness.

With one finger, he traced a line down my face. Hesitancy clouded his eyes. He pressed his lips together, then sighed. “I’m worried about you.”

I stilled. “Why?” I asked as nonchalantly as possible. My conversation with Jonathan floated into my mind -- and the memory of him and Nicholas talking about me the night before.

“You know why,” he said, as if I knew full well what he was talking about. Which I didn’t.

“I’m fine, Nicholas.”

“I want you to talk to someone about what happened.”

My temper flared. I didn't want to hear this from him, too. "I already told Jonathan no. I'm fine."

"If you're fine, then why not at least talk with someone? It was pretty obvious that deer head --"

Sightless eyes. Spilled guts, blood everywhere -- I pushed against Nicholas. "Let me up."
"No."

I pushed harder, squirming out from under him. I saw his wince of pain, but I didn't, at that moment, care. That shame would come later. I nearly fell off the couch, trying to get away.

"Stop, Brandon." He sat up and hugged one of the pillows. I looked away from those devastating, knowing eyes of his. "Why are you so upset, if you're fine?"

"I told you and I told Jonathan, there's nothing wrong with me."

"So why did I find blood on your shirt?"

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"When you threw up last night, in the bathroom. Why did you throw up? What upset you this time?"

"Are you spying on me, Nicholas?" What the fuck was he talking about? A cold, steely, phantom hand gripped the back of my neck. "What the fuck is this? I am not fucking sick in the head; I don't need anyone in my business. Leave it alone!"

His face had paled, but I didn't care. "You are my business," he said.

"Not about this I'm not."

"I think you need --"

I clenched my jaw until it hurt. "Leave it alone, Nicholas."

He stood and grabbed me by the arm. "Just hear me out --"

I wrenched from his grasp and headed for the kitchen. He followed, of course. He never could leave things alone. Mutt looked up from the kitchen table where he was eating a sandwich. Great. Well, fuck, he'd heard us have sex, might as well hear this, too. I yanked open the refrigerator and pulled out a beer.

Nicholas took it from me. *Took it from me.*

"It's not even noon yet."

"Give me the beer."

"No." He hid it behind his back.

"I don't need this shit, Nicholas." I turned to open the refrigerator again, but he pushed it shut.

"You need help. And you don't need a beer."

I clenched my hands, turned on him, and yelled in his face, "I don't need some fucking shrink peering into my brain! I'm fine. Can't you understand that? I am fucking *fine!*"

The bastard didn't even flinch. "Then why are you screaming at me?" he said with infuriating calm.

"I'm not screaming!" I turned away, didn't want him to see the tears swimming in my eyes.

I heard him set the beer down. It was all I could do to keep from leaping for it. But I'd show him. I didn't need it. I didn't need to see a shrink.

"At least talk to Dr. Anson again. You threw up blood when you got sick last night."

I whirled on him. "I did not! I did not throw up last night!"

He stared at me, mouth agape. "You don't remember?"

Blackness crowded my vision. Fear punched me in the gut. *You don't remember?* I pushed past him and into the laundry room. My new car's keys were hanging on the rack on the wall. I grabbed them and yanked open the door.

"Brandon, wait, where are you going?"

I slammed the door behind me and half-stumbled down the stairs. Cold slapped me in the face. I didn't have on a coat, and the wind chilled me to the bone. Every breath I breathed in seared my lungs. I didn't care. I pressed the alarm button and grimaced in satisfaction as my new Lexus -- *my* car, and I hadn't even driven it yet -- flashed its lights and the doors unlocked.

I got in, ignoring Nicholas. He stood at the top of the stairs, his arms wrapped around himself. Just watching me.

Mutt, the bastard, was halfway down the stairs, pulling on a coat. I started the car and took off, knowing full well Mutt would follow.

But I had a head start.

I'd only left the house a couple of times since we'd moved in, feeling no need to explore Durango, though I'd promised myself I would as soon as I could. This seemed as good a time as any. I followed the winding street down, past our closest neighbors, and turned onto the street that eventually hit the highway.

At the intersection, I paused to consider what to do and glanced in my rearview mirror -- Mutt was in the Denali behind me. Fine. I headed toward downtown, realizing as I did so that my hands were sweating and my heart was pounding. Fuck fuck fuck. I'd thrown up? Nicholas claimed I'd thrown up, and I didn't even remember?

Thrown up blood?

That scared me, I admit it, but that didn't mean I was about to head for the nearest shrink and have him analyze my childhood. Tell me all my problems were because of my "unnatural" lifestyle or because my dad hated me or my brother had tormented me or some

other shit. No way. All I needed was some relaxation, to take it easy for a few days. The worst was behind us. The detective was taking care of finding our tormentor. I was ... I was ... fine. Fine. I was fine.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I wiped them away. My stomach burned. I clasped one hand to it, a moan escaping me.

Shit shit shit.

The highway into Durango sliced through a long alley, past small ranchlike estates, restaurants, hotels for the skiers and other tourists. A nice little community that I hoped to get to know better. Eventually, the highway led straight into downtown, which, even during that time of day, bustled with activity. Ski season was well underway, the holidays were approaching, and the area was packed with tourists.

I smiled grimly to myself and glanced in the rearview mirror again. Mutt, the bastard. I approached a yellow light and slowed -- then gunned the engine as it turned red, knowing damn well what a fool I was being as my car leaped ahead, leaving Mutt behind.

Shame for that would come later, too.

I turned down a street and saw the nose of the Denali coming after me. I found a parking lot, pulled in and went to the back, then found a space, parked my car, and got out. Damn, it was cold, though at least the buildings blocked the wind. I'd seen an Italian restaurant and decided that sounded good. I was actually hungry. Fettuccini Alfredo, perfect.

No one noticed one coatless guy with a broken foot as I hobbled up the sidewalk -- guess in a ski town, broken legs and such weren't so uncommon. I kept my head down, wishing I had my coat as I headed for the restaurant, expecting by now Mutt had found my car and come after me on foot. I looked over my shoulder, but didn't see him yet. I accidentally bumped into someone, muttered an apology, then looked up and saw the restaurant's sign across the street. I waited for traffic and headed across toward the restaurant's blue door ...

I slowed, stopped. My vision clouded. I blinked. Hot tears ran down my cold cheeks. My stomach clenched, and I held my hand against it. A horn blared at me. I stumbled backwards, my blood freezing in my veins as I stared at the restaurant --

"Hey, you idiot, get out of the way before you get hit! Damn tourist."

A stranger's hand fell on my arm, an old man, his blue eyes -- *Nick's eyes* -- peering up at me. "Son, you all right?"

My stomach roiled. I pressed a hand to my mouth as my head pounded, my heart thrummed in my ears. The old man with Nick's eyes pulled on my arm, tugging me toward the blue door, that door ... The world began to spin, my knees gave way, and the pavement rose up to meet me.

I reached for the ground, grateful for its existence. *Take me, swallow me, sear away the burn. The shame.*

Arms came around me from behind, holding me up, pinning me tight. I cried out, fought to get away, hysteria punching me in the gut.

"Brandon! It's me. Cut it out!"

Mutt's voice. I collapsed, my weight propelling me to the filthy snow at the side of the street. My stomach heaved and I retched; a sea of faces watched in disgust. Mutt yelled at them to get back and leave me alone.

"Oh, sweet Jesus." The old man, his hands on me, patting me -- *Nick's eyes, watching me, accusing me, "See? Told you! I told you! You're sick sick sick!"*

"Let's get him over there, to that bench. He's very sick."

"Nothing's wrong with me," I wailed, then was sick again, feeling a giddy gratefulness that it was over quickly this time. I wiped my hand over my mouth and pulled it away. Stared at the red.

So why did I find blood on your shirt?

I hadn't been sick last night. I hadn't been. I would've remembered --

"Brandon?" Tightly controlled anger in Mutt's voice. "Come on, let me help you. We've got to get you out of this street."

"Is he okay? Bring him inside." A woman's voice.

I looked up as the hands hauled me to my feet. "Not in there, no," I whispered.

"Just help me get him to that bench."

The sea of faces again, a cold, hard bench. A warm, damp cloth was pressed to my mouth, my stomach clenching over and over again, threatening to erupt. I folded down, covering my head with my arms, like a soldier in a battlefield.

"Isn't that Brandon Ashwood?" A girl's voice, fascinated horror.

The old man again. "Where is your car, son? You need to get him out of here."

"Not far. Can you stay with him while I get it?"

"Of course."

Then I threw up again.

"Dammit, call 911! Quick!"

I'm sorry. I'm sorry ...

* * * * *

Warmth cloaked me, dripped into my wrist, up my arm. I opened my eyes, staring in fascination at the IV hooked into me. It whirled and twisted, making me dizzy. Was I dreaming? Dreaming I was back in the hospital? I felt loose, strange, removed. I closed my eyes again. Had to be dreaming. I'd left this place already and wasn't back, no way. I was

home in my bed with Nicholas asleep beside me; we'd just screwed again like rabbits, me on top, him on top, all twisted together this way and that way. Like pretzels.

My stomach hurt.

Sounds echoed in my ears. Hospital sounds, hospital smells. Voices, familiar and not.

"The sedative we gave him might make him confused when he wakes up."

"How much longer will he be out?"

Nicholas?

"He should be coming to soon. I think he is now."

Nurse Goodall?

I reached out blindly, groping the air. Warm fingers found mine, lifted them, and pressed them against something soft. Nick's lips. I opened my eyes again, willing the room to not spin. This time it cooperated a little better. His eyes widened and he smiled at me -- a worried, tense smile. His eyes were red. He'd been crying? I pulled my hand from his and cradled his cheek, brushing my thumb over his eyelashes. A tear escaped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Nicholas let out a sharp laugh, then took my hand and kissed it again. "You gave us quite a fright."

Nurse Goodall moved into my line of vision. She reached out and wiped my face with a warm cloth. "You're in the hospital, Brandon. You were brought here yesterday after you collapsed downtown."

Collapsed? Yesterday? Then today was ... Monday? Something important about today -- I couldn't remember. Something about Nicholas.

My face must've shown my confusion. "You don't remember, do you?" Nicholas whispered.

"No."

"It could be the medication, Nicholas."

"I want to go home." I started to shake, my lower lip quivering like a child's. I couldn't stop it.

"Brandon, Brandon, don't," Nicholas murmured, gathering me close. Louder, he said, "Is this the drugs, too?"

"Could be. We need to let him go back to sleep now."

"Can I stay with him?"

"Of course you can. The doctor should be here to discuss the test results with you fairly soon."

Tests? What tests?

"Can you scoot over a little, Brandon?"

I couldn't. I was too weak; my stomach hurt too bad. Strong arms slid under my shoulders and knees and pulled me over. Mutt. Nicholas slid into the bed with me, and I folded against him, cradled in his arms.

"Go to sleep, Brandon."

I did.

When I woke up, it was dark outside, and in my room only a single light shone. I was alone except for a shape in a chair near the door. I turned my head to try to see who it was.

"Who is that?" I asked.

The figure stood. For a minute my heart beat wildly, but when my guardian drew closer to the light, I realized it was Jeff. Where was Mutt? Why wasn't Mutt here?

"Hey, boss, how you feeling? I'll go get Nicholas."

"Where's Mutt? Is he with Nicholas?"

Jeff hesitated, then smiled. "Mutt's gone home to rest. Don't worry; I have someone with Nicholas."

Jeff started to turn away, but I grabbed his arm. "What happened, Jeff?"

He hesitated again, actually looked ... sorry. He grimaced. "You ran off. I'll get Nicholas."

I lay back in the bed, trying to remember. Ran off?

Then it came back to me in a flood. The fight with Nicholas, snatching the keys, driving off like some fool idiot with Mutt on my heels. Standing in the middle of the street for some stupid reason, nearly getting hit by a car. My head hurt. I palmed my forehead, willing the pounding to go away, and cradled my stomach with my other hand.

I'd gotten sick. A lot. Crimson on snow.

I'd run away from Mutt.

Shit.

I took a deep breath as the door opened and Nicholas, followed by a man I didn't know, walked into the room. Nick's eyes were dry now as he sat on the bed and took my hand. In fact, he looked downright angry. I recognized the signs; something had worked him up, had stretched his patience thin.

Me.

But when he spoke, his voice was soft. Cautious, even. "Better?"

I nodded. "Where's Mutt?"

The door opened. "Here."

I sighed in relief as Mutt came just inside the room and leaned against the wall, arms folded across his broad chest. In the half-light I could see his jaw was clenched tight, his

shoulders set. Jeff walked over to him, and Mutt bent his head down to talk. I couldn't hear what they said.

"So," Nicholas said, distracting me. "Here you are."

"What happened, Nicholas? I mean, I remember ..." My voice trailed off. "You're mad at me."

"No, I'm not," he said quickly. Too quickly.

"Yes, you are. I'm sorry for getting sick."

Nicholas covered his face with his hands and sighed, then dropped them in his lap. I noticed he didn't exactly reach for me. "I'm not mad about that. Turns out the doctor thinks you have a hiatal hernia, and that's why you were bleeding when you got sick."

"A hiatal hernia? What is that exactly?" A physical reason for the blood? Then I wasn't going nuts?

"The doc explained it to me. Part of your stomach pushes up above your diaphragm or something like that and causes blockage or something. Nurse Goodall will have to explain it better. But sometimes when people have them, and they get sick, they bleed because everything is already all irritated. Something like that."

I sighed. "See? I told you it wasn't anything in my head. There was a reason I was getting --"

"Brandon!" Nicholas cut me short. "That does *not* explain why you were throwing up in the first place. That just aggravated the hernia, is all."

I sank back into the pillows, drawing my hands close to my chest.

"Dammit, you could've bled to death! Do you have any idea how upset that makes me? If Mutt hadn't followed you when you ran away like some childish fool, you could be dead now!"

"I'm sorry," I whispered, turning my head away and squeezing my eyes shut. I couldn't handle this right now. I shifted onto my side, away from him, and curled my legs up.

Nicholas sighed in exasperation and laid a hand on my hip. "Brandon." He climbed into the bed in back of me, spooning me like he had before, when it'd been him in the hospital bed with IVs in his arm, the dreaded dick monster shoved up his cock. At least I didn't have that to deal with.

"Brandon," he whispered again, nuzzling the back of my neck. "I love you. You know that?"

I nodded.

"But you are driving me crazy with this. This time, will you do what the doctor says? You skipped your medicine, didn't you?"

"Yes."

“No more skipping meds. No more running away. No more refusing to talk to me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to go back to sleep?”

I nodded. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost eight o’clock. Then it hit me. “What’s today?”

Nicholas chuckled against me. “Monday.”

“Your single --”

“Being played on thousands of radio stations across the world right now. Hopefully.”

Oh, shit. I turned onto my back so I could see him. “I ruined it for you.”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s certainly been the most memorable of new-release days. And no, I didn’t do a single interview. Marisa was pissed.”

“All my fault.”

His eyes twinkled. “Of course it was. But as I told her, you’re my number-one consideration right now.”

I looked at the solemn dark shapes by the door. “I pissed off a lot of people, I guess. Mutt?”

“What.”

Oh, geesh. “Could you come where I can see you? I want to -- to apologize.”

Mutt approached the bed, and I fell silent. His eyes flashed dangerously. Jeff stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. The other bodyguard moved outside the door.

“First, Mr. Ashwood, I have something to say to you,” Mutt said. “And I want you to listen closely.”

I swallowed. “Go ahead.”

“If you won’t cooperate with me, I quit. I’m not being paid to take care of a ... a ...”

“Spoiled brat?” Nicholas interjected.

Mutt nodded. “You make it impossible for me to do my job properly by behaving like that, running off like that. If your actions that I can’t control should end up causing you to get hurt again, I would not forgive myself. Do you understand what I’m saying? I’d rather quit now and be done with you. I don’t want to, but I will.”

I looked away, unable to stand this. If I hadn’t already felt like shit, I would now. “I’m sorry, Mutt. I -- I was wrong to run from you. Wrong to put you through that. Please don’t leave me.” I swallowed hard, realizing how much I’d counted on Mutt to be there. Hadn’t I kept looking for him in my rearview mirror, over my shoulder, cussing him for being there, damn grateful he was? “Please,” I said, my voice catching. He still looked as angry as I’d ever seen him, jaw clenched, shoulders set, eyes blazing.

I reached out and touched his wrist, and when I did so, he let out a long sigh. "All right. But don't ever do that again, do you hear me?"

Nicholas bit back a smile. I didn't dare look at him. "I understand." I took a deep breath. "Thank you for being there for me. I need you, Mutt."

Only then did my bodyguard relax and let a small smile escape. "You do, don't you? Don't ever forget it." Then he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. Jeff winked at Nicholas, clapped me on the shoulder, and then followed his partner.

"Well, that went well. I really thought it was over."

"I feel like a little kid," I said, unable to keep the edge of a whine from my voice.

Nicholas laughed. "You deserved that. Mutt's gotta be in control, Brandon. At least about this." He sobered. "So you mind him, okay?"

"I will. I promise."

Nicholas nuzzled my shoulder and sighed. "Say, how you feeling?"

"Much better. Why?"

"You wouldn't want to ..." He winked at me. "Hey hey?"

"Nicholas! No. No way. I vowed never again in a hospital bed, and I meant it."

He pouted at me. "Darn, you're no fun. Guess we'd better wait until we get you home, then."

"Now?"

He shook his head. "Not until the morning. Sorry, babe. But I'll stay with you tonight if you'd like."

"I'd like."

He stood and shimmied out of his jeans, then slid back into bed with me. "Turn over. Let's spoon."

I smiled and did as he told me to. This time when I fell asleep, I was smiling.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Mr. Ashwood? Time for your morning meds.”

My eyes fluttered open of their own accord. I sure as heck didn’t want them to open, because I knew what I would see -- hospital walls, hospital ceiling, the rails to my hospital bed. I’d ended up back here, and it devastated me.

I wanted to go home.

I looked at the nurse, a redheaded woman I guessed to be about twenty-seven or so -- I hadn’t seen her before -- and at the glass of water she held in one hand, the little paper cup she held in the other. She had that look in her eye I’m all too familiar with, yet hadn’t actually seen in a while -- she was a fan, an avid one, one of those who likely knew way too much about me to make me comfortable. A screamer. I could see the questions hovering at the tip of her tongue, but hospital policy prohibited harassing the patients.

I hoped.

I very carefully sat up, wincing as I took the water in one hand, the meds in the other. My stomach was still sore beyond belief. I hunched over, stared at the little pink and burgundy pills, and felt like crying. Why did I have to end up here again?

And where was Nicholas?

“Go ahead and take them, Mr. Ashwood.”

“I guess you won’t leave until I do?” My throat hurt; my voice was scratchy. I winced, swallowing against the pain. Why did it hurt so much?

She smiled. “Exactly. Your doctor’s orders.”

“She doesn’t trust me.”

The nurse laughed. "She just wants to make sure you don't miss any again. She'll be by here in a minute. She's seeing another patient. So if anything, to keep me from getting in trouble?" She grinned at me, nodding to the cup. "Please?"

All right, maybe she wasn't so bad. I took the drugs, grimacing as I did so. My throat was raw and felt as if a cat had scraped it from the inside. I fell back against my pillow, and she took the glass from my hand. She poured me more water and left it on my table. I closed my eyes, hoping she'd get the hint and leave. She did.

But I heard other, familiar footsteps come into the room. I opened my eyes and smiled in relief. Mutt.

"Hey, Mutt," I said, a little cautiously, as I wasn't positive he'd entirely forgiven me yet.

He nodded. "Morning, Brandon. How you feeling?"

"Like hell." I laid my hand over my stomach. "Hungry, I think. Why don't you sit down for a minute?"

He shook his head. "On duty, boss. Your doc is just outside anyway."

"Oh," I said, wondering again where Nicholas was.

The door opened and my doc walked in, folder in her hand, her glasses perched on the end of her nose, a frown of disapproval on her face. Mutt took up his station beside the door -- even though this was the doctor Nicholas and I had had since the beginning of the madness, he wouldn't leave me alone with her.

"Mr. Ashwood, good to see you awake. We've got some serious talking to do this morning."

I held my breath, then let it out in a whoosh. I didn't like the look in her eyes as she peered at me. I glanced anxiously at Mutt.

He nodded at me. "He and Jeff are on their way up. They just got here."

"Where'd he go?"

"Home, long enough to shower and change."

I nodded unhappily. I hadn't even realized.

The doc raised one eyebrow as she opened the folder on my tray table. "We'll wait for Mr. Kilmain to get here. I want him to hear this, too. Who else is living with you, who can help keep an eye on you?"

"My brother and his wife, my cousin ... Why?"

She started to answer, but the door burst open and Nicholas, his face flushed, his eyes bright with worry, hurried in.

"Oh, my gosh, sorry I'm late. I went home to change and ended up doing some phone interviews, and then Marisa called and she wanted to discuss the CD's release date and something about they didn't like the cover picture and want to redo it, and how am I going to do that? I'm not leaving, so I told her they'd have to send a photographer here --"

"Slow down, Nicholas," I said.

"I'm sorry."

He took a deep breath and, after glancing at the doctor, kissed me on the lips. I couldn't conceal my delight at seeing him practically crackling with energy.

He laughed. "Getting back to normal at last, aren't I?"

"Beautifully so." And here I was, falling apart. I bit back the bitterness and the fear. I cleared my throat. "Any news yet?" I asked.

He grinned, then eased onto the bed with me and put his arm around my shoulders. I leaned into him, grateful for his presence, his warmth. He smelled like soap and shaving cream. Wonderful. "I'll tell you in a minute. This is more important."

My elation faded. The doc shuffled her papers again, then looked from me to Nicholas. I know she didn't disapprove of us, but now that Nicholas was better, I think he took her aback a little. Nicholas does have that effect on people. He can be quite the whirlwind. And he wasn't even at full throttle yet.

She smiled, though, shaking her head at Nicholas. "It *is* good to see you doing so well, Mr. Kilmain. But now we've got a new problem." She nodded at me. "Mr. Ashwood, Mr. Kilmain has told you that you have a hiatal hernia?"

I nodded. "Yes, he did."

Nicholas squeezed my arm. "I tried to explain it, but I'm not sure I did too good of a job."

"Nurse Goodall told me this morning. You weren't too far off, Nicholas."

"You understood what she told you?"

"Yes," I said softly. I was terribly glad he was there, that I didn't have to face this alone.

"Good. We have two options. Because it appears you are quite the bleeder, I want to do surgery as soon as possible. We can't take the risk of another incident like you had this week."

I froze, staring at her.

Nicholas tensed against me and held me tighter. "Surgery?" he said. "How? I mean, what will it do? Will it stop him from bleeding anymore? What are the risk factors? Can I be with him? Does he really have to have surgery?"

"Yes, he does have to have surgery, and as I've said, as soon as possible." She turned her gaze to me. "Mr. Ashwood, the hernia is causing acidic fluids to build up in your lower esophagus, which is likely aggravating your throat quite a bit." I nodded. "Smoking and drinking have aggravated the condition further." She paused. "I understand from Mr. Kilmain that you were until recently a heavy smoker, and a drinker."

I nodded and stared at my blanket.

"And that you have a history of getting sick easily."

I picked at the blanket.

"Since he was a teenager," Nicholas said. "Right, Brandon?"

I nodded again, but looked up at the doctor, unable to speak now as disbelief coursed through me. I'd had this for that long?

Her voice softened as she spoke. "And you've been under tremendous stress. Stress aggravates the condition even more, and over time, all these factors added together can bring about a lot of troublesome conditions, the most frightening of which is the bleeding and vomiting. It is a scary cycle, difficult to stop. And a potentially dangerous one, Mr. Ashwood. Do you understand?"

I nodded, again.

"You're saying he could bleed to death, aren't you?" Nicholas said, his voice hushed.

"Yes, I am."

I steeled myself as fear gripped the back of my neck and squeezed. I leaned my head against Nicholas and closed my eyes. I could bleed to death.

"So surgery is really the only option," Nicholas continued.

"Yes. There is no other choice."

Surgery. She wanted to do surgery. The thought terrified me. I groped for Nick's hand and squeezed it tight. I'd never, ever had surgery in my life.

"How soon do we have to do it?" Nicholas said. With his other hand he stroked my head, smoothing my hair back. Soothing me. My throat clenched, and hot tears swam in my eyes. Even after two days of sleep, I was so damn exhausted, I had nothing to fight my raging emotions with. A single tear dropped onto Nick's hand; he kissed me on the forehead. "It'll be okay, baby. Don't cry."

"This is really shitty, Nicholas."

"I know. I'm sorry about this."

"When?" I asked the doctor, struggling to sound normal. I only half succeeded.

"I'd like to get you a little more rested, your insides a little less aggravated. Within the next week or so, no later than that."

"Do I have to stay here until then?"

She smiled. "No, you don't. You can go home today, as a matter of fact." At my relieved exhalation, she held up one hand. "But you will have a long list of dos and don'ts. No more alcohol. No more smoking, or even being around it. You'll be on a strict diet, and if your bodyguard has to tie you to the couch to keep you resting, then I'll add that to the list as well."

Nicholas giggled at that. "Mutt won't have a problem with that. Will you, Mutt?"

"Not one bit."

My face heated.

“And just think, Brandon, you’ll have time to write all those thank-yous now.” I knew he was trying to cheer me up, but I couldn’t even muster a smile.

Surgery. I had to have surgery.

“I’ll have my nurse call you before you leave, to set a date. I’ll want you to come see me in a few days at my office, and we’ll discuss the procedure.”

“How will it be done?” Nicholas asked. “Can’t you, like, go in through his mouth or belly button or something like that?”

I glanced at Nicholas, but the doc was nodding. “As a matter of fact, yes. That’s one of the options, but we’ll discuss that next week. Now, I want you to get some rest. We’ll finish up this last IV, and then ...” She paused, flipping through her chart. “How about seeing if we can’t get that cast off today?”

“That would be wonderful,” Nicholas said. “Wouldn’t it, Brandon?”

I nodded, seriously glad of some sort of good coming out of the day. “Yes.”

“Okay, then. And Brandon, I want you to stay as calm as possible. We don’t know exactly what triggered this last episode, and as it’s imperative we avoid that happening again, I don’t want you to leave your home or ever be alone. I realize the detective assigned to your case will have to visit with you, but I’m going to tell him, too, to leave you alone as much as possible.” She looked from me to Nicholas, then shook her head. “I hate to do this, but I think it would also be best if you refrained from ... more strenuous sexual activities until we get you through this.”

Nicholas moaned and buried his face in my hair. “But we just got back to normal again! Does this mean I can’t even give him at least a blow--”

“Nicholas!” I barked. My face heated.

“Sorry. But, baby, I can’t stand the thought of not ...” He sighed. “Maybe if I’m gentle?”

“Nicholas,” I whispered, embarrassed beyond the usual. “Please.”

“Sorry.” He kissed me on the forehead. “You know I don’t like to embarrass you.”

“Yeah, right. Never.”

He snuffled into my neck. “But I miss you already. I don’t know if I can handle this.”

The doctor closed her folder. “I’m not banning it entirely. Just use common sense. I’ll have a nurse call you to set up the appointment.”

I nodded again and she left. When the door closed, Nicholas sighed. I squeezed my eyes shut as a shudder rippled through me.

“Brandon,” Nicholas said. “Look at me.”

I shook my head, covering my face with my hands. A choked sob broke through despite my efforts to keep it concealed, away from Nick’s ears. I coughed, then gasped as I tasted a strange, metallic taste in my mouth. *Blood*. Just from coughing?

“You okay, Brandon? Look at me.”

I swallowed, grabbed the glass of water on my stand, and drank it all. I laid my head back, eyes closed, and licked my lips, praying there was no trace of blood for him to see. *I'm so scared, so damn fucking scared.* I felt a wet trail down my cheek. A finger brushed it away, and I felt Nick's lips press against my cheek.

"Don't cry. It's going to be fine. You'll see."

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. I've ruined everything for you --"

"Brandon Ashwood. Just hush now. Look at me!" He raised my chin with his fingers, and I opened my eyes. He was inches from my face, frowning at me. "Don't say that. You didn't ruin anything for me." He quirked his mouth. "It does suck, though. No sex for two weeks? Three? How can we stand that?"

"I'm scared, Nicholas."

He scooted down in the bed and turned on his side. How many times had I done this with him? And now the tables were turned. He stroked the side of my face, then kissed me.

"I know you are. I am, too. But it's going to be okay. We'll get this fixed."

"Will you stay with me?" I moaned. "Lord, I sound like a whiny baby."

He laid his hand on my chest, over my heart, then slid it down my stomach. I really didn't even understand where the hernia was, only that it existed.

"You're my baby, baby, and you can be whiny if you want. Of course I'll be with you the whole time. Marisa won't like it, as she's got her heart set on jetting me to New York next week, but I don't care."

"For how long?"

"Just a day or two."

"You should go. I'll be fine."

Nick's gaze bore into mine, his cheeks reddening. "No. I. Will. Not. Leave. You." He let out a breath. "Do you understand me, Brandon Ashwood?"

I stared at him, at the tiger-man who was my Nicholas. I nodded. "I understand."

"Good."

He drew closer to me, his lips hovering so near to mine I could feel his breath on my face. He slowly closed his beautiful soft eyes, drawing closer. A shudder of hunger for him ran through me. Slowly his mouth closed on mine, brushing gently against me. His tongue flicked into my mouth, asking me to open up, and I did. My heart began to race as his hand moved up to cover my heart again. His tongue wrapped around mine.

I arched into him, craving the feel of his body against me, but his hand held me back. Damn the doctor and her "recommendations." I knew Nicholas -- he'd stick to her rules with dogged determination no matter how much I might beg for release. I couldn't help the soft whimper that escaped me as his hand, so warm, so soft, moved up to cradle my face. He

broke the kiss, looked at me, and smiled, only to return for another kiss before breaking away again, leaving me reeling.

He scraped his hand over my cheek. "Trying to give me lip burn?" he said softly.

"Offering to shave me?"

He chuckled, running his lips over my chin. "I don't know, could be kind of fun. I've never shaved you before." He quirked an eyebrow at me. "Maybe you should grow it out, though. I can think of a few places that would be even more interesting to shave ..." He reached for my groin, chuckling as I smacked his hand away.

"Nicholas! I don't think so!" I looked askance at Mutt. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, but I saw his mouth quirk. "You're embarrassing Mutt."

"Sorry, Mutt."

"No problem, Nicholas."

Nicholas giggled, then nuzzled my neck. "I'm just kidding anyway," he said, his voice muffled. He pulled back. "Believe me, it's hell, having to wait for hair to grow back. I'm still prickly."

"I know," I said, grinning wryly at him. "Your single. You were going to tell me."

"Tell you what?" he said innocently.

"Nicholas," I said in exasperation. "How's it doing?"

He sucked on the inside of his lip. My heart raced; I hadn't seen him do that in so long. Then he grinned. "We're number one, can't be number two --"

I stared at him. "You're kidding. No, you're not kidding."

"Finally something else good has come out of being kidnapped. I'm a superstar, baby." He ran his fingers through my hair as I laughed, reaching for him. Nicholas entwined his legs with mine and kissed me again, a long, lingering kiss. I pulled him closer -- close enough to eat, as he put it to me once -- and kissed him hungrily, tasting his lips, plunging my tongue into his mouth as his invaded mine. He groaned, bucking his hips against me, running his hand down my side. When his fingers automatically started to search my backside for entrance, I stopped him, breaking off with a gasp.

"Mutt?"

"Yes?"

"Could you excuse us a little while, make sure we have some privacy?"

"Of course. I'll be immediately outside the door."

As Mutt left, Nicholas looked at me, perplexed. I trailed my fingers down his chest, taking a deep breath as I slid my hand underneath his shirt.

"Brandon, I thought you said no more hospital beds. And besides, the doc said no sex."

I took a deep breath again. "For me. I'm not to. But that doesn't mean I can't pleasure you, you know."

"You're not serious, are you?"

I nodded and kissed him. He held back for a split-second, then, with a grin, opened his mouth to me. I kissed him soundly before I pulled back. "I think I can stay calm enough. I need to do this for you." I hesitated. He reached for my hand and pulled it to his groin, pushing himself into it.

"Need to keep your mind off things? Okay, whatever you need, baby. I can make that sacrifice."

"Such a martyr you are."

He answered me by undoing his jeans. I marveled at the ease with which he took them off. He really was moving around so much better now. He left his boxers on. I shook my head. "Marvin the Martian?"

"Remind me to have a talk with your PA. She's the one who got them for me."

I laughed and ran my hand down his side, then unbuttoned the single button to his boxers. He sighed in contentment when my fingers found what they were looking for. The boy was already semi-hard. "You're doing great, Nicholas. You know that?" I kissed his nose.

"I feel great. Still hurts if I turn over too fast, or reach too far, or walk too much, jump up and down, throw the ball too far for Barkley, but the last day or so I've had a heck of a lot more stamina. I imagine I'll crash and burn pretty soon." He grinned at me. "Tonight. When I get you back home where you belong."

"Any idea when Tommy will get out?"

"Forgot to tell you -- he's there! He got out yesterday."

I breathed a sigh of relief as I sank my hand inside his boxers and grasped his erection. I chuckled as he spread his legs wider.

He groaned, covering my hand with his. "No more questions now. Pleasure me, boy," he choked out.

I snuggled up to his side and did exactly that.

* * * * *

"Med time," Nurse Nicholas said as he handed me my pills and a glass of water. Almost two weeks had passed since I'd gotten out of the hospital. I was about to strangle him. I was actually looking forward to the surgery, now scheduled for the following Monday. Four more days of enduring his hawk eyes, his admonishments, his extreme pampering. I couldn't do a thing by or for myself -- he even waited outside the bathroom for me. He watched everything I ate, every move I made. Made sure I took in the required amount of liquids and peed out the required amount, too.

He made sure on nice days I sat outside for a little while, and kept all phone calls and intrusions to a minimum. And he decided the doc was right -- no sex. None. Not even a tiny

blowjob. I tried to convince him being in a constant horny state was just as stressful as having sex, but he ignored me.

He was driving me nuts.

"Come on, take them."

"Thanks, Nurse Ratched," I muttered, popping the pills into my mouth.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, darling." I drank the water and handed him the glass. He glared at me, then sauntered off to plan the next spate of torture.

I lay back in bed, feeling rather nifty in a new, thick robe Nicholas had picked out for me the day before, and the satin pajamas the fan from Spain had sent. I'd finally written her a thank-you note -- including a picture of me and Nicholas in our gifts, on top of our bed, Barkley lying between us. I figured she'd get a kick out of that.

Nicholas sure did. He had the darn thing blown up and framed for his picture wall. So far there wasn't much on there, just the one picture and several get-well drawings from the assorted nieces and nephews. He had quite a few more things to frame, including some of the better interviews, the newspaper clippings concerning his new single's amazing number-one debut in Europe, America, and even the top ten in Australia. The CD wasn't due to come out for a bit, but there was talk of moving it up, to take advantage of all the publicity surrounding the kidnapping.

We hadn't had a chance to celebrate yet, so with the doc's blessing, Nicholas had planned a small dinner party for that night. Everyone in the house was invited, of course, along with Adam, Katie and her sister and mom, who had finally been released from the hospital, Nurse Goodall -- Noreen, and I doubted I'd ever get used to that -- and her husband. My parents were coming in, too -- my mom insisted on being there for my surgery. I was glad she was coming, but nervous about my dad. Adam had just left, moments before Nicholas had swooped down on me with my pills, to drive to the airport to pick them up.

I wished my dad would've stayed at home, but I didn't dare say that.

Mutt was even bringing his boyfriend -- I'd only discovered he was gay the day before, when he asked if he could bring a date, as he was off duty at night now. We'd hired a third bodyguard since Tommy had come home, to take over the night shift.

When I told Mutt "Sure," and he said, "Great. Greg's been wanting to meet the guys who take me away from home all the time," I'd about flipped and Nicholas had nearly dropped to the floor in laughter. Mutt grinned and shrugged.

"Well, you never did ask," he said.

"What about Jeff?" I asked.

He grinned again. "His wife, Marcy, is all woman. Believe me."

See, I hadn't even known Jeff was married, which explained why Mutt was here with us more than Jeff was. Although I felt really bad for Greg for monopolizing his man so much.

Steak and seafood on the grill, salad, cheesecake, baked potatoes, and of course for me lime-flavored Jell-O. Mmm. Bland diets suck.

But I did feel better and more rested. I had my emotions under control more, and having the cast off my leg was pure heaven. Fortunately, Marisa had managed to keep my condition under wraps. The public wouldn't be told about my surgery until after it was done. My confidence in that had soared, too, as the doc had decided the less-invasive, laparoscopic surgery would likely take care of the problem, as I was doing so well.

From time to time, though, I still tasted blood.

At least I had Tommy to commiserate with. It was great having him around, and our years of estrangement were as if they'd never existed. Sam had called; he'd be back in town after my surgery. Lee had gone on tour with another band after he was sure Nicholas was okay, but he promised to get to Durango as soon as he could. I looked forward to seeing him again, as I hadn't actually seen him since Nicholas and I split up, though we'd exchange the occasional email.

It would be good to get the boys back with me and Nicholas again. At least I had Tommy to mope around with. I looked up as he wheeled into my room. He still looked like hell, but then again, quite fantastic for a guy nearly blown to bits.

"Hey, bud, is it time?" he asked, carefully maneuvering his broken leg around next to the bed.

I glanced at the clock. "Yup. *SpongeBob* will be on in a few minutes." When I picked up the remote and punched a button, a panel in the ceiling opened, and the new plasma Nicholas had bought for me swung down. He'd had it installed while I was still in the hospital -- little devil, *that* was why he'd run home that morning.

"Sweet," Tommy said as I turned the plasma on.

No shit.

He parked his wheels and eased out and onto the bed, then carefully lay next to me. Nicholas walked in and gave a loud sigh as Tommy, with a wink, rolled onto his side to face me and reached out to wrap his arm around my waist. I bent down and kissed him on the head. He squirmed against me and sighed loudly. "You're so cuddly, Brandon. I love you."

"I love you, too, Tommy." I ruffled his hair -- no more spikes, but I counted at least four colors in it. He closed his eyes and grinned sappily, then squeezed my backside, making me yelp.

"You have a nice butt, Brandon."

"Thanks. I think."

"Cut that out, Tommy Hubbard. He's mine."

Tommy opened one eye and looked over his shoulder at Nicholas. "Sorry, the bed was empty and your man looked lonely, so I'm taking over."

I looked up at Nicholas, at the dangerous, humor-laced glint in his eye, and said, "Well, you won't settle down for more than five minutes, Mr. Hyper. Is it any wonder I found another cuddle buddy?"

Nicholas stuck his tongue out and climbed onto the bed on the other side. He curled up next to me, draping his leg over mine and pushing his groin into me, the little minx (and no, Tommy wasn't doing that to me, too -- he knew better), laying his arm over my stomach and pushing Tommy's aside. Tommy laid his head on my chest. Nicholas did the same. I sighed. I fumbled for the remote and changed the channel, shaking my head at the two idiots as they fought their little war over me.

"I was here first," Tommy said.

"You're engaged. Besides, you're straight, or have you forgotten?"

"I don't want to fuck him. I just want to cuddle with him."

"But he's mine," Nicholas said with a distinct whine.

"Mine."

"Mine!"

"No, he's mine!" a third voice chimed in. We all looked up as Jonathan tore into the room, ran around the bed, and climbed in behind Nicholas. I hoped the bed would hold. Jon threw his arm around my lover and lay curled against him, spooning him. But Nicholas held *my* hand, so I wasn't jealous. Really. Except maybe when Jonathan kissed Nick's neck and made him giggle.

I really wonder about my brother sometimes.

"Well, will you look at that."

"Isn't this a cute scene."

We all looked up again. Amanda, Jenn, and Sylvie stood in the doorway, shaking their heads at us. With a wink at Jenn, Sylvie darted away.

"You cozy, honey?" Amanda said, shaking her head at her husband.

"Yes, dear. Fine and dandy."

"No groping Nicholas, now. You hear me?"

Jonathan scowled. "Yes, ma'am." And beneath his breath, "Wench." He got off the bed and sat in the chair beside it. But he stopped scowling when Amanda joined him, cuddling up on his lap. He kissed her and sighed happily. "Okay, this is much better."

"What *are* you guys doing, anyway?" Jenn asked, smiling as she pulled another chair up and sat next to Tommy. Bubba was obviously doing a number in her belly. She rolled her eyes at me.

"Almost time for *SpongeBob*," I said.

"And he's about to be on. Go away," Nicholas said. "This show's for manly men, not for girls."

Jenn snorted at that, as did I.

Sylvie reappeared -- and she had her video camera. "Smile, boys," she said.

"No!" Tommy shrieked, hiding his face in my shoulder. "Not that! Why did I buy her that damn thing?" He groaned.

"Too late to take it back, Tommy. Proof! See? I *told* you that you had a crush on Brandon!"

I laughed, though I felt Nicholas tense against me -- that other videotape was still on both our minds, though there hadn't been any further repercussions from it. But he smiled at me. Now was not the time to let certain things get us down. He pulled himself up higher on the bed and kissed me. I met his lips hungrily with my own, knowing full well Sylvie had it on tape. I really didn't care.

Nicholas smirked at Tommy. "See? Told you he was mine."

Tommy just chuckled, then ruffled Nick's hair. "You're nuts, know that? I know he's yours. He's not my type anyway."

"And don't you forget it." Nicholas looked at me. "You, either."

"Don't worry. I won't. You're number one with me, too."

"I know," he said, then leaned down to kiss me on the stomach. "Be better," he whispered to it.

I pulled my hand out of his and stroked his hair, feeling an unaccountable urge to cry. I was so happy right at that moment, felt so incredibly loved. He looked at me again, saw my expression, and reached up to touch my face. I kissed his fingers and sighed as he draped them possessively, adoringly, around my neck and wrapped himself tighter over me. Sylvie set her camera down and walked around the bed, taking Jonathan's vacated place (though she drew the line at spooning Nicholas, content to simply lean against the headboard) just as the show started.

Then, another figure appeared in the doorway, and a snort of disgust ruined my mood. "What the fuck's going on here?"

Adam. And my dad stood right behind him, his eyes glued to Nicholas draped over me. Our gazes locked, and my stomach clenched. For the first time in days, I felt like getting sick.

Chapter Twenty-Two

SpongeBob as background music. Interesting notion, but not one I thought exactly worked for a confrontation. I flipped off the plasma.

“Hey, guys, I’d like to talk to my dad alone. Okay?” I glanced at Jonathan. His jaw was clenched, his eyes flashing dangerously. “I’ll be okay,” I told him. He popped his wife on the butt. She frowned at him, but got up and left the room, glaring at Adam as she did so. Adam glanced impassively at Jonathan, whirled about, and walked out the door. The others left me then, Sylvie helping Tommy, each nodding to my dad as they passed through the doorway. Except for Tommy. He glared.

My Tommy. Gotta love him.

“Do you want me to stay?” Nicholas asked. He hadn’t moved from his position draped over me -- I wouldn’t have let him if he’d tried, not until I was good and ready for him to move. I was long over trying to please my dad.

I kissed him, shaking my head. “I love you, and no, I’ll be fine. Know what I’d like?”

“What’s that?”

“Some blackberry Jell-O.”

He rolled his gaze to the ceiling. “Blackberry.” He grinned at me. “Think I bought some, actually. Bananas?”

“Absolutely. Please.”

He peeled himself off me, his gaze capturing mine and not letting go. I saw the question hovering in his eyes, the *Are you sure?* I nodded. With a wicked grin, Nicholas leaned over the bed and kissed me. And not just any kiss, but a this-boy-is-mine kiss.

Deep. Hard. Long.

Arousing.

The varmint.

I chuckled, reaching up to grab his face between my hands. He pulled back, just inches from me. I saw out of the corner of my eye that my dad had turned his back to us.

"I love you," I said to Nicholas.

"And I, you."

I let him go and watched him as he approached my dad without hesitation, then nodded to my dad as he pushed his way past him.

My dad watched after him, then, shaking his head, turned to me.

"Where's Mom?" I asked, cutting off any remark he could have made about my lover.

"She's in the kitchen. Helping your assistant."

"Her name is Katie. I'd like to talk to Mom."

"And I told her I wanted to talk to you first."

I held my tongue at that, just watched him. I moved my hand to my stomach -- willed it to stay calm. Willed myself to stay calm. But it was impossible. My dad always had this effect on me, made me feel small. Insignificant.

Wrong.

I steeled myself. Not this time. No, I would not give him the satisfaction -- the kind of satisfaction like he'd had after grinding me into the ground, telling me what a failure I was and would be, in front of Nicholas that day in the kitchen.

My dad shoved his hands in his pockets, then walked further into our room. "So, you're back together for good this time, I understand."

"Yes, we are."

"You kissed ... *kissed him* ... on national television?"

"Yes. You watched it, then?"

"Adam told me about it. I heard about it."

I snorted. "I bet that was an interesting version."

"It was enough. Brandon, how could you? Why couldn't you --" He threw his hands up in the air, the look of disgust back on his face.

I clenched my fists. "Why couldn't I what?"

"Why couldn't you -- Why the fuck couldn't you have just been --"

"Normal, like my brothers?" I said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Well, yes."

If he thought Adam was normal, he could take normal. And Jonathan -- well, he didn't know his oldest very well at all, did he? "Maybe then you could've been proud of me?"

He stared at me. "I *am* proud of you."

"Like hell you are. I'm your fag son. Isn't that how you look at me? The queer. The fairy. The cocksucker. Isn't that what you see when you look at me? Not your son who made something of himself, who became fucking world famous and a millionaire, who tore your predictions for him to bits, who gave *you* -- despite your hate for him --"

"I never said --"

I cut the air with my hand, then wrapped my other arm around my waist, pushing against the pain. "Let me finish. I've been waiting a long time to say this."

"I don't think this is the time, Brandon. It's not good for you."

I took a breath, tasted the metallic taste in my mouth again, and swallowed. I reached over and grabbed a tissue, wiped my lips with it -- no blood, thank heavens. I swallowed again.

"Why not? Who knows, I might not survive the surgery. I could bleed to death before then."

"Don't say things like that."

But I barreled on. "You always thought I'd become a failure, but I'm not. I'm not."

"I never thought you'd become a failure."

"No, of course not. Because I was *born* one."

"Brandon, I --"

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, he still stood there, staring down at me, his eyes reflecting his barely controlled incredulity. Why was he surprised, I wondered? Had he thought I hadn't figured it out? How he really felt?

"What will it take to make you proud of me? If I wasn't gay, would you be proud of me then?"

He stared at me for a long time, so long I thought he was about to turn on his heel and leave.

Finally, he spoke. "You have no idea what it's like, having to deal with ... with being your father. The father of a ... a queer. The constant questions, from friends, coworkers, clients --"

"I can't believe strangers care that much."

"You have no idea." He laughed, the sound coming out like a bark. He straightened, pulling his jacket into place. "Enough of this. It's all in the past now. Your mother and I want you to come home after the surgery. Where you belong."

Now it was my turn to stare at him. "Excuse me?"

"You found Nicholas. He's fine. He's got a life without you. I hear his new single is doing well. He doesn't need you anymore."

I shook my head. "You simply don't get it. You just have no idea, do you? What we mean to each other? What he's been through?"

"That has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me! He wouldn't have gone through what he did if not for me!"

"Adam told me he got hurt, but --"

"Yes, he got hurt, all right," I said sarcastically. Nearly cut in two -- but my dad didn't know that, because he'd never asked. Not once.

"He seems fine now. Adam said --"

"Adam doesn't know shit about what Nicholas went through. No one does. No one but me, and the cops, and the doctors who put him back together."

My stomach clenched, but I ignored it. I pushed off the bed; I couldn't sit there anymore. I stood, a little shocked to realize how dizzy I was. But I fought it off, wouldn't show my dad how weak I really was.

"No one told me."

"Why didn't you just ask?" I said softly. "Why, out of all the times I talked to Mom all those days we were in the hospital, didn't you ask?" I shook my head. "You know something, Dad? You've always hated him, and I just don't get it. You've always thought him weak, and ... and ... I don't know. I just don't understand it. Despite everything we've achieved. The fame. The money. The success we had --"

-- that nearly cost you your sanity! You would never have broken down if not for him! You wouldn't be sick now if not for him!"

"Yeah, and I'd be working at some five-and-dime, the loser you always wanted me to be."

"At least you'd be --"

"Normal? Saddled with a wife and kids, struggling, miserable, hating my life, but hey, at least I'd be straight? Would you have liked that better? Then you wouldn't be ashamed of me around your buddies, huh?"

I sat on the edge of the bed, trying not to make it look as if my knees had buckled -- which they had. Rubbing my hand tiredly over my face, I shook my head. I was so tired, exhausted. I didn't need this, but I couldn't let it go.

"You say what happened to Nicholas has nothing to do with me, but you're wrong." I looked up at him. "I am the reason Nicholas was kidnapped. Nearly died." The expression on his face was priceless. I snorted. "You didn't know that, did you? You have *no fucking idea* what he's been through. Did you know he was beaten? Tormented? Did you know he was starved, kept locked up, blindfolded, naked and freezing in a fucking dog crate?"

"You can't be serious --"

"I am serious," I said quietly as the horror began to replay in my mind. "What, did you think his kidnapper kept him at the Hilton? Complete with room service?" I shook my head

and looked at him, realizing at that moment just how small and ... and *old* he looked. When had that happened? Not that I cared. He'd made sure I wouldn't.

At least he had Adam. Two peas in a pod.

"Oh, I am serious, Dad. That barely touches what he endured. Nick's the strongest, most amazing person I know. You don't know, Adam doesn't, even Jonathan doesn't." I laughed bitterly. "Only I, and the cops and doctors, of course, knew what happened to him. He didn't want anyone else to know, and I'd appreciate you not telling Mom or Adam. Almost every day, new photographs of Nicholas would come to me. Photographs of my Nicholas, starting with the first ones, coming to me." I closed my eyes, felt the heat of tears. "Lying there, beaten senseless next to his car. He'd just been to see me, did you know that?"

I looked at my dad. The horror in his eyes had no effect on me. I was too numb with the remembered pain.

"You can't imagine what it was like, knowing I was responsible for what happened to him. That if he hadn't come after me, he'd never have gone through such unbelievable hell. He'd tracked me down in Murrieta, insisted I see him. Just one more time, one more time he tried to talk to me, but I was too wrapped up in my own world of misery to listen to him. At least at first."

I stared down at my hands. Clenched them until my knuckles turned white. "But finally I did listen. I finally said yes, I still loved him. And he was so damn happy. Despite all I'd done to him, how much I'd hurt him, killed Dream, he still wanted me. So, we made love. He fucked me, and it was glorious." My dad inhaled sharply at that. "One last, long, beautiful night of screwing our brains out. But I still rejected him. I broke his heart, tore him to pieces. Sent him away, said I never, ever wanted to see him again. You see, I had to. I had to. If I didn't, they'd kill him, and I knew it. I knew it because they'd promised me they would."

Or I would have, had he given me the chance.

"Who? What are you talking about? This was ... did this have to do with that damn tape? With what happened to Tommy?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. I was just so fucked up right then that I thought I was protecting him, by rejecting him. Like I'd always done, even though it was killing me. Funny thing is, he saw through it all. He told me he was going to figure out what was really going on, somehow. He figured it out, all right."

I smiled at my dad, a sneering, feral smile that made him wince. But I didn't care. "He figured it out when he drove home from the airport in California and saw an old man who needed help. When he pulled over, no one else was around. The guy he stopped to help attacked him. Beat him. Nick's not weak. He's a fighter. He's not a big man, but he's scrappy as hell. I know he fought his attacker hard, but his attacker was stronger, meaner. You should've seen the pictures, Dad. I'm sure *your* first thought would've been that Nicholas deserved it."

"I would never --"

I pushed off the bed. "Wouldn't you? Weren't you just a little bit disappointed when we actually found Nicholas? When you learned your gay son's former lover had been found alive?"

I waited, my whole body tense with anger. Waited to see the split-second of indecision, the split-second of truth.

But if it came, I didn't see it. A stab of pain hit me in the gut. I winced, wrapping my arm around my middle. I sat on the bed, hard, coiling against the pain. He reached for me, but I hit him away. "Leave me alone." I tasted blood. "Just go. Leave me alone."

He stepped away. "You're wrong. I would never wish that on anyone, Brandon. I've said a lot of things I've regretted, maybe even done some things, but I would never, ever wish that kind of hell on anyone."

I couldn't look at him. I was too caught up in the roiling pain in my stomach. *Control, control, control.* "Please, just leave me alone. I want Mom."

He breathed out in a huff. "Fine. I'll go get her."

Once he was gone, I gasped for breath, wiping my hand across mouth.

It smeared red.

Only one thought hit me -- *I can't let her see.*

I stumbled to the bathroom and closed the door. I turned on the water, spit again and again into the sink, watching the blood whirl down the drain until it finally stopped. I hurriedly brushed my teeth.

Control, control. Relax, Brandon. Relax.

"Brandon? Are you all right?"

I rinsed my mouth out again, took a deep breath, and stood, willing myself to be okay. "Yeah, Mom, I'll be right there." *Control, control, control.*

With a last look in the mirror -- I looked pale, but that wasn't surprising anymore -- I opened the door. I smiled, forcing myself to relax. "My most favorite person in the world," I said.

Okay, so she wasn't likely fooled, but when my mom hugged me, I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her hair, I felt better. I really did.

She hugged me, then pushed me back so she could look up at me. "Brandon Ashwood, you need to get back to bed."

"I know. I was headed that direction. I'm glad you're here." I let her lead me back to the bed, then climbed in, laughing as she pulled the covers over me. "I'm fine, Mom."

"Hush, you. It's been years since I was able to baby you. Let me have my fun."

She sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. I nestled against her, inhaling that Mom-smell. Almost beat the Nicholas-smell.

But not quite.

"I'm glad you're here," I said again.

"I am, too," she said, stroking my hair back from my face. I closed my eyes. "Think Nicholas will let me help take care of you?"

I chuckled. "I don't know. I think he's rather enjoying himself."

"I'll say. He made you a huge batch of blackberry Jell-O and gave explicit instructions that no one but you is allowed to touch it."

"He makes sure I eat right, drink enough, even pee enough, take my meds, get enough sleep -- everything the doc told me to do, he makes sure of it."

"He told me."

"Getting you in on the conspiracy, huh?"

"He also told me what she told you not to do."

I groaned. "He told you that? I can't believe -- I'm going to kill him!"

She laughed. "Yes, he told me. Nick's never been shy around me."

"I'm glad. I think. But I sure wish he wasn't such a stickler about everything. At least not about that." Gawd, I can't believe I'd said that to my mom. My face heated.

"Want me to talk to him?"

"Mom!"

"Well, it seems to me it would be far more stressful not to have sex than to have it."

"I can't believe --"

"Sex can be very relaxing."

"Mom, cut it out!"

Nicholas appeared in the doorway. "Why you yelling at your mom, Brandon?"

I pulled away from her and laid my head against the pillows as she stood. "I don't think I want to answer that."

"Well, I do. I told Brandon I thought he could use some help relaxing. Now, I'm going to go help your lovely new assistant in the kitchen. Dinner's almost ready; your other friends will arrive soon. But there's time yet for a ... nap. You look tired, Nicholas. I'll tell everyone you're both resting and shouldn't be disturbed."

Nicholas snickered after she left, closing the door behind her. I opened one eye and glared at him. "It's not funny."

"Your mom was talking to you about sex!"

"Yeah? What does it matter? You won't let me." I stood, headed for the bathroom, feeling unaccountably grumpy. Nicholas followed after me.

"What are you doing?"

"Pissing. Want to measure it, Nurse?"

He snickered, jumping up on the counter as I did my duty. I let out a groan, making him burst out in a ringing peal of laughter. "Feel good, baby?"

"You know it." I turned my head to him and grinned despite myself, flushed the toilet, and closed the lid. Nick's got this thing about closing the lid, and I'd learned long ago to simply close the damn thing and live with it. Like folding towels. You've got to do it Nick's way, or he pouts. And Nicholas in pouting mode is a pain.

I turned to the sink and pushed him aside, then washed my hands and brushed my teeth again. He watched me avidly, like Barkley does when someone is filling his dog bowl.

"It isn't that interesting, surely," I said.

"What's that?"

"Watching me wash my hands. Brush my teeth. Piss."

He giggled. "She really was, wasn't she? Telling us to have sex?"

I dried my hands and then, making Nick's eyes widen, pushed in between his knees and slid my hands onto his hips. I kissed him, leaning into his warmth. "Yes, she was. And I want you, Nicholas," I whispered into his ear. He sighed against me.

"The doc said --"

"Screw the doctor. I want you. I need you. If I don't have you, right now, I'll burst."

He nuzzled my neck, his hand seeking my dick. "Mm. Are you hard for me, Brandon?"

"What do you think? I've been hard the last two weeks."

I pulled away from him, tugged him off the counter. Before he could say a word, I pressed my finger against his lips and shook my head. I turned him around so he was facing the bathroom mirror. "Don't say a word. Don't move."

I left the bathroom and fetched the good stuff. Returning to him, I grinned as I saw he had obeyed me, hadn't moved. I pushed the bathroom door closed, and locked it for good measure.

Then, holding his gaze in the mirror with my own, I dropped my robe to the floor and stripped off my pajamas. Totally naked now, I tossed my hair out of my eyes and moved behind him, wrapping my hands around his waist.

While I'd stripped he hadn't moved, but the color in his cheeks heightened, and his eyes widened, then narrowed with unabashed lust. His breath quickened; he licked his lips -- those impossibly beautiful, full lips.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"I'm going to fuck you," I whispered back.

"Here?"

"Damn straight."

He chuckled at that. "Damn gay sounds funny, doesn't it?"

"Hush, Nicholas."

He laid his head back against my shoulder, pressing his cheek to mine. I relished the warmth of him, his body's heat. Not taking my eyes off him, I slid my hands underneath his sweater. He sucked in his breath as my hands met his flesh. A soft whimper escaped him.

"You're so easy," I said.

"I used to say that about you."

"I still am. Promise. I'll let you see for yourself later."

He smiled softly. A wave of incredible love for this amazing man warmed me, heating my blood. My arousal pushed against him, insistent. He closed his eyes, parting his lips. So sensual. So beautiful. So blatant. Nicholas experiences sex like he does his music -- with everything that he is. Everything he can. He taught me to do the same, though I swear I never had it down quite as good as he did.

I kissed his neck, my breath rapid, matching his. My hands sought and found his nipples. He reared against me, moaning as only Nicholas can as I caressed them, tickled his chest. I pulled his sweater up, not taking it off. There is something incredibly sexy to me about Nick's stomach. All those tummy-revealing shirts he used to wear -- he had no idea how that flash of pale flesh undid me.

Every time.

Now, though, the perfection was marred, thanks to his tormentor. But as I always did, I reminded myself that scar meant he'd survived, and he was still very much alive. And whole. And sane. How he'd managed to do it, to endure what he had, and still be able to give himself so completely to me and be there for me, I couldn't comprehend. I would've given up, but not Nicholas. He's a fighter.

Scrappy, just like I'd told my dad.

Nick's without doubt the strongest person I've ever known. Far, far stronger than me. Stronger than I could ever hope to be. The only thing I could give him back was myself, the small pleasures. And really good sex. I owed him good, I figured, for taking care of me the last two weeks. Helping me get stronger. And I did feel stronger. I really did.

I ran my thumbs over his stomach, teasing his belly button, laughing softly as he whimpered and shifted beneath me. I had him trapped between me and the counter. Don't think he could have gone anywhere even if he'd wanted to -- he had to brace himself with his hands to keep standing.

"You want me?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Hard and fast?"

"Yes."

"Or soft and slow?"

"Yes."

I chuckled, sliding my thumbs beneath his waistband. He moved his head from side to side, totally caught up in the rapture of my slow invasion, gasping as I found and grazed what I was looking for. I undid the top button to his jeans, rubbed one hand down his tight arousal. "Jeans a little tight?"

"Yes."

"Can you say anything else but yes?"

"No."

I smiled and unzipped his jeans, then quickly pulled them down around his hips. He gasped as his dick sprang free, cried out as I grasped it with one hand, making him rear back in shock.

"Oh, my! Brandon!"

"Yes, dear?" I stroked him, running my thumb over the head, spreading the escaping moisture, watching his face in the mirror. "Open your eyes, Nicholas."

"What?"

"Watch what I do to you," I whispered to him.

He reached up, wrapped his arms around my head, and watched. It was all he could do to keep standing as I stroked him, played him with one hand, held on to him with the other. His backside was bare to me now -- I pushed my arousal into him, toying with him. He began to pant, his eyes lidded and heavy as I teased and pulled at him.

"You ... you're ..."

"What, Nicholas?"

"Take me, please," he begged, squeezing my neck before dropping his arms, covering my hands with his own. "Please, Brandon. You're tormenting me."

"You tormented me all the last two weeks."

"I know, but you needed the rest."

"I'm rested now." I reached for the lube and, not taking my hand from his dick, flipped the top up. "Put your hand out."

"Oh! Okay." He did as I told him to. I squeezed some lube out, then pulled away from him.

"Put it on me."

With a wicked grin, he eyed me in the mirror and reached behind his back, finding me. Now it was my turn to moan.

"Keep your eyes open," he commanded.

I did so, watching his face as he stroked me. Then my eyes captured his as he guided me. I moved both hands to his hips as he braced himself on the counter and spread his legs a little. Never taking my eyes off him, I slowly, exquisitely slowly, pushed my way into him.

His eyes widened at my unhurried intrusion. Soft panting escaped him, but he made no other sound.

"Push back," I told him. He did so until I had firmly impaled him.

We stood like that for a moment, in front of the bathroom mirror -- him still partially clothed, me naked, him pinioned by me.

It was the sexiest fucking thing I'd ever seen.

"Wish we had a camera," Nicholas said, his voice hoarse. "I want to remember this forever."

In answer to that, I began to stroke inside him. He fell onto his elbows, cradling his face in his hands. I reached around him and grabbed hold of him again, not wanting to slam his dick into the counter. That would hurt.

"Slow," he said.

"Yes."

Long, easy strokes gave way to harder, faster ones. Bracing himself, he pushed against me while I pumped into him.

"Now," he cried out.

"Yes."

"Please, Brandon."

"Yes."

"Can you ... say anything else but yes?" he said, panting.

"No." I laughed as I felt the final burst of heat build in me. *Now.*

I felt Nicholas thicken even more under my hand, felt the sudden surge as he finally came. I joined him, crying out, not giving a flying fuck who heard.

It was glorious. It was beautiful, taking him, feeling him, pouring everything I was inside him. My stomach didn't hurt a damn bit. I felt nothing but elation, pure joy as I held him up while he came down, watched his face in the mirror, watched my own as the passion we shared cooled, soothed.

I slid from him, grabbing a towel and quickly wiping us up. He laughed, pointing at the mirror. "Oopsie."

"You messy boy," I admonished, wiping the mirror, but only succeeding in smearing it.

"Sorry."

"Uh-huh. You get bathroom duty next."

He sighed as I tossed the towel aside and pulled him back to me. We were both breathing heavily. My skin was flushed, damp with sweat. He felt hot, so hot beneath my hands, his body radiating heat like a little baby's would. I tugged his sweater down, pulled up his pants, and fastened them, chuckling as he winced.

"Still tight, Nicholas?"

"Yes."

"All better, though?"

"Yes. You?" He turned in my arms, pulling me close, running his hands over my backside, up my spine. I shivered beneath his touch, welcoming his lips on mine. Then he covered my face with rapid-fire kisses, giggling as he did so.

"Nicholas, cut it out!"

"You smell like sex."

"So do you."

He pulled back. "Why don't you take a shower, and I'll go see how supper's coming?"

"That was an awful quick nap. Don't you think they'll suspect?"

He sucked on the inside of his cheek. "Only your mommy will know for sure."

"Why'd you listen to her and not me? I've been wanting you for days."

He looped his hands over my shoulders, shaking his head. I laid my cheek on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck. I sighed happily, feeling incredible, standing here like this, naked and warm and sated for the first time in days. I could make it to my surgery now, I thought.

"I know. But, Brandon, you have no idea how bad you've looked. No way would I jeopardize your health just to satisfy our wild animalist urgings. Not until I was sure you'd be okay. You haven't had any bleeding in days, so this was your reward."

I was glad I wasn't looking into his eyes at that moment. Instead I nodded, then pulled away. "All right. I'll take a shower. I'm starving."

"I put your Jell-O in the freezer. It should be ready soon."

I grimaced. "Oh, boy. Can't I have some steak?"

He wrinkled his nose. "No, you can't. Now, come on. I'll lay clean pajamas out for you."

"Thanks, dear." He started to leave, but I grabbed his hand. "Wait."

"What?" he said, smiling at me. I licked my lips, feeling a sudden urge to hold him. I pulled him to me and did so. I shuddered, a wave of pure gratefulness sweeping through me as his hands caressed my bare back, stroked my hair.

"Brandon, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Bull. What's wrong?"

I pulled back, biting my lip as I looked down at my lover, my best friend, my life. "I'm just going to miss you."

"I'll be right in the next room."

"That's too far."

Concern etched his face. "What's wrong?"

"I -- I'm sorry." A tear slid down my cheek. I wiped at it, surprised. I hadn't realized I was crying.

He cradled my face with his hands and looked up at me, his face still flushed with passion, his eyes so incredibly blue. "Tell me what's on your mind. Remember what the doc said."

"I know. It's just that ... You have to promise me something."

"Promise you what?"

"If ... if anything happens to me in surgery --"

He reared back as if I'd slapped him. "No! Nothing's going to happen to you --"

"Listen to me!" He stopped, shock widening his eyes. I stroked his face, kissed his cheek. "No, no, just listen. When I thought you were dead, Nicholas ..." I closed my eyes, but forced myself to go on. I hadn't planned on telling him this, but it was important. He had to know. He had to know so he wouldn't do what I'd nearly done, because the thought of him doing what I'd nearly done about undid me.

"Brandon, you're scaring me."

"I don't mean to. I'm sorry. I have to tell you, though. When I thought you were dead ... I didn't tell you, but I didn't want to live anymore. I didn't get to say goodbye. Just one last goodbye. I nearly killed myself, because of that."

A sob tore from his throat. He flung himself into my arms, and I held him tight.

"Why? Why would you do that?" he asked. "Why would you even think about killing yourself? Don't you remember our song? What it said? Things are never that bad."

I stroked his hair back, leaned my cheek against his. "I know. I just didn't have the strength I have now, Nick. The strength you give me. I had nothing. Nothing left to live with. I want you to promise me you won't think that. That you won't ever think you have nothing to live for, if something happens to me. Do you understand?"

He pulled back. "What stopped you?"

I smiled sadly at him and reached out to touch my earring that he still wore. We hadn't had a chance to replace it yet. "I really don't know. Something did, a strange feeling, maybe a guardian angel. Maybe you singing that damn song in my head. Who knows? Just long enough for a stranger to tell me that you'd been revived in the helicopter and had gotten through surgery."

I grimaced, remembering the hours I'd thought him dead, the deadly calm I'd felt as I plotted my suicide. If I hadn't been in the hospital myself, with half a dozen nurses around me, watching me, I would've found a way. I remembered thinking, over and over again, *If I'd only had one last goodbye ...*

"How long did you think --"

"Two hours after we got to the hospital, maybe three." I laughed bitterly. "They forgot to tell me. Took you to surgery, sent me to a separate room. I didn't know. I really thought you were dead."

"Brandon, no, you never told me."

"I know. But promise me, Nicholas. If anything happens to me, go on. Make me proud. I *am* proud of you, but there's so much more you can do."

"I want to do it with you," he said, his face set and stubborn.

I pulled him closer and kissed him. "I know you do. And I want to with you, too. Just promise me."

"I -- I promise."

A wave of relief filled me. "Good. Now I want that shower. Okay?"

He nodded, then kissed me once again. And again. And a few more times, until we were both laughing, all the sorrows I'd managed to bring up forgotten for a while.

Finally he left me. I turned on the shower and stood beneath the hot, stinging spray. It felt so good. I felt good. I stood under it for a good fifteen minutes before finally turning it off. Great water heater.

As I reached for a towel, I realized I heard something. Voices. I stilled, puzzled.

Wrapping my towel around my waist, I left the bathroom, stopping as I saw Katie standing facing the plasma, a look of horror on her face.

"Katie, what is it?"

She turned to me, her eyes wide, distraught. I looked up at the plasma, frowning as I saw ...

I saw myself.

On a bed. A bed I didn't recognize, yet in my heart knew well.

Naked.

My gut clenched.

Terror in my eyes.

"Put this on him."

I tasted blood, covering my mouth with my hand as I stared at the screen, at the boy that I knew ...

A room, in a house with a blue door. A blue door. A blue door. Then, nothing, darkness -- a blindfold. *Put this on him.* They'd put on a blindfold.

They.

More than one, they'd raped me, again and again, more than once. And not just one day. All the time. They did it again and again.

And I'd let them.

“What would you be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe?”

“Brandon?” Katie’s voice, hollow, far away.

“What would you be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe?”

Bile mixed with blood. I stumbled back, unable to tear my eyes away, unable to stop watching me, that was me, me -- Hot moisture on my hand, gagging me.

“What would you be willing to do to keep your lover boy safe?”

“Me. I’m willing to give you me.”

“Damn smart, aren’t you, boy? How’d you like to take up jogging?”

A room, in a house with a blue door. A blue door.

A strangled cry escaped me.

“Brandon! Oh, my God!”

Hands clawed at me, at my chest, stomach. Pain, welcome pain as I watched the blindfolded boy take it, not once, but twice, and then another --

Another figure crossed the screen. Silent. Never said a word. The one the blindfold was meant to hide ...

The blue door.

I sank to my knees as a wail filled the room. *Me, that was me.*

I folded over, no longer able to stop it. The blood came and the pain came and my eyes saw nothing but red ... and him. *Him.*

Silent. Never said a word.

“Nicholas! Oh, my God. Nicholas!” Katie screamed and then ...

Red-tainted silence.

Part Two

Chapter One

Colorado -- Present Day

"I don't think it's ready yet, Nicholas," Margaret said. She put the Pyrex bowl on the counter.

"I know, but Brandon's going to want it soon," I said, poking at the Jell-O. Dammit, darn stuff was still too liquidy. "I should've made some this morning," I said with a pout.

Margaret patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, honey. He can have the orange. There's enough of it left still. You'd better just put this in the refrigerator lest it turn into a popsicle."

I sighed and did as Brandon's mom said. I closed the fridge and returned to my post, sitting on the stool Jeff had fetched for me. I still couldn't stand for very long. Even sitting a long time was hard, though since I couldn't lie around all day, I just lived with the pain. I hoped it would get better -- it had to -- but sometimes I wondered. The doc had warned me I might not ever get all the way back to my previous health, but Brandon didn't know that. No one did.

I didn't care, really. So what if I couldn't prance around anymore? I was thirty-one now, not a teenager anymore. As long as I had Brandon, nothing else mattered.

"Hurry up, Nicholas. I'm almost ready to put those in."

I grinned at Brandon's mom. "Yes, Mom. Sorry."

She laughed, but pointed at the bowl awaiting my attention. I grabbed a carrot and dove into my chore with relish, singing happily beneath my breath.

And I *was* happy. My lover was doing better. He'd just fucked my brains out. His family and our friends were here, and we were safe. We were going to get him through the

surgery and through the next few weeks, and all his worries about ... I refused to think about it.

No, no, he was going to be fine, and then we could put all the bad crap behind us, and he and I could start our real life together. For the first time since we'd met, we could truly be together.

I couldn't believe it sometimes, had to pinch myself to really grasp what had happened between me and Brandon. That I had him back. This time it was for real. Once he was okay, the fantasies that had sustained me during all those long weeks of hell *would* come true.

I'd been right all along, all those years he'd held me at arm's length. He loved me. And, boy, had he proven it to me just minutes ago.

Margaret hadn't said a word about my quick return from our "nap," just grinned, patted me on the cheek, and handed me the bowl of veggies and a knife.

I love Brandon's mom. And she loves me. She's an incredibly beautiful person, and I am so thankful for her. She'd been there for me from the beginning. From that awful-beautiful day we stood outside Brandon's car, me scared to death and hurting like hell and holding tight to him. I'd loved him so much when he stood up to his dad, wrapped my arm around his waist like he had, and let me give him strength.

I like to think my own mom and dad would've accepted Brandon, if they had lived.

It had taken me some time after Brandon and I got together before I could tell him exactly what had happened to my parents. It wasn't until Karen and I were officially divorced, actually. He'd never asked, just knew that they had moved away when I was in high school my senior year, and I refused to go. I was about to graduate, had a boyfriend I thought I loved, and a dream part in the school play. And I had Karen, pregnant and desperate. My dad's job took him on the road a lot, and he and Mom decided to move to Arizona, as it was centrally located to his route. But about three weeks after they got there, the new house they were in developed a carbon monoxide leak. Undetected.

They were found several days later, having died in their sleep.

They would've loved Brandon. Just like his mom loves me.

How Brandon's dad could be such a bastard to him, though, I didn't understand. I glanced at where he sat reading a paper at the kitchen table, and wondered yet again what he and Brandon had talked about. I'd have to drag it out of my lover later, but drag it out I would.

Jon entered the kitchen, sidled up to me, and snatched a carrot out of the neat pile I'd made. "Hey!" I said, slapping at him. "Out of my veggies, thief."

He laughed, dodging away from me. "Missed me!"

I swatted at him and he laughed, coming back up behind me to look over my shoulder as I continued cutting carrots. He placed his hands on my shoulders and snuffled my neck. "Mm, sex," he murmured into my ear.

I grinned, pausing in my cutting. "Mm, right. Sure is."

"Finally let my little brother out of his straight jacket, eh?"

"For a minute or two." Images of Brandon behind me, looking at the mirror as he plunged into me, made my neck heat. Oh, yeah. I could still feel him, too -- deep inside, where he belonged.

"Little Willy had some fun, then. Good."

"Jon!" I said with a laugh, looking askance at Margaret and bumping against him with my shoulder.

"Don't worry, Mom's used to me." Jon wrapped his arms around me, trapping me, chuckling into my ear. I glanced at Margaret, but she rolled her eyes, always so tolerant, and opened the oven to put some rolls in. I wondered what Jon's dad thought of us messing around like this, deciding that Jon could stay put if it annoyed his dad. But Mr. Ashwood just sat at the table, his nose in the newspaper. Ignoring us.

Guess that was better than snarling at us.

"Nicholas!"

I looked up from the carrot I was cutting as Amanda burst into the kitchen, her gaze wide as she looked at me cradled in her husband's arms. "Hey, Mandy, I'm innocent. He's the one messing with me --"

But she waved me away. "Nicholas, it's Brandon."

The knife clattered from my hand as the sounds of shouting filled me, pierced me, tore out my heart. I stared at Amanda, saw the blood on her shirt. And understood.

No ...

I ran through the house, Jon on my heels. My side hurt like hell and I didn't give a fuck. *Brandon.*

"Let me through," I demanded as I blindly pushed my way into the bedroom.

I stumbled. Someone caught me, held me as I stared down at Brandon lying on the floor. Katie held his head to the side. Brandon, wearing nothing but a towel, which she futilely held over his nakedness, his hair damp from his shower, sprinkles of water still on his shoulders. The scent of his shampoo mixed with blood and ... and oh, God, he'd thrown up blood. The stench smelled obscene to me as my head whirled with the assault on my emotions and senses and the scene before me emblazoned itself into my mind.

Bleeding from his mouth.

His body shaking, convulsing, his eyes closed.

Blood coming from his mouth.

Someone threw a blanket over him, covering him, wrapping him tight. Mutt.

I stared down at him, unable to move, my mind screaming, *No! No! No! Not now, this can't be, we just made love, we just talked, we just held each other. I just promised him ... no!*

"We've called 911. They're sending an air ambulance."

"Brandon, can you hear me?" Nurse Goodall. *She's here. It'll be all right now she's here.*

"It's freezing in here. The door's open. Shut it, dammit!"

"Turn off that fucking camera!"

"No! Don't touch anything!" Adam. He was right. Don't touch it, don't touch anything, don't touch Brandon --

Margaret entered behind me. "Oh, my God, Brandon!" A strangled cry from Brandon's dad.

I stared at Katie. Her horrified gaze held mine as I stood there, frozen, a soundless wail crawling up from deep inside me. She looked over her shoulder, and like a trained dog I followed her gaze.

And saw Brandon up on our plasma, bigger than life and naked and being raped by that laughing bastard Seth, the mother-fucker, over and over again. I watched as that bastard raped my lover, and I stared at Brandon's face on the screen, taking it, just lying there blankly taking it. Why would he do that? Why would he endure --

Because of you, you jackass. You idiot, this was why ...

Bile rose in my throat, but I pushed it back. He was bleeding to death. Brandon was dying, and all I could hear was the laughter on the plasma, the mocking laughter, and I knew its purpose. I knew why Seth did it, why he'd raped Brandon.

But Seth had been dead for years ...

With a roar of fury, I hurled myself at the camera and threw it at the plasma, shattering it. Silencing it. I fell to my knees, an alien wail pulling from deep inside me. I crawled like a baby for Brandon, covered his body with my own, holding him, trying to stop him from shaking. I felt his blood soak me, smelled it, tasted it mingling with my salty tears, and I keened soundlessly as I brushed his hair from his face, tried to brush away the blood from his mouth. But it wouldn't leave, wouldn't do what I wanted it to.

Why wouldn't it go away?

"No, no, no," I whispered. "No, no, no --"

Hands grasped me as new sounds filled the room. Blood, blood everywhere. The hands pulled me away from him. I fought, screaming as the gurney came in, as the men quickly put on their gloves. *He doesn't have AIDS, you fuckers! Stop wasting time!*

"Nicholas!"

I lunged at them, wanting to hit them, make them stop. Why were they doing that to Brandon? Why were they sticking all those things in him? I sobbed, unable to understand in my hysteria what they were doing, as I saw flashes of another time, another flight, another man wailing *my* name, not me wailing his.

"Brandon!"

* * * * *

They took him from me. I watched from the back porch, shivering as the helicopter flew away into the sky. This was how it'd been for him, for Brandon, as he'd watched me leave. He'd thought me dead, then. And I should've been, sliced up as I'd been, starved as I'd been, emaciated and dehydrated and cold, so damn cold --

No, I won't think about it, won't won't won't ...

Now I thought the same of him, that that helicopter was winging him away to his death. Away from me.

All that blood, everywhere. Too much. He'd lost too much.

"Nick, come on, let's get you cleaned up so we can go to the hospital."

I couldn't move, just stared at the sky though the helicopter was gone, like a bird wafting over the snowy-topped mountains, away and out of my life.

* * * * *

"I know. It's just that ... You have to promise me something."

"Promise you what?"

"If ... if anything happens to me ..."

I stood in the bathroom in my blood-soaked clothes and stared at the mirror, the smeared mirror, and blinked.

"Come on, Nick, let's get this off you."

My hands hung at my sides, and I couldn't move, just stared at the mirror.

"He's ... He's ..."

"Nick, listen to me. We've got to get you out of these, into the shower. This isn't doing Brandon any good. He needs you there. Now, come on, help me."

I turned reluctantly away from the mirror and stared at Jon. He'd turned on the shower; steam roiled into the bathroom. He closed the door. The cops would be there soon. Cops were always around us, but bad things kept happening. I didn't understand it. Why was this happening? Who had done this?

I looked down at the blood on my sweater. Brandon had bought it for me. "It's ruined, Jon."

"Yeah, I know, kid. Let me help you."

I stood like a child and let Jon pull off my sweater. I didn't have the energy to do more than stand. I had no more strength to pretend I could handle it, that my injury wasn't continually stealing what little reserve I had left. I could barely stand, felt dizzy. Usual fare for me.

"I love him, Jon," I said as I stood like a mannequin, waiting for him to do whatever he was going to next.

"I know you do, babe. I love him, too."

"He wanted me to promise not to leave if anything ... leave here, Jon."

Brandon's brother looked at me. "I know. He told me he was going to do that."

"He did?" I said in surprise. "When?"

"Last night. He made me promise to make sure you kept your promise. You did promise him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now come on. Jeans."

I did as he said, shucking off my blood-soaked jeans until I stood only in my boxers. "What am I going to do, Jon?"

He stared into my eyes. "You are going to take a shower. You're going to get dressed, and we're going to the hospital, and you're going to be strong for Brandon. He needs you, Nick."

"But you don't understand," I whimpered. "He's my strength. I'm nothing without him. How can I be strong for him if I'm so weak myself?" I felt a tear fall down my cheek, burning a trail that would be followed by others, many others, later. "I've been faking it, Jon. I'm not strong, not anymore. It's all used up. I can't take care of myself. How can I take care of myself without him? I need him so badly. What am I going to do? What am I going to do if he dies?"

Jon grabbed me by the shoulders, his expression darkening. I felt dizzy, like I was going to hyperventilate.

"Nicholas, stop it. Cut it out. Enough! Take deep breaths. Come on, with me."

I wavered in his grasp, clinging to him. He took a deep breath, and I did the same, mine coming out in shuddering spasms.

"Again, Nick. Cut out the fucking drama. You're going to pull yourself together, right now. Right here. My brother needs you, dammit, and you falling apart like this isn't going to help him any. Do you understand?"

I took another deep breath, felt the dizziness move away. "But --"

"No buts. I'm here for you, too, dammit. Don't you know that? I love you. You need to lean on someone, lean on me. You need strength, get it from me. Do you understand me? Take it from *me*."

I stared at him, at the anger flashing in his eyes, the conviction in them -- and the love.

"You ... you mean that."

He pulled me to him and kissed me on the forehead. "Yes, dammit, of course I do. I love you. Always have." He smirked, stroking my cheek then patting it, making me startle.

"I don't know what to say, Jon."

"Nothing to say. I love my brother, and know that you guys are meant to be together. Simple as that." He shrugged. "I love being your friend more than anything. Amanda loves you, too, you know. We're both here for you guys, understand?" I nodded, a little dumbfounded still. "Come on, enough of this. You lost it for a bit and I understand that, but enough is enough. Now, are you going to get in that damn shower so we can get to him, or am I going to have to haul you to the hospital in your boxers?"

I looked up at Jon. "I'm guessing I'd better get in the shower first. Then we'll go."

"Good boy." Jon clapped me on the shoulders, rubbing them. Then with a shake of his head and a sad smile, he clasped my face between his hands and kissed me. I kissed him back, then hugged him tight, drawing on that strength he'd offered. I felt better already.

"Thank you, Jon. Thank you so much." I pulled back, not feeling awkward at all. I was damn lucky to have him, and knew it. "I love you."

"Love you, too, boy-o. I'll get you some clothes. He's going to be okay, Nick. Brandon's tough, you know. Noreen's sure we got him out of here in time."

I rubbed my scar absently. "It's not the bleeding that scares me the most, Jon. It's what he saw."

He grimaced, anger making his eyes darken. "That bastard, raping him --"

"I can't believe it -- why didn't he ever say anything?"

"I don't know, Nick. I really don't." He dropped his hands from me. "Fuck, Nicholas, all this time, I should've known. Why didn't I see? What kind of brother am I?"

"A damn good one. You're incredible. I don't know, though, Jon. Maybe he felt like he couldn't tell anyone."

"I think he was in complete denial. Maybe he just pushed it out of his mind so much the shock of seeing himself being ... being raped set him off. I don't know, Nicholas. I don't have any answers, but it makes me feel like shit, knowing he couldn't -- wouldn't --" Jon shook his head. "I can't wrap my head around it. I think the cops are here now. Maybe they'll be able to give us answers. Now, get cracking so we can get out of here."

He left me then, and I pulled off my boxers and climbed into the shower, scrubbing at myself until my skin was raw. I would pull myself together. I would be strong, and be there for him. Be there for Brandon.

He needed me like he never had before. I paused as I watched the last of his blood wash away into the drain. No, not like he never had before. I feared -- oh, how I feared as I thought back to what I'd seen on the plasma, knowing that was Brandon from years ago -- that he'd needed me long before this, and I hadn't been there for him.

None of us had been. Not his parents, his brothers, his friends, me. Brandon had a way of holding himself off, holding back, always had. So we just got used to it, all of us. "That Brandon," we'd say when he fell into silence over something. We were seemingly such

opposites -- me craving, needing, demanding the attention, the friendships, the pampering, and it had worked. All this time, which of us had all the support? Which of us always had others there for him?

Me.

When in reality, it was Brandon who'd needed it most.

I was in control of myself again by the time I emerged from the bathroom, dressed and ready to go. Jon was waiting for me, as was Detective Anderson. Thankfully he pulled me aside for only a minute, explained what he was doing for the investigation, and then Jon and I left for the hospital.

Barely an hour had passed since Brandon was whisked away. It seemed like an eternity. We arrived at the hospital to find ourselves taken to a private waiting room. Everyone but Katie and Jenn were there.

I sat next to Margaret, looping an arm around her and hugging her.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"In surgery, honey. They took him straight in."

I nodded, took a deep breath, and kissed her on the cheek. "He's going to be okay," I whispered. "I won't let him be otherwise."

"I know you won't."

So we waited. And waited.

Finally, someone came to talk to us, but it wasn't who I expected -- or maybe it was. Nurse Goodall.

"Noreen," I said when she came in.

"Nicholas. We need to talk."

"I know."

She led me to the corner where I'd been sitting. I offered her the chair I'd been using, then sat next to her. "Do you know anything about how the surgery --"

She clasped my hands in hers. "I just checked, and he's doing well. He's lost a lot of blood, though, Nicholas. He's had two pints so far. He's going to be in the hospital awhile, I'm afraid."

I looked down at the floor, thought how much he hated hospitals. "I know."

"They're going to keep him sedated after the surgery, son. I've spoken with his doctor, told her what I observed, what Katie told me."

I nodded. "How long will they keep him under?"

"As long as they can, but remember what we talked about?"

"He had something to tell me, and wouldn't."

"I think he couldn't."

"The ... the raping --"

"Is part of it, but I think there's more to it than that. He's going to need some help, Nicholas. Something terrible happened -- I think far worse even than what we saw. I'm afraid it may be up to you to figure out what it is. I've talked to his doctor, and she'll be talking to you about seeing Emilie Yancy. She's a wonderful psychiatrist, and she's willing to talk to you. She'll be sympathetic to you and Brandon, I promise."

I leaned over and kissed Noreen. "Thank you. Thank you for caring. For being here so much for us. I'll talk to the doctor whenever she wants me to. We should've done this before --"

Noreen touched me on the cheek, shaking her head. "Remember, Brandon couldn't be pushed. He wasn't ready yet."

"But now there's no choice, is there?" I said bitterly. No choice. How I knew about that, with all the "no choice" walls I'd been up against in my life, especially recently.

"Are you doing okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"

I shook my head. "I'm okay. Just knowing you're here is enough."

"All right, then. I'll go call Dr. Yancy's office. And Nicholas, he will pull through this surgery. But he's going to need all the help he can get to pull through this mentally. Something terrible triggered this."

Worse than what I'd seen? "I just wish I knew how to find out what it was."

"And without asking him, Dr. Yancy said. If you possibly can, figuring out what it was before he wakes up could be vital to helping him."

She left. Jon had sat silent throughout this exchange, his expression thoughtful. I watched him. I felt an inner calm now that hadn't existed before. It's funny, thinking about it, how knowing Jon cared that much about me made me love him all the more.

Strength.

And I did love him. He was, next to Brandon, the best friend I'd ever had. I guess it didn't really surprise me, knowing how much he did care, because I knew in my heart that Brandon meant the world to him. He loved his little brother no less than if Brandon had been his own son. Even when Brandon and I'd been apart and Jon had sided with me, he'd talked often about his brother to me, about how he was sure that something else was going on ...

I startled, making him look at me in surprise. "What's wrong, Nick?"

"Remember when Brandon and I were apart, you telling me you thought something else was going on with him?"

Jon sat back in his seat. "Yes, of course. I guess now we know I was right."

I shook my head. "No, no. I mean, yes, I think you were right. But he already told me about Seth. I mean, not about his --" I shoved my hands against my face, trying to think. I dropped my arms and leaned toward Jon. "His computer," I said.

Jon's eyes widened. "All that writing he's been doing."

I nodded, excited that Jon had caught my meaning. "Yes! Maybe he's written about it. On his laptop."

Jon stood, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "I'll run to the house and get it. I just hope the cops didn't take it as evidence."

"If they did, you can damn well be sure I'll get it back," I said.

* * * * *

"Mr. and Mrs. Ashwood?"

"I'm Mrs. Ashwood."

I looked up from the magazine I hadn't been reading. Everyone in the waiting room tensed. It was, I presumed, the surgeon. Margaret looked over her shoulder at me. I stood, joining her, biting back the resentment that it was Brandon's parents, not me, who the surgeon addressed.

"How is he?" Margaret asked, wrapping her arm around my waist. I pulled her close. Brandon's dad stared at me, then looked away.

The surgeon looked exhausted. I stared, mesmerized, at his scrubs, flecked with blood. Brandon's.

"He came through the surgery, but it was difficult. The shock from blood loss was harder on him than the surgery itself. I repaired the hernia, and he should recover well from that. You can see him in a few minutes."

Then he was gone. "Is that it?" Adam asked. "What about everything else?"

"He's a surgeon, honey. He's done his job," Margaret said. She squeezed me. I laid my head on her shoulder and closed my eyes as she stroked my back.

Strength.

A few minutes later a nurse looked into the room. "Mr. and Mrs. Ashwood? You can come see your son now."

I started to follow. The nurse held up her hand. "Immediate family only."

I nearly burst into tears, but rescue in the form of a ninety-eight-pound Irish fury arrived. Noreen glared at the nurse. "He *is* immediate family. Come on, Nicholas. You boys, too, Jon and Adam." She held out her hand and I took it. She squeezed my fingers tight.

Strength.

* * * * *

Oh, Brandon, I don't want to see you like this.

I stood by his bed, his cold hand in mine, lifeless except for the steady pulse beneath my fingers. Tubes and IVs were everywhere. I felt like sobbing, seeing what they'd done to him. A dick monster, he had a dick monster, and he was intubated, and I counted no less than seven IVs pouring into him. His hair was matted against his head, his skin pale. His body kept shuddering.

"From the anesthesia," Margaret reassured me.

It was so hard, looking at him. Just a handful of hours ago he'd made love to me. How did it end up like this? Why, dammit? Who had put that tape on, knowing he'd come out right then and see it?

The cops didn't have any answers. The open doorway onto our deck was the only clue they had. That and footprints in the snow, which, to my fascination, they actually took molds of. But so many people had been in and out of the house since we'd moved in that there were too many prints to get a clear picture.

And bright boy here, throwing the camera, hadn't helped. Detective Anderson was unhappy with me. What's new there? Me and my big mouth, me and my overreactions. But the tape was okay -- and he wanted me to watch it.

I dreaded that.

"Nicholas, say something to him. He might hear you," Margaret said.

I nodded and moved up to the head of the bed, my gaze drifting to the bandage over his stomach. He was bare, naked beneath the sheet that hardly covered him up to his hips. His chest rose and fell, forced by the intubation to keep him going. The tube would come out soon, I knew, but I hated seeing it force him to breath in an unnatural rhythm.

This was how you looked to him, Nick. Even worse than this. How had he stood it? He never said. Not really.

Strength. Where did you find it? How did you cope, all those weeks so alone, not knowing what was happening to me? How did you hack it when you got those photographs? How did you handle it when you found me, imprisoned and filthy and cold and scared, like the wild animal I was, barely recognizing you, nearly insane with hunger, thirst, what had been done to me?

Oh, Brandon, what they'd done to me --

Who was there for you?

"Hey, babe," I whispered to him, drawing close to his ear, sucking my breath in as I realized his earrings were gone. I stroked his hair back from his forehead, ghosting my fingers over his face the way he liked me to do. "You're going to be okay. I'm here; we're all here for you," I murmured, brushing my lips over the edge of his, the only part of his mouth I could touch. I kissed his cheeks. I kissed his eyelids -- happier memories came to me of

doing the same thing to him as he sat at his piano. I remembered how he'd leaned into me, lost himself to me at just a whispered sigh, a brief touch.

My mind drifted back to a more recent memory -- that of just hours before. I couldn't believe it, how quickly things could change. As I held his hand and watched his chest rise and fall, my gaze drifting over his slack face, I let myself drift back to us, in the bathroom, taking out the memory and savoring it, remembering it. I didn't want to forget it, not a single part of it.

"You need a chair, Mr. Kilmain?"

I broke away from my thoughts, my face heating. I smiled at the nurse -- Noreen had seen to it that it not be forgotten again who I was. What I meant to Brandon.

"Thanks. Where's Brandon's parents?"

"They left a little while ago," she said, smiling.

"Oh. I didn't -- I didn't notice."

"You were a little lost in thought." My face blazed, so I looked at Brandon, hoping she didn't notice. "Try talking to him some more. Hearing is the first sense to come back. He should be waking soon."

"I thought they were going to keep him sedated?"

She nodded. "Yes, but we have to bring him back for a little while, just to make sure he's able to."

"Oh. Okay."

I sat in the chair and leaned on the bed. I'm not sure what I said. I sang softly to him, song after song. The nurses came and went, smiling at me, one leaning over me and whispering, "I love that song." I was impressed -- a true fan, knowing a B-side song. I gave her a hug. I needed that.

I sang until I couldn't sing anymore. Time passed, not sure how much. I dozed in my chair, never letting go of Brandon's hand. Jon came in at one point. He had the laptop, but I wasn't ready to leave Brandon. Not yet.

"Do you know his password?" Jon asked me. "He always kept it locked, Adam being such a nosy bastard."

"Oh, my gosh, no, I don't," I said in despair.

"Don't worry, I'll figure it out."

He stood on the other side of the bed, holding his brother's hand. Adam hadn't touched Brandon, just stared at him, but Jon had no such qualms. He stroked his brother's arm much as I had, whispering some wicked nonsense about me and him in Brandon's ear.

I watched Brandon's face, praying for a flicker of recognition, but nothing yet.

They kicked me out eventually, and I had no choice but to go home. It was almost eleven o'clock at night, and I had nothing left to draw from. The too familiar weakness had

given way to total exhaustion. I couldn't even talk, I was so tired. Jeff almost literally carried me into the house. Jon stayed up, working on breaking into Brandon's computer, but I stumbled into bed, fully clothed, pulled Brandon's robe and pillows to me, and fell immediately to sleep.

Jon woke me at three the next morning. He looked like hell, but he was grinning in triumph. "Get up, Nick. I got in."

It was easy to find the file, practically the only thing on the computer, except for a shopping list. I made a copy of the file and gave it to Jon -- he knew his brother in ways I didn't, would maybe see something I couldn't see.

Amanda got up, made us some coffee, started a fire, and after a phone call to see how Brandon was doing -- no change -- we settled into our chairs and got to work. My heart skipped a beat as I read the first lines, and I said a little prayer that we would find what we needed to find, deep within Brandon's writing. Deep within his soul.

"Come on, Brandon," I whispered beneath my breath as I began to read. "Show me. Show me what you've been hiding from me all this time."

I'll never forget the first time I saw him -- the wild shock of black hair, the beautiful blue eyes, the full lips with that perfected pout. Such a diva, even from the beginning. I was entranced, smitten, mesmerized. He had the face of an angel, and the voice of one, too. And almost from the start, I began the pattern of losing Nicholas. I was good at that. I guess I never believed I really deserved him, what he would bring to us both. What we would experience because of him. What we could be because of him. What I could be because of the strength and belief he had in me.

Denial denial denial.

Damn, I was good at that.

"Oh, Brandon," I murmured. "You never lost me. Not once. Not a single time." With a heavy sigh, I returned to my reading, and in so doing witnessed the unfolding of a side to my lover, my best friend, my soulmate, that I had never known.

Chapter Two

Whenever I start a new piece of music, write new lyrics, find myself faced with that blank page waiting for me to fill it up with my words and the secrets of my soul, I'm seized with terror.

Can I do it? Am I really good at this, like they all say? Like my fans believe?

Can I possibly reach down deep inside me once again, just one more time, please, God, and find something tangible ... or maybe not tangible, no. Maybe something elusive and as afraid of being drawn out as I'm afraid of it being drawn out? Yet I know must be drawn out because it is those things, those rare intangible things, that set me and my music apart from so many other artists.

The terror is real, but I know without it, I am nothing. Fear is what keeps me honest with myself.

Fear of failure, fear that I can't possibly do this again, can't possibly produce, yet again, what is expected of me. I feel like a child, an unformed child, as I stare at the blank screen or the notepad in front of me or even that imaginary writing space in my mind. I nearly always panic. I nearly always leap up and run away. I don't want to dig inside myself. I don't want to expose what I know must be exposed if I'm going to satisfy my fans.

It is so damn scary.

But I always go back to that blank screen, page, space in my mind. And the words and the melody do come. Hard at first, yeah, but they do come. And then I lose myself in the amazement of it. But it is always scary at first. Always. And I always have that fear that I won't climb out the next time, that the next time I will be totally lost.

That's how I felt reading Brandon's writing. Scared. Terrified. Lost. Desperate to find a way to help him, not knowing if I was wasting my time reading over his thoughts, meeting the boy he was. As I read, I realized just how much I'd depended on him all those years.

Brandon was the one person in my life who I knew, without question, could pull me from the deep, dark places inside me where my creativity resides, and save me. He had to do it more than once over the years. Many, many times, in fact.

There did come the time, of course, when he wasn't there. When I was writing everything for my first solo album. Writing those songs, I didn't really dig as deep as I should've, and it showed. Yeah, my first solo album did well enough, but it wasn't the same. Because I didn't dig deep, really, really deep. I was afraid to without Brandon there to save me. Because he wasn't by my side.

Yet as I read what he'd written, saw the sad, sad boy that he was, in no small part because of me, I was so damn sad. I was never there to pull him from his dark places. Sometimes, I just lucked out being there at the right place at the right time, which is funny because I never even knew he was in those dark places.

Some of the revelations in his writings amazed me. Like, he loved me from the moment he first saw me, sitting out in that audience I couldn't see. It's hard for me to believe now that while I was up there on stage having the time of my life, he was out there watching. Watching me, wanting me. Setting himself on the awful-beautiful path of love and despair that would be his life.

As I sat in my chair in a house once so happy but now cloaked with a grey pall of despair and read his words, I can't stop the tears falling. Neither could Jon -- from time to time we looked up at each other, pacing our reading so we pretty much stayed together. That morning, when we first started to understand the real Brandon Ashwood, let's just say we were devastated by most everything we read. From Brandon's heart-wrenching realization that yes, he was gay, to dealing with his brother Adam's hate, his father's brutal rejection, and even Jon's innocent but painful teasing, to living with the knowledge the boy (me!) he'd come to love was lost to him, probably forever. It was no wonder he was sick all the time.

"You know, I remember that time. After the play, before he found you," Jon said. "What he was like then."

I didn't want to hear it, but like a drowning man in seawater I looked at Jon, ready to lap up whatever he could tell me. "What was he like?"

"It was rough, Nick. Really rough." Jon shrugged. "He acted so lovesick, it was pretty comical. And I teased him. Teased him all the time. Of course, I thought it was a girl he was being so mopey about, but --" He shrugged again. "He never would talk about it, what made him like that. Who he was so tragically in love with. I'm just damn glad you came back around when you did."

Guilt flashed through me even though that was so far in the past there was nothing I could do about it now. "He was sick a lot even then, wasn't he?"

"That's when it all started, yeah."

We went back to our reading. From time to time we would chuckle, even laugh, and Jon would tease me about blushing -- reading about the coffee shop incident, for instance.

Oh, my, how I remember that, looking up and seeing him, so blond and beautiful in that dreadful AC/DC shirt and me wondering what the fuck did he have on an AC/DC shirt for? That was my first thought. About the shirt. I remember thinking damn, how disappointing, we have different musical tastes after all.

Then my head cleared and our eyes locked, and I realized he'd followed me from the music store, and my dick got so freaking hard right at that second there was no use hiding it. And he was hard, too. Hard for me. That gorgeous blond god, hard for me.

And I used that, boy did I, made love to him with my words, my eyes, my voice, and oh, God! I remembered how he looked when he spilled his Coke, smiled sheepishly at me. And how the audience loved it, friends and strangers alike. That was the first time I made love to Brandon Ashwood, and I didn't even touch him.

Of course, then devastation followed, emotional and physical, and I can't think about that, what else happened that night, except for remembering the first time he kissed me -- sweet, awkward, beautiful Brandon, who I knew immediately had never kissed a guy before, just like he'd said. But it was so good. So very, very good.

And oh, when we reached in our reading the part about the head-banging incident? The first time we had gropey-sex together? Jon's chuckling was evil, pure evil ... And I began to wonder what other sexual encounters Brandon had written about.

Surely not the first time, that disastrous first time. Or the time in the back seat of his car when the elderly couple next door caught us. Or outside on a blanket beneath the trees, our naked bodies twisted together while just on the other side of the fence a bunch of kids came out for a freaking birthday party, and there was no way we could stop what we were doing. I'd just slid inside Brandon, and he was trying not to scream out my name like he always did ...

Or the time we lay on the couch in the living room, believing Amanda and Jon were gone shopping for a few hours at least, they'd promised. How good was that? We'd stripped our clothes off, giddy with having the entire house to ourselves. This was just after we'd written "Dream of You" and realized that, hey, we really did have something special, more than great sex between us. I'd lain on the couch, Brandon on top of me. A wide couch -- that's why we'd bought it, though we never told Amanda and Jon (or the salesperson) that. I loved that couch.

That was, I think, the first time Brandon rode me. I don't think Brandon ever realized that Amanda and Jon came into the house as we were headed down the home stretch, but I remember their faces as they stood in the middle of the kitchen, looking through the cut-through at us, Brandon totally lost in his passion, me holding on for dear life and pumping his dick hard. I saw them, they knew I saw them, and I just smiled and let my boyfriend ride on while they watched. They couldn't not -- to move again would have alerted Brandon, and he'd have been devastated with embarrassment.

I don't even remember when they did slink away, because I lost myself in our passion, too. It was sweet and beautiful and wonderful, and nothing was ever said about that. No, no, I didn't think that would be in there, because I never told Brandon.

I closed my eyes, feeling incredible weariness overtake me. It was almost eight in the morning, we'd been reading for hours, and I needed to stop reading and take a shower and get to the hospital. The day stretched before me, and it would be a long one. Meetings with doctors, the psychiatrist. The detective wanted me to come by the station and look at the video of Brandon being raped. And oh, yeah, Sony had called the day before -- "The first release is doing damn good, Nicholas. We need to think about the next one. And when will you be up to photographs, maybe doing some interviews?"

Marisa was coming back, thank goodness; I needed her so badly now. All I wanted to do really was crawl into bed with Brandon and sleep and sleep and sleep, but that wasn't an option, of course.

I heard the sound of footsteps, felt a hand on my shoulder. I recognized her scent. Like chocolate, my Amanda. "Hey, guys, guess who just called?"

I opened my eyes, and Jon looked up from his computer. "Who?" he asked.

"Lee! He's about ten minutes away."

My heart skipped a beat. I saved the file and closed my laptop. "You're kidding! I didn't know he was coming."

Jon grinned. "I kinda persuaded him to get his ass here ASAP." He sobered. "But that was before I knew about Brandon, Nick. He doesn't know."

"I've got to take a shower. I'm skanky," I said.

"Make it fast. He's almost here," Amanda said.

I made it fast. I couldn't believe it; Lee was coming. After Jon and Marisa, and of course Brandon being first, Lee was my closest friend. Knew me the best. He alone of the band had known from the moment we broke it off with Adam that Brandon and I were lovers. Hadn't fazed him in the least. When we'd finally been ready to start getting everything together again, had a record contract with plans to tour, Lee had been the first musician we'd called. He'd stayed with us ever since.

With me.

And later, when Brandon left me, he'd been there for me, let me cry on his shoulder, patting me awkwardly and watching over me as the depression set in, when I reached complete zero. He and Marisa, and later Jon, had been instrumental in keeping me going. Right before I was kidnapped, he'd taken on a touring gig with another band and I'd wished him well -- he'd be back for my next tour because Lee's *my* bassist -- but I hadn't seen him since then. He'd stayed in touch with Marisa, and I'd talked to him on the phone once Brandon found me, but I hadn't seen him. And boy, did I need him now.

I smiled to myself. Strength.

But that, of course, sobered me. Yet again, here was another person in both our lives who had chosen me over Brandon. Seemed like everyone had, at one point or another. I'd even chosen myself over him. How he'd forgiven us all, I couldn't fathom. Brandon Ashwood was definitely a better man than all of us put together could ever hope to be.

* * * * *

I left my bedroom after freshening up, to find Lee standing in the living room, talking to Jon. "Lee!" I cried out, and he turned to me, held his arms out, and I practically leaped into them. "You grew a beard," I said, wrapping myself around him.

"Yeah, I sure did." He hugged me tight, and I hugged him tight, and we were laughing and kissing. And yes, he's as straight as Sam and Tommy, but we'd always played kissy-face, because he's just goofy like that. Lee is not shy and is damn sure of his sexuality, is no homophobe, never has been.

He finally let me go, shaking his head. "First you, now Brandon. What the hell's going on?"

I walked over to my laptop and started to put it into the case. "I don't know, Lee. Did Jon tell you everything we do know?"

"Yes, he did." He paused for a moment, and I looked up. His eyes were dark with distress.

"What is it, Lee?"

He shifted on his feet, looking unsure of himself, a rare thing for Lee. He shook his head and ran his hand over his beard -- he looked rather hot with a beard, I thought.

"I'm worried how Brandon's going to react to seeing me again. I wasn't the best of friends to him --"

Jon clapped Lee on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Everything's cool. He'll just be damn glad to see you, I promise."

"That's right. We're headed to the hospital now. Come with us?"

Lee looked down at his rumpled self and shrugged. "Sure."

"Good." I grabbed his hand and shoved my laptop case into it. "I need someone to carry this for me anyway."

He groaned as he pulled the strap over his shoulder. "A drudge. That's all I've ever been to you, isn't I?"

"No," I said, smiling at him, then hugging him. "Just like Jon, you're my strength. Our strength. Now, come on. I want to go see Brandon."

* * * * *

We left for the hospital -- Lee eyeing Jeff with mild interest, as I'd always sworn I would never, ever, ever have a bodyguard -- but when we got there, I was whisked away from the guys to meet the psychiatrist.

I walked into her office, feeling kinda strange. Unlike Brandon, I hadn't avoided psychiatrists. After all, I'd known Karen's psychiatrist granddad for years, and he'd had fun peering into my brain (and I into his, he acknowledged once with a laugh). No one simply realized I was a candidate for needing one. I didn't let them realize. No one really knew what I'd gone through during my captivity, a fact I quickly learned had been noticed by Dr. Yancy.

She was good. Very, very good. She also looked like my grandmother. Seriously. So, knowing how my grandmother felt about homosexuals -- I mean, look at her generation and all the hang-ups she'd had to deal with (although before she passed she did say it was fine with her if I liked boys, although of course I only liked one boy, but that hadn't seemed important then, with her dying and all) -- the first thing that popped out of my mouth when I greeted the doc was, "Brandon and I are gay. We're lovers, and we're not going to change. If you have a problem with that, I'd prefer talking to someone else."

"I have no problem with your sexual orientation at all, Mr. Kilmain. It's a pleasure to meet you. Noreen Goodall has told me a great deal about you both." Dr. Yancy held out her hand and I took it, shaking it, watching her eyes, the lack of surprise, reaction, revulsion.

"Okay, then," I said, sitting down on the edge of the seat. "What do I do now?"

She smiled.

Five minutes after I sat in the chair opposite her, I was bawling my eyes out, telling her everything. Everything. How terrified I was when I was first attacked, my disbelief and shock and the terror of thinking, dammit, I was only thirty-one and now I was going to die. Of the abuse. Oh, God, what they'd done to me. Of the starvation, being so cold, being stripped and tormented and shoved into a dog crate and left there for days, living in my own filth and stench.

Days of that. Weeks of that.

My captor's laughter, the television that was always on the same channel but I couldn't quite see it, the scraps I was given to eat. The lack of water, pulling myself out of the crate, the leg cramps I endured in so doing so I could be hosed down like a dog. Being tied to the wall, naked, watching *him* eat and drink and toss his steak bones to the real dog, a Rottie that eyed me hungrily, like I was a piece of meat being aged just for him.

Not being allowed to speak. Even hum. No singing. Six weeks of that, and more, no music in my mind, in my throat, in my heart, for fear I'd make a mistake and be beat again. Being posed in frightening and embarrassing positions and photographed, knowing, only because my captor let slip and told me, that the pictures were being sent to Brandon.

Brandon.

"How did you feel when you learned Brandon was out there, getting these photographs?" the doctor asked.

"Hopeful," I whispered. "I felt hope." Because I knew that Brandon was out there, looking for me, being strong for me. Believing in me because I was still alive. At that point I started to do things in the photographs, tried to give clues as to where I was, praying my captor wouldn't notice.

It worked, eventually, but I was so scared, so fucking scared he would see the letters painstakingly written one by one in the dust on the ground or in the dirt on my skin, the way the leaves were arranged to spell out the word that saved me. Scared that Brandon wouldn't understand my message. But he had, because he loved me and knew me. He'd been there again to save me from that place deep down inside me where only he and I knew I dwelled.

That's when I lost it and really started to cry.

Dr. Yancy was very good. We got through that -- I think we crammed months of therapy into one hour, I was so ready for release -- and then at last conversation steered to Brandon and his condition, but by the time that happened I felt drained and, unbelievably, relieved.

"I saw him already this morning. Talked to him for a short while."

That made me bolt up in my chair. "You did?"

She nodded. "I've recommended he not be sedated anymore. He doesn't remember what happened to him." At my widened eyes, she said, "Think of it as sort of a protective amnesia. His mind has blanked out yesterday's events to protect him."

I sat back in the chair with a whoosh. "All of them?" Oh, no, not our beautiful sex in the bathroom, my promise to him. But that seemed trivial now. Sex was nothing to having him whole and safe and in my arms again.

"He might remember in time; he might not. My concern now is finding out what exactly was going on in his mind when he saw that video. Have you seen it?"

"No, not yet. I'm to go this afternoon and ... and watch it."

"It will be frightening to you, I know."

"You've seen it?"

"Yes, I have."

I waited for her to say more, but she didn't elaborate. I guessed I would have to see for myself. I stood. "I'll go see him now."

"His tubes are out, and he'll be able to talk to you. Try to keep things normal as possible; don't mention what happened to him. He just believes at this point that he had a collapse as you both had feared, and had to be brought to the ER."

"Jon and I are reading his journal, trying to figure out what went on from that."

Her eyes widened at that. “He kept a journal? That is fantastic. Be looking for anything odd he might mention, and, perhaps most importantly, things he doesn’t mention. Noticeable gaps. Repetitions. Things that seem odd, or out of place. Why don’t we meet again in the morning, say around ten? We’ll talk more about your experiences, and about Brandon.” She shoved a piece of paper across the desk to me. “He’s been moved to this room. I think you’ll be happy to see how much better he looks already.”

I left her then, feeling a damn sight better than I had when I first walked in. I was exhausted, my side hurt, and I wished someone with a wheelchair would plunk me down in it or Jeff would carry me, but I also felt curiously stronger. It had felt good, letting all that crap out. I’d barely touched on what I’d been through, but I’d never told anyone just how horrible those weeks were. And there were some things I wouldn’t, either, no matter how good Dr. Yancy was.

Of course, Dr. Yancy probably expected me to believe that. She wasn’t done with me yet, and I knew it. But right then, all I cared about was seeing Brandon, holding him, touching him. Giving him my strength.

Chapter Three

I was nervous as I left Dr. Yancy's office. Me, nervous, yes. But, you see, it's like this -- I hate seeing Brandon hurt, and I knew he was hurting, and badly, and I felt so drained and wiped out from my session with the doc, I was afraid I'd start to cry, or say something upsetting or stupid, when I saw Brandon lying there in that bed with all those IVs, and tubes, and all the other shit they'd attached to him. Like the dick monster. I didn't want him to see me all strung-out. I didn't have a firm enough grip on my emotions. But I wanted to see him so fucking badly that it seemed kind of silly to be worried about crying in front of him. But I did worry. I was a mess and knew it. My thoughts were all jumbled, flustered, just like my emotions. Like me. I guess that is the explanation, my emotions all being all twisted up like they were, for why I lost my temper so easily not ten steps outside of the doctor's office.

"Excuse me, aren't you Nicholas Kilmain?"

I'd been walking with my head down, Jeff as ever on my heels. I nearly stumbled when I heard my name, all lost in thought, my mind only on Brandon and what all he'd been through, and how I wished I could've spared him all that he'd endured. Gladly, I would've stayed in my captor's prison for twenty years if it'd meant I could erase the last ten years of hell Brandon had gone through. Not that he'd let me do that. Brandon's like that.

"What?" I said, catching myself, and then I heard the unmistakable sound of a camera's whirl.

"Anything you can tell us about Mr. Ashwood's condition, Mr. Kilmain?"

Jeff pushed his way in front of me. "Mr. Kilmain has no comments. Now, if you'll excuse him --"

But the reporter wouldn't be deterred. He just moved around Jeff like he wasn't there. "The people want to know. Your fans, Mr. Kilmain. His fans. They care about him, you know. What's wrong with him? Is it true he's cracked?"

I shook myself. What had he said? He hadn't just said what I thought he'd said, had he?

"I suggest you remove yourselves --"

"Wait, Jeff," I murmured, staying him by putting my hand on his shoulder. I stared at the smirking weasel trying to stare me down. At his camera boy. "What did you say?"

The man's eyes glittered. "They say he's lost it, gone nuts. Is that true?"

Jeff looked hard at me as I moved around him. "Who told you that?" I said, my voice soft.

There's only two times I'll talk really soft, and both times you'd better watch out. The first was when I was aroused, and only Brandon's heard that kind of soft. And he knew to watch out when he heard it. In a good way, of course.

The other was when I was pissed. Beyond pissed. Furious. Barely in control. And considering I was already pretty much out of control, I was speaking very, very softly indeed. Anger bubbled inside me. It takes a lot to make me angry. I tend to let things simmer too long and then I explode, but I had a feeling the simmering stage was going to get bypassed. Quickly.

Sensing victory, the weasel's camera boy started his camera whirring again. The bubbling grew louder within me. I clenched my fists. "Sources. Inside sources," he said, earning a glare from the weasel.

Weasel turned to me and smiled. "He has a history of that, doesn't he? They said he nearly bled to death because of it. That something he saw freaked him out. He collapsed downtown outside The Blue Door restaurant, didn't he? So can I quote you on that, that Brandon Ashwood had a nervous breakdown?"

Boiling, roiling fury seared through me. I'd had enough. "No, but you can quote me on this." I pulled my fist back and punched him in the face, grinning madly at the satisfying crunch. Weasel bellowed, bending over at the waist, his hands covering his nose. Blood poured out onto the floor.

"He hit me! Did you see that? Take a picture. He fucking hit me!"

The camera boy stared at me in shock. I grabbed the camera and hurled it at the wall.

"Nicholas!" Jeff said.

But I was beyond listening to Jeff. I was pissed. I was mad. I was ... incensed. I pushed the weasel. He caught himself, and I pushed him again, all reason leaving me. I don't think I'd ever been that mad. No one messed with Brandon. No one.

"Get the fuck out of this hospital. Get the fuck away from Brandon. You get near him, write any trash about him, and I'll fucking really kick your ass." I'm such the lyricist, aren't I?

Jeff grabbed the weasel, started to haul him toward the elevator. Weasel cringed, his face white except for the blood dripping out of his nose.

"You're the one who's nuts. You're insane. You're gonna regret this, Nicholas Kilmain. I'll print whatever the hell I want. You punched the wrong guy." He snarled at his cameraman, who had frozen in place. "Get the camera, you fool!" Jeff punched the elevator button. The cameraman reached for his camera, but I said with my Soft Voice, "Leave it."

He gulped, nodded, ran for the elevator as it opened. Jeff pushed Weasel inside. I whirled on my heel and stomped down the hall, stopping halfway, waiting for Jeff to catch up. One didn't run from one's bodyguards.

"Don't worry about that one. Reporter with the *Star*, trash mag," Jeff said as he caught up to me. "You all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm just peachy," I said, stomping off again, anger making my steps quick. I couldn't believe it. I was shaking, my gut twisting. My scar hurt, and I didn't give a damn. I dug my nails into my palms and didn't care. I wanted to feel pain, lest I break out screaming. People passed me in the hall and stepped back, and I didn't care who saw me like that.

Let it be known: Nicholas Kilmain is *pissed*!

"I want to know how he got in here," I said, fury fueling my steps. "I'll take care of it. Nicholas, stop. You can't go in to Brandon like this."

I stopped, cradled my face with my hands, eyes closed. Only then realizing my hand hurt. "Dammit, that hurt!" I said, shaking my hand and holding it to my chest. I was definitely not meant to be a boxer. Tears stung my eyes. I fought to take a deep breath, calm myself. Jeff put his hands on my shoulders. When a sob escaped me -- I couldn't believe what that nasty man had said, what I had done -- he pulled me to his chest. His nice, broad, big chest. But not Brandon's chest, so after a moment, once I got myself a little more together, I pulled back.

Jeff released me. "You gave him a hell of a good hit. Where'd you learn to hit like that?"

A giggle escaped me. Hysteria? "I don't know. I've never hit anyone in my life. But he made me mad." Then I realized no, I had hit someone before. My captor, when he first took me down. But he'd been bigger and stronger and meaner than me, and my blows had been like those of a gnat. Useless.

I wiped my face with my sleeve, took a big sniff, shook myself. "Do I look okay?"

Jeff eyed me, then straightened my jacket. "Yeah, your cheeks are flushed, your face is pale, your eyes are red, you're all tense, and your jaw is clenched. You look fine."

I huffed. Grinned. "Okay, okay, sorry. I just can't believe that man, though. I hate reporters sometimes."

"We'll find out how he got in here. We'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Jeff."

"Any thoughts on who could've given him such ideas?"

I started to walk again, slower now. "Lucky stab in the dark. Brandon's not crazy, but he *has* had a nervous breakdown before." A couple, really.

"He has? When?"

"Barely into our second tour," I said, shoving my hands into my pockets. I didn't want Brandon to see my reddened knuckles. We were at the end of the hallway, where Brandon's room was. "He never liked touring. Didn't handle it very well." That was an understatement. I smiled wanly, then straightened my shoulders. "Do I look okay now?"

"Nicholas, he won't care what you look like. He only wants to see you." He nodded as I continued to wait. "You look fine."

"Good. Good. I wish I'd brought flowers --"

"Are you nervous or something?"

"No! No of course not. Why would I be nervous?" I smiled sheepishly, then laughed. "Silly, huh."

"Just go in. The worst is over. He's waiting for you."

"Don't say anything about the reporter where Brandon can hear, okay?" I grimaced. "At least not until he has to know. The bastard will probably throw a suit at me or something."

"I won't say anything. No problem."

I nodded. "Thanks, Jeff. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"About time you appreciated me."

I laughed, then, straightening myself up, running my hands through my hair, walked toward Brandon's room. I opened the door, and smiled. Just in time to see Brandon's mom spoon him some Jell-O. "Mmm, yummy," I said.

Brandon swallowed, glared at me. "You like it, you eat it." His voice was harsh, rough. But he was talking. He was awake and talking and the nasty intubation thingy was gone, as were most of his IVs. Not the dick monster, though, I noted sadly.

I walked up to the foot of the bed and looked at him, cocking my head to the side. "I would, if it meant you'd get well faster."

Brandon raised a hand, stilling his mom's descent with the spoon. "Enough."

"You need to eat, son."

"I know. In a minute. I want to be alone with Nicholas."

She nodded, then winked at me as she handed me the Jell-O. "You make him eat it, then."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, kissing her on the cheek. She smelled like roses. Infinitely better than hospital smells. She left and I took her place. "Ready?" I said, holding a spoon of the jiggling orange stuff in the air.

"Nick --"

"Yes?" I said brightly.

"Put the fucking Jell-O down and come here."

I stared at my lover, then smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I'm sorry." I put the Jell-O down. "I'm sorry, Brandon." Tears began to well in my eyes. "I'm so sorry, so damn sorry." My breath caught and a sob escaped me. I'm such a fluff. He reached out and I grabbed his hand - his grip so weak -- and let him pull me to him. I collapsed onto the bed, whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again. That's all I could say and I couldn't tell him any more than that, because he mustn't know exactly what I was so sorry about. I sighed.

He pulled me onto his chest, making me flinch with worry -- what if I hurt him? -- but he hushed me, held me, stroked my hair back as the tears, I couldn't stop them, cascaded onto his neck. My ribs hurt, my scar hurt, my stupid hand hurt. I hurt all over but it was nothing compared to his hurts. And yet here he was, again, yet again -- why was it always like this? -- the one comforting me.

He kissed me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. "Hush, Nicholas, it's okay. I'm okay."

"You nearly died," I whispered hoarsely. I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering my promise to him, a promise he now didn't remember me giving him, but that didn't matter. I was sworn to it, and I sobbed again, remembering how important it had been to him that I promise never ever to give up. Never give in, if anything ever happened to him.

"You nearly died," I said again, snuffling.

"But I didn't. I'm weak as hell, but I didn't die, okay? I'm not going anywhere, I promise you. I'm going to be okay. They didn't do anything to me I can't handle, honest."

"But -- but you have a dick monster!"

He chuckled, his hand resting on his groin. "It doesn't bother me. Bothers you more than it does me." I pulled back, looked at him in horror. He grinned tiredly, brushed my cheek with the back of his hand. "The nurse told me it's out tomorrow."

"I'll hold the pee bottle for you."

He groaned at that, flinching as he held his hand over his incision. "Please, Nicholas, let's not go that far."

I kissed his cheek. His skin felt warm, dry. "But I will. You would've for me, you know."

"Of course I would've. They said they were getting me up tonight."

"Tonight? You're kidding. What if you slip? How will you walk with that -- that thing in you? Oh, Brandon, that's nuts!"

He laughed softly. "No, you're nuts. Pure nuts." He stroked my hair back from my face and smiled. "I think I'll win the battle on this one, Nick. Don't worry so much."

I knew he wasn't talking about battling the dick monster. He was talking about everything -- everything he was going through. "You'd damn well better."

He blinked. I smiled, amazed at how beautiful he could be even though he was so sick. How brightly his eyes shined. In his writing he always talked about my eyes, how beautiful my eyes were to him, but they're just plain ordinary old blue eyes. Millions of people have blue eyes. And my thick lashes? Mascara. Seriously. Without it my lashes are invisible.

But his eyes -- He's the one with the amazing eyes. The stunning eyes. There's nothing simple or plain or ordinary about them, hiding beneath feathery lashes. Knowing eyes.

Lover's eyes.

Green, beautiful, rare mossy green, clear and bright and looking at me with such love, such joy and happiness because he believed the worst was over, that he was going to be okay. I wished I could believe it. I felt my eyes water, and he shook his head, using his thumb to brush my tears away.

"You feel so much, Nicholas," he whispered.

"Too much."

"Never too much. How many times have I told you that? But please don't cry anymore for me. I'll be home before you know it." He hesitated, then said, "Nick, do you know what happened? Why I lost it when I did?"

I steeled myself, then shook my head. "No. I was in the other room."

He closed his eyes, letting his hands drop to the bed. "I'm so fucked up. I don't remember, Nick. I don't remember anything."

Even though of course I knew he didn't remember, I was pretending I didn't know that he didn't remember, so he wouldn't be suspicious. Tricky Nicholas, huh.

"You don't remember our wild passionate sex in the bathroom?" I said, whining.

He opened one eye at that. "No. You'll have to tell me all about it."

"I will. Your bedtime story, tonight, I promise." I sank my fingers into his hair, running them through it, grinning at what a mess it was. Such a mess. And so dark. I wanted to highlight it again. Get him out in the sun. His face was so pale, and his cheeks were fuzzy. I rubbed them with my hands, making him smile. He needed a shave. Highlights, sun, and a shave. Maybe I could do it for him. The shave at least. That would be fun, especially over the cleft in his chin, I thought, stroking it with my thumb and looking at it thoughtfully. I wondered how hard it would be to --

"Earth to Nicholas."

I grinned sheepishly, dropping my hands. "Sorry. Don't push it, okay? Remembering. Don't push it. It'll come when it's supposed to. You need to rest. It's more important that you rest than think."

"I know. But I hate not remembering. It's right on the tip --" He shook his head in frustration. "I just can't."

"Please. Brandon. Don't worry about it. The important thing is we get you well enough to come home. That's all I care about right now, okay?"

"What about your CD's release? The interviews? The photo shoots? I imagine Marisa's having a cow about all this."

"Actually, she's not." I shook my head at him. "You silly goose. You are what's the most important thing to me. She knows that. Everyone does. And besides, Marisa says I'm doing pretty damn good without me." He smiled at that. I kept my gaze steady even though inside I was screaming. Dammit, Brandon, oh! I could smack him for worrying about such petty things.

Fortunately, his ability to mind read was a little weak and he didn't note my frustration with him. He licked his lips, his gaze straying to a cup with a straw in it. I picked it up and held it for him while he took a sip. He lay back on the pillow with an exhausted smile. "Thanks."

"No problem."

He smiled at that. "Lee was here."

"I know. He came with me. He was really nervous to see you."

"So were you."

I looked at him in surprise. "What makes you think that?"

He pushed the collar of my shirt aside, touching my flushed skin. "You were afraid of saying something to upset me. I'm okay, Nick, I promise." He closed his eyes, and I was glad, because I knew he wasn't. Far from it. But I didn't need him to know that I knew that he was far from okay. I sat with him, holding his hand, watching his Jell-O melt in the warm room. Soon his breathing evened. He'd fallen asleep.

I leaned over and kissed him, lightly, so damn grateful I could do that, could feel his breath on my face, smell him, taste him, wanting more than that but not wanting to wake him. Jon peeked in just as I kissed Brandon once more, his eyebrow raised in question. Lee was behind him. I motioned for them to come in but they shook their heads.

"We're going to get something to eat," Lee said. "Hungry?"

I shook my head. I had no appetite. Except maybe for Jell-O. If that's all *he* got, that's all I wanted, too. "Can you bring me back a bottle of water, though?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Where's the computer?"

Lee pointed to the corner, and I nodded. They left then, and realizing how bizarre it was, how strange it was that our roles had reversed so dramatically, I settled into the chair closest to Brandon so I could watch him sleep.

Just like he'd done for me.

I opened my laptop, fumbling with it a little -- this was a new computer and I hadn't completely gotten the hang of it yet, but soon enough found the file I was looking for. Where I'd left off in my reading that morning. As voracious of a reader as I am, I'd run through a lot of what he'd written already. It had been fun and fascinating and yet strange, really, reading his account of what all we'd been through. But sad, too -- like the night he'd found out I was married, the part I was about to read. I kind of dreaded that. Big regrets, there.

That was also the night he'd been attacked. I frowned, fumbled through the file until I found the spot, and began to read. And as I read, I began to feel sick. Really sick. This was when it'd happened, when Seth Green had laid the groundwork for the next few years of my lover's hell. It'd been Seth who'd attacked him, and as I read on, learning how Seth had entrapped Brandon into his snare. Because of that shirt. That fucking AC/DC shirt, the one Brandon had worn at the book store, had taken off and handed to me after Percy raped me to ... to ... wipe myself off.

"Oh, Brandon, no."

He didn't. He couldn't have believed what Seth told him, that the shirt would nail me as responsible for the attack on Percy. "Fuck," I whispered. Shit shit shit. Percy hadn't even died. I couldn't believe it. How beat down Brandon was -- that younger Brandon -- would believe such nonsense.

I glanced to where he lay so peacefully, safe and fast asleep. My sweet, beautiful, innocent, and horribly, horribly naïve Brandon. I laid my head back in the chair. Why hadn't he told someone? I could've told him that what Seth had on him was nothing. Karen's granddad could've told him the same thing.

Absolutely nothing.

But he hadn't said a word to me. To anyone. Believing in his eighteen-year-old innocence that there was no other way to protect me except to trade himself for me. To be raped, again and again and again, while being filmed ... My nose tickled, my eyes burned, as I reread what he'd written, trying to understand what in the hell he was thinking.

He'd offered himself on a stake to protect me ... from something I would never have feared. I wouldn't have sat back and taken that, I really wouldn't have, because unlike before, I had Brandon by my side. I may be a pansy and a fluff, but I would've fought. I would've gone to someone for help. Gone to my friends at the shelter. They would've helped me -- legally, I mean -- to stop Seth Green from carrying out his plans.

Oh, Brandon.

But eventually the rapes had stopped, surely, maybe when we moved to Los Angeles the following year. I shook my head. It was all a mess in my head. The rapes, then the tape that was made of us, then the blackmail which was not made by Seth but he thought it was

made by Seth, but the blackmail continued ... and he thought it was Percy, but Percy was in prison, and it couldn't have been him --

Which meant, of course, that someone else was involved. We knew that, now, but who? And when? From the beginning?

The thought of that being the truth of the matter made me sick. From the beginning, from the time I came along.

If he had never found me, if I had never answered that ad, none of this would've happened. Brandon would likely be ... be ... what? What would his life have been had I not come into it? What would my life have been without him?

I closed my eyes over the bizarre twists and turns our lives had taken. I couldn't think about it anymore; it hurt too much, confused me too much. I wanted to talk to Detective Anderson, ask him what he thought, tell him what I was slowly figuring out about all this crap.

I checked my watch. It was only ten in the morning, and I had hours yet before I had to go to the police station and see the video. I dreaded it, but now I felt desperate to figure out what else had gone on inside my lover's head. I didn't understand, really, how he could write about this stuff, but not tell me about it. Maybe he couldn't, like, remember it to tell me -- that made no sense. Or maybe he did remember it but couldn't say it, which was basically what he said in the beginning of his writing -- that he hoped through this I would understand him, that he couldn't say what he was feeling but could write it.

I shook my head, my confusion growing. I had to talk to Dr. Yancy about this. I was glad now I had an appointment with her in the morning, even if she did intend to pry my brain open and peer inside. She could have at it, if it would help Brandon.

I glanced at Brandon sleeping, so peaceful, so clueless as to what had happened to him the day before. I was glad he hadn't remembered, yet it terrified me, too. He had a habit of not remembering, it seemed. If he didn't remember this, couldn't exorcise what had happened from his mind, how could he ever get better? A walking time bomb. Ready to explode, any minute, and the thought of that happening to him, of maybe losing him to where I could never get him back, completely terrified me.

I had to get to work. I had to save him. I scrolled down to where I'd left off, and began to read, Brandon's voice coming alive in my mind. Time passed, and he slept on. Every once in awhile, I'd get up and walk around the room, walk over to him and watch him sleep before returning to my reading. Nurses came and went, checking on him, one making me blush when she tossed his cover back and checked his catheter, handling my lover's dickie like it was just a piece of meat or something. It made me cringe, seeing that thing in him. I couldn't wait until it was out.

But at least all the nurses who came in smiled and nodded at me, offered me drinks, blankets, whatever I wanted. These nurses knew who I was and did not question my presence in Brandon's room, my right to be there. Brandon's mom came and sat with me for

a while, then left again. His dad poked his head in once, saw Brandon sleeping, looked at me -- and then gave me a nod, which actually made me smile.

"How is he?" he asked.

I couldn't believe it. Mr. Ashwood talking to me, so normal. "Resting well. We talked for a long time."

"Good. We're going to eat lunch. Do you need anything?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Thank you."

"You haven't eaten anything since breakfast, have you?"

Caught. "No, sir."

He nodded. "Turkey sandwich, coming up. Lettuce?"

"Um, please. Thanks. And tomato. And some chips?"

He smiled, then glanced at his son again, nodding. "Be right back."

He closed the door, and I let out a surprised whoosh of air. Wow. Maybe I wasn't the demon boyfriend anymore to Mr. Ashwood. Wow.

Mr. Ashwood brought me lunch, and actually sat with me while I ate. To make sure I ate. "Margaret's orders," he said with a chuckle.

Surreal.

Hard to believe this was the man who had said such horrible, hateful things to us so long ago. In time he left and Jon and Lee checked on me again, then went on back to the house for a while, to check on Barkley.

Katie came by and I went outside to talk with her, get some hugs and love, and I learned then that Katie was also expected at the police station. They wanted her to watch the video, too. So brave and determined, our Katie. I didn't want her to see it, see Brandon raped, but she might help pinpoint exactly at what point Brandon lost it. That was important.

"I'm sorry, Katie," I said, giving her a hug. She had tears in eyes.

"I'm sorry, too, Nicholas. I -- I hope Brandon will understand why I have to watch this --"

"Maybe it won't be necessary to tell him. Unless you want him to know. Later, I mean. If we even tell him about the tape at all."

"I think he should know. It's only fair. If you want me to quit, I'll understand --"

"Katie!" I said, grabbing her fiercely. "Don't you dare say that! We need you." I pulled her into my arms and we hugged each other fiercely. I loved my Katie so much. No no no, Brandon's Katie.

After talking a bit longer, Katie left, promising to wait for me at the station. We would watch the video together. Share each other's strength. I found I dreaded it a little less now.

I returned to my chair, kept on reading, yawning tiredly after a while, but no way was I stopping. But the last few pages I'd started to note something, and Dr. Yancy's caution came

back to me. Look at what he'd written, yes, but also what he hadn't. There were big gaps in what he'd written about what we'd been through, gaps that likely wouldn't be so obvious to Jon, but made me wonder. The biggest gap came from when he wrote about us leaving Ashwood, promising Lee we would call him once we had a record deal. Such confidence we'd had -- it made me chuckle, remembering that day. How pissed Adam had been, how glad I'd been he was pissed. Hey hey. Nyah nyah, boy did we get the ultimate revenge -- though I never begrudged Brandon's wish to help Adam out financially. We had millions. Millions and millions, and what Brandon did with his money was fine with me. Even if it meant giving some to Adam.

Who, of course, took it. The bastard.

I got so skinny during those days, before we made it. I remember how hungry we were, not just for food, but for our music, for the imagined fame and riches we just knew would be ours. We were ravenous for it, ravenous for it all.

And for each other.

The sex had been incredible. Oh, gosh, had it been incredible. My face heated and my dick jumped just thinking about how incredible. Of course, it hadn't exactly started out that way.

I scrolled back to that first time, shaking my head in disbelief as I read it again. I couldn't believe he wrote about our first time! We'd done so much better the second time around, but he'd skipped that. When I wasn't such an eager fuck bunny, gave him time to get ready. Why hadn't he written about that? Such a silly boy.

But it was strange, to me, what all else was missing. What Brandon had left out, some of the most fun times we had, starving like we did in our little flat-with-kitchenette with only him and me, his guitar and keyboards, a bunch of notebooks and pens and pencils and a mattress on the floor. And a single lamp. The excitement of writing our first song in his parents' house (while his dad was gone). Of recording our demos. Of getting some gigs here and there about Murrieta, the rush that came from seeing our little teeny tiny audiences build, our music catching on. Sending out our demos, spending hours sitting on the floor and labeling them, the pain of rejection when they'd come back, one by one.

And the overwhelming elation when we finally struck gold.

I yawned, closed my eyes. Just for a minute, I thought, my hands resting on the keyboard. Why hadn't he written about those times? Why hadn't he written about the first real time I took him, took him right, when we shared our passion and it was good and special and beautiful, so wonderful ...

I yawned again and glanced at Brandon. Still asleep. I smiled, watching him, thinking how sweet he looked. Maybe if I were careful ... I set my laptop down and walked over to the bed, looked down at him. I wanted to be with him. Crawl into bed with him as he'd done with me.

I could do it. I could, and it would be okay.

I tiptoed over to the door and opened it. Mutt and Jeff were talking, but stopped when they saw me.

"Everything okay?" Mutt asked.

I nodded. "Yes, we're going to take a little nap. Do you think you could --"

They winked at each other. Winked! "A nap, eh?" Jeff said with a grin.

"Jeff! Just what do you think -- He just had surgery! Of course I mean a nap!"

Mutt nodded sagely. "Yes, Mr. Kilmain. I'll guard the door for you."

"I'm serious! I'm going to take a nap --" He grinned. I punched him on the shoulder, giggling. "You big oaf. Be nice. Now, guard the door and don't let anyone in so we can take our nap in peace."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Kilmain."

"Absolutely, Mr. Kilmain," Jeff said.

I rolled my eyes and closed the door, grinning. I was so glad we'd found those two, and that Mutt had agreed to stay despite Brandon's misbehavior.

I walked back to the bed to find Brandon's eyes open, looking at me sleepily. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"I told them to guard the door so we could take a nap."

"Nicholas, there's no way --"

"Oh, shut up, silly. I mean it. I'm tired and want a nap. To sleep." I touched his face. "I want to lie beside you, Brandon."

He stilled, then slowly smiled. "Help me move over, then come on in."

I helped him, then climbed in to lay carefully next to his side, tucking my head under his arm. I sighed happily as I closed my eyes. I wouldn't take a nap, just lay here for a bit. And rest. Just for a little while.

Just for a little while, maybe think about pleasant things, like the first time Brandon and I made love. The *real* first time ...

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"What are you doing?" I asked as I walked into our bedroom. I had just come home from work. Brandon lay on his stomach on our bed, shirt off, wearing only his jeans, which gapped enticingly around his waist, flipping through a booklet.

"Reading," he said. "What does it look like?"

I glared at him, but he didn't see it because he was stretched out the other way. "I know that you're reading, silly. I want to know what you're reading."

I could see the side of his face. Blushing!

"Nothing."

I pounced on the bed, snatched the booklet from his hand before he could stop me. "Got it!" I chortled, rolling over with it underneath me as he grabbed for me.

"Give that back, pest!"

"No way, I wanna see what it is!" I smashed it under my stomach. He straddled me then, and started to tickle me.

"Give it back, Nick."

"No no no no! I refuse! Not unless you tell me what it is!"

Then he stilled. Bent over me. Whispered in my ear. "It's a booklet on ... on how gay people make love."

I sucked in my breath, looked at him over my shoulder. "Really?"

He smiled shyly at me, slid off me to lie on his side, propped up on his elbow. He looked so damn fetching, his skin warm and golden and smelling so good. He wore the boomerang I gave him. I stared at it, envying it, the way it draped over his chest. Tickled his nipple. Like I wanted to do.

I rolled onto my side and handed him the booklet. "What does it say?"

He took it from me, eagerness lighting his eyes. I wanted to laugh, he looked so cute. Instead I lay on my back and waited to see what he would say.

He sat up, crossing his legs. I loved the teeny tiny creases in his tummy when he hunched over. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the boy, and I loved it. Not that I could say the same, but he swore he loved me anyway.

"Well, I see where we messed up, Nicholas. Look." He flipped through the pages, finding what he was looking for, then handed it to me.

"No, just tell me."

"Lazy," he muttered. "Okay, what it says is that basically, since I was a ... a ..."

"Virgin?"

He blushed, dipped his head. "Yeah. One of those. Anyway, if we'd given each other more time, if you had, uh ..." Now he was beet red, up to his ears. Interesting phenomenon. I thought only I blushed so vividly.

"If I had what?"

"Uh, if you had ... um, used your fingers to, uh ... oh, heck, just read it, will you?" He shoved the booklet at me.

I took it, read what he was so excited about. Now my face heated. "You want me to do this?" Put my fingers inside him? Stretch him. Make him ready for me. I didn't even know that was possible, but there it was. I flipped the booklet over. It was the one Jon and Amanda had given us.

He nodded. "Yes. I think that's what we need to do."

"When?" I couldn't believe it, what he wanted me to do. But I realized he was right. I'd rushed him. Hadn't given him time to get used to my invasion. I felt like a dolt.

"Now?"

"Brandon --"

Worry lit his eyes. "Unless you don't want to, I mean we can wait --"

"No! No, I mean, I'd love to."

It'd been a month since the First Time. We'd lain together since then, having mutual jerk-offs, but I hadn't tried to make love to him again. I'd been too scared; it'd been too mortifying for him. Throbbing heat immediately filled my groin and I looked at him, how he watched my face so carefully, so eagerly. He really did want to try again.

"Okay," I said.

"I want to do it without a condom, too, Nicholas. I think that made it harder." He flushed. "I mean, more difficult."

I grinned. "But if it'll make me harder ..." I laughed, then pulled Brandon down on top of me so I could kiss him.

Our lips met, his a little awkwardly, but I was ready -- so ready -- to take him. I couldn't wait. But I refused to rush it this time, would take it slow, easy, make it good for him. Like I should've before.

He shivered beneath my hand as I laid it on his waist, as I slowly pushed him onto his back. I undid his jeans and slipped them off so that he lay naked on the bed. Still fully dressed, I lay on top of him, loving the vulnerability he showed me. Cradling his head between my hands, I met his lips with my own, keeping my eyes open, wanting to see him as I explored his mouth, rejoicing crazily as I always did when his tongue wrapped against mine, as the heat of our kisses slowly increased. He squirmed beneath me, his hands stroking my back, pushing my shirt up, grabbing my backside and pulling my hips down hard against his own. I rutted against him, reveling in how hard he was, how hard I was, until I thought I would burst.

I wanted to feel his skin against mine. I pulled away from him, reluctant to break contact, so I kept his gaze locked with mine. He looked at me, puzzled, but smiled as I pulled my shirt over my head, kicked my shoes, jeans, and boxers off.

"Lie this way," I said, guiding him to lie lengthwise on the bed. Our heads were at the end, our feet up by the pillows as we lay side by side. I trailed my fingers down his jaw line, letting them travel down his neck to fulfill their fantasy of playing with his nipples. He arched his back, half-closing his eyes, pushing his cock into mine.

"I want to take you from behind."

His eyes opened. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, grabbed the booklet, and lay on my back. He scooted closer to me, his face pressed to mine as I held the booklet up over us so we could both see. He shamelessly massaged his dick as I flipped through the pages, found what I wanted.

"See? Says here, for the first time it's easiest to do it like this."

"Doggie style."

I giggled. "Yeah. Ruff ruff."

He pushed himself quickly to his knees, his backside to me, and wagged it at me.

I laughed, pulled myself to my knees, positioned myself in back of him, and folded over his back, kissing his shoulders. "You are nuts sometimes, Brandon Ashwood. You know that?"

He laughed, fell onto his stomach, taking me with him. Our laughter slowly died as the intimacy of how we were positioned hit us both. I kissed his shoulder, brushed his hair from his eyes.

"Brandon," I said, my voice soft. *That* kind of soft.

"I love you, Nick."

"I love you, too." I reached for the bedside table, found the lube. Rolling onto my side, I opened the lube. He was on his stomach in front of me, his leg cocked at an angle. "I'll go slow, okay?"

"Okay."

"Try to relax."

"I'll try."

He closed his eyes. I didn't want to rush him, wanted this to go smoothly. He may have thought he was relaxing, but he was as tense as if he were about to jump off the bed. I started to rub his back, just smoothing my hand up and down his spine, over his shoulders. Feeling the softness of his skin beneath my palm, my fingers. He flinched, laughing softly whenever my fingers skated over his side.

"Ticklish one, aren't you."

He nodded. "Feels good."

"Good." I kept massaging him, thinking, *boy, I needed to get some oil or something, so it would feel really good.* I continued on like that for a little while, playing with his ribs, making him flinch some more, wrapping my hand around to his front, brushing over his dick. Toying with it, running my fingers up and down his shaft. He moaned, squirming now, arching back against me.

"Nick --"

"Brandon --"

I smoothed my hand down his thigh, back up again, over his rear, marveling how narrow his hips were. I gently pushed him flatter onto his stomach. His breath hitched, but

he did as I wanted, moving his leg when I spread him wider. I circled my fingers ever closer to his opening, grazing it, making him gasp. "Nicholas --"

"Shh."

He could barely lie still now. I circled my fingers around his opening, removing them only to coat them with lube. He hissed when I found my mark again. Holding my breath, I slowly pushed inside him. He clenched tight against my finger, but I kissed his back, murmured gently to him to relax, and finally he did. Little by little I entered him, taking my time, stroking inside him, holding him while he writhed, until he calmed, nodded for me to go on. I used two fingers then, fascinated by how he moaned, pushed against me. *I did this to him*. I made him make the little sounds he made, made him beg for more.

"Nicholas, please --"

So, I did. Removing my fingers, I jerked on myself until I was as hard as I could get, then coated myself, wiped off my hands, and slowly this time, so mindful of how I'd hurt him the first time, I pushed my way inside him, steadying myself by gripping him by the hips. He pushed against me, panting groans roiling from deep inside him. He fell to his elbows, burying his face in the covers.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I want it quick, Nick. Please --" He shuddered. "I'm so close."

"I don't want to hurt you --"

"Now, Nicholas."

So I took him. Hard, fast, yet as smoothly as I could. He rocked against me, groaning in time to my thrusts. Heat shot through me, my skin inflamed. I lost all sense of reason, all sense of time. All I knew was the white-heat enveloping me, the incredible thrill of seeing my lover groaning as he took me in, the amazement I had burst through me as he pushed up onto his hands, arched his back and threw his head back, crying out as, finally, with an incredible groan of pure ecstasy, he came, his body clenching so hard around me that I knew, just knew we were fused permanently together, could never be torn apart.

Time would prove me wrong on that count.

But then, the future seemed very far away. All I knew was him. I exploded within him, crying out as he reared up and I wrapped my arms around his waist as wave after wave of passion rocketed through me and into him.

He folded over, taking me with him again. Great shudders wracked him. His skin was warm and clammy, and the rich smell of our sex enveloped us. He pulled me down and we fell to our sides, still joined, both of us senseless as we let the last rippling waves of shared pleasure roil over us.

We lay like that for the longest time, our breathing slowly evening out, our hearts calming. I couldn't move. How wonderful and amazing and stunning and beautiful he was.

My hair plastered to my face, my skin flushed and warm, I lay against him, kissing his damp back, making him sigh in pleasure.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No. No. I want to lie like this forever, Nick."

"I know. Me, too, Brandon. Me, too."

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Nick?"

"What? Huh?"

"You were talking in your sleep."

"What are you talking about? I wasn't asleep."

"Yes, you were. It must've been some dream you were having."

I grinned. "Mmm-hmm, it was." I blinked, yawned. Lifted my head to look at Brandon, and smiled. I humped his leg, and he laughed, ruffling my hair.

"It's time for you to go, Nicholas."

I pushed myself up on my elbow and pouted at him. "You're making me leave?"

"Jeff just poked his head in. Said you had to meet with Detective Anderson shortly."

I grimaced. "Yeah, I do. Just to talk about a few things."

He looked at me, his suspicions clear, but he smiled, lay back. Let it slide. "Just promise me something, will you?"

I stilled myself, remembering the last time -- was it just yesterday? -- that he'd dragged a promise out of me. "Yes, of course, Brandon. What is it?" I held my breath.

"That you'll come back to me. You still owe me that bedtime story, you know."

I grinned. Waggled my eyebrows at him. Then I kissed him before pulling back and giving him the best, biggest, orneriest look of love I could. "I promise, Brandon. Tonight and forever, I'll always come back to you. I don't ever want you to doubt that, ever again."

Chapter Four

“Um, excuse me,” I said to the policewoman sitting at the desk. I looked around, feeling rather self-conscious. Jeff was a few feet away from me, talking to one of his former fellow cops.

The room in which we’d walked was filled with people -- people in uniform, people who were upset, people with anger in their eyes and others whose eyes were filled with desperation. I jumped as two uniformed cops walked by, a prisoner in handcuffs and shackled feet shuffling between them.

The prisoner looked at me, straight into my eyes. I looked away. He had those eyes -- those terror-stricken, helpless eyes. I knew those eyes. Just a few short weeks ago, they would’ve mirrored mine.

I looked over my shoulder. At my escape route. I always have escape routes now. I wanted out of that place. I didn’t want to be there. I wanted to go back to Brandon and crawl into bed with him, hold him, comfort him, maybe tease him a little when the nurses weren’t looking (or even when they were) and gain comfort for myself in the process.

“May I help you?”

I startled. “What? Oh, yes,” I said, looking down at the officer. I clutched my knit hat in my hand, feeling amazingly nervous. And cold, I was so damn cold.

“I’m sorry. I’m here to see Detective Anderson.”

“Write your name down and take a seat. He’ll be with you as soon as he can.”

“Um, oh, okay,” I said, then quickly wrote down my name and, without looking much at the others waiting, hurried to an empty chair. I sat in it, touched its worn, scarred surface, and clutched my hat again, staring at my feet.

I closed my eyes, softly sang one of my older songs. Or tried to.

Oh, fuck, I couldn't remember all the words; I didn't remember them right. All those weeks while I was in captivity I was scared to even think about my lyrics lest I accidentally start humming or singing, and I don't know, maybe it was the food deprivation or something. I'd forgotten too many, and I needed to fix that. As soon as I could. Almost all my guys were here now. Maybe we could sit down and jam a little, help me remember --

Remember. Oh, Brandon ...

I felt a hand on me. I jumped, nearly screamed.

"Nicholas! Easy!"

"I-I --" I looked up. It was just Jeff, fuck fuck fuck. I'd nearly pissed on myself. "I'm sorry, I was just --"

Jeff bent down to look me in the eye. He grinned, but it wasn't a funny grin. A compassionate one. "You look like a terrified little kid, waiting to see the principal. You don't have to wait here. Come on."

I stood. "But she said to put my name down and wait --"

"That applies to lesser mortals, not you. Come on."

He took me gently by the arm, led me through the room, past the sign-in desk. I wondered if people watching thought I was a criminal. Jeff wasn't dressed like a cop, but he sure looked like a cop. Maybe they thought I was about to be interrogated or something, good-cop bad-cop routine, put in one of those rooms with the big two-way mirror in it with all those cops on the other side watching.

"You didn't tell her who you were, did you?"

"I ... no." How to explain? I'd never liked kicking my name around, even at a place like this. Not a place I wanted extra attention focused on me. That was for sure.

"Hey, you okay?" he said.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure, Jeff," I said. Panic made my heart flutter. "I -- I don't want to do this. I don't want to be here, I want to be anywhere but here, but I know it'll help Brandon, so I have to be here."

He clapped me on the shoulder, making me look up. "Let's get you through this, and then I'll take you to Starbucks."

Despite the flutters in my chest, I grinned at that. Smirked at my bodyguard. "Gee, thanks, Dad."

He laughed, then gently guided me back down the hall. I wanted to dig in my heels, turn around and run, but his grip was firm -- think he had me pretty darn well figured out. Bastard. He pushed me gently to the side of the hallway as a cop with yet another prisoner walked past. I wouldn't look that one in the eye. I was too scared to. Once he was gone, Jeff opened a door to a room.

"In here. Take off your coat and I'll go get the detective."

When I hesitated, he squeezed my shoulder, then motioned to another detective-type guy passing by, a big, dark-headed fellow who looked like the perfect specimen for one of those cop calendars geared toward horny women -- and horny gay males. Yeah, I had one once -- Jon bought it for me. As a joke. I'd loved it. Such pretty boys, cops. A barrel-bellied officer walked by.

Some cops, I amended.

"Nicholas? You okay?"

I shook myself. "What? Sorry."

Jeff grinned, then indicated the other man. "This is Nate. He'll wait with you."

"Oh! That's not really necessary --"

Nate nodded. "I'll wait, Mr. Kilmain."

"But I don't want to impose on you, Detective -- you are a detective?"

"Call me Nate. It's not a problem."

I gulped. Big tough cop guy, do as he says. "Um, okay, thanks."

Jeff winked. "I'll be right back."

"Okay, I'll be fine."

He left alone with Nate. Nate, Nate, very handsome Nate, very quiet, stoic, stern-looking Nate. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I took off my coat, tossed it and my hat aside, then sat in one of the chairs, pulling my feet up under me, making myself small. I wanted to call Brandon so damn bad I could hardly stand it. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to touch him, feel him next to me, soothe him, watch over him and make sure ... make sure he didn't remember. I didn't want him to remember, not yet, what had happened. Not until I could figure it out.

"Mr. Kilmain?"

"Yes?" I said, looking up. Nate sat in a chair next to me, and I hadn't even noticed. I realized then though that he was blushing.

"I hope you won't think of this as an imposition, but ..."

Fan alert fan alert -- I was stunned. "But what?"

"Would you be willing to autograph my Dream CD?"

I knew it! But I gave him my trademarked pout. "What, you only have the one?"

He laughed. Nate laughing was much nicer. "My sister took my others. We're looking forward to your new CD. She's a huge fan. She'll flip when I tell her I met you."

"Babysat me, you mean. Sure, I'll sign it. It's always a pleasure to sign stuff, really. Makes me feel not so forgotten."

He looked at me then, frowning, shaking his head. "You're not forgotten. I don't know if anyone's told you what it was like around here, knowing you were up in the mountains

around here somewhere and we couldn't figure out where. A media circus. Everyone celebrated when you were brought back and we learned you would make it."

I nodded, picked at the seam on my jeans. A little thread poked up. I hate that. Wished I had some scissors. Wish it really all was over, for real, but it wasn't.

"Thanks. I was glad I made it, too."

"You'll have to check the sales records for Colorado. I imagine they'll be pretty big around here. The record stores went nuts, trying to get more of your CDs. I bet the orders for the new one are huge."

I grinned. "You do know how to make a boy feel better, don't you?"

He bowed his head. "I am yours to command."

I squealed, laughing. "Oh, don't tempt me into hiring you, too. For some reason Jeff sees right through my diva act."

He chuckled at that. "He's very perceptive."

"Colorado produces the best cops. Darn it." I sighed.

"And you have two of them watching over you already."

I sobered then, nodding. "I know. I know, we do. We're very lucky to have Mutt and Jeff. We might never let them go again, you know."

"They're a good team. I'd hate to lose them." He grinned. "I'm their boss."

"No kidding? Thanks for letting them come help me and Brandon."

"No problem. I think they would've quit had I refused."

The door opened, and I looked around. Katie walked in, followed by Jeff. He had a tape in his hand. The tape, I guessed.

"Nicholas?" Katie said, then hurried toward me.

I popped out of the chair with surprising agility and only a modicum of pain and hugged her. "Thanks so much for coming, Katie. I know this won't be easy."

She hugged me tight. I kept hold of her hands. "I wish we didn't have to do this."

"I know." I tugged her into the seat next to me, clasping her hand tightly. Her fingers were cold, and so small in mine. I was used to Brandon's big, warm hands, dwarfing my own. But now I had to be the strong one, I reminded myself. I drew in a deep breath, smiled at her, knowing it wavered. But she smiled back and looked reassured. Good. Maybe I should take up my quest to be an actor again.

Or maybe she was the one doing the acting.

Nate and Jeff were talking. Then Nate nodded and, with a single wave to me, left, closing the door behind me. I made myself a mental note to be sure and get him his own copies of all my CDs. Least I could do, he was so nice to me.

"Okay, Nicholas, this is the tape."

"I guessed as much," I said, warily eyeing it. "Where's Detective Anderson?"

"Double-homicide, just outside of town," Jeff said grimly. "He had to leave. I'll be in here with you, will stop the tape any time you want me to. Okay? Either one of you, just say the word and I'll stop. But it's important you watch the whole thing, very carefully. Katie, if you can, figure out where the tape was playing when Brandon walked in. Since Nicholas wall-banged it, it kind of messed up and automatically rewound."

I cringed. Fuck. "I'm sorry."

She looked at me, squeezed my hand. "Okay, I'm sure I can figure it out. I'll try, at least." She sucked in her breath and shuddered. "I don't want to do this."

"I know, I know. It's all right, Katie," I said softly, touching her cheek. "I know it's going to ... going to be hard seeing him like this."

"I'm so sorry, Nicholas. Does he have to know I saw it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I think it's best that he does, but when we'll tell him, I'm not sure. Depends on what his psychiatrist thinks."

She nodded, then smiled. "I might want to talk to that doctor myself when all is said and done."

I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "You need to, tell me. I'll take care of it. Okay?"

"I just want to help him."

"I know. Me, too." I cleared my throat. "Okay, Jeff, go ahead."

I put my arm around Katie, held her hand with my free one. My stomach clenched and my scar screamed and my heart did, too -- I didn't want to see this. Fuck, I didn't want to see this.

But see it I did.

Katie gasped and I cursed as the tape started. Brandon, my beautiful Brandon, walked into a room. His eyes looked so dead, his face so worn. His shoulders slumped. In the corner the date showed.

"That was when ... when we first got together," I said, then watched, mesmerized and horrified, as the tape continued, showing my beautiful young Brandon of so many years ago. Nineteen, twenty -- no, nineteen.

Just after we first met, after the party at Karen's grandfather's house, when he was attacked and lied to me about the attack. But I knew the truth now, thanks to his story. Or at least part of the truth. There was much, much more to what he'd written. And I had much more yet to read.

There was no sound. I don't know if I was relieved or furious -- sound may have given us more clues. But all was silent as I watched a disembodied hand point to Brandon, flick its

fingers, indicating he do something -- take off his clothes. Katie gasped. I squeezed her hand, glanced at her pale face. She smiled at me bravely and we watched.

They stood in a room with blue doors. Robin-egg blue. A four-poster bed with a nubby white coverlet, a dresser with nothing but a lamp and a couple of pictures, and the camera itself, which I figured must've been on some sort of stand.

Brandon nodded, eyes downcast, and pulled off his shirt. Kicked off his shoes and his sweats -- "OH, FUCK!" I barked out.

The tape stopped. "Nicholas, what is it?"

I collapsed back in my chair, covering my mouth with my hand, staring at the frozen image. "Oh, Brandon. Oh, shit, no --"

"Nicholas!"

I started to shake, closed my eyes, took a deep breath. No, no, no, I couldn't collapse now, not now. I forced the words out. "Jogging. He only wore those shoes jogging -- oh, fuck, Jeff, that's when it happened, when he went jogging. He took it up just after we got together, when ... when ... oh, shit shit shit." I took a deep breath, bent over, felt Katie's reassuring hand on my back.

"What else, Nicholas?" she asked.

"I know where this is." I looked up, still hunched over, stared at those blue doors. The same blue on that house's front door, the one he jogged to and showed me once. "He jogged to the house with the blue door, and then he'd come home, so exhausted, and I worried and asked him to show me how far he went. I never figured it out. He showed me the house with the blue door, on the corner across from the park, and I remember thinking, *How'd he get so tired, just going that far?* As much as he ran back then, he could've gone four times that distance, should've, without being so wiped out. Even though he smoked back then."

"Could you figure out where the house is now, an address?"

I nodded. "Yes, yes, I have an old friend who lives on that street; her parents still do, I mean. I think it's probably Seth Green's house, though."

"I'm going to start the tape again."

"Oh. Okay."

The tape started again. This time I watched, without interrupting, holding Katie's hand. I couldn't look at her now. I could feel her mortification through her fingers, her harsh breathing as we watched Brandon position himself on the bed, his butt in the air. Ready. Waiting. Steeling himself for what was to come, deadening himself to it so he could endure what he had assigned himself to endure.

Katie was so young to be seeing this, and she adored Brandon, and I heard her cry softly as she and I watched Brandon be violated. With little grace and no consideration, no gentleness at all, his attacker thrust his cock hard into Brandon. I studied the naked body of

the man, knowing it was Seth, glad he was dead. I hoped he'd died an anguished, painful, horrible death. He deserved no less.

Brandon took it without any reaction at all -- except for the white-knuckled grip on the bed covers, the shudders across his shoulders, the way he bit his lower lip.

It didn't take long to complete the assault. And then, before I knew what was going on, the tape changed, the date changed. Weeks after the last one, and the whole scenario was repeated. Again it changed, and then again, another month, and another, and another assault, one after the other, just snippets of them, the date changing, the shirt Brandon wore each time and stripped off changing, but always the same room, the same man raping him.

Then, something different. Katie gasped. "This is it," she whispered. "Brandon came in right after this."

This time, there were two bodies, two naked men, waiting. Touching each other, their faces hidden from us, but not their hands as they pleased each other with rough fingers, getting each other hard and ready.

Nausea roiled through me. I wanted to throw up. Understood all too well why Brandon had thrown up, only for him it was so dangerous ...

The door began to open and one of the men hurried out. Brandon came in and did as he always did, stripped and took position. But this time, his attacker made him put on a blindfold. Brandon frowned, puzzled, but did as indicated. Then the door opened again, and another man came in, this one shirtless but with jeans on. The third man leaned against the wall, watching. I wanted to see his face, but the angle was wrong, I couldn't.

The assault happened as always, but as his rapist was pumping hard and fast, and Brandon just lay there, holding on, biting his lower lip but taking it in silence. *Why why why, Brandon? Why did you think this was the only answer?* The third man came and yanked the first man back. I watched, mesmerized, horrified, as the second man took the other's place. He was shorter than the other, a lot skinnier.

"This is it, this is when Brandon came into the bedroom," Katie said. "Right here." And the second man raped Brandon, the blue-jeaned man brushing Brandon's hair back from his face. Brandon jerked, spreading his hands in surprise -- as if he knew something was different. But he held his position. His attacker dug his fingers into Brandon's hips, finished, then pulled out. The blue-jeaned man slapped Brandon, hard, across the back. He collapsed onto his stomach, writhing in agony -- and then the tape went dead.

Stunned, I stared at the blank screen. Listened as the tape rewound, listened to Katie's soft crying, my harsh breathing, Jeff's muttered curses. I stood, had to get away, needed some fresh air. I yanked open the door and stumbled through the main room and out into the bright sunshine. The cold air slapped against my bare damp cheeks, whistled through my sweater. Cold, bitter, horrible cold, how well I remembered it.

I closed my eyes, lifted my face to the sun, and took great gasping breaths. I held my hand against my scar because it hurt so fucking bad. How many times had he endured being

raped? Ten? Twenty? Fifty? I tried desperately to calculate how many times he went “jogging” -- ha, no wonder he never wanted me along -- and the numbers added up to the hundreds in my mind, and I couldn’t bear thinking that. But it was that much. I knew it, knew it in my heart and soul that Brandon had endured being raped maybe hundreds of times in the year and a half we were there, living at Jon’s, waiting for that wonderful day when Adam got pissed at me and called me a fag in front of our bandmates.

Only Lee hadn’t quit, beautiful, wonderful, amazing Lee. I wished he was with me, right now. And Jon, too.

I took a deep breath. Looked up, saw Katie and Jeff had come outside. A couple hurrying past glanced at us, but no one else paid any attention.

“I don’t understand. How come I didn’t know, Jeff?”

He grimaced. “He didn’t know himself, Nicholas. It came as a huge shock. Saw himself getting raped and he lost it.”

Katie shook her head. “But it wasn’t right away, his reaction. He saw it, looked stunned for a minute. Then the third guy came in, and Brandon started to ... to get sick. But it wasn’t right away.”

“I just don’t understand,” I said.

“He must’ve seen something else. Recognized the third guy, maybe?”

“Take me back to him, Jeff. I just want to go back to him.”

I just didn’t understand, didn’t know what to think about all I’d seen, and I was too exhausted and worn and depressed to think about it anymore. I just wanted to go home, home to his arms. I leaned against Jeff, let him guide me back to the car, let him help me inside. Nate came out, my coat and hat. I took it, holding my coat tight against my face. He closed the door. Jeff got in and we took off, me remembering too late that I hadn’t said goodbye and thank you to Katie.

We drove through downtown Durango in silence, my chin cupped on my hand as I stared out the window. Then I saw it. “Stop!”

Jeff slammed on the brakes, muttered, “What’s wrong?”

“Pull over. At that corner. Now!”

“What is it?”

But I didn’t answer, fumbled with the door handle. I tumbled out of the SUV, ignoring my coat as it dropped into the dirty snow. We were at an intersection, people bundled against the cold passing by, looking at me, some with recognition but I didn’t care, didn’t care that the cold bit at my bare hands and I’d started to shiver.

I waited for a car to pass, then walked across the intersection. Jeff caught up with me. I stopped in the middle of the street. This was where he’d stood.

I looked up -- and saw it, whispered, "Fuck," as Jeff draped his coat around my shoulders, me barely noticing what he was doing.

"What are you talking about -- Shit," Jeff said.

A car honked at us, but I ignored it, ignored the people looking at me, and stared at the restaurant across the street, the cheerfully painted blue door.

"This is where he got sick the first time, Jeff, where he started to throw up blood," I said. "He looked up and saw that restaurant, that blue door, and he lost it. His body remembered what his mind didn't, and he threw up blood."

I fought to pull myself together. Brandon couldn't see me like this, upset and bewildered and scared. He knew me so well, could see everything I was in my eyes. Yes, he was used to my overly emotional personae, but what I felt then was no act. I stopped Jeff as we stepped out of the hospital elevator into the lobby.

"Do I look okay?" I asked him, looking up.

He nodded. "If he asks why your cheeks are so red, it's from the cold."

"Oh, yes, wonderful," I said, relieved. Handy thing, bitter cold. I could blame the redness of my eyes on that, too. I pulled off my coat; Jeff took it from me. I nodded to him, and we headed down the hall, pausing as a nurse left Brandon's room.

She spied me. "He's been asking about you. Go on in."

I glanced once more at Jeff and went into Brandon's room. Mutt sat in the chair beside him, reading the newspaper. He looked up and stood as we came in. Brandon's eyes were closed, his breathing even. The lights were dim.

Mutt said, "He's dozing in and out a bit. The doctor will be by shortly to talk with you."

"Thanks, Mutt," I said, my gaze glued to Brandon's face. "I appreciate you watching over him."

"I live to serve."

I smiled at that.

Mutt and Jeff left. Panic fluttered in me again, but I quelled it, knowing they would be right outside. Always close, ready to help at a moment's notice.

I stared at Brandon. His hand rested just over his groin. I smiled; he often did that, as if he were afraid I was going to ... Was it because of what had happened to him? Was he trying to protect himself?

Was I going to start reading a terrible meaning behind everything Brandon did? No, no, they hadn't ... they hadn't hurt him like that, they hadn't ... I forced all thoughts like that, about what I'd seen, out of my mind. I couldn't let him know what I'd seen, what I thought, what I knew.

He shifted, his hand clutching briefly, a grimace crossing his face as he slept. I sighed in relief. Poor Brandon. No, no, he was covering himself probably because of his catheter. I'd kept pulling at mine in my sleep, trying to get rid of its offensive presence. They'd had to tie my hands down at first. At least they didn't have to do that to him. I hoped he wouldn't have to have it much longer. I didn't like to think about that thing stuck up him.

He opened his eyes. Smiled. "Hey, why looking so glum?"

I gave him a tremulous smile. "Not glum. Except about that," I said, pointing at his dick.

"Miss it?"

I laughed, surprised at him. Decided to say, "Yes, terribly."

He shifted in the bed, wincing. I moved to his side. "They said if I was a good boy it'd come out tomorrow."

"Good," I said. Then leaned over and brushed my lips across his. His return kiss was so weak I couldn't help but be shocked, but I pushed away my fears, steeled my expression as I pulled back and sat carefully on his bed. "Maybe then we can, you know --" I waggled my eyebrows at him.

He lifted his hand up and brushed the back of his hand across my face. I closed my eyes, leaned into his touch, and pretended to purr. He laughed softly. "You trying to cheer me up or something?"

I opened my eyes and grinned. "Of course I am, silly." But dammit, I lost it then, my eyes welling with tears. I looked away, wiped my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this, am I?"

He rested his hand on my thigh and squeezed it. "I love you soppy or not, Nick. Get a tissue."

I glanced furtively at the bedside table, snatched up a tissue. "Thanks," I said, dabbing my eyes. "I'm sorry, it's just been ... been a long afternoon. I wanted to be with you."

He frowned at me; then comprehension lit his eyes. "You went to the police station? What did the detective say?"

Oh, shit. I forgot my cover story. Then I remembered. "He wasn't there. I could've been with you."

"You're here now." He closed his eyes, his breathing evened out. And just like that, he fell back asleep. I leaned over, kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Yes, I'm here now," I whispered. "And I promise, I'm not leaving you again."

Then with a sigh of longing -- I wanted to crawl in next to him so bad, but didn't dare it right then -- I slid off the bed and glared at the chair. Then I spied my computer. I walked over to it and picked it up, then returned to the chair, smiling sadly as I thought how many times Brandon had done this, had sat with this computer in the chair next to my bed as I slept, as I fought to get better.

He'd been so scared, I thought, as I sat in the chair and covered myself with a blanket. Put the laptop on my lap. A nurse came in then with an IV in her hand, smiling at me as I settled in and opened up the laptop. She checked one of the IVs, then switched it with the new one, nodded to me, and left.

I scrolled down to where I'd left off, found myself really smiling for the first time in a while as Brandon's voice filled my mind, and my heart.

"Hello, young Brandon. Talk to me. Tell me what I need to know," I whispered, then settled in to read.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"Well, this is it, Brandon! Our first home by ourselves! I mean, of our own!"

I watched, shaking my head in amusement as Nicholas bounded about the one-room flat like an eager puppy, his face shining with excitement, little squeals of delight escaping him as he dashed to the corner that was our kitchen, then plopped on his back on our bed, which was little more than a mattress on the floor, then dash to the worn green velvet couch. He stretched out, eyes closed, his feet crossed at the ankles and his hands clasped over his heart. He sighed happily.

I stared at him, at how his jeans tightened over his dick. I laughed then.

"You're hard, Nicholas."

He opened one eye. "Uh-uh, of course I am, silly. I'm a happy boy!"

I set the suitcase that contained all my clothes down next to the box that contained his. "Well, happy boy, you need to get up and help me move all the other stuff inside."

He pouted. "But, Brandon, I'm tired. Can't we take a wee nap first? Try out our new bed?"

"It's the same as we had before. At least the mattress is. There's nothing new about it."

"I'll miss that bed."

"You'll be able to buy a new one someday, I promise. Maybe even something fancier. But not if we don't get all our stuff in."

"Just a minute, really. In a minute."

"No, now." He didn't move. Pretended to snore. I sighed, walked over to him, grabbed his hands and pulled them. He giggled, yanking me down on top of him. "Nicholas," I warned, even as I wiggled into place between his legs.

He grinned in triumph. "Gotcha."

I sighed. "So you think."

Then I tickled him, laughing as he bucked and screamed, his laughter loud and clear. And then we heard banging on the wall. We looked at each other and burst out laughing. I collapsed on top of him, nuzzled his neck, breathed in his scent ... and smiled as his breathing hitched and a soft, melodic moan escaped him.

"Gotcha," I whispered as I nuzzled him again, and he answered by sighing, sliding his hands into my jeans, and cupping my backside.

"No, I got you," he said.

I lifted my head, looked down at him. Shrugged. "Yeah, you do, Nicholas."

"Yeah, I do." He pulled me tighter against him -- it hurt, the way our hard dicks jammed against each other between us, but it was such a sweet, sweet pain.

He smiled at me as I stroked his hair back. "It's amazing, isn't it? What all's happened to us?"

His eyes glinted. "And it's only going to get better. We're on our way, Brandon. You and me. We're going to be superstars. A year from now, we'll be on our way to being famous all over the world."

I kept my sigh to myself, shaking my head at his folly. We saw things different, Nicholas and I. He was so convinced that we were a shoe-in for fame. The both of us. Looking back, I realize how such opposites we were then. He so full of conviction, me so full of doubt, yet I always believed in him. Believed that if anyone could be -- should be -- a superstar, it was Nicholas Kilmain.

He told me once that when he was a young boy, when his daddy asked him what he was going to be when he grew up, the expected answer of fireman or doctor or whatever didn't come.

"I'm going to be a superstar," he told his dad. And his dad, of course, being the practical man he was, told him to be a teacher. And he was, and nearly would've been still, but for that advertisement I placed.

Amazing thing, fate. I believe to this day he would've made it, with or without me. He would've been a great teacher. But I almost panic sometimes, thinking how close he came to not realizing his dream.

Back then though, in that mean, ugly little apartment that was a castle to Nick's eyes, he completely believed in himself. In his talent, the lyrics in his head, his amazing voice. In me. And oh, if I'd known, if I'd realized how disappointed I would make him in the coming years ...

Would I have had the strength to walk away from him, leave him to his remarkable fate, to face it alone? Without me?

No. I never had that kind of strength. I couldn't tear myself from him then, and only did later because I had no choice.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

The hospital room door opened. "Mr. Kilmain?"

I nearly snarled in frustration as the voice's owner poked in. I tried to keep reading, see what Brandon wrote next, but it was useless. "Excuse me?"

"What?" I said tersely, pouting heavily at the stranger.

The stranger did not get the hint. Came in anyway. I glared at the redheaded man who, I estimated, was barely my age. Probably younger. Some nurse or blood techie. The vampires.

"I'd appreciate you not disturbing Brandon. He's sleeping comfortably now," I said.

The stranger raised an eyebrow, then picked up Brandon's chart from the end of the bed, and I realized, a mere bit late, that this was the doctor. I winced as he looked at me, then back at the chart, then walked up to Brandon, gently moved his hand from where it still protectively cupped his dick.

I stood, embarrassed for Brandon though the doc seemed unfazed. Then again, at least this was a guy doc. I'd had a girl doc. But she was a cool girl doc, and very understanding of me and Brandon, what we meant to each other. About our being lovers.

I put the laptop down, my breath hitching a little as I twisted about and stood. Damn scar. The doctor looked at me and raised an eyebrow (he had a remarkable talent for that).

I stood on the side of the bed, my hands on the cool rail. "Will he get the catheter out soon? I hope?"

"Tomorrow. We'll get him up walking then."

"So soon? I wasn't allowed to walk for days after I arrived."

He looked at me then. "You also nearly died from your injury."

"But I thought this nearly killed him."

"Not the surgery itself. The blood loss and shock."

I felt very small. "Oh."

The doctor had pity on me. Said, "He'll be okay now. He's out of that danger, at least."

I nodded. "At least there is that," I said, brushing Brandon's hair from his face. The doctor pulled the covers back, to check Brandon's incision, I suppose. It felt weird, standing there next to my lover, his body naked except for the flimsy hospital gown which was open anyway, another man with us. Not my idea of a threesome. Not that I was into that sort of thing. No way.

The doctor eyed me, and I frantically wondered if I'd giggled or something. I cocked my head at the doc and waited. He lifted that eyebrow again and then peeled the bandage off of Brandon's incision with practiced fingers. "We'll leave it uncovered now," he said.

I stared in fascination at the staples. Yes, of course I'd had staples, plenty of staples, and so had Brandon on his back, but I hadn't actually been in any shape to look at them.

I cringed as I looked at the angry scar. "Is it okay?"

"Yes. Looks very nice, actually," he said. "I'm pleased."

I sucked in my breath, then let it out. "It makes me very happy to hear that."

"He's not out of the woods yet, though. Don't forget that."

"But I thought you said he wouldn't die now --"

The doctor gently covered Brandon again. He hadn't moved throughout the entire examination.

"I'm talking about mentally, Mr. Kilmain. I've discussed Mr. Ashwood with Dr. Yancy. He's still in danger."

I stroked Brandon's arm, watched his face. My chest tightened, fear settled its ugliness on my shoulders again. "I know. I know." Fuck, I knew.

The doctor made a few more notations, then left me. I still didn't move, didn't stop stroking Brandon's arm. He shifted in bed, his eyes fluttering, then opened. He turned his head to look at me.

"Still here?"

"Of course."

"Go home. Get some rest."

"No," I said.

"Stubborn," he whispered.

"Uh-huh," I said, then returned to the laptop. Shut it down. I was anxious to get back to it, but couldn't while he was awake.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice heavy with sleep. I smiled at him.

"You sound like a bullfrog."

"Gee, thanks."

I leaned over him, then kissed him. His hand cupped the back of my head, deepened our kiss before he fell back, exhausted.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"You promised me something, you know." Then he pulled back his covers and patted the bed next to him. It looked awfully narrow, but I dutifully kicked off my shoes, pulled off

my jeans while he watched, pleasing me by the warm glow in his eyes, and pulled off my sweater. "Nick, what if a nurse comes in?"

I climbed into his bed. "Then she'll think I'm naked in your bed, doing wild things to your dick underneath the sheet."

"Nick," he groaned. "If only it was the truth."

"It will be, soon as you get rid of that thing." His coloring deepened, making me grin wickedly. "That's a promise."

"You made me another promise. My bedtime story, remember?"

"What, the two bad boys in the bathroom story?"

"The same."

I slid down further into the bed, pulling the covers over us. I sighed in contentment as I curled as carefully as I could against his side, getting my face as close to his as I could. "All right, Brandon," I whispered, kissing his cheek, lacing my fingers with his, relishing their warmth, their gentle strength. "I'll tell you a story. A remarkably horny story about two remarkably horny men who loved each other remarkably hornily well, and remarkably creatively."

"Nicholas." Exasperation. I grinned.

"Okay, okay. I'll behave." I cleared my throat, nuzzled his face, kissed his cheek, and whispered in his ear. "Once upon a time there were two beautiful men, one dark-haired when he was in the mood, the other a beautiful blond god. They loved each other very, very much, these two, and had an amazing life, and an amazing way of showing how much they loved each other ..."

Chapter Five

“What are you doing?” Lee asked as he walked into the living room back at the house the next morning.

I pushed the plug into the wall socket, then glared at the floor. “Barkley’s shedding. What does it look like I’m doing?”

I turned the vacuum on and, ignoring the twinges from my scar, began to suck up the little dust bunnies, stabbing at them with the vacuum’s nozzle, chasing them underneath the couch. Little buggers couldn’t escape me, nope.

“Don’t you guys have a cleaning service?” he said over the vacuum’s roar. “That thing is awfully noisy.”

Yeah, it was. Not that I minded. The noise drowned out the panicked beating of my heart. “Yes,” I said loudly. I didn’t look him in the eye.

He sat down on the couch, then lifted his feet up when I glared at them. I attacked the carpet beneath his feet, then said, “Get up and help me. Move the couch. Dust bunnies under there.”

Lee started to protest, wisely thought better of it, then stood and pushed the couch over.

“Aha! See?” I said, sucking up my quarry and grinning in triumph. “Nasty little bastards, full of germs.”

Then I started to vacuum the couch. What if germs got there, too? I could see Barkley’s little hairs all over the place. When Brandon came home, he didn’t need to rest on a bunch of dog hairs. Really, Barkley needed to stay on the floor, but given that I’d spoiled him rotten and Adam had, too, that wasn’t likely to happen.

My side started to hurt, but I didn’t care. I directed Lee to move the couch back, then push the chair aside so I could get under there. I could feel his eyes on me -- huge, brown,

knowing. He has lovely eyes, I've always thought, but they show him too damn much, and right now they were focused on me. Watched me as I moved like a maniac, attacking dust bunnies both real and imagined in my futile quest not to let what I'd seen the day before play over and over again in my mind.

"Nicholas," he finally said again. This time, he put that "Lee means business" tone in his voice. I ignored him, moved to the piano. I was getting tired, my heart thumping madly.

"What?" I said, grimacing as I moved too fast. I turned aside so he couldn't see, but it was too late; I had to grab my side. I felt his hand on my shoulder. I bowed my head, closed my eyes against the roiling pain. He cursed beneath his breath, took the vacuum from me, and turned it off.

"Come sit down."

I tried to protest, but he pushed me onto the couch and sat next to me. Looked me in the eye and frowned. I was short of breath. I laid my head back, found Lee's arm, and rolled my head to look at him. I love Lee. Straight as a board, but always had been my faithful companion, always looked out for me, was there for me from the beginning. We'll grow old together, me and Lee, my bassist, my friend, playing my music together. Would Brandon get to, too? Or would I lose him to some nameless, faceless enemy in his mind? How could I fight that? With what?

"Fuck," I whispered.

Lee sighed, pulled me to him. "Nicholas, you can't push yourself like this."

"I love you, Lee."

He chuckled, but when I tried to sit up, he wouldn't let me. "I know you do. Now tell me what's up. I'm not letting you go until you do."

I sighed. Pulled my feet up under me on the couch, but still leaned against him, drawing in his strength. I'm worse than a vacuum, stealing everyone's strength like I do, but Lee's always freely given it, always been the only one who really has. Well, except for Jon. And Amanda.

"I can't remember my lyrics," I blurted out.

He stilled. "What, you mean you can't remember every single lyric to all two, three hundred songs or so that you've written over the past eleven years? Shame on you."

I smiled shyly and laughed despite myself. "No, no, just the important ones. I tried to remember and I couldn't and I freaked." I dropped my gaze. "It scared me, Lee, not being able to remember."

"You will. We'll practice and it will all come back."

I sat up then and he let me, handed me a box of Kleenex. I took one and blew my nose, then leaned against him again. Lee's a good leaning post, warm and non-threatening. "I know, I know, you're right, but knowing I should know something and not being able to remember, really freaks me out. I keep wondering ..." I trailed off.

"How Brandon must feel?"

I nodded, relieved he understood. "I know he knows there's something he's not remembering, and that he should remember it, and I know he knows that we know what it is." I thumped my chest. "That I know, and I'm not telling him."

I looked at Lee. He gave me a quirky grin. "Okay, I think I understood that. Has he asked you what it is?"

"No."

"Then I wouldn't worry about it just yet. Why are you here, cleaning, anyway? Why aren't you at the hospital?"

I studied my fingernails. Really needed buffing. "He's meeting with the psychiatrist, and she wanted me not to be around."

"Is that a good idea?"

"She said that I, uh, tend to dominate Brandon in conversation." I glared at his grin. "And he defers to me too much. Like I'm the boss. Like I'm the total top, basically. Except she didn't put it that way."

Lee chuckled at that. "That's interesting. Is that how you see you guys now?"

I shrugged. "No, no, I don't know. Things are different, Lee. I'm -- I'm different. After what I went through --" I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "I'm just not the same man," I said. "I used to be like that, but not anymore. Brandon and I ..." I smiled at him. "Well. Let's just say a lot of stuff is different. But I guess she's right; I do tend to go on a lot. And, yeah, I guess I answer for him, but it's because I know what he's going to say. But that's not how it was before. Before, I wouldn't let him --" I stopped. "Wow. No, I don't do that anymore. I'm not the same as I was, not the same."

He grinned, ruffled my hair. He's always loved to do that. I always pretended to hate it. Did so now. "No, you're not the same you were before all this, but you're still the same Nicholas. Believe me. I've watched you grow and change and evolve over the years, but you've always stayed the same person, in here." He tapped my chest. "And that is a good person in there, Nicholas. A very brave person. Smart. Witty. Intelligent. And very clever."

I laid my head against the back of the couch again and stared at the ceiling. "Am I smart enough, Lee? Am I clever enough to figure out what Brandon saw before I lose him completely?"

"Is there really a danger of that?"

"I don't know," I said. "He seemed really good when I left this morning, feeling much better, but I don't know. I'll go back up after lunch. He gets to come home tomorrow. Can you believe it?"

"Can you? Are you ready?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. I've been trying to go through all his stuff, all he's written before he comes home, but I have a lot to read yet."

Lee looked at me, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

I pushed myself to my feet and walked over to the table where my laptop was set up. "Look." I sat down, motioned for him to join me. He dragged over a chair and sat. I pulled up the file Brandon had started. "See, he's written me a story, his life story. Jon and I are reading it, trying to figure out what was going on in that head of his, why he ... he ..." I closed my eyes. "Why I'm losing him."

He put his arm around me. "You aren't going to lose him, Nicholas."

I looked at Lee, felt my throat tighten. "How do you know that, Lee? We don't know what happened. I mean, we know he was raped repeatedly --" Lee cringed at that. I recognized the look in his eyes, saw it in my own when I looked in the mirror. I put my hand over his and squeezed. "It's okay, Lee. None of us knew."

He sat back, rubbed his hand over his beard, shook his head. "Should've. Should've pushed. I had the chance, more than once, to force it out of him, pin him on the real reason he was pulling back --"

"I don't think it would've done any good. We were destined to lose him, from the band anyway. He just couldn't handle it like you and I and Sam and Tommy and the girls could. He just couldn't." I took a deep breath and looked at the computer, at Brandon's words on the screen. "He wrote about it, though. What he couldn't tell us, he wrote about."

Lee leaned over and, taking the mouse from me, scrolled down, reading quick snatches.

"Wow," he whispered, a smile stealing across his face as he read through the part where Brandon first saw me in the play. My audition, and how Brandon had fainted from lack of food and being sick and the shock of seeing me. And later, his eyes danced as he read how Brandon finally tracked me down after so long at the bookstore, how I'd made verbal love to him in a room full of my friends.

And then he read how I was attacked, and raped. My face heated at that part. I felt sick, remembering. His eyebrows lifted as he read Brandon's account of how he saved me, how we hid in that nasty, filthy apartment, how we were threatened by those bastards. I felt so weary, reading that again.

"I never knew. I didn't --"

"It's all right, Lee. That was a long time ago."

"But --"

I sat up and shook my head. "No, no. Remember, that was the most horrific night of my life, but also the most wonderful. It brought me lots of pain, but it also brought me Brandon."

"But if it hadn't happened --"

"We likely wouldn't be sitting here trying to figure out what all this means. But we also might not be sitting here at all. I don't know, Lee. I've thought about this over and over again. That night's tragedy brought us together so hard and fast we couldn't help but become

what we did.” I smiled sadly. “We might not have gone beyond that night, not thinking we needed each other. Sparks might not have flown. Dream might never have been.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

I grinned and shrugged. “I think Brandon believed that with or without him, I would’ve succeeded.”

“You probably would’ve, Nick. That’s just it.”

Lee didn’t get it either. “But see, Brandon believed I didn’t need him, ever. But that’s not true.” I pounded the table in frustration. “I would never have pushed myself like I did, or maybe I would’ve been singing stupid musical crap or something. Brandon brought me to a place I could never have reached on my own. He helped me, Lee. I don’t think he truly understands that.”

Lee nodded. “I’d like to keep reading this, if I can. Maybe there’s something I can see in there --” He paused. “If you think it would be okay?”

“Would you?” I said. “Maybe you would be able to see something.” I looked at my watch. “It’s just about ten. I want to take a shower, and then I think I’ll read a bit more before I go back.”

“Want me to go to the hospital with you?”

I shook my head. “No, not if you don’t want to.”

“I can always take a cab back if I start to annoy you guys.”

I laughed at that and nodded. “Okay, great.” I picked up a blank floppy from the table and made a copy of the file, handing it to Lee. I smiled shyly. “There’s some stuff in there that he wrote about me and him and, well, he wrote about it all.”

“Gay sex?” Lee said, wagging his eyebrows. “Always wondered what it was like, two guys fucking each other. And now I get a firsthand account? Cool.”

I punched him on the shoulder. “Lee! I’m ashamed you.”

“Hey, it’s not like I’m asking you to tell me what it was like.”

I stood. “No, you’re not. But I think you’re enjoying the prospects of reading about it a little more than you should, for a straight man.”

He laughed at that, clearly not perturbed. “Just curious. I’ll just pretend it isn’t you guys. But from what Jon told me, you haven’t exactly been shy of your affections for Brandon lately.”

I grinned broadly. “Only because he lets me now.”

Lee sighed and stood. “It’s really amazing. When I saw the articles written about you guys, how Brandon handled you guys coming out to the whole fucking world, I was amazed.”

I smiled happily. “I was flabbergasted!”

“So you think he’ll tour again?”

I hesitated, shrugged. "I don't know, Lee. Honestly I don't. Dream will live again --" The light danced in his eyes. "And yes, you are definitely a part of it. Sam and Tommy, too, if they want to. But it will be a while. We've got our coming tour to worry about first, don't forget."

"You know I'm on board for the long haul."

"I know. And I appreciate that. We both do." I took a deep breath. "Okay, then, shower time for me. I'm stinky." Lee wrinkled his nose and I held a finger up to him. "Not that stinky. I did have a shower this morning."

"Before you worked up a sweat attacking killer dust bunnies."

"Get your laptop, and I'll join you in a bit."

"Okay. Sounds like a plan."

I left Lee, feeling immeasurably better. I took a shower as quickly as I could, then got dressed in black jeans and a gray turtleneck Katie had bought for me. She is a great shopper. Then I joined Lee at the table. Brandon's mom had arrived from her errands, and Tommy and Sylvie had finally gotten up and were eating a late breakfast, and Jeff would be back soon. So I felt content, and ready to dig once more into Brandon's -- and my -- past.

"Okay, baby, let's get to it," I whispered to the computer. Then I began to read.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"What are you doing, Brandon?"

I looked up from my bowl of soup. "Eating."

"Have you had a chance to look at the lyrics I wrote last night?"

I pushed the bowl back and nodded. Hell, yes, I had. "Yeah, they're really good, Nicholas."

He pulled a chair back and sat, then took my bowl of soup. "I'm starved. Done with this?"

I chuckled and stood, grabbed the pan off the hot plate, and spooned some more into the bowl. "Guess I was. How were the little dirt monsters today?"

He groaned, rolling his eyes. "I swear, kids are so bad here. I don't know what it is. It's not like where I used to teach. The kids have no manners, they cuss. I have a biter." He pulled his sleeve up and showed me a bruise. "Look what the little bastard did to me."

I peered at the angry purpled skin, stroked my fingers across it. "As long as the skin wasn't broken."

"It wasn't, but my temper was. I yelled at him." He put his chin in his hand and stared at his soup, playing with his spoon. "I'm really getting tired of this, Brandon. I don't ... I love

kids; you know that. But these kids are ..." He closed his eyes, then looked up at me. "How much longer do you think it will be?"

I couldn't help but glance at the stacks of mail on our bed. I'd sorted it into rejects and bills. There were more rejects than bills -- not unusual for us. "I don't know." I pulled my chair around the table to sit next to him, put my arm around him. He still had his chin in his hand, but his eyes shifted to me. I didn't like the sadness in them. Or the fear.

"I'm worried, Brandon. No one likes our music."

I ran my fingers through his hair. "Not true. Remember how everyone liked us in Murrieta?"

"Yeah, but this is Los Angeles, no friends to fill our audience up and scream and holler and --" He shrugged. "I don't know, maybe we were always meant to be a cover band."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know anymore." He sighed and looked down at his soup. "You should be eating this, not me. You're too skinny."

"I had enough," I said, knowing he likely didn't believe my lie. I *was* hungry, but he'd been sick a lot lately, his constant sore throats a real worry. He pushed himself really hard, both at school and every night when we stayed up late making love and writing and planning for our future -- a future that, as the months passed, grew more and more uncertain to me. He needed the little food we had more than I did. And we didn't have much.

"I don't know what else to do, Brandon."

I walked over to the notebook he'd left for me, came back, and sat by him, flipping to the lyrics he'd scratched down the night before. I reached for my guitar and began to strum some chords, reading the words over and over again while he finished eating. After a while, he started to sing the words to me, closing his eyes as the words overtook him.

He had no idea how beautiful he was. He thought people there didn't like him. That wasn't true. They just hadn't *seen* him yet, not like in Murrieta. Somehow, we needed to remedy that. I grabbed a pencil off the table and began to jot down some notes in the notebook. I'd run out of blank music paper some weeks ago, so I had had to make do with the notebooks Nicholas got for us from the school.

We continued like that, as we did every night -- Nicholas so tired he could barely function, and me coaxing him along, drawing out what I knew was hidden deep inside of him. Nicholas told me once that if not for me, the emotions inside of him would never have been unleashed and he'd no doubt have been eaten alive by the age of thirty. That only I had the key to let them out, let the words flow through his mouth and carry on his voice into the world.

He was wrong about that, of course. Nick's one of those rare, magical beings whose gift is so strong, so tangible, there would never have been any way to stop him. I was just the guy

lucky enough to be there to catch his wind in my sails and be transported by him across amazing worlds.

That night, though, we both were feeling down. It was too warm, even with all the windows open. Our little Christmas tree I'd bought for two dollars at a thrift store sat sadly in the corner, its tinsel drooping. I looked around at our place, at the blank, ugly walls, the dirt-brown, matted carpet, the torn linoleum and yellowed refrigerator that never ran cool enough, and felt despair weigh me down.

I didn't need much, but I sure as hell wanted more than this. I never said that to Nick. He needed me to keep his spirits up. Sometimes it was hard, though, really hard.

Nicholas rubbed his throat, tears in his eyes. He looked at me, shaking his head. "I can't sing anymore tonight, Brandon. I just want to go to bed. I don't feel so good."

"Okay, Nicholas, that's fine." I put down my guitar, picked up his bowl, and rinsed it out in the sink, taking care not to slosh the liquid in the crack on the left side.

He trudged into our bathroom -- a room so small both of us couldn't be in there at the same time unless one of us stood in the tub -- and brushed his teeth, washed his face. He stared at himself in the mirror -- I watched him, and he didn't know it -- and began to pose. I bit my lip to keep from laughing as he tried different postures on his mirror self.

Later, when he and I found every move we made photographed, I regretted not joining him in his practicing. That's what he was doing, after all -- practicing posing in front of a camera, making sure he was so well trained and ready that, unless a photographer caught him unawares, they never saw what really lurked in those blue depths.

Fear. Fear not of success, but that he wouldn't find it at all. That he'd be stuck in a place like this for the rest of his life. And later, when the success did come, the fear that he would lose it all. I'd known from the beginning that Nicholas had an insatiable drive to succeed. Success to him meant never being hungry again, having a nice house, being able to help friends and, later, strangers ... the fans ... too. The lyrics he wrote, especially in latter years, reflected that desire of his to help others through his music. Through his words he tried to bring people up, mend their hearts, lift their spirits. Almost every song he wrote had a basis in someone else's pain or need. Or, quite often, his own.

Nicholas didn't write songs because he thought "this" or "that" would give people what the current "those in the supposed know" thought they needed. He wrote from his heart, and from that deep, dark place inside of him. Sometimes it was a painful thing to witness, and more than once I'd seen him change lyrics that delved too deep.

So many people claim Nicholas feels too much, and maybe that is true, but that is Nicholas. And maybe because of that, we had a nice, big stack of rejections to sort through every day.

We'd sent out about a hundred fifty or so of the demos we'd made after scraping together what Christmas money we'd been given and the little amounts we'd been able to save from our jobs. I'd gotten a job at a copy shop, where I'd been able to make us nice little

covers for our tapes. I'd been addressing them all myself, and after each group was ready, Nicholas and I walked to the post and sent them on their way, Nicholas singing a silly little good luck song to each tape as he dropped it in the box.

The rejections had started almost immediately. Some were just simple "no, thanks, not for us" rejections, others were scathing. One was so bad I tore it up and threw it away before he got home from work. If Nicholas had seen it, it would've crushed him, and that I didn't want. I'd been waging a battle to keep his spirits up, and something like that would've put him to bed for a week. Maybe made him give up entirely.

Years later I had the chance to talk with that individual who had been so needlessly cruel. We were at some event or other; I don't remember what because frankly so much of those years are like a fog in my head. But I remembered this event. Nicholas and I were the guests of honor. We'd gotten some award that evening and had gone to this producer's house that night -- think he had something to do with the show or something. Don't remember, don't care.

So, anyway. We were at this guy's house, Nicholas and I. I think it was just after our first number one, when I found myself surrounded by a group of people -- and him. James Rivers, his name was. I remembered. He started fawning over Nicholas, saying hey, if we ever got tired of our current situation, to look him up, he'd do right by us. Nicholas was dazzled by the attention -- it still hadn't really hit him, what was going on, the power he had. He was still so like a little kid then, staring in disbelief at the magic taking place around him, naively unaware that he was the cause of it all.

But I knew.

I looked Rivers square in the eye. "You mean you want to represent Nicholas? Nicholas Kilmain, who you once said screamed like a stuck pig in heat, whose shallow lyrics you wouldn't use to wipe your ass? Nicholas Kilmain, who even if he did get anywhere with his music, it would be only fit enough to entertain drunken fags?" Okay, it was something to that effect. Maybe not the exact words, but close.

Nicholas stared at me in shock. "When did he say that? We've never even met him before."

I grinned and held my glass up to our manager Steven, who was also there. "Not in person. But we encountered him, all right. About five rejections before Steven recognized the brilliance that is you." I turned to Rivers then. "By the way, I didn't get to say it then. But fuck you." Then I flipped him the finger and walked off.

I heard Nicholas sputter something, then come after me. But instead of the chastising I expected, he threw himself into my arms -- something he rarely did by then. I laughed, hugging him back, and we escaped that party, a bemused Steven accompanying us, more than a few people wondering about the quick kiss Nicholas gave me, but which I quickly covered by grabbing him by the neck and rubbing my knuckles on his head, making him laugh.

By then, I was well practiced at covering for Nick's occasional slips. Not even Steven knew Nicholas and I were lovers. By then we lived in separate houses, and Nick's continued marriage to Karen, though not exactly something I liked, had proven to be quite useful. He'd started to wear his ring, and though it seared my heart to see it, I knew it was the right thing to do.

That night, though, was a long ways away from that hot day at the end of December, when Nicholas first started to come down with a cold that would put him in bed for a week. But would also put him there, with me, when we finally got the news we'd dreamed of getting -- and I'd feared we never would.

* * * * *

"I feel so terrible," Nicholas said, rolling onto his side. He sneezed into yet another tissue and stared at me, his misery so clear I felt guilty.

"I'm sorry, baby. What can I get you? Some more soup?" I sat wearily in the chair, ready to forget my own tiredness if he wanted something.

He lay back with a thump on his pillow. "I hate soup. I never want soup again, ever, ever, ever, okay?"

A whole bag of soup cans sat on the counter in back of me, but I nodded. "Okay."

"I want a prime rib."

I laughed. "But you're a vegetarian."

He sighed, closing his eyes. Drew the blanket up to his chin. He had the chills, had on both his robe and mine underneath the blankets and was still cold. "Right now I'd eat a whole cow if it would make me better."

I smirked at that. "I won't hold you to it. You'll get better. You'll see. We'll rest all weekend, and by Monday you'll feel fine."

He noticed then that I'd slipped on my shoes. "Where you going?"

"To check the post."

"Why bother?"

I grimaced, stared at the box that held all our rejections. Almost all, that is. Except for those I tore up to protect Nicholas. I'd marked them as "no response" on our checklist. "Hey, you never know. We could hear from one of the sweepstakes places today. We could be millionaires."

He laughed bitterly at that. "Like that will ever happen," he said, his voice trailing off into a sigh. He grabbed another tissue and wiped his eyes, then turned to me and held out his hand. I smiled, reached out, and took it, letting him pull me to the bed. My heart thumped wildly as he looked at me, touched my cheek. We hadn't kissed in days, much less made love; he was too afraid of making me sick. This was his third really bad cold since I'd known

him. They always affected his voice, and that worried me. I reached for his medicine and shook two pills out, handing them to him.

"Swallow these like a good boy."

He wrinkled his nose. "They taste like chalk. Do I have to take them?" he whined.

"Yes. You won't get better if you don't."

He pouted at me, but I gave him a stern look. He took the meds, whimpering as he lay back. I pulled the covers back over him. "You're not dying, you know."

"I feel like it. You don't look so good yourself."

I sighed. "I think I might be getting your cold."

He thumped the bed. "I knew I shouldn't have let you sleep with me. I breathed all my nasty germs on you."

I laughed, then grabbed a tissue and blew my nose. I really did feel sick-tired, sort of dizzy even. "I wasn't about to sleep on the floor. I'll be fine."

"Where are you going?"

"To get the post, bonehead. Remember? I haven't checked in a few days."

"Oh. Isn't everything back now?"

I bent down and laced my shoes. I paused as I looked at them -- I'd grabbed my running shoes. I hadn't done any running since we'd left Murrieta, I realized. Not that I missed it. I'd never really liked it anyway, but just had been ... compelled, I guess you'd say, to keep it up.

My stomach clenched, and I wrapped an arm around myself, took a deep breath.

"Brandon, you okay?"

I took a deep breath and nodded, willed my stomach to relax. Finally it did, and I tied my other shoe. "Yeah. You don't have a stomachache or anything, do you?"

"No. Except from throwing up. I threw up so much this morning I thought I was going to make my stomach explode."

I grimaced at him, and a wave of sympathetic nausea roiled over me. I really *wasn't* feeling so hot, I realized. "Thanks for sharing that. I hate throwing up."

"You think I like it? Go check and hurry up. I want to snuggle. I'm cold."

I laid my hand on his forehead. He still felt so hot. Hopefully the meds would bring his temperature down again fast. "I'll hurry. Don't answer the phone if anyone calls, okay? You need to save your voice."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay," he whispered. "Hurry back to me, Brandon."

I leaned over and kissed him on his forehead. Figured if I was getting sick already, there wasn't a reason not to. "I will."

I left the apartment, headed for our post box. It was hot without any clouds in the sky. The sun beat down on me, making me feel dizzy. I really needed to eat more than I was, I guessed. I'd just gotten paid, but almost all the money went to meds for Nicholas. All I'd been able to buy was more soup. And like Nicholas, I was really getting sick of soup.

I took a deep breath, trying to breathe in something besides the stench-laden air. I passed a couple of guys Nicholas talked to occasionally, but didn't stop -- I'd insisted we keep our living together as quiet as possible. We existed in a little vacuum, Nicholas and I, a small circle of hope and love surrounded by depression and blight.

The neighborhood we lived in was gay-friendly, but rough. Too many of our neighbors were like us -- young, in love, rejected by their families. And damn poor. Not that Nick and I were rejected, but my dad had pretty much made it clear I wasn't to come back around the house unless he was gone.

The last time I'd stopped by to see my mom -- and get the money she insisted I come get -- my dad came back home with Adam from the grocery store. Adam had moved back home, which my dad had allowed with open arms. The bastard. I was in my old room, which my dad planned to make into a study, getting the last of my books to take with me, when Adam walked by. I'd just picked up the book where I'd hidden the little pictures of Nicholas. Adam startled me -- the pictures slid out of the book, fluttering to the floor.

"What the fuck's this?" Adam said, all innocence, swooping down and snatching one up. I knew from my mom that he'd known about the pictures, so he wasn't fooling me. I grabbed for it, but he was quicker.

"Give it back, Adam."

But he danced out of my reach and started to laugh. "Look at this, it's Nicholas. And didn't he look sweet back then? So cute and innocent, so fuckable."

I grabbed for him, but he jumped on my bed. I gave up. Pushing it would make his taunting continue, and I'd about had enough of my brother. I put the rest of the pictures back in the book and put it in my box.

"What, you giving up that easily? Of course, you have the real thing now, don't you. No money to eat on, but you can eat each other, huh?" He jumped off the bed and shoved the picture in my jeans pocket. He laughed at my frustrated snarl, leaned close to me, and whispered in my ear. "Tell me, little brother. Which of those did you jerk off to every night? I used to hear you, you know."

I wrenched from his grasp. "Cut it out, Adam."

He laughed, then threw himself on my bed onto his back, crossing his feet and putting his hands beneath his head. "You thought you were being quiet. It was hilarious. Oh, oh, oh, Nicholas! Baby! Make me come, baby. I wanna come!" He started to buck on my bed. My face flamed, and I picked up the box and left the room.

He jumped off the bed and followed me. "What's wrong, Brandon? That's what you said. I heard you. Nick, Nick, Nick, make me scream, Nick. Oh, yes, suck my cock, Nick!"

I whirled on him. "Shut the fuck up!"

He threw his hands up, his eyes lit in mock horror. "What's the matter, Brandy boy? Afraid the parents will hear you jerked off to a little picture? I'm sure they know already. You're really loud. A screamer. Did you pretend he was in there with you, yanking your dick?" I turned away from him and headed down the hallway, anger spurring my steps. He stayed on my heels. "Which one of you is top, Brandon? I sure as hell bet you aren't. You're the fucking girl, aren't you? You the wifey, Brandon? Do you let Nicholas stick his little bitty dick up your ass, wifey boy?"

I dropped the box, whirled around, and punched him in the face. He stumbled against the wall, knocking a picture off. It crashed to the floor, glass flying everywhere. Then he came after me, swinging wildly.

I went nuts. Hunger, frustration, fear, worry over the futility of what we were doing, and fury at Adam's taunting took hold of me then and I went after him. We fell to the floor, the glass cutting me on the arm, pummeling each other until my dad came roaring in, jerking us apart.

We were both cut and bleeding, and I'd never felt so much hate for any one person in my life as I did then.

"What the fuck are you boys doing?"

"Brandon's nuts, Dad. He punched me."

"Only because you wouldn't leave me alone!" I took a step toward Adam -- he backed up, right into Mom.

"What is this all about?" my dad demanded.

I stared at Adam -- and he grinned. Blood trickled from his nose and his eye was swelling, and he fucking *grinned* at me. "I'll tell you if he won't," he said.

"No!" I yelled, then leaped for him.

My dad pushed me against the wall. My head snapped back, and I cried out, which made Adam laugh all the harder.

"Brandon!" I slumped to the ground as my mom knelt beside me, brushing my hair from my face. "Honey, are you all right? What is this all about?"

My face heated as I stared up at my brother. He leered at me, mouthed, *Momma's boy*. Hatred rolled through me, but he just grinned, pulled the book out of the box, and yanked out a picture of Nicholas. "Caught Brandon jerking off to this."

Stunned, I stared as my dad took the picture, disgust reddening his face. He crumpled it, then threw the paper at me while Adam laughed and my mom tried to soothe me.

"Leave me alone," I said, pushing off the wall. My heart clenched -- that was the first time I ever rejected my mom, but I didn't need her babying me, not in front of Adam.

"Don't you dare leave, Brandon Ashwood," my dad said.

"Leave me the fuck alone!" I grabbed the box and ran through the house to my car, bloodied, cut, humiliated. I threw the box into the back seat and sensed my mom coming after me, but I slid in and slammed the door shut.

"Brandon --"

I looked up at her. "I wasn't doing that. He lied."

"I know, dear."

"Why, Mom? Why do they hate me so much?"

"They don't hate you. Brandon, please come back inside."

"No. I'm not going back in there. I just want to go."

I started the car and took off. When I reached our apartment, Nicholas had been home, so I hadn't been able to hide the cuts from him. The scene that followed then was almost as bad. Nick's a soft kind of guy until he's angry. I almost had to beg him not to drive to my parent's house and add a few more bruises to Adam's face.

"Hey, you getting your mail or what?"

I startled, realizing I stood in front of the mailboxes, our key in my hand. I'd lost myself, hadn't realized what I was doing. I looked up to see Mrs. Parkson, one of our neighbors, staring at me. "Sorry. Was just thinking about something."

She gave me a funny look. "Hurry up. I'm expecting a letter from my sister."

"Oh, yeah, okay. Sorry, Mrs. Parkson." I keyed our mailbox and opened it, my heart sinking as I saw the mail stuffed inside. I hadn't had the heart to check it lately, hadn't wanted Nicholas to suffer through more rejections while he was so sick.

I pulled everything out and sorted through them real quick. It wasn't much. Bills, circulars, and ... My heart skipped a beat. One of the people we'd sent our demo to had written back.

"Son, I'd really like to get my mail."

I looked up. "Oh, sorry. I'm sorry."

She frowned, then said, "Are you okay? Bad news?"

"I -- I don't know."

I tucked all the mail underneath my arm except for the letter and headed back toward our apartment. Sliding my finger in the corner, I ripped it open, then stopped. Stared at the letterhead. I began to shake. "Oh, my God," I whispered, staring at the words. "Oh, my God."

Dear Mr. Kilmain and Mr. Ashwood, I reviewed the demo tape you sent me and would like to talk to you at your earliest convenience --

"OH, MY GOD!" I screamed, jumping up and throwing the bills in the air. I ran for the apartment, dodged a woman walking her dog, leaped over a bush, tore up the cement steps to our apartment two at a time, wincing at a sudden pain my stomach -- and realized the door was open.

"Nicholas?" I called out, panic replacing my excitement. I burst in to find him sitting at our table, wrapped in both robes, a cup of hot tea cradled in his hands. He wasn't alone.

A man in dress pants and a shirt stood next to him, smiling. A briefcase sat on the floor next to him.

"Nick?" I said again, a wave of dizziness making me grab the back of the other chair.

"Brandon, you won't believe," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper he was so hoarse.

"Stop talking, son. Rest your voice," the stranger said, putting his hand on his shoulder.

I stared at the man, angry at his familiarity with Nicholas. "Who the fuck are you?" I demanded.

The man grinned and stuck his hand out. "You must be Brandon. I'm Steve Rasmussen. Did you not get my letter? I'd like to help you and Nicholas. I was very impressed with your demo, and I think you guys have what it takes to be superstars."

Another wave of dizziness overcame me as I stared at Nicholas, at his shining eyes, his happy grin -- and for the second time in my life, I fainted.

Chapter Six

Colorado -- Present Day

"You're kidding, Nicholas. He really fainted?" Lee said.

I nodded. "Yup, he sure did." I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my side. Margaret walked into the living room, carrying plates with sandwiches on them.

"Thanks. What kind are they?" Lee said, peering at his sandwich.

"Chicken salad. And you're welcome, sweetheart."

"But, *Mom*," I said, glaring at the sandwich. "I don't like --"

"Hush. You'll eat it, and that's final."

Lee laughed as he took a bite, nodding his pleasure. I glared at him and picked up half my sandwich and bit into it. I'd promised my doc I would eat a good bit of protein every day. But chicken salad?

"Stop making faces, son. It has vegetables in it."

Lee nodded. "Celery. Mmm. Good. Eat."

I chewed on it -- and yeah, it was pretty good.

"You boys need anything else?" Margaret said, placing her hands on my shoulders.

I swallowed and leaned against her. "Water?" I said as she brushed my hair from my face. I looked up at her and fluttered my eyelids. "Juice, maybe?"

She laughed, then bent and kissed me on the nose. "No need to bat your eyelashes at me, Nicholas Kilmain. Lee? Water or apple juice?"

"I feel like a little kid. Apple juice, please."

She winked at him, then ruffled his hair and left us, returning moments later with mugs of ice and two bottled juices. Then she left, and we were alone again. Lee pointed with his sandwich at the screen. "Did he really think Steven didn't know you guys were lovers?"

I nodded and stared at the screen, my sandwich forgotten. "Yeah, I know. I couldn't believe it when I read that. I thought it was kinda obvious -- small apartment, one big bed. The way I looked at Brandon. Couldn't stop looking at Brandon."

"The condoms in the trashcan."

"Weren't using them by then."

He arched one eyebrow. "The lube in the bathroom --"

"Bedside table, actually."

"Gay porn magazines sitting around -- not that *you* looked at them."

"Never!" I said in horror.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right, never. The smell of sex in the room --"

I laughed. "The way I kissed Brandon right in front of Steven before Brandon actually woke up from fainting, and the things I said to him, the promises I made if he'd just be okay. Yeah, Steven knew. He just never said anything. Except to say 'keep them guessing.'" I shrugged. "We pretty much did. Most people never figured out about us. Not until later, anyway."

Lee grinned. "Well, it was always obvious to me, but then, I've got a strong gaydar."

"You had strong gaydar before gaydar was even a word. We really didn't surprise you at all, did we?"

"Nope. But I knew it was hard on Brandon. That's the only reason I put up with you flirting with me."

I punched him on the shoulder. "You loved it and you know it." He blew me a kiss, then made me giggle when he bent over and nuzzled my neck and growled at me. "Lee Nelson, cut it out!"

Margaret poked her head through the door. "Everything okay in here?"

I pushed Lee away. The little monster pushed back and attacked me again.

"Where's Jeff when I need him?"

Lee sat back in his chair, smiling innocently as Jeff appeared in the doorway, frowning, Katie watching from behind him.

"Want I should toss him in the snow, boss?"

I smirked at the bad gangster accent. "That would be fun to see."

"Hey! Oh, no, you don't," Lee said, darting from his chair as Jeff took a step forward. My bodyguard winked at me, then pointed a finger at Lee.

"Behave, or out you go to the doghouse."

"Even the dog doesn't sleep in the doghouse."

Barkley woofed. We all looked at him -- he'd raised his head from his pillow and was looking at us.

"Don't worry, baby, I wouldn't dream of making you go out there," I said to my precious pup.

"But you would me?" Lee said.

"Yup." I picked up my sandwich and took another bite as Lee laughed. Margaret, Katie, and Jeff disappeared again. "But, yeah, he really didn't think anyone knew," I said, thinking of Brandon, now asleep at the hospital -- we would be heading that way later -- and his naiveté, his almost obsessive need to believe that no one knew he was gay.

I put my sandwich down.

"Nick, what is it?"

I blinked. "Lee, do you think he was ashamed of me?"

Lee's eyes widened. "Nick, no of course not! Brandon was incredibly proud of you. Amazed by you. Why would you think that?"

I stared at my hands, my pale, almost ghostly-white hands. They looked older to me than they used to. Scarred. Lots of scars. My captor had liked his little knives. "It would've been so much easier if we'd just let it be known we were lovers, don't you think?"

He nodded. "I don't think it would've hurt your success at all, Nick. It wouldn't have bothered me or the guys, either. Besides, I think most people realized it, if they looked close enough, that you were -- are -- gay."

I gave him a half smile. "Think?"

"Yup."

"Good thing I really didn't want to be an actor."

He laughed, rubbed my shoulder. "Oh, yes, you did. You still would if you could."

"Only if I could be in --"

-- in *Star Wars*. I know. Hey, shouldn't we go on to the hospital?"

"No, Brandon's dad said they gave Brandon something to make him sleep, and that he'd call me. He thought I'd be more comfortable waiting here."

"He's probably right."

"It's weird, Brandon's dad being so nice to me now."

Lee looked at me and nodded. "It's good, though. I'm glad."

"Me, too."

I looked out the window. The day was a dismal one, heavy clouds cloaking the little mountains off our property. And cold. The wind blew hard against the house. It *was* better here than the hospital. A fire roared in the fireplace; Barkley lay curled up on his cushion in

front of it, basking in it; I was warm and comfortable in my Under Armour and jeans and fuzzy-lined house shoes.

Jeff and Amanda were in the kitchen. Jon and Sam, who had flown back into town the night before (think Katie was a bit of incentive there), were in the den along with Katie, watching TV. Tommy had even come downstairs. He was pretty sore now, and itchy -- everything was healing really well, but he said the healing was almost worse than the burns themselves.

I had no idea where Adam was. I couldn't have cared less.

The people who mattered to me the most were here, under my roof where they belonged. Except for Brandon, of course.

Tomorrow he would come home. I could hardly wait, yet it terrified me, too. At least at the hospital help was right there. Just a few feet away. Here, we would have to wait for help to arrive if something else bad happened, and that made me very nervous.

The cold, whistling wind made me shiver; the heavy clouds made me cringe. The mountains had looked like this, that day I was brought by my captor to the place destined to be my hell. It was, I realized, pretty much the first time since Brandon and I bought our house that I wished I were in California again.

But that was no longer an option. I wouldn't go back there for a long while. Hadn't been there in so long ...

"Nick, you okay?"

I startled, smiled sheepishly at Lee. "Sorry."

"Think I'm going to read some more. You in?"

I sighed. "I guess. I'm so tired, though."

He nodded in sympathy. "You're pretty pale. How about we go sit on the bed? Put on some music and --"

"- and pull the blankies up and cuddle while we read?"

He laughed. "We could, yeah. If you want."

"I want. You could read to me --"

He sobered at that, shook his head. "No, no not a good idea."

I paused from getting up. "What is it?"

"I've read a little ahead of you. Remember you told me to look for the strange, unusual?"

"Yes ..."

"And things left out?"

I stood, closed my laptop. Didn't want to look at Lee. Heard the caution in his voice. "Yes."

"He jumps. From that moment when he fainted, he jumped around, a lot."

I looked at Lee. "What? What do you mean?"

He picked up my laptop, then took me by the arm. I was stunned how tired I was -- really shouldn't have chased those dust bunnies. "The next chapter is like a tornado, whirling as fast as it can through the next months. As if he can't stand to think of anything long enough to write about it. The good and the bad, and he mostly focuses on the bad."

"The bad between us?"

Lee pressed his lips together. "No, mostly the bad he felt inside. You'll have to see for yourself."

"Oh." I felt very small.

I don't want to do this, Brandon. Why can't you just be okay?

He carried my laptop to the bedroom, tugging me along with him. Barkley looked up as I limped past, and he followed after us. A few minutes later, we were sitting on my bed, blankets pulled up around us and my laptop on Lee's lap. He opened it and scrolled to where I'd left off.

"Read."

"How much farther ahead are you?"

"A chapter. Go ahead."

I glanced at him. He raised his eyebrow and nodded to me. "Go on."

"What are you going to do?"

He sat back and put his arm around me. I sighed, tucking my head against his shoulder, wishing desperately it was Brandon's shoulder, and looked at the computer.

"I'll be your mouse operator," he said.

"I think I can handle that much. You're quite the team player, aren't you?"

"Always, Nick, always. I've got your back and you know it. Go ahead and read. I'll be here if you need me."

I started to read, grateful for Lee's presence once I read the first few lines.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

I hardly remember the next few months. Looking back, it was such craziness, a whirlwind of amazing things and activity as our dreams began to come true.

Our dreams. Nick's dreams, really, not my own.

It seems odd now to acknowledge that. My dreams, I realized that first day -- yeah, that very first day, when Steven hustled Nicholas into decent clothes and took us out of that apartment -- had consisted mainly of what I already had.

Nicholas.

I lost control the minute Steven took over our lives.

It was like a fairy tale, I guess. At least it was to Nicholas. I fainted -- I can't believe I fainted -- and when I woke up, I was lying on the floor, my head in Nick's lap. He'd been crying. His eyes were all red and puffy, and since he was sick already anyway, he looked awful, his hair dark and stringy in his face. He kept pushing it back behind his ear.

Steven was on the phone, telling someone to do something, I didn't know what.

"Brandon, can you talk?"

I looked up at Nick and forced myself to smile. I touched my forehead. "Head hurts."

"You hit it."

"Again?"

He grinned. "Yeah, on the chair. I thought I'd be the one to faint at the news, but it was you."

I closed my eyes, felt his hand on my face. I stiffened and looked up at him -- what if Steven saw? But Nicholas moved his hand. His eyes were sad; I remember that now. How sad his eyes looked because I'd wanted him to move his hand away.

I felt like shit. "What's he doing?"

A smile broke over his face. "Getting us a hotel room."

"Hotel room? But why --"

Steven walked up then. "How you feeling?"

"Awful. Sorry about that."

"Well, got to admit that was a first when I've delivered such news." He laughed and held his hand out. I grabbed it and let him pull me up. Nicholas helped me into a chair and then took his place. I wrapped my arm around my stomach. It hurt.

"I've made hotel reservations for you two. A driver will be here in an hour to take you there. Pack up what you want and leave the rest."

"Why?" I asked.

Steven winked at Nicholas. "Guess he missed that part."

Nicholas smiled. "We're leaving here. Never coming back, Brandon. He wants to sign us."

"Are you sure?" I asked Steven.

"That's why I'm here." He picked up his briefcase. "I'll come by tomorrow afternoon. You boys enjoy yourselves. Order room service, take showers, and sleep late."

I stiffened as dollar signs floated across my mind. We couldn't afford this! I barely had fifty dollars in the bank, Nicholas wouldn't get paid for another week, and his check would be short at that. "Nick, we really can't afford --"

“Brandon,” he said gently, laying a hand on mine. “Don’t worry about it.”

“We only have fifty dollars --”

Steven laughed. “You missed that part, too.”

“It’s all on him. We’re not to worry, Brandon.”

“Think of it as an advance, Brandon. You boys need to get out of here. You’re both sick, and you aren’t going to get better in this place. I’m investing in your future, and I think it’s going to be a bright one. Getting you well is the first priority. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

So began the whirlwind. I thought we’d go to some cheap motel, but no, when the car came for us and our two suitcases and a box (we left the soup behind), we were taken to the nicest place I’d ever been to up to then. We did as ordered, me not believing that we should, and Nicholas finding such relief in our sudden turn of fortune that he got well far more quickly than he would’ve had we been in our apartment still.

I guess I was a skeptic, but over the next few weeks my skepticism turned to an all-out worry that we were losing control. Nicholas became a madman, bursting with creativity, writing song after song, discovering what he had a knack for, and learning just how crazy our lives were becoming -- learning that he loved it.

While I hated it.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful for what we had. For the amazing money we made, are still making, off our songs. We’ve been able to help friends and family. We’ve met incredible people, and I’ve loved watching Nicholas become the superstar he deserved to be.

But even as he glowed and grew and we escalated into stardom -- saw our first releases become hits in the US, then Australia, and Asia and Russia and Europe and everywhere across the world -- I began to diminish. Fade. Become less and less myself.

Nicholas loved it. The photography sessions, the interviews, the talk shows, the flying, the creating, the studio work.

I hated it. The photography sessions terrified me; the interviews wore me out; the talk shows made my stomach hurt; the flying -- I hated the flying. And we flew *a lot*.

The keeping myself separate from Nicholas, unable to touch him, hold him, love him, even when we were in the same room.

The odd thing ... yeah, the odd thing was, Nicholas didn’t seem to miss that. He got so much attention, so much love from his fans and everyone he talked to, that he didn’t feel starved like I did. He didn’t ache to touch me. He ended every day high as the tallest mountain and elated as the luckiest man in the world. Which he was -- lucky, I mean. Really lucky.

But luck can carry one only so far. It takes hard work to get to the top, and stay there. And Nick’s energy was boundless; nothing fazed him, not really. Even when the diva in him came out -- which it did, more and more often -- everyone loved him so much that his nonsense was tolerated. Even encouraged. Superstar.

Superstar.

Not superstars.

He didn't need me.

I'm not sure exactly when I realized it. He didn't need me. I was incidental, the tail end of a glance, the thought after the last comment.

By then, we'd all but stopped sleeping together. By then, his flirting with me had fallen to just on the stage, and only barely. It hurt, and still hurts now, remembering the thrill I got even then -- as I was dying, killing myself by living on beer and handfuls of vitamins that didn't help much, more underweight than I'd ever been in my life -- the thrill I got from his touching me on stage. A hand here, a lean there. That's all I was getting by then.

Our lives. Not what I wanted. Marisa -- yeah, I could blame her -- Marisa worked it that way, but she didn't do it alone. Nick did, too. Maybe so did I. I'm not really sure anymore. When he moved to London between albums, citing a creative need to get away from California, which I could not leave, well, I only know by then I couldn't take it anymore.

You know the history. You know what happened. No need to say anymore. Plenty of articles, stories, lies about it, but the truth is, once the third tour was over, that was it for me. For me and Nicholas.

So, I quit. It was me all along -- in desperation to try and get myself through the days, I latched on to the creative side of things, began to imagine life beyond the tour, what I would do. I knew Nicholas wanted to try a solo album, which was fine. I needed time to recuperate before we started work on the next album, and with his wild energy I knew he needed to keep busy or go crazy. I understood that; it was okay; I didn't mind at all. I wanted him to be happy. Anything to keep him happy, since I couldn't keep him happy, since he didn't want or need me anymore.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Nick! Hey, Nick, stop crying, it's okay," Lee said.

"I can't! I can't, Lee. He thought --" Sobs wracked me as I folded myself against Lee. His arms held me tight as I lost it, bewildered and confused.

"I know, I know. That's why I wanted to be here with you when you read it."

"Why, Lee? Why didn't I know? I'm such a fucking selfish bastard, I thought -- even then, I mean, I knew of course when he lost it -- but I thought ... I thought it would be okay! I thought we'd be okay. Oh, God, why did I stop? When did I stop touching him?" Hate roiled through me -- hate for myself. Hate for what I'd put him through. Oh, Brandon ...

"I played him -- his music, his mind, his heart -- and I destroyed him," I practically yelled, sitting up. "I did it. It was me!"

"Nicholas, cut it out," Lee said, grabbing me by the shoulders.

But I shook my head. "No. No. It was me. I destroyed him. I should've never listened to any of them, but I thought we were doing the right thing. I believed them when they told me Dream would die if it got out we were lovers." I paused, then laughed bitterly. "But the fucking thing was, by then we weren't lovers anymore."

I buried my face in my hands. I couldn't take this, couldn't read anymore of the pain, the harsh black pain Brandon lived with. The rejection. The loneliness. The bitterness. I'd loved touring, thrived on it, drank it up and ate it up and exploded with it, and all that time, even though I knew, I didn't truly believe that it was killing Brandon.

I couldn't see what was before my eyes.

I couldn't see that the man I really loved, who I took so much for fucking granted I'd even moved across the world, just assuming he'd be there whenever I made the time for him, was dying.

He said it himself, he was dying.

He'd been raped repeatedly for over a year, and I hadn't seen that, either.

How could I forgive myself? How had he ever forgiven me?

"He's a better man than me, Lee."

"Nick --"

"No. I nearly destroyed him. I destroyed Dream. He blames himself, but it was me, selfish bastard that I am. It was me. How hard would it have been for me to just say 'okay, Brandon, enough of this, I need you?'" I fell back against the pillows, stared at the ceiling. "How hard would it have been for me to say 'I love you Brandon, and we are going to show the world?'"

"It might've caused a lot of problems. You had no choice."

"No, I believed I had no choice. I was led to believe it. It wasn't true." I looked at Lee. "It wasn't true. None of this should've happened, Lee. I should never have let him go."

"You didn't --"

"No, I let him go, Lee. I let him insist we were better apart, and I opted out the easy way and said, 'Okay, it was good, wasn't it?' I'm still not sure why I said that, you know. I knew what I was saying. I knew he would hear and I guess ..." I shuddered. "... I guess, like the fool I prove myself to be time and again, I guess I believed I could shock him into saying, 'No, no, no, we're not over, Nick.'"

"But that isn't what happened," Lee said, turning to face me, crossing his legs.

"No," I whispered. "No. He was so hurt. He was shaking with hurt, with disbelief. But he took it, Lee. He said, 'Okay. It's over.'"

"You didn't expect that."

"No. Yes. I don't know."

Lee sighed. Shook his head. "So tell me, how does this all tie in with what happened later?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. The blackmail, he hasn't even written about that."

"Missing things, remember what your psychiatrist said."

That was a big one. "Yeah, especially since he set out to write this to go over that very thing. It's like he forgot what he was writing about."

Lee eyed me. "Maybe he did forget."

"Blanked it out, you mean?"

"Yes. Defense mechanism. When was he writing this part?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. He wrote an awful lot of this when I was still in the hospital."

"Too bad we don't know. But if the timing is that he wrote this part while he was starting to really get sick --"

"Before he ran away from Mutt?"

"Yeah, that would explain why he didn't write about it. The guy who blackmailed him is dead though, right?"

"Yes. The bastard."

"And the other is in jail."

"Yes."

"And the guy who kidnapped you was not, as far as the police could determine, in any way connected with them."

"That's right."

"And the psychiatrist says what he saw shocked him so bad -- What would shock him that bad? I mean, other than walking into a room and seeing a video of yourself being raped." He grimaced. "Sorry."

I thumped my fist on the bed. "I don't know! That's just it. I don't know!"

"Which means we're no closer to figuring this out than the police are."

"Which means he's still in terrible danger maybe. And not just in his mind," I said.

Lee got out of the bed and held out his hand. "Come on. Let's go on up and see him, okay? I think you need to."

I smiled wanly and grabbed Lee's hand, let him pull me up. "I do need to see him. To tell him I'm sorry. To apologize. Smother him with kisses. Crawl into bed with him and never let him go again."

Lee grinned at that. "Come on, then. I'll go tell Jeff, okay?"

I nodded. Lee left, and I turned my attention to the computer again, dared to look beyond the point at which I stopped.

Anything to keep him happy, since I couldn't keep him happy, since he didn't want or need me anymore. That was all that mattered to me. I could live the rest of my life alone, as long as he was happy.

And safe.

Oh, please, God, let Nicholas stay safe. Why didn't you let him stay safe?

Why did you let them take him from me and steal him away just when I thought maybe, maybe it would be good again between us, maybe he would have time for me again, want me again like he had that night, that one magical night that he came back to me and told me, "I know you're lying, Brandon. I know you still want me, love me, and I'm going to figure out why you're doing this to us. You better believe it. I will figure this out. I just have to go home and settle a couple things. Then I'm coming back here, and I'm moving in with you, and fuck the world. You are mine. We are meant to be ... even though you say 'no, not true, go away, it's the only way for you to be safe, you've got to be safe, I have to keep you safe, go back, go away.'" But he said, "No, I'm coming back for you, Brandon Ashwood."

I'm coming back.

But he didn't get to. He left, and then he was taken away from me. And OH, MY GOD, I thought he was going to die. I couldn't live without him ... not without you, Nicholas, I won't. I won't live without you again.

I won't.

"Let's go," Lee said, walking up to me and closing the laptop.

"It's really bad, Lee."

"I know."

I stared at the computer. Wondered if the answers I needed would be found in there, or if they were, as I feared, still locked tight in Brandon's battered mind.

Chapter Seven

"I'm scared, Lee," I whispered as I watched Brandon sleep. Not a natural sleep. Oh, no. Drug-induced. When we arrived at the hospital to take Brandon home, we learned that wasn't happening. I wasn't sure whether I wasn't a little relieved.

"What happened, exactly. Did they say?"

I shrugged, stroked Brandon's fingers with my thumb, lifted his hand and kissed each knuckle. Such beautiful hands, Brandon's. Hands that were limp and lifeless, except for their warmth. They'd had to sedate him, they told me, when he'd plunged into hysterics after a nap.

"He had a nightmare." The results of which were devastating. "He'll be so upset when he wakes up. He'd wanted to come home today so badly."

Lee sat on the arm of my chair and rubbed my back. I laid my head on Brandon's arm, closed my eyes as Lee clued in that what he was doing was most welcome. I tried to relax as his strong hands massaged my neck, worked my tense muscles. "You're one big knot, Nicholas."

"I know. I can't -- ouch! Oh, wow, that feels good," I said as he worked on a spot just about my shoulder blade. "Where'd you learn that?"

He chuckled. "Oh, this girl I'm dating is a massage therapist. A really good one."

I lifted my head and looked at him. "You have a girlfriend? Why didn't you tell me?"

He blushed. *Blushed*. "Yeah, well, I'm not the high priority here. You'll meet her soon, I promise. Now tell me --"

"What's her name?" I said, letting him push me back down.

"Maya."

I sighed as his hands found another tender spot. “Maya. That’s a lovely name. Is she pretty?”

“She’s beautiful. You’ll like her, I promise.”

“Going to marry her?”

“Yes. If she’ll have me.”

“She’ll have you. You’re awesome.”

His hands paused. “Thanks, Nicholas. That means a lot.”

I lifted my head and looked at Brandon. Still sleeping, peaceful, undisturbed. The nurse had assured me the dreams couldn’t torment him while he was under sedation. I wasn’t sure I believed, her but I needed to believe her, so I did. Dreamless sleep, that’s what he needed, in order to heal.

Lee dropped his hands and stood, leaning over Brandon to push his hair out of his face. Lee’s so tender, so sweet. Maya’s one lucky woman. “We need to keep reading, Nicholas,” he said.

“I know. But I’m scared to, Lee.”

Lee turned around and leaned against the nightstand, arms folded over his chest. “I know you are. But we have to keep reading so we can tell his psychiatrist what we’ve learned. Jon’s bringing our computers up.”

“Poor Jon. This is hard on him, too, you know.”

Lee nodded. “I know. We talked a long time about you two, but he’s hanging in there like he always does. He’s caught up to where we are. We’ll talk about it when he gets here.”

The door opened. “When who gets here? The pack mule?” Jon stood in the doorway, three computer bags strapped over his shoulders. “That’s all I’m good for around here, lugging stuff for you guys.”

“Thanks, Jon,” I said.

Jon set the computers down and walked around the bed to me, ruffled my hair. “You doing okay, Nick?”

“I’m trying.”

He nodded, then bent over his brother and kissed him on the forehead. “I love you, baby bro. Sleep. Heal,” he whispered, then straightened, looked at me, and smiled sadly. “You okay? You look exhausted.”

“I am,” I said, nodding.

“Why not take a nap? Lee and I will get started reading and will let you know if we find anything.”

I shook my head. “No, I can’t sleep. I want to keep reading, too.”

Ten minutes later, Lee, Jon, and I were ensconced in chairs. We sat in a protective circle around Brandon while he slept, and once again we dove into the daunting task of trying to uncover who my lover, Jon's brother, and Lee's friend really was.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

I'm not sure how many days I sat on my hidden sliver of beach in the blistering sun, the cooler loaded with Coronas by my side. Endless days, starting early in the morning after endless, restless nights, sitting on my blanket, watching the waves as they broke against the shore. Just me, my beer, my cooler, and my blanket.

Those days were endless, unvaried, and hot. I saw no one, would talk to no one, at least at first. That's what I wanted.

I was in hiding, if not from my family, then from myself, though my attempt was in vain. I couldn't escape, though I tried. How I tried.

The shock of what happened, how things finally came to an end, pushed me into a rage so deep and violent, I scared myself. Knew if I didn't take myself away, I would do something I would regret -- if I lived to tell about it.

It was the end, it was my choice, yet the way it ultimately happened was so beyond my control as to be a shock to me. A deep, serrated shock that cut my heart in two.

We talked, of course, after it happened. For a long time, when I assured Nicholas everything was fine between us, I wished him well, hoped he would find the success he wanted so badly for himself. I told him I had no real right to be surprised, that this was what I wanted, too.

He believed me.

I guess he wanted so badly to believe I would be happy that he couldn't, or wouldn't, hear the desperation in my voice, the silent scream lacing my words together, the wild, frantic beating of my heart.

After all we'd been through together, to have us drift apart like we did, and have it end like we did ...

And it was all my fault. My fault, my fault, my fault.

Nicholas, if you ever read this -- and I don't think you will because I think, once done, I am going to burn this computer so you can't. Start a bonfire on a beach, maybe that sliver of beach where I spent so many endless days, and put the computer in it. The whole thing, and let it melt and explode and do whatever computers do in a hot flame. There's no reason for you to see this, I don't think. I could just erase it, but they say even erased files can be retrieved again, and I don't think you will want to see this, see the proof of my deterioration.

That's what's happening to me, I think. Even as our love for each other is growing stronger, I feel less and less real. Something's happening inside me, a tiger in a cage, red and angry and furious, trying to burst out through these flimsy walls of string. Guitar string, I think. Guitar string can't hold the tiger inside me for very long, I don't think.

I should be used to feeling crazy. I have for most of my adult life, after all, as I've watched everything I helped Nicholas build split apart and coalesce into a new shape -- a shape that surrounded Nicholas, and alienated me.

He never needed me. The tape lied, of course, the tape that held so much power over Nicholas Kilmain's life, and he never knew it. It lied. And I believed it. He doesn't need me, never did. Hear lies long enough and you start to believe them, but I guess we both know that, don't we?

I'm sorry, baby, for not ever telling you about the tape. If I had, what happened after the endless days on the beach would never have taken place. But I didn't say a word, still locked into my adolescent belief that only I, Brandon Ashwood, had the power to keep the evil that wanted to swallow you at bay.

What a fool I am. Stupid dickhead.

Wintertime. That winter after we finally broke apart was particularly cold, but the months passed, January, February, March, and on and on, in a Corona-induced haze. I barely remember anything about those months. My mom would come check on me, bring me food -- most of which rotted or ended up in the trash because I couldn't eat. My grief was so real, so tangible and yet untouchable, that even Mom was helpless to chase it all away.

I spent all my time staring at waves, remembering the past, reliving all we'd done, Nicholas and I. The good stuff, the good feelings, the hopes and dreams. By lunchtime I'd be so wasted I'd pass out. Sleep through the lunch hour. Would wake up, hot and sand-covered, throw myself in the ocean and pray that I'd drown, but even totally wasted my stupid survival instincts would kick in and I'd drag myself back to the beach. I was too good a swimmer to let myself drown.

I started to entertain other ways to die.

Car crash? No, too painful. Plane crash -- no way, the long fall down would terrify me too much. Drug overdose was a good possibility. Maybe even a gun, but that would make my mother cry, I think. Could drink myself to death -- that seemed the most logical way to go, especially for me.

I spent a lot of money on limes and Corona, half-believing I could die by sitting in the sun and drinking beer and that would be a great way to go. Very fitting. But I guess even that didn't work.

Jenn would come by, usually in the evenings after she got off work, try to talk some sense into me. But I grew angry with her, cut her off, cut her out until she stopped talking to me. She'd still come, though; she never reneged on her promise to me to always be there for

me. But for weeks we barely said a word to each other. Finally, she simply moved into my beach house, dragging her stuff in from her car by herself while I stared at her.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked her as she deposited groceries on my counter.

"You won't take care of yourself, so I'm going to do it."

"Fuck you, Jenn. I can take care of myself," I mumbled. I sat on the couch, wearing nothing but my swim trunks, which was all I wore by then, a Corona in one hand, a lime in the other. I blinked, held my Corona out, and tried to squeeze the lime into my beer. I frowned at it, squeezed the lime some more, but nothing would come out ...

Because I'd forgotten to cut it into slices.

It took me a good five minutes to realize the problem, all the while with Jenn watching me. Waiting. Tears running down her cheeks.

I'm sorry, Jenn.

I know I broke her heart during those months, but she stayed with me anyway. She was all I had. Jon never came by; he was so mad at me. Adam was off doing his own things. My mom would call me, and that was all I'd let her do; I refused to see her. And my dad -- well, I refused to see him, too, the censure in his eyes, the triumph and the satisfaction. He'd been right about Nicholas -- I could see it in his eyes; even though his drop-out loser fucking fag son was a millionaire, my dad celebrated my defeat.

Amazingly, I heard from Nicholas now and again, about once a month. He was doing great. He was excited about his new music, writing songs and loving his new home in San Francisco. He got a new dog. "Hey, listen to this, Brandon. What do you think of this?" and he'd sing some for me. And "Hey, my friends and I are driving up the coast to Seattle. ROAD TRIP! Me and, oh, yeah, Lee and your brother -- did you know he was here? Visiting me? He and Amanda ... no, you didn't know?"

And "I miss you, Brandon, you okay? Really?"

He missed me. Maybe a minute or two on odd days he did. It was nice to think that, but I didn't really believe. "Yeah," I'd lie, protecting him even then. I didn't want him to be sad just because I was. "Just fine, enjoying playing all day. You know me, I love being on the beach."

"As long as you're happy, Brandon."

"I'm happy, Nick. I'm so fucking happy, I could die of happiness right now."

My brother, Amanda, Lee ... with Nicholas. ROAD TRIP! No, I hadn't known; why would I know? I never saw Jon anymore by then, and it hurt, hurt so bad. I love Jon so much, but Nicholas needed him more than me. I don't need anyone, right? Loner, that's what and who I am, have to be, so they won't hurt you. They can't hurt you. I won't let them. I've got to make sure they don't, got to protect you, keep you safe ...

I am alone. That's how it has to be.

I got tired of sitting on the beach. My skin had browned so deeply and my hair bleached out so much and grown so long, I wore it in a ponytail. I barely resembled the man I'd been half a year before.

One night, I stood in the bathroom, just staring at myself, realizing my quest to kill myself by drowning in Corona wasn't working. Part of that was Jenn's fault. Slowly, she'd managed to make me eat again. I started to put on weight under her determined care, stopped drinking so much. But the demons still rested on my shoulders, teased me with their relentless chattering, dug their little claws into my skin and gleefully hung on. I could not be rid of them.

The first time I did it, I remember with such clarity.

And Jenn was there to witness it.

"What are you doing, Bean?" she asked that night when she came in after work. She stared at me, but I wouldn't look her in the eye.

"Nothing. Going out."

"Where?"

I stuffed my wallet in my pocket. My wallet with a few extra condoms tucked inside. I'd bought them on a whim earlier in the day, realizing I was hungry -- hungry for sex. I wanted to fuck. Long and hard, some nameless, faceless stranger who didn't look like Nicholas.

No blue eyes allowed.

When I bought them, I'd stared at those condoms for so long the salesclerk finally asked me if I was okay. *No, lady, can't you see I'm not okay? The man I love is half a world away, and I'm standing in a drugstore with a hard-on, and I want to fuck, but I have to buy condoms, and I hate condoms. Nicholas knows that.*

I bought the condoms. Two boxes.

I used them up within a week.

That first time, that first night, I'm amazed someone would let me approach them, much less fuck them. I'd found a gay bar, Illusions, that was far enough away that I hoped no one would recognize me, but close enough that I thought I could get home even wasted, if I had to. There was no question that I wouldn't be bringing any tricks home -- even in the state I was in, I wouldn't do that to Jenn.

It was easy. Walk into the bar, case the joint, grab a beer at the bar ... and minutes later, seconds even, a shirtless blond with the chest of a teenager sidled up to me, looked up into my eyes, and his own brown eyes widened.

"Brandon Ashwood?"

I looked down at him, at the worship in his eyes, and said, "Want to fuck?"

"You're Brandon --"

I reached out, touched the boy's face, put a finger on his lips. "Shh ... don't say a word."

He smiled at me and nodded, and ten minutes later we were in a hotel and I was making that boy scream in ecstasy.

He was the first. Not the last. Not by a long shot.

Word got out, of course, though I never once said my name or acknowledged who I was. Long-haired, bearded, tan, and, after that first night, always dressed in black leather and shirtless, I was the Brian Kinney of Illusions. The guy everyone wanted, and I took them all. I fucked so much and so many men over the course of the next five months, I thought about buying condoms by the case.

But I didn't always use them.

Like I said before, my angels had to have been working overtime. I barebacked, did it raw more and more often, my hate of condoms matching the hate I had of myself. And I always topped, always -- no one fucked Brandon Ashwood. The only man allowed to do that was Nicholas Kilmain, and he didn't want me anymore.

That was my life. I hated it, hated myself, hated Nicholas ...

No, no, no, not Nicholas. Sorry, baby, I didn't hate you. I could never hate you; please believe me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you.

I'll never stop loving you.

So when he called, that last time, long after all the furor had died down, long after his solo album came out, and he'd written all those new songs, some all by himself, I was so fucking proud of him. They delayed the release of the CD, and he was so upset by that. And he called me and stormed his frustrations over thousands of miles to my welcoming heart, and said, "I'm coming to see you. I need you."

And I said no. I told him NO! Oh, God, NO! NO, don't come, *they'll know ...*

But he came anyway. Found me at my parents' house, where I went to visit them for Jon's birthday even though he didn't want me there, didn't want to see me or talk to me. Adam was there, too, and he talked to me. But Nicholas came -- oh, my God, he came, and he called the house and said, "Come get me at the airport." And I did. Oh, God forgive me, I did.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

A hand thumped my computer closed. I looked up, shocked, but the tears had clouded my eyes so badly I couldn't tell if it was Jon or Lee until he spoke.

"Enough, Nicholas." Jon.

I tried to open the computer. "I've got to keep reading."

"No."

"But --"

A tissue was stuffed into my hand. I wiped my eyes with it and looked up, saw Jon's eyes were as red as mine. "Please, Jon."

He leaned over me, hands on my shoulders, and shook his head. "You're exhausted. Brandon will sleep until tomorrow, and Lee will stay and watch over him. I'm taking you home, feeding you, putting you to bed. Understand?"

"You can't tell me what to do, Jon --"

"Yes I can. He's my brother, Nicholas, and you are the most important person in the world to him." He smiled. "And I'll be damned if I let you collapse, too, and have him blame *me*. Understand?"

I looked down at the closed computer, at the secrets buried in it. Thought about what Brandon had written, how disjointed it was, yet oh, so revealing. So much hurt, so much pain -- I really couldn't take it anymore. Not today. I nodded.

The computer was taken away. Lee's hand found mine, and he hauled me to my feet. Jon grabbed my coat, helped me on with it and zipped me up like I was a little child, then plunked my knit cap over my head.

I hated that thing, but let him do it. "Come on, Nicholas. Let's get you home. We'll bring the computer with us, and we'll read more later, okay?"

"Since protesting is proving useless, I guess okay."

He grinned. "Good boy."

Lee opened the door. "Jeff," he called, and my bodyguard was there waiting. "Take him home. I'm going to stay with Brandon."

"Hold on," I said. I walked over to Brandon, studied his still, quiet face. So pale, he'd not seen the sun in so long. He'd lost all that tan he had. I remembered how he'd looked when I'd gone to see him, so golden, so blond, his hair down to his shoulders. He'd cut it since then. Next time I saw him, when he saved me, it was the shortest I'd ever seen it, almost buzzed to his scalp. It'd looked pretty weird, but I hadn't cared -- Brandon had come for me.

"I love you so much," I whispered to him, then bent over and pressed my lips to his, hating how cold and still they were. How I longed for those eyes of his to open and look at me and for him to grin and say, "Hey, Nick!"

But they didn't.

I felt Jon's hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Nicholas. He's safe."

For now.

Seconds later I was on the elevator, Jon at my side, holding my arm with one hand as if I'd try to escape back to Brandon (thought about it), my computer with the other hand; Jeff

behind us. The elevator lurched and I closed my eyes, leaning on Jon's shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me and squeezed me tight.

"It'll be okay, Nick."

I sighed as the elevator door's opened.

"Will it, Jon? Will it ever be okay again?"

Chapter Eight

California -- The Past

But he came anyway. Found me at my parents' house, where I went to visit them for Jon's birthday even though he didn't want me there, didn't want to see me or talk to me. Adam was there, too, and he talked to me. But Nicholas came -- oh, my God, he came, and he called the house and said, "Come get me at the airport." And I did. Oh, God forgive me, I did.

"Thanks for picking me up."

"Uh, yeah, no problem," I said as I tossed his single piece of luggage onto the back seat. I opened the door for Nicholas and he slid in, his usually so expressive blue eyes not betraying what he was thinking. I closed the door and walked over to the driver's side, hesitating before I got in. *Come on, he just wants a ride home.*

Yeah, right.

I got in the car, started the engine, and pulled out of the parking space. Nicholas stayed silent, staring out the window, his expression thoughtful when I stole a glance at him. Pensive even. I was glad he wasn't talking. I could barely breathe, much less say anything. He looked tired, his face unshaven, his skin pale and ghostly compared to mine, especially now. His hair was a mess. He looked like he hadn't slept well in days. I knew, of course, his frustrations about everything with his new album were getting to him, but it worried me just how haggard he looked.

I had no idea right then that I, not his album, was the cause of his pain.

As I came up to the crossroad that would either lead us to a hotel or my own house and I prepared to go left, he said, "Turn right."

"Sorry?" I said, confused. "Don't you want to check into a hotel?"

He looked at me then, his expression as grim as I'd ever seen it. "I don't want to see a hotel, Brandon. I came to see you."

I looked away, a rush of heat running down my spine, pooling in my stomach. Lower. My stomach clenched. I turned right and headed for my beach house.

None of the idle chit-chat I'd expected took place. No "How you doing, Brandon?" or "Hey, I've never seen your hair so long, so blond" or even "Hey, you look like shit, Brandon, why are you trying to kill yourself?" He didn't say a word, and I found myself wishing he would. I felt like I would explode.

"Why?" I finally burst out.

He cast me a somewhat smug smile. "I came to prove to you that you still love me." He reached over then, touched me on the ear. "That you never stopped."

My ear burned. When his hand dropped and he sighed, so sad, I gulped and stared straight ahead, wishing we'd get out of the car, away from the confined intimacy, and yet terrified of arriving at my house. There he would see all of me, the man I'd become, and the thought terrified me.

You never stopped.

I did. I did love him, and fool that I was, I knew I was going to let him prove it. I was helpless to prevent it now that he was here. *Did I hide the tape well enough? Will he find it? Will he start digging around while I'm in the shower or --*

No, no, no, he couldn't stay there. Maybe I could convince him there was nothing to prove, to let me take him to a hotel, let him do with me what he wanted and then he'd leave. He'd be safe.

We arrived at my beach house. I started to say, "Hey, maybe you'd rather stay at a hotel," but Nicholas gave me another of those looks. One of those "I know what you're going to say and forget it" looks, hopped out, grabbed his luggage out of the back, and headed for the front door.

I bolted out of the car, not even bothering to lock it, and ran after him. He half-turned as I approached the door, the key in my hand. He looked up at me, a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Here," I said, hesitating, waiting for him to move out of the way, give me room so I wouldn't touch him while opening the door. But he didn't. He just stood there, waiting, so I finally gave a huff of exasperation and stood next to him and unlocked the door. I pushed it open, held it so he could go in ahead of me.

"Nice, Brandon," he said as he set his suitcase down and walked into the living room. "Very comfortable."

"We're comfortable here," I said, feeling a little jolt as he stared at me. "I mean, well, Jenn was living with me. But she isn't anymore."

He smiled faintly then. "Yeah, I heard she got married."

"She's pregnant, too."

"She happy?"

I set my keys down. "Yeah, very."

He nodded. "Good. I'm glad. Give her my love, won't you? I'll send the baby a present. Maybe ... I saw this huge teddy bear at F.A.O. Schwartz a few months ago."

I laughed. "You still going there?"

He grinned, flopping down on my couch. "Of course. If they had season passes, I'd get one. You know me."

"Yeah, I do. Want some water?"

"I'm thirsty, yes. Thanks."

I headed for the kitchen, feeling a little more comfortable. This was going to be okay. I opened the refrigerator and pulled out two cold bottles of water, grimacing at all the Corona in there. He wouldn't see it, though; I'd make sure of it. I could handle this, let him say what he had to say, then call him a cab --

"Hey."

I whirled around. He stood directly behind me. He glanced inside the refrigerator, his eyes widening a bit, but he didn't say anything, just held out his hand.

"What?"

He smirked. "Water?"

"Oh, yeah."

I handed it to him. He opened it, then raised the bottle to his lips and drank half of it. I stared at him, unable to stop myself. And, damn it, he noticed. Waggled his eyebrows, then set the bottle and the cap down.

"I'm pretty rank. Mind if I take a shower?"

"Sure. No problem." I escaped the kitchen. He followed behind, and I went into my bedroom, the master bath. Too late I thought, *You should've taken him to Jenn's old room! Her bathroom!* I cleared my throat. "Uh, there you go. You can use my shampoo and stuff, if you need to."

"I've got some in my suitcase."

"I'll get it for you." I darted out of the room before he could say anything else. By the time I got back, he'd closed the bathroom door and the shower was running. I set the suitcase down, knocked on the door, and said, "It's outside the door."

No sound.

Not knowing what else to do, I left the bedroom, tried not to imagine him, naked and alone in the shower. I went into the living room and sat on the couch, closing my eyes, to wait for him to come out.

* * * * *

“Brandon.”

I opened my eyes. Gasp. “Nicholas!”

He stood before me, a towel in one hand, his face freshly shaved, his hair still wet, and the rest of him naked.

And fully aroused.

Heat cascaded through me. I moaned as my groin swelled. The look in my eyes must’ve reassured him because he smiled then, tossed the towel on the coffee table, and, without saying a word, straddled me. I instinctively reached my hands to his hips and leaned my head back. My face was hot; my entire body thrummed. He knew me, knew me so damn fucking well. *Don’t give me time to talk, to think, to excuse. Just do it.*

Pressing me back with his hands so I couldn’t escape -- I didn’t want to escape -- he bent his head to mine and brushed his lips over mine, just like he had before, always had before, teasing me, those warm, soft lips of his capturing mine, possessing me with their insistence.

“Open for me, Brandon,” he whispered.

And, God help me, I did.

His tongue, hot and sweet, dove into my mouth, lazily mating with mine. He strained against me, wiggling himself tighter against me. All the last bitter months, all the fear, fled from me and I became mindless, became once again his, the grateful receiver of the incredible gifts Nicholas gave me.

His kisses grew harder, more demanding. I met them even as I yielded to him, so sweet, oh, God, it felt so good to give myself to someone again, to *him*. To feel his kisses hard against my mouth, his hands cradling my face, his lips tracing my jaw line, giggling softly at my beard. His hands sank into my hair, pushing it back from my face, chuckling at how long it’d grown. Nearly to my shoulders by then.

I stared up at the ceiling as his mouth continued exploring me. My heart raced; my breath grew rapid; my chest heaved. Yet all I could do was sit there and take it, my hands still holding his hips as with his mouth he undid all my pain.

“Brandon,” he murmured against my neck.

At the sound of my name, I finally moved, pushed him back. He sat back on my legs, concern in his eyes, waiting I knew for the rejection, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t. *I’m sorry --*

“Help me with my shirt,” was all I said.

He smiled, and together we took it off. He ran his hands up my chest, tweaking my nipples as he knew I liked. He smiled in appreciation. “Golden boy.”

"Been outside a lot."

"I can tell."

I ran my hands over his chest, thumbing *his* nipples. He arched back, letting out a moan of pleasure. I pulled him to me, took one nipple into my mouth, tonguing it into a hardened nub as he bucked against me. I thrust against him, my cock hard and hot, straining against my jeans.

"Brandon, please, I want inside you."

I pulled back, nodded. *So long, it's been so long.* He got off me and I stood. Somehow we got my jeans off. I fell back on the couch, and he shoved me into place, how he wanted me.

"Lube?"

"I --" *Oh, fuck.* "Bedside table drawer."

He nodded, his eyes clouding for a moment, but now wasn't the time to discuss the reasons for why I had any in the first place. I closed my eyes, put my hand over my face -- he'd find the lube, and a half-used box of condoms. Briefly I wondered if he'd grab one, too. I should've insisted, he should've. But when he came back, only one thing was gripped in his hand.

Then he was on top of me again. He pushed one of my legs over the back of the couch; the other I held up. He knelt between my legs, a soft, mysterious smile on his face as he looked at me, flagrantly opening myself to him. Just as I used to. I thought he'd say something, but he didn't. The only sounds were our harsh breathing and the faint sound of the surf beating against the shore.

He flipped the lube open, coating his fingers. I reached out and stopped him. He looked at me in surprise.

"Not necessary. Just get inside me, Nick. Please."

He nodded, wiped the gel on his cock, and, holding my gaze with his own, gently guided himself inside me.

Oh, my God, he still wants me. Nicholas still wants me, even after all I'd done to him --

I cried out, pain skittering through me as he breached me.

"So tight," he murmured as he gently thrust into me. I pushed against him until finally he was in inside me. "You okay?" he asked, his breath warm as it brushed against my cheek.

"Yes, yes, Nick, fuck me, fuck me hard. Please."

He thrust into me, slow at first, then harder. I could barely contain myself, the pain laced with the pleasure as he expertly hit my prostate over and over again. I started to shake, could barely hold my leg up anymore, had to let it drop, but he didn't protest the awkwardness, his angle sharp and hard as he possessed me, fucked me, made me his once again.

I held him, my beautiful, amazing lover, as he came inside me, his cries mingling with my own as I, too, came, digging into his stomach, feeling a rush of love and wonder for this incredible man. But as we lay on the couch, him still inside me, on top of me, as our breathing slowly settled and our hearts calmed, the darkness crept into my awareness again. He sensed it; I know he did. He lifted his head and looked at me, his face inches away from mine. Nothing was solved; we both knew that. I could see the knowledge in his eyes.

But he shook his head, said, "No, Brandon, don't."

"Nicholas, I --"

He laid a finger on my lips. "I know something's wrong, Brandon. But I also know you love me. I'm going to leave you --"

Panic lanced through me, and my heart, not my brain, spoke. "No! You just got here --"

He smiled sadly at me, shifting on top of me. I could feel his cock softening, pulling out of me, away from me. I whimpered, didn't want the connection lost. Not yet. *Please don't go.*

"I'm not leaving until the morning. But I want you to listen to me. Okay?"

I swallowed and nodded. "Okay."

"I love you. I don't care about anything else, about Dream, about our music, or anything. Nothing matters to me more than you, and I'm going to find out why you pulled away, Brandon." I couldn't say anything. Just stared at him. He brushed my hair from my face. "I've got to go back to LA, take care of a few things there. Then I'm coming back. I'm going to figure this out. I refuse to live my life without you, do you understand? Nothing else matters, and I'm not going to do anything else until we solve our problems."

"But your new CD, the tour --"

He smiled, then kissed me on my bearded chin. "Yeah, it'll be out in a few weeks, supposedly, and I've already started getting the tour stuff together. But I don't care about that. All I care about is you. Do you understand what I'm saying? No more running. No more hiding. Can you tell me, Brandon? Can you tell me now the real reason you left me?"

I stared at him, my throat clogging.

He sighed, smiled that sad smile again. "It's all right, Brandon. Don't worry. I'm going to figure this out no matter what you can or can't say, understand? I'll be back as soon as I can."

I nodded, too overwhelmed to speak. But as he nestled against me, already I was formulating my plan. I had to get away, as soon as he was gone, leave here, go somewhere he couldn't find me, so he'd be safe, where they couldn't find him. Would never, ever find him with me.

Because if they did, I knew they'd kill him.

Then he fucked me again.

As I held Nicholas in my arms afterward, felt him slip from inside me at last, cradled him as he finally succumbed to the exhaustion, I knew that this would have to be the last time. He'd tricked me into loving him again, but it couldn't go on. Too risky, too much, I had to protect him. I had to.

I held him as long as I could, until his weight smashed me down so much I felt I couldn't breathe. Taking great care I slid out from beneath him, onto the floor. He reached for me, whimpered softly at the loss of my heat, but he didn't wake as he turned onto his side. We'd made a mess of the couch, but I didn't care. I cleaned him up a little, even then not waking him. I turned off all the lights -- it was past eleven already -- and padding naked into my bedroom. I took a couple of blankets from my bed and returned to the living room, covering him with one of them. Then I sat cross-legged next to him, the other blanket wrapped around me, and watched him sleep.

The phone's ringing woke me up. I stretched, wincing at my sore back -- I was on the floor, naked, next to my couch. Confused, I sat up, then remembered. The couch was empty. I bolted to my feet and ran into my bedroom. He was gone. The suitcase, his clothes, everything was gone.

I looked down at my nakedness, the dried come on my stomach, felt the heavy ache in my backside, and knew it hadn't been a dream.

Stunned, I walked into the kitchen. The phone had quit ringing. On the counter, next to our empty water bottles, sat a little teddy bear, one my favorite shade of blue. F.A.O. Schwartz. I smiled, despite myself. He'd been there a few months ago, he'd said, and I guessed he'd bought the bear then. For me.

The bear sat on an envelope with my name written on it. With shaking hands, I opened the envelope and pulled out the single piece of paper inside. *I'm sorry I had to leave so early, but had to catch the first plane out and didn't want to wake you, so I called a cab. I love you, Brandon. I'm going home, but I'll be back in four days, and you'd better be here. No more running, no more hiding. Nicholas.*

He didn't come back.

Four days later, I was still at my beach house. I hadn't run. I wasn't hiding. No, I was beside myself, wracked with fear and grief, my home full of family, friends, cops, all of them asking questions, demanding I tell them what I knew. But see, that was the problem. I didn't know anything except one thing, and that they already knew, too.

Nicholas never made it home, and it was all my fault.

* * * * *

Colorado -- Present Day

"Hey, Nicholas, I thought you were asleep."

I looked up as Jon all but jumped onto my bed. I sighed, waving the papers I was reading. "I printed some out, thought it'd be easier to read that way."

"Probably more comfortable than a laptop in bed. Good idea."

I hadn't meant more comfortable, but I just nodded. "Has Lee called?"

"Yup, sure did, sleeping beauty. The doc came to see Brandon."

I glared at Jon. "And?"

He sighed. "No change, really. She wants to keep him as calm as possible."

"Which means sedation."

"A little while longer, yeah. Sorry, Nicholas."

I closed my eyes and leaned against the headboard. "Yeah, me, too." I was still so tired. Exhausted, even though I'd slept all night.

But I'd tossed and turned, unable to rest without Brandon beside me. Or at least in the same room. It amazed me, really, how quickly I'd come to depend on his presence again, after being alone for so long. "I want to go see him."

Jon popped out of the bed. "Thought you might. But how about I take you to breakfast first?"

When I hesitated, he shook his finger at me. "Got to eat, boy-o. No complaints, hear? You need to be strong, and remember, I'm supposed to keep my eye on you for Brandon."

I smiled. "Who said?"

He grinned at me, showing all his teeth. "I said. Now, get up and get a shower, Stinky, so we can go eat."

"Pushy bastard, aren't you?"

"Always. Now scoot. Oh, yeah, and Adam called, too."

"Oh?" I said as I pulled off my pajama top. I headed into the bathroom. "What's he doing?"

"Headed this way, he said. Will be here this morning sometime."

"Good. I guess."

Jon laughed. "He's a bastard, I know, but he's been calling me for updates every few hours to see if Brandon's woken up yet. I'll be waiting for you outside. I'll let Jeff know we're going."

"Okay. Thanks, Jon."

I stripped off my pajama bottoms, glad Jon hadn't mentioned they hadn't exactly matched the top. Messy night dream. Just wish I'd remembered it, but it'd gone clean out of my mind. I didn't really remember my dreams anymore. Not like I used to.

I remembered the nightmares though.

An hour later, we sat outside a lovely little restaurant, Cinabar's, that Jeff recommended. Though the morning was crisp, the sun shone brightly and the skies overhead were a clear, startling blue. It felt good to sit on the deck. Jeff and Jon were talking about something in the morning paper, and I contented myself with sipping my coffee, half-listening to whatever they were discussing. Or, rather, arguing about.

"Excuse me? Are you Nicholas Kilmain?"

I looked up to find myself being adored by three young women. I smiled. Just what I needed -- and I don't mean that sarcastically. I hadn't had hardly any interaction with fans except through the mail in ages, and I realized at that moment that part of the anxiousness I felt was about that. It'd been so long since I'd played the role of singer. Too long.

"Uh, listen, girls --"

I raised a hand. "It's okay, Jeff. I don't mind my thoughts being interrupted." I nodded at the girls. "Yes, I'm Nicholas, and you're --"

They were, I estimated, somewhere in their mid-twenties. Dressed for skiing, they looked so young, carefree, and so fucking healthy I found myself on the jealous side.

"This is Marlene, I'm Angela, and this is Karen."

I held out my hand and shook each girl's in turn. "Good to meet you."

"How are you doing?" Karen said. "We've been following the papers, but there hasn't been much lately."

"You live here?" I asked.

All three girls nodded. "Just here for the weekend, though."

"We go to college in Boulder."

I smiled. They looked at me. *Now what?* I was thinking. Oh, yeah, they'd asked me a question. I smiled in apology. "I'm sorry, just a little scatterbrained today. I'm doing fine. Not ready to go skiing yet, though."

"What about Brandon? How's he doing?"

I made myself smile even bigger. He didn't want anyone to know he was in the hospital again. "He's all right. Sleeping."

"I figured he'd be the early riser, not you."

"Oh, usually they're both early risers," Jon murmured.

I glared at him, then said to Angela, "Yeah, well, sometimes we like to switch roles. Keeps things interesting, at any rate."

Jon burst out laughing at that, and I kicked him beneath the table, my face heating. But he ignored me, winked at the girls, and said, "Yeah, keeps them from getting bored --"

"Shut up, Jon."

"Hey, you said it, not me."

"Want me to toss him in the snow for you, Nicholas?" Jeff said.

"If he keeps it up," I said, pouting.

Jon burst out laughing again. "It's not *me* who keeps it up, Nick. That's Brandon's job."

I gasped and smacked him on the arm. "Shut up, Jon! That's not what I meant, and you know it." I paused, batted my eyes thoughtfully, and grinned shyly at the girls. "Although I guess it's actually quite true."

Jeff rolled his eyes, and two of the girls laughed. The other, Marlene, looked puzzled.

"What?" she said.

But Angela grabbed her by the arm, shaking her head as she said, "Never mind, Marl. Thanks, Nicholas. We can't wait to get your new CD. You guys are really living here now?"

I nodded. "For now, anyway."

"We'll see you around, then?"

"More than likely. But probably not Jon," I said, snarling at him. "He's being sent on the first plane back to Murrieta."

"Ah, Nick, don't say that." He leaned over and kissed me, then nuzzled my neck, making me laugh before he said, "You love me and you know it."

The girls stared, wide-eyed at Jon. "But we thought you and Brandon --"

I pushed Jon away. "Just ignore him. Please. Sorry, this is Jon, Brandon's pest of a brother. His very married brother. And Jeff's our bodyguard."

Angela grinned. "Well, we've got to be going. Thanks for talking to us."

Marlene said, "I still want to know what you guys were laughing at --"

"Shut up, Marlene," Angela said. I waved goodbye as they left, the two girls dragging their still clueless friend with them. After a moment I heard a shriek and an "Oh, my God!" and I groaned, covering my face.

"Such a way with words you have, darling," Jon said.

I kicked him again. "Shut the fuck up."

"Now, now, don't get testy."

Fortunately the waitress showed up and took our orders. To my surprise, when the food arrived I was able to eat. But as the hour dragged on, I got more and more anxious to leave. Once we finally paid the bill -- after I was recognized by several more people, which led to everyone else noticing me, had my picture taken with a grandma fan, and signed about twenty-five autographs (good gosh, I thought, would I ever find anonymity again? Oh, darn) -- we escaped the restaurant and headed to the hospital.

When we got there we had a surprise -- Adam was in the room with Brandon, fluffing his pillows for him. And Brandon was awake.

Chapter Nine

I stared at Adam, then at Brandon, his half-closed eyes focused on me. He smiled. My baby looked loopy. *Helpless*.

"You okay?" I said, unable to explain the heated prickling at my neck.

Brandon lifted his hand up to me and nodded. I took his hand, pushing past Adam, who moved back to talk to Jon. I sat on the edge of the bed, still holding Brandon's hand. I stroked it, his warm, dry skin, then kissed his knuckles, making him smile.

"Where you been?" he asked.

"Getting breakfast. I didn't expect you to be awake."

He frowned, wrinkling his eyebrows together as if he were in pain. "Hurts."

I nodded, glancing at Lee.

"I'll go get a nurse," he said.

"Thanks, Lee," I said.

He bowed sharply. I smiled as Lee left, turning back to Brandon, but he'd closed his eyes, drifted off. I stroked his face, shaking my head. So pale, so terribly pale. I couldn't wait until summer, when he could be outside again and be my golden boy again. I hated him almost being the same color as me. It wasn't right. Brandon was supposed to be gold and sunshine, bright white smiles, and sparkling green eyes like molten pools of emeralds. Not like this. Once he got well again, I'd spend the rest of my life making sure he never hurt again.

The pain and horror I'd suffered at the hands of my captor was nothing like what Brandon had endured. *Still* endured. I pushed thoughts, bitter and dark, away. I couldn't think about such things now, and how the evil that pulsed around us still had its clutches on

Brandon. Adam and Jon talked quietly behind me, and I felt sour. I didn't want Adam there, really didn't want anyone there but me and Brandon.

And him I wanted home.

The nurse came in, checked Brandon's IV.

"He woke up?" she asked. The puzzled expression on her face alarmed me.

"Yes, he was awake when I got here," I said, glancing at Adam. "Is he okay? Is that unusual?"

The nurse frowned. "A little. We're just keeping him lightly sedated, but perhaps ..." She nodded, adjusted the drip. "A little more is in order. The doctor should be around in a bit to take a look at him, and I'll let him know."

"He's sleeping now. He's slept so much."

"Yes. This extra sleep isn't a bad thing, Mr. Kilmain. His vitals are good, and the rest will do him good as well. I need to check his catheter, though, so, if you gentlemen would please leave ..."

Jon glanced over at that. "He has another one?" He winced, covering his own dick and winking at me. I rolled my eyes at him.

"Yes, hopefully he'll get it out today. Now, if you two would please --"

"Get your asses out of here, in other words," I said and looked pointedly at Jon. He grinned.

"Okay, okay, no need to growl at us. We'll vacate. We're going to go get something to eat. Want anything?" Jon said.

"No, I'm fine." I frowned. "But we just ate."

Jon grinned, sticking out and patting his tummy. I wanted Brandon to gain weight, but if he ever developed a belly like that, I'd tie him to a treadmill. Jon looked almost as pregnant as Jenn. "I'm hungry anyway. Must be the good mountain air. We'll be back later."

Adam nodded to me and followed after Jon, passing Jeff and Mutt, who were talking to Lee outside. Jon said something to him and he nodded, winked at me. Once the door was closed, the nurse smiled at me.

"I'm staying," I said.

"I expected you to stay. Family is good to have around, but right now he just needs quiet."

"You don't have to check his catheter?"

She laughed. "No. I'll come back later and see how he's doing."

"You are a gem. Thanks."

Once she was gone, I studied Brandon, watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest. It bothered me he'd woken up, but it was good, seeing him smile at me. I guessed he didn't

remember what he'd been through, the relapse, nor that he was supposed to have come home.

I leaned over him, batting my eyelashes gently against his cheeks. Butterfly kisses, followed by a gentle brushing of my lips over his eyes, his nose, breathing in his scent. He smelled kinda like baby lotion. I kissed his cheek, moved down to the corner of his mouth, gently nuzzled his neck. No response, but maybe, just maybe he'd have sweet dreams and wake up thinking about me and wondering if I'd watched over him while he slept.

Which, of course, I did.

I felt a strange urge then, a wave of protectiveness sweep through me. A fierceness. Whoever was trying to hurt him wasn't going to get to him ever again. I would sacrifice myself rather than let him be hurt again. Nothing else mattered.

Nothing.

With a sigh, I settled in the chair next to him, and as I had so many times now, and as he'd done so many times when I was at my sickest, I opened my laptop. I stared at the screen, my finger poised to click the file open. Dread filled me -- this that was coming next was the part I was scared of reading, but for entirely different reasons than one might think.

During all those long, horrid weeks while I was caged up like a dog, all I could think about was Brandon. My beautiful Brandon, holding the teddy I'd left him, wondering if he'd ever see me again.

I wasn't afraid to die. Oddly, that's never frightened me, the thought of dying.

But what frightened me, and what I fretted over so much, what made my heart pound and made me cry, was thinking about Brandon, my beautiful Brandon, out there wondering what had happened, getting those awful pictures, not knowing where I was or if I was going to die and leave him completely alone for good.

I wasn't sure he could have survived that, being alone like that. Not knowing what I know now about him, the real Brandon Ashwood. Oh, how I thought I'd really known him, but I'd barely known the slightest sketch of the man he was, even after all those years we were together. He'd never shown the reality of himself to me -- not until now, with his words, with this story he was telling to me now.

And as I drank in each word, felt every tear, every agony, every cry of frustration and anger, I fell harder for him, ever harder with the real man who was Brandon Ashwood.

Oh, God, I love him so much, so very, very much. Please let me save him. Please give me the strength.

With a deep breath, I began once more to read, Brandon's voice filling my mind.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

"Brandon, son, you need to eat something."

"No."

"You aren't doing Nicholas any good --"

I whirled on my mom. "No. I said no! I can't --" My stomach clenched, and I had to fight not to wrap an arm around my middle. She would ask me what was wrong, and she couldn't know. "How can I eat when we don't know ... if he ..."

I collapsed on the couch, my hands cradling my face. The scent of pizza, my favorite, permeated the room, but all I could smell was my fear.

Fear that I'd never see him again.

I stood, kicked the coffee table. "I'm going out."

"Where?"

Anger flared. "I don't know, okay? I just -- I gotta get out of here."

"Brandon!" she said sharply. I stopped. One didn't disobey that particular mom voice no matter how old one was. "Have you been drinking, son?"

I laughed, bitter and hard. "Drinking? No. No, Mom, I haven't had another fucking thing to drink, and I won't. So don't worry, I've no intention of letting myself be killed now. Not until I kill the bastard who took Nicholas. I'll be back later."

My mom watched me as I grabbed my keys and my cell phone, pausing to grab the little teddy bear. I left her standing in my kitchen, watching me as my descent into stark terror truly began. A good son would've reassured her that I was really okay, that I'd be fine, I could handle this. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't even give my mom that much.

After all, I wasn't sure I believed it myself.

I drove. Not sure where, or how long, just drove. Thought about everything that the cops had told me, let the words and the horror play over and over again in my mind as if by doing so I could make sense of the terror Nicholas had to have felt as someone else took control of his life.

I knew he had to have hated that.

His flight to LA arrived right on time. No problems there. He was on it, had checked in, charmed his flight attendant as he always did, helped the lady in first class next to him with her two-year-old twins, happily playing with and holding one or the other and talking to their mom. She had loved talking to Nicholas, of course, and he'd told her all about me.

When I met her, later, to go over everything he'd said just because I *had* to do that, she'd been so sweet and kind and caring I could see why Nicholas had opened up to her.

She has damn lucky kids to have a mom like her.

Eventually the kids had fallen asleep, and Nicholas had written some, just little emails and stuff, a journal he liked to keep for his fans that sometimes he actually remembered to

send in to his website manager. Jotted a few lines down for new music and, to my sad amusement, tweaked some of our old songs, ones we never recorded but he'd liked anyway, though he always said he couldn't get the damn things right and maybe later, someday, he would find the right words.

Such a perfectionist, my Nicholas.

The plane landed on time, like I said. He disembarked, saying goodbye to mom and twins, meeting their daddy, who asked for an autograph. And Nick being Nick, he did that, and promised to stay in touch "cause he was the twins'" uncle now, you know.

Nicholas would adopt every child in the world if he could. I really wish he could have one of his own; I really do. He'd be the best dad ever.

He picked up his luggage from baggage claim, just the one piece, and called Marisa to let her know he'd arrived safely. She told him to come by and see her, and he agreed, after he picked up Barkley from the vets because they closed at six p.m. and he really missed his dog.

Then he called the vet to let them know he was on his way, and paid for his car, which he'd kept on the airport parking lot so he wouldn't have to bother any of his friends to come and get him.

He ticketed out of the airport grounds, and just after that called his sometimes co-writer Blair, who he was to have a late dinner with to let her know he was back home. She was the last one he spoke to.

All these things the detective told me. Those were the cold, hard facts, what they had to go on. A few phone calls, one passerby's observations, and scant little else. There was nothing else, and the realization that all I could so was wait, and see what the kidnapper wanted, about killed me.

Money, of course, I thought. Well, I was ready to give every dollar I had to get him back. Considering how much I was worth, that was a considerable amount, but I didn't care. The money never meant much to me, except for what it could give my family.

I constantly gave my money away. Donations, family, friends, anyone who needed it, really, if they were important to me. Or the cause was. Even then my net worth only continued to rise. Not nearly as much as Nicholas's did, but rise it did, and now it felt like an albatross around my neck.

Was this why he'd been kidnapped? For the money?

Eventually, I got tired of driving. Really wasn't sure where I'd ended up, somewhere along the beaches. I stopped the car and got out, sat on the hood of my car and looked out at the waves, a bottle of water in my hand. The sun was setting over the clouds along the horizon. They looked like mountains, and I was reminded of a time Nicholas and I had snuck off to Colorado for a weekend of fun and frolicking and lots and lots of fucking.

Marisa had been livid. When we got back, she and I had our first really bad fight. I'd accused her of being a controlling self-righteous bitch who thought only of herself and not

about Nicholas, and she'd slapped me and called me a worthless cocksucker who thought only of my dick and where I could cram it next. Of course she assumed I was top. I'd laughed at that. Proved my point -- she didn't know Nicholas if she didn't think he was a total top, at least then.

At that point I think I called her a whore who didn't know an ass from a dick. Not sure. Think so, though, because I got slapped again.

Lovely, huh. Never told Nicholas about that.

In any case, this happened long, long ago, before the second album. Before I really started to pull away from Nicholas. He'd begged me to take him skiing, which he was lousy at, but it had been fun, just the two of us decked out in our parkas and escaping for the weekend. We told Lee where we were going, but unless someone died, he was sworn to secrecy.

"Glad to help out," he whispered to me. "Going to be hell of a lot of fun watching Marisa scream."

And scream she did.

Later, when she found out Lee had known and refused to tell her, she wanted him fired. Nicholas, of course, didn't permit that, but where she and I never forgave each other, she and Lee did.

Losing my train of thought here. I took Nicholas skiing, and it was one of the best weekends of my life. Cold, yes. Nicholas had a hell of a time with his skis, yes. But we made it up to the top of the mountain, and the ski lodge. I popped my skis off, and he was still struggling with his poles, getting the loops off his hands.

"Here, let me help you," I said, clomping over to him. I smiled, shaking my head as he pouted up at me.

"I am not sure about this, Brandon."

I pulled one of his gloves off so he could get his hand out. "You're the one who wanted to do this."

"I wanted to snuggle in front of a fire with snow and mountains outside," he said, looking around to make sure no one was looking. "With you," he added in a sharp whisper.

I chuckled and bent over to help him get his skis off. "Lift up," I said.

He leaned on me, taking advantage of my position to pat me on the rear. "Nice butt."

I popped his other boot off, then stood, taking him in my arms. His hair was still long back then, so I kissed him, hoping anyone who happened to pay attention would think he was a girl.

So that was a little silly, but with his hat on and freshly shaved and glasses and long hair sticking out, and the ridiculous parka he'd insisted on, and that pout and those incredible, full lips and pale, cold-blushed cheeks -- he looked positively fem. So I kissed him.

He gasped. "Brandon," he whispered and took off his glasses. He winced -- the sun was bright -- but his eyes held the kind of heat and promise I hungered for. I didn't dare kiss him again, though.

I nodded toward the lodge, started to walk that way. "Come on, let's go get some hot chocolate."

"With peppermint schnapps?"

"Sure, that would be good."

He caught up with me. "Be even better if we were naked in bed drinking it."

I laughed as we reached the bottom steps and pushed him up them. There were quite a few, and he clomped noisily up them, like a kid in his dad's boots. "Is that all you think about?" I said to him as I followed.

He looked over his shoulder. "What, sex?"

He got a few looks for that one.

"Yes, silly, go inside."

"Not silly," he said, then turned around and gasped. "Brandon!"

I reached the top of the steps to turn and see what he was looking at. Someone tried to pass us, so I pulled him out of the way but he barely noticed I'd grabbed his elbow and tugged him aside. "What is it?" I asked once we were finally out of the way."

"Look."

I slid behind him, realizing that here at least, out of the way, no one was behind us. No one had recognized us, either -- back then, we still enjoyed a certain measure of peace. We were just two guys having some fun, like everyone else. No one would know if I slid my hand around his waist, so I did. He dared to lean back against me, his cheek pressed to mine. Still no one noticed, so I said, "Fuck it," softly in his ear. He smiled at that, turned his face to mine, nuzzled along my cheekbone.

We looked down, then, at what had entranced Nicholas so.

It was midday, just after lunchtime. The sun shined bright on the snow, fresh and clean and sparkling white. We were at the top of the mountain, and swaths of white trails split the trees, leading down to the ski village below. Bright blue skies, crisp fresh snow, towering trees, nude and evergreen, lined the trails. Other mountains rose up around us, yet didn't seem to reach as high, studded with evergreen trees and deep banks of snow. I pulled Nicholas closer to me, nuzzling his ear. A few curious looks were cast our way, but nothing bad, no one with any menace in their eyes. Still, I felt a protective wariness as I cradled him close. If one person had said anything to us, I would've been ready.

But Nick's thoughts were far, far away from those who might or might not take offense at two men holding each other as if they were lovers. Which, of course, we were.

"It's breathtaking, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," I whispered in his ear, laughing softly as he giggled at the warm brush of my words.

"I've never been on a mountain, really. Not like this. Have you?"

I thought a moment and shrugged. "Sort of. When I climbed Ayers Rock in Australia that time, I felt on top of the world. But this is even higher."

"Was it pretty up there?"

I chuckled at that, hugging him again. "Yes, it was. Beautiful. But a different sort than this. Maybe someday I'll get you up there and you can see for yourself."

"No way. No, too hot for me. And gritty. And all that sweat, no thanks." He paused. "Unless you could helicopter me up there."

I pointed to one of the mountains, far off to the side, on our right. It was flatter than the others, and bare of snow. "See that one? It reminds me of Ayers Rock, sort of. Kind of shaped like it."

"I wonder who owns it. Maybe I could buy it for you."

I laughed at that. "You're nuts, Nicholas. What would I do with a mountain?"

"I don't know. Just enjoy it. Build a cabin on it and stay there whenever you wanted some peace and quiet. I'd like a home up here. Wouldn't you?"

"Maybe we'll have one someday."

"Just you and me."

"And a big giant bathtub with a picture window so we can look out at our mountain while we splash in our tub."

"A big giant bed."

"Lots of lube."

I laughed. "And yeah, lots of lube."

"Lots and lots. I wish we were there now, could stay there for a whole month." He sighed against me. "I miss you so much, Brandon. Sometimes I wish things were simpler, that we could be together like we are now. No one's paying any attention to us; we're just two strangers holding each other."

"Two fags holding each other," I said, noting one person at least who looked up at us with disapproval in his eyes.

"Fuck him," Nicholas muttered, making me laugh.

"I'd rather fuck you."

He drew in his breath at that. Clutched my hand and sneakily reached behind and gave my dick a quick squeeze. Even with all the clothes I had on, I swear I felt the heat of his hand. It seared me.

We stood there for the longest time, just looking down the mountain. Later, when we got back, Mr. Curious actually looked into that other mountain, to see if it was for sale. It

was privately owned, much to our surprise, and was used for hunting moose during the season. There were several cabins on the property for rent, and Nicholas promised me we would get one the next winter and escape for a long, decadent weekend; at least, he'd planned on that until he learned just how basic those cabins were.

My brothers were visiting us then, and Adam regaled us with just how tough it would be. He and my dad liked to hunt, something neither Jon nor I enjoyed it, though I didn't let Nick know that. It was too much fun to tease him.

"No central heat. You have to chop your own wood, too, Nicholas," Adam said, laughing at Nick's expression.

He had been horrified. "Chop my own wood? Are you nuts? I suppose there's no running water, either?"

Adam had smirked. "Or electricity."

Jon had winked at me. "And no beds. Or pillows."

Nicholas stood. "Crazy fucking hunters. It's cold. What man in his right mind would subject himself to that?"

I'd laughed, then, at his silliness, at his absolute conviction there was no way any human being could survive long, and definitely not for a whole weekend, in such abysmal conditions. No way. Especially not him.

Later, of course, he learned otherwise. That he could, and for much, much longer than a weekend.

But right then, all such thoughts were quickly pushed aside as we made love with our hotel windows open so we could see the mountains. Not quite the view we wanted, though when we finally did buy our house, after he was rescued, I was very happy that he finally got what he wanted.

But what a hell of a way to have it come about.

* * * * *

He told me, later on, what happened that night, at least what he could remember. Some of it he forgot -- the worst of it, thank God. Writing it down now hurts so bad, but maybe ... maybe if I do, the demons that sit on my shoulders will shut up. The guilt's eating me from the inside out, even now that I now he's okay. Maybe if I'd gone with him, he wouldn't have gone through this. I could've told him not to stop, leave the old man, forget him.

If he'd woken me up, I would've gone with him, and then he wouldn't have been alone.

There's several ways to get to Nick's house from LA, but his favorite is longer, winding, and remote. That's not the road he took. Maybe if he had, then he wouldn't have been caught by his kidnapper. No, instead he took the most direct route. He was in a hurry. He

wanted to get to Barkley and then to Blair's for supper and no doubt tell her about what happened between us. But for some reason, reasons he says he doesn't remember because he's kinda fuzzy on that point, he stopped.

A man who passed by in his truck came forward later and said he saw a gray car by the side of the road and an elderly gentleman with a thick, bushy beard standing beside it. He had a flat tire. We think that Nicholas stopped to help the so-called elderly man because that's just the way Nicholas is, although got to admit I've never, ever seen Nicholas change a flat tire.

I sure as hell didn't think he knew how.

He pulled up either behind or in front of the man's car and got out, left his car running -- it was still running when the police pulled up to it approximately fifteen minutes later when a passing motorist called in that this really nice bright yellow convertible was just sitting there on the side of the road, idling away, and no one was around.

Nicholas had put the top of the convertible down. It was such a pretty day that day, he said. He remembered that, the feel of the cool breeze and the warm sunshine on his face. He remembered being so happy, and confident, having made love to me again at last. He said his mind had been drifting some; he was singing to the radio and remembering how I'd given myself to him. How good and incredible it felt to be inside me, like he'd dreamed of for so long.

I felt like crying when he told me that. Still recovering from his surgery, he'd been barely coherent when he tried to tell me what all had happened, but that he remembered, he said. He remembered driving along and reliving making love to me.

Nicholas walked up, talked to the man, offered his help. The man opened his trunk to show Nicholas the spare, hit him on the back of the head, stuffed him into the trunk, and drove off. Nicholas doesn't remember much about the ride, floating in and out of consciousness like he did, but he remembers everything afterwards.

Everything.

Yet though he says that he's told me what happened, I know there is much he has chosen not to tell me. There's no doubt about that. He's not seen all the pictures I have, and he never will -- I will never, ever let him -- and what those pictures told me are indescribable. Terrifying.

I feel sick now, writing this, knowing how scared he was, and no one there to reassure him. No one was there to chase away this particular demon. I would've lost it, gone insane with fear, I think. But Nicholas is and always will be stronger than me. I admire him so much for that, for his inner beauty, his inner strength.

He woke up in the back of a van. He was naked, wrists and ankles bound, and was in a large wire dog crate. It was hot and still, and he remembered being very hungry and thirsty, barely able to breathe. The van had stopped, and Nicholas remembers a whistling sound, and then the man opened up the back of the van and took pictures of his captive.

He made Nicholas pose, reveal himself to the man's eyes in ways only I have ever seen. It disgusts me and angers me now, what the man did to him, and when Nicholas protested, he poked him with a broomstick, or threw water on him until finally Nicholas did as he was told.

Then the man said the words that gave Nicholas his first dose of real terror -- and hope.

"Brandon's gonna love these," the man said, his voice hoarse, deliberately so. As if he didn't want Nicholas to recognize him.

Those were the first pictures I got, courtesy of Federal Express. I received them the day after my endless, mindless drive. I was fast asleep on the couch, cradling my teddy bear.

I remember my mom was still waiting for me when I got home the night before, and she'd insisted on staying with me. Jenn had showed up sometime that morning, cooked me breakfast, and nearly force-fed me. I finally ate. Full for the first time in days, and beyond the point of exhaustion, I had passed out on the couch after giving strict orders to everyone to leave me alone.

But my mom woke me up anyway.

"Son, wake up."

I blinked, looking up to find my mom and Jenn staring down at me. "What's wrong?" I bolted up. "Is it Nicholas? Did he call? Did they find him?"

"No, no," Jenn said, shaking her head. "Oh, Bean, this came for you and I opened it. And, well, sit down. Try not to touch them."

I sat as she handed me a FedEx envelope. I stared at it for a moment, then slid its contents onto the coffee table and stared numbly at the pictures.

They were of Nicholas.

Inside a trunk, clearly unconscious.

On the ground beside a car, trussed up and seemingly dead.

Stripped naked, hands and feet bound.

Inside a dog crate, his eyes wide and blue with terror, his body positioned for the ultimate humiliation.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God," I said. I stared at the envelope again -- it'd been stamped in California.

The cops came and took the envelope and its contents. The next one came a day later. More photos, mailed from a different location.

The next day, the same.

And the next.

For seven straight days the envelopes came and I lived in stark fear that each one would be the last, that each photo that showed Nicholas more and more filthy, stressed, hurt, would be the last -- would be of him dead.

Then they stopped coming. For two weeks, nothing. I was beside myself. Which was worse? The envelopes showing the slow progression of Nick's descent into hell, or nothing at all?

My family watched over me. Adam left the group he'd been playing with and moved in to help keep an eye on me. I actually welcomed his presence. Our anger toward each other had tempered over the years. I was insensate. I was nearly insane. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. Every time the phone rang or the doorbell buzzed, I thought it would be the final one, the one I dreaded.

I started to get packages again, but not from the kidnapper. Instead, it was something else entirely -- the fans. Oh, yeah, Nick's fans were living the horror right along with me, those nameless, faceless, loving thousands who filled the internet and bulletin boards and even my inbox and our record label's with sobbing emails over the disappearance of Nicholas Kilmain. They sent me flowers, packages, presents, good-luck charms, books and clothes and even food.

They sent me their love. As if they'd forgiven me for destroying Nicholas.

It's not every day that a celebrity gets kidnapped. I was inundated with phone calls, requests for interviews, my thoughts on what could've happened to Nicholas, how the investigation was coming. And I did them. I had to. I talked to radio stations, gave interviews, desperate to keep the investigation alive, to make the investigators keep working on Nick's case.

I read everything I could, all the notes and emails and message boards and journals, thinking maybe someone knew something, would see something, could help me somehow. I answered every email, practically begging the fans to be looking out for Nicholas. One person was all it could take to find him.

But finally it was too much, all the anguish, the crying fans, the well-wishing. My obsession with being everything to everyone was killing me. Marisa took up fielding a bunch of it, she and I having established a truce of sorts.

The hope that someone out there would know something that could help began to fade. I told Marisa not to tell me anything anymore, and I collapsed into myself like I'm so good at doing, hiding from the world, slipping into a state of numbness that even Jenn failed to pull me out of.

Adam fielded everything else the best he could, convinced me to hide away in a hotel for a while, but news would get out where I was and I'd have to move again. It's an odd thing to me but the brother who hated Nicholas was there for me when the one who loved him refused to be.

It hurt, how it hurt, the day Jon did come, not to see how I was doing, but to make sure there wasn't anything else he could do on his end to help find Nicholas. There wasn't, of course, and how I ached, how I cried after he left, longing for him to hold me again. Just once, to let me know he loved me, forgave me, believed Nicholas would be found.

But he didn't. He wouldn't.

Then the kidnapper made his mistake. He sent another picture of Nicholas. He'd lost weight, and was filthy, but scratched into his side in the grime was the letter A. That's all, just an A.

Nicholas had found a way to give me a clue.

Chapter Ten

Colorado -- Present Day

It is really weird, being in a grocery store and hearing your voice wailing over the loudspeaker. I'd been lost in thought, thinking about what I'd read earlier in Brandon's journal. We'd all started calling it that. The journal. What are you doing now, Nicholas? Oh, I'm reading the journal. It had become the center of my life, the keeper of secrets, the only hope I had for Brandon's salvation. I was as fixated on that journal as Brandon had been on the pictures of me. He'd found what he needed to save me in those pictures, but I feared I wouldn't be so lucky.

I remembered how terrified I'd been when I'd scratched that first letter on my side. Terrified my kidnapper would see it, terrified that Brandon wouldn't understand what I was trying to do. Terrified that the kidnapper would stop taking pictures of me altogether. I'd been lucky in that respect. He got some sort of kick out of posing me and taking pictures, the pervert.

"Hey, Nick, hear that?" Lee said as he put four gallons of two-percent in the cart.

I nodded as the oh-so-familiar *Put your hand in mind and I'll banish the hurts of time* continued to bath me in the dairy section of Durango's finest grocer. "Why does it have to be that song?" I asked.

Lee smiled, chucking me playfully on the chin. "Coincidence, I'm sure."

God, I sound so young, I thought as I let my mind sing along with myself. So naïve, so innocent, so blithely clueless. Mind you, I love that song and always will, but I thought I had all the answers then, could solve all the problems of the world. The reality, of course, was I that was a mere infant in my knowledge of the world. So much yet to learn, though I hadn't the brains to realize just how much.

I thought I was so fucking smart.

I wondered what Brandon thought when he first heard those lyrics. I mean, I know what he said, that he loved them, had even messed around with the words a bit himself and helped me tweak here and there. He'd really liked that song. But ... I don't know that he ever listened to it. *Really* listened to it.

I wondered why he never told me how much he was hurting by then. Maybe he'd tried; maybe I just hadn't listened. I was good at that, especially during my posturing years, when I was trying to be everything for everyone else. Everyone else but Brandon. And, yeah, myself.

I felt Lee's hand on my shoulder. "Hey, it's going to be okay, all right? He fooled all of us. There was no way to realize what was really going on in that head of his. You know that."

"If I'd just stopped for a minute, if I'd just *listened* and ... and ... and ..."

"Nick. Hush now." He gathered me into a hug, and I sighed, sliding my arms around his waist and wishing it was Brandon holding me. Which, of course, Lee knew, which was why he chuckled at me when I nuzzled his neck. "Come on now, people are looking."

I pulled back, noticed a few people had stopped, or at least noticed us before going on. Two young men in ski parkas watched us with appalled fascination, acting as if they were looking at the yogurts we'd just left, when they were really actually watching me. I stroked Lee's face, then kissed him before looking at the boys.

"What, never seen a gay man kiss a straight man before? It's how we convert them, you know," I said to the red parka one. Then I leered at him. "Wanna give it a bit of a try? You might like it."

His eyes widened, and he and his companion scuttled off, looking over their shoulders. Lee threw his head back and laughed as he released me. "You're mean, Nick."

I grinned maliciously at him. "When I wanna, I can be." At least I felt better, the momentary blues chased away. For now, anyway.

A couple with a baby in a cart drew closer, the chubby infant so bundled against the cold he couldn't move. He seemed happy, though, as he gummed a box of mac and cheese. The young woman grinned at me. She looked up at the ceiling (the song thankfully winding up by then) and back at me, and I grinned, shrugging my shoulders. Her eyes lit up.

"That *is* you. I was right. Nicholas Kilmain."

I bowed slightly, wincing a little at the stress on my scar, but ignoring it. "At your service."

"I know those boys, by the way. They didn't mean anything, I'm sure."

I waved a hand after them. "I know. No big deal." I winked at her. "But it sure was fun freaking them out. "

She nodded, then pushed away, her husband casting me a curious look. She bent close to him, then whispered to him as they pushed their cart on down the aisle.

"That was Nicholas Kilmain. The song you were just singing to? That's his," she said, her voice filtering to me. Her husband looked back at me, then actually blushed.

I smiled at him and said to Lee, "What else do you think he'd like? I want to get out of here."

"Jell-O? Popsicles?"

"He's sick of Jell-O, but I guess we'd better get some." I doubted we could get popsicles this time of year, but it was worth a look. We walked down the frozen foods section, Lee a few steps ahead of me.

"Yo, victory, there they are."

"Great." I tossed some in the cart. Then some more. And a third box.

"I think that's enough, Nicholas."

I stared at the cart. "Oh. Yeah. I don't know what else to get."

"Oatmeal?"

I sighed. "I guess. Can we go now?"

"Yes, sir, no problem. Onward, Jeffrey."

Jeff gave Lee a dangerous glare, but pushed the cart toward checkout by way of the cereal aisle, where we grabbed a few boxes of oatmeal. I lingered behind, but not too far because Jeff would look at me and frown if I fell behind too much. Then I would have to catch up and endure his frown a moment longer for not doing like I was supposed to. Bad me.

Amazing how he could make me obey him with that frown. After Brandon's little incident with Mutt, I didn't dare cause trouble for his partner. I certainly didn't want to see *my* head on the platter, like Brandon's had been.

Thank you, God, for sending us Mutt. And Jeff, I thought, watching my so solemn bodyguard as he consulted the list Jenn had given him one more time. He checked off a couple items, then nodded in satisfaction.

"All done," he said to no one in particular. "Let's rock."

We chose a checkout line, and while Jeff put the items on the moving belt thing, I looked over the magazines and rags. Lee had one in his hand. "Hey, Nick, did you know Godzilla's having King Kong's baby?"

I snatched the rag from his hand and stuffed it back on the rack. "That's not what that said. I can't believe you read that trash. And you forgot one thing -- Godzilla was a guy."

"So's the monkey. Which one's top, you think?" I punched him on the arm, making him yelp. "Shit, Nick, that hurt!"

"You'll get worse than that if you don't be quiet." I pushed him past Jeff to where a cute high school boy was bagging our groceries -- when he wasn't staring at me. I smiled at him, grinning at his adorable blush. I winked. He nearly dropped a can of tomatoes. Hey, I may be taken, but I'm not blind.

Lee and I waited by the door as Jeff took care of paying. I nodded and smiled as people went past us, but though I saw a few looks of recognition, no one bothered us. Really, the people of Durango were great about leaving me alone. I sure appreciated that.

Yeah, a few would sometimes stop me, ask how I was doing, if I was excited about the coming release of the new CD, and I'd answer and smile and say all the right things. Then they'd go on and leave me in peace. Not once was I asked anything remotely tacky or intimate. It was good. Really, I was starting to just blend in with the rest of the world in certain places -- the local Coffee Haus, Starbucks, the grocery store, the bank. Though there, our new local bank had almost put out a red carpet for me until I'd fussed at the manager for being so silly. I was just another guy, nothing special.

We checked out of the store and headed back to the house. I was tired--we'd spent all day at the hospital, and Brandon's doctor had chastised me for wearing myself to a frazzle (as she put it) and ordered me to go home, take a hot bath, eat a good dinner, and go to bed.

Jeff was then told I was not allowed to show my face at the hospital again until ten o'clock the next morning. I'd pouted, said I'd be there at nine o'clock. I got overruled -- by Jeff. Even though I am Jeff's boss, he told me he was obeying the doctor on this one, not me.

Bastard.

I'd insisted on going by the store first because maybe just maybe they'd let Brandon come home the next day and we needed to be ready. And Jenn had a bunch of stuff she wanted us to get, having given Jeff a list. Even though she was close to term, she insisted on cooking for us all. Said it kept her mind off worrying about her cousin, and I couldn't deny her that. Besides, I was also on orders to gain weight and she was doing her part to make sure I did.

I really was exhausted, so once we were done at the store, I was glad to be home again. I followed Lee into the mudroom, stomped the snow off my boots, and took them off, slipping my feet into my slippers. Lee helped me off with my coat -- the cold kinda bothered my scar when I tried to move certain ways. I didn't say anything, but he knew anyway, so he helped me without my asking him to.

"Go on in the kitchen and get some coffee," he told me.

"Caffeine-free," Jeff said.

I made a face at him. "That's not real coffee." He just looked at me.

I had to laugh to myself, but didn't let him see. I really was growing fond of that boy and his solemn protectiveness. It didn't even bother me anymore that he rarely smiled. In fact, about the only time I saw him smile was when he was with his lovely wife.

How to talk him into staying with us permanently, I didn't know. Both he and Mutt had solid roots here. But we weren't going anywhere anytime soon, that was for sure. Time enough to worry about it later, but I couldn't imagine going anywhere without Jeff now.

I was scared to, I realized.

I padded toward the kitchen. From the hallway I could see Jenn standing at the stove, stirring something in a huge red pot. It smelled wonderful. And the kitchen was warm, a fire crackling in the corner stove and music not my own playing on the sound system. Nice nice nice. Wished Brandon were there to enjoy it.

Maybe tomorrow. I had to hope, maybe tomorrow.

Jenn looked up as I came in. Barkley zoomed into the kitchen, all wiggles and sloppy kisses, and I petted him, wishing I could bend down and hug him like I used. He followed after Jeff, into the living room.

"Hey, Nicholas, you guys get everything on my list?"

I stood behind Jenn and snaked my arms around her. Nestling my head on her shoulder, I sighed, spreading my hands over her huge tummy. "Yes, ma'am, we got everything. How's Peanut?"

She laughed, pressing my hands against her stomach and the moving creature inside. "Peanut? He's doing fine. Kicking like crazy."

My hand jumped, making me laugh. "I can feel him!"

"Hold still for a second."

She leaned her head against mine, then turned and kissed me on the forehead. I held her for a moment longer, marveling at the undulating creature she carried, the tiny being beneath my hands.

I was so excited -- the baby was going to be born here, in Durango. Two weeks to go. Any second, really. And Jenn promised I could be there. And Brandon, too, though I wasn't too sure he was okay with that. If he'd even be up to it. *God, I hope so, please let him be okay.* So squeamish over the silliest things, Brandon. Considering what all he'd seen and been through, it was kinda funny he was terrified of childbirth. I think it was just he didn't think it proper to see his cousin like that, see *down there*, and in the full throes of labor.

I, on the other hand, could hardly wait. Peanut was the closest thing to Brandon's baby I could ever have, and I planned on spoiling him rotten. F.A.O. Schwartz, watch out!

"How's Brandon today?" she asked.

I sighed. "Sleeping. I watched him sleep all day, really."

"That's good. He didn't wake up at all?"

"Just a little while." I chuckled. "I got to give him a sponge bath."

"That was fun, I bet."

"Yeah, except the nurse insisted on being there, too."

"Poor Brandon! I bet he hated that!" she said with a laugh.

Poor Brandon was right. He'd blushed more than I had. "Yeah, he's got a real modest streak." I sobered at that, thinking about what he'd endured. Jenn sighed and hugged me tight. We pressed our cheeks together, both of us lost in our grief for what the boy we both loved so much had faced for so long.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas."

"Me, too, Jenn. Me, too."

I finally released her as Lee brought in the groceries. I started to help him put them away, but he chased me off. "Doc's orders, remember? Go take a bath."

"You saying I stink?" I said, wiping my face with the back of my hand. Lee didn't say a word, given Jenn's eyes were a bit on the shiny side, too. It was a common thing in our house, moments of deep emotion. One never knew who would be crying next, though unfortunately it was usually over pretty much the same thing.

I was so sick of tears.

"No, I'm saying you are restless, exhausted, listless, and dinner won't be ready for a while yet, so ..." He looked at Jenn, one eyebrow raised.

"Another thirty, forty minutes."

Lee nodded. "So go. Go get in the Jacuzzi tub and relax, and try to, well, relax."

"And don't rush it, either, Nicholas. Soak for a little while," Jenn added.

"Have you people noticed how bossy you all are lately? Always telling me what to do," I said with a pout.

Jenn laughed and patted me on my backside, pushing me toward the door. "You love it and you know it. Now scoot. I'll fix a tray for you so you can eat in bed."

"I'm all right; I can eat at the table --"

"Nicholas," Lee warned. He pointed toward Brandon's and my room. "Go. You need to relax. Doc's orders, remember?"

I sighed. He was right. My mind was jumping all over the place. The waiting ... the just *being* that I was having to do was driving me nuts. And what was worse, I was bored with myself, and nothing was more exhausting than a bored me.

"Okay, okay, but why don't you join me?"

Lee paused, then frowned at me. "Take a bath with you?"

I rolled my eyes at Jenn's laugh. "No, just keep me company. Please? I --" I hesitated, looked away. "I -- I don't want to be alone. In there, I mean."

"Okay, no problem. Holler when you're hidden by bubbles. Don't want anything peeking up at me, you know."

I guess I really was tired -- all I could do was nod. I headed for our bedroom, nodding at Jeff, who'd made himself comfortable on one of the couches with Barkley, scratching his ears. My dog barely looked up at me. Traitor.

I left the door open. Didn't think anyone would peek in, and even if Jeff did, he'd seen me naked anyway, so no big deal. Heck, Jenn had seen me naked, too, as had Jon and Amanda and Marisa and ... I chuckled at myself at that. My lack of modesty was legendary. Almost everyone in the band had seen me naked.

I thought of the pictures, and the video. Half the Durango police force had as well.

Fuck.

I stripped off my clothes, put them in the hamper, and started the tub. I grabbed the remote, turned off all the lights, and opened the curtains. I wanted to see the mountains that rose up at the end of our land.

Evening had settled her gentle cloak over us soon after we'd reached home, and I was glad. Evening meant the end of another day, and sleep, and soon it would be morning once more, and I could be with Brandon again.

I hated this forced separation. I resented being told what to do, truth be known. I didn't show it, but it was there, deep inside me, the festering frustration that I was still horribly out of control of this situation Brandon and I were faced with. And if you know me, if there's anything I hate, it is being out of control. I'd had way too much of that lately, and it kinda pissed me off.

I wanted this over with. I wanted Brandon well. I wanted him home, in my arms, in my bed. I wanted inside him. I wanted to feel his skin slick with sweat. I wanted to breathe in his scent and mingle it with my own and the sweet smell of sex. I wanted to kiss him, love him, assure him that never, ever would anyone hurt him again.

I just ... I just wanted to hold him. Above all, I wanted to hold him and have him open his eyes and have them be bright and carefree again, not clouded with fear. With worry. Clouded by a shadowed past that refused to let the sunlight into his mind and heart again.

When did you last truly see the sun, Brandon? When was the last time you were truly happy?

Have you ever been? Really?

I winced as I got into the tub, only now that I was alone acknowledging how sore I was. I held my hand against my scar, eyes closed, willing the sharp triggers of pain that insisted on keeping me company throughout the day to please, please, go away.

They wouldn't though, likely not ever, according to my doc. How I was going to cope in the months to come with this ... this disability, I didn't know. How I'd keep up with the demanding schedule some nameless, faceless record label execs had come up with, I didn't know.

Somehow I would, though. As long as Brandon was there to help me.

I turned the bubble jets up to full steam. That way no chance of scaring Lee with my little submarine. I sat back, getting myself comfortable, and looked out the window, at the mountains, and forced myself to think about the last thing I wanted to, but really needed to, if I was going to figure all the angles of this thing out.

My captor.

It was such a puzzle, really. Who he was.

I'd been kept carefully in the dark as to his identity, blindfolded like I was, though I'd believed for so long it was Percy that I guess I'd pushed his persona onto my tormentor. Now that I knew it wasn't him, that it was someone else altogether and Percy had nothing to do with my kidnapping, I tried to think about other clues. Let my mind drift back where I hadn't dared to let it drift, except when I told Brandon what had happened during all those weeks.

But as he'd guessed, and written, I hadn't told him everything. No way I could've. What I did tell him -- had to tell him -- was bad enough.

Oh, God, it was so bad.

I let my mind drift back to those first days, after Brandon found me. After he killed my tormentor, forever erasing any chance we had that the bastard could've told us who was behind this madness. I'm not angry about it, though. Brandon didn't think about that when he killed the bastard.

After all, all he'd thought about was saving me ...

"Hey, you, you awake?" Brandon had said, sitting next to me in the chair, his hurt leg propped up, his back leaning against the pillows.

I'd turned my head, carefully. Oh, God, I hurt so bad. "Yeah, can't sleep," I'd said, my voice so hoarse, so hurting, I couldn't keep the tears from my eyes. I closed them, a soft sob escaping. *I hurt so bad!*

"Nick, Nick," Brandon softly admonished me.

I heard him get up. I didn't want him to have to do that. He was hurt, too, had stitches in his back and his leg was broken.

But when he sat carefully on the bed beside me, propping his leg up on the chair, and took my hand, I was grateful. So fucking grateful.

He smiled down at me, his fingers brushing away my tears. "Don't cry."

"I'm sorry, Brandon. I'm such a whiner, I know."

His eyes widened at that. "Whiner? I don't think so. For a guy who went through what you did, and just had major surgery and a gazillion staples put into him, even if you were whining, I'd say you were entitled. Don't you?"

"You don't. Whine, I mean. Or cry."

He shook his head sadly at that, his eyes glittering as he studied my hand clasped in his. "You have no idea, babe. I cry where you can't see me."

"Oh."

His fingers entwined with mine. I sighed, shifted, winced as I felt the tug of the catheter on my dick. *Fucking dick monster*. I covered my dick with my other hand and whimpered.

"Leave it alone, Nick."

"I want it out!"

"I know. But you're too weak yet. It has to stay."

Tears rolled down my cheeks. "I hate this."

"I know. I know. Let it go."

Reluctantly I removed my hand, shifted to try to get more comfortable, but it was impossible, really. I know it sounds crazy maybe, but of everything I'd endured, the catheter was the worst. The humiliation of it. My poor dick.

"I'm so scared, Brandon, and I don't understand why. Why am I scared now? I wasn't scared before, not really. I knew you'd find me and you did, but I feel more scared now than I did then."

But he shushed me again. "You don't have to talk about that now."

"I want to. I need to."

"All right, then." He squeezed my hand. It felt so good, holding his hand. Something so simple, but so powerful. Just to feel him touching me again with his warmth, of his own volition, meant everything to me. "What do you want to tell me?"

"Everything," I whispered. "I want to tell you everything, except I don't remember everything."

"The doc told you not to push it. You'll remember in time."

I nodded. "I know. I know. But I have to tell you what I can. Right now, before I forget." I squeezed his hand tight as I could, and that wasn't very tight at all. I was so weak. And then, I told him, and he listened without saying a word until I couldn't talk anymore.

Brandon, my beautiful, amazing Brandon, I'd wanted so bad right then to be able to do more than hold his hand. I'd wanted to hug him, kiss him, make love to him again, but with my body screaming with pain, my dick busy with other interests so that I didn't even dare to think about sex -- oh, my God, can you imagine having a catheter in your dick and getting hard? Shit. No way. Anyway, I'd had to be content with holding his hand. That's all I could do.

But I'd wanted him to kiss me. So bad, I'd wanted him to kiss me, but I hadn't dared ask him to. I didn't want to push him. Not yet anyway.

The Brandon who'd rescued me was a man I didn't know, I'd realized that first day of consciousness in the hospital room. Or maybe the man who had rescued me was just showing me another hidden facet of the mysterious, multilayered man I'd fallen in love with, when we were just boys, so young, so naïve, so innocent and untried.

Over the weeks of my captivity, he'd gotten tougher, harder, more forceful, commanding. He'd forced himself to be that which he'd always hated before -- a public figure, pushing himself, my cause, the fight to find me. He was terrified the cops would toss my case aside, and say, *Oh, well, lots of people get kidnapped. You'll just have to wait and see what happens. There's nothing else to be done, sorry.*

But they never did. I don't think they dared, not with Brandon pushing like he did.

I smiled to myself, remembering how he'd looked when he'd saved me and taken me out of the dog crate, yanked that awful blindfold off me and pulled me into his arms, not caring a fig that I was filthy, soiled, caring only that he'd found me.

Stunning. Purely stunning. He'd shaven off his beard and chopped his hair military-short. He'd looked like Arnold himself, anger stilling his face -- except for his eyes.

I'll never forget his eyes.

But once I was safe, and it was just him and me in the hospital room and the threat of my dying anyway, despite everything, had passed, and I was able to show him the best way I could how much I loved him, he all but shut out the outside world, focusing on me, as if he could force me by sheer will to be better.

I think, at first anyway, that he thought he *would* get me better, and then he would run off again, hide again, but I'd put a stop to that as soon as I'd realized which direction that brain of his was going.

As if I'd ever let him get away again. No way.

"Hey, you decent? Decent enough anyway?"

My thoughts scattered like snowflakes in a gust of wind. I turned my gaze from my inner thoughts and the mountains outside my window and looked up to see Lee's silhouette framed by the bedroom door.

"Yeah, come on in."

"Sure I'm not interrupting? You were awfully quiet there. You're not falling asleep, are you? If so, we'd better get you into bed."

"No, come on in. Have a seat," I said, waving to the chair over which I'd draped my towel. "I was just thinking."

"About what?" he said as he joined me.

"About the past. About ... about when we were first in the hospital, and I told Brandon what happened when I was captured. I keep thinking about it, thinking there might be something there I missed."

“Oh. Want to talk about it now?”

I blinked, realizing then I did want to. Lee’s always been a patient man, a good listener. I love him for that. So I settled back against the tub, enjoying the hot water bubbling over my skin, and looked out at the mountains again. I knew that Lee knew me well enough to know I was gathering my thoughts, that he’d just have to wait a bit and I’d start talking.

I let my thoughts drift again, but this time as was my curse, they took me back to that day, that beautiful, awful day that had started out so incredible, and ended up to be such hell.

“I woke up early that morning, after making Brandon mine again in his beach house. I remember stretching on the couch, loving the feel of it against my bare skin, yawning like a satisfied cat full of cream. And I *was* full, filled with Brandon’s love,” I said to Lee.

He grinned at that. “I can imagine what else you were full of.”

I splashed water at him. “He was the full one. I’m the top in this relationship.” My frowned faded. “At least, I was. Now, I’m not so sure.”

Lee sighed. “You’ll have to start over, you know. Take it slow. This is going to be really hard for him. You’ll probably have to change a lot of things.”

“I don’t mind starting over. Fuck, I’ll be a total bottom for him, if that’s what he wants. I don’t care. I just want him to love me again. Let me make love to him again.”

“He will.”

I eyed Lee. “No one can promise that, you know. They say --”

“Forget what they say.” He sat on the edge of his chair, elbows on knees, and eyed me with about as serious of an expression on his face as I’d ever seen. “He *will* be all right. He *will* get well. He will. He does love you, Nicholas. It may take time, but you guys have the time you need. Fuck everyone else, take whatever time is necessary. Screw the record company. The fans will understand. So will the band.”

“But it’s their livelihood, too, Lee. Your life, too. I can’t just walk away from you guys. Especially you. You’ve always been a part of this.”

“I know, and I fully intend to keep being a part of it, as long as it’s good for the both of you. I’m not worried about me. Right now, Brandon needs you.” He paused. “And while I’m at it, fuck the label. There’s other record companies. Hell, you and Brandon could even start your own fucking record company. Screw ’em!”

I smiled at that. Lee’s distaste for our record label was well known. Hell, so was mine, but I tried to keep it under wraps. Although, it was definitely tempting to piss them off so much they dropped me. The freedom of it ... But the advance sales on the new album were ridiculously awesome. The label was actually being rather nice to me. Now, when I could care less.

Ah, life and its ironies.

I stretched out in the tub, letting myself float. The bubbles felt great caressing my skin. Especially my scar. And my dick. I submerged myself a little as the up periscope threatened to breach the surface, then let it just because it felt so damn good.

I giggled, eyeing Lee. He just shook his head. Really, nothing fazes the man. Dammit.

"You are such a child," he said.

I stuck my tongue out at him. "You're younger than me."

"Technically perhaps. Go on with what you were telling me." He got out of the chair then, making me laugh as he pulled off his boots and socks and his jeans (*not* his boxers, though) and stuck his feet in the water. "Fuck, that feels good. Maybe I should get in with you after all." But he didn't move to, so I just smiled. I would've let him if he'd wanted to, but he was just teasing me.

Now, if it'd been Jon keeping me company, he would've been right in there with me. But he, Amanda, and Adam were taking in a movie. Tempting to join them, but I really didn't want to be around Adam when I didn't have to.

I closed my eyes, let my mind drift back to the last night I'd been with Brandon before I was kidnapped, and let the words roll out of my mind to my willing listener. So much to tell, so much I was afraid I'd already forgotten, my own mind protecting me from the true horrors I'd experienced, just as Brandon's had tried to protect him.

Luckily, my mind did a better job than Brandon's.

* * * * *

California -- The Past

Brandon was mine again.

And this time, no matter what, though he had some terrible, unnamed fear inside him, he'd let me take him. Fill him. Oh, my God, it'd felt so good, fucking him again, loving him again. Holding him, just holding him would've been enough, but when I'd gotten out of the shower, so tired, so exhausted, and stood in his bathroom, saw his lonely toothbrush in its stand, the lone towel hanging on the rack, the single robe hanging by its single hook on the door, I got so hard so fast I almost giggled in relief. Crazy reaction to all that obvious loneliness, but it meant the world to me. No one had replaced me.

I know now no one could've, even had they tried.

I walked into his bedroom, eyed its stark simplicity, its bare, undecorated walls, and shook my head. Brandon would live in a box and be content. I really liked his beach house, though, and even as I stroked my dick, fondling myself to get harder because of what I was going to do, I let myself imagine what pictures we'd put on those empty walls.

I can hardly wait to make it *our* beach house.

But first, I had a lot to do before I knew I'd see those walls again. Granted, I'd planned to see them again in no less than two weeks and here it's been quite a few months and I have yet to see them again, but I will. I will.

That day, though, the only thought on my mind, truly, was walking into the living room buck naked and showing Brandon exactly how I felt about him.

And oh, my God, when he saw me, opened his eyes and saw me, he couldn't deny it, the hunger in his eyes. The rush up my spine, I can feel it now, remember it so well, and I knew he felt it, too. He wanted me, he wanted me, *he fucking wanted me!*

A fantasy that had once been my reality was about to become real again.

Making love to him again after so long -- it was heaven. Pure heaven. He was mine again, all those others were forgiven. I didn't care, as long as he was okay. Oh, I knew about the other lovers -- tricks, really, Jenn told me. Nameless, nearly faceless one-night stands, none of whom were allowed to resemble me. She and I kept in communication, unbeknownst to Brandon, and I knew all about the months of craziness he went through. Underhanded, but fuck, she was just as bewildered by his behavior as I was. But unlike everyone else, she stuck by him. Thank God she did.

I fell asleep after we had sex twice. *Made love*. Too exhausted and worn out, I had to give in and go to sleep. I barely felt him ease away from me, certainly didn't feel the blanket placed over me. Not until the next morning when I woke up to the sound of the surf beating against the rocks outside his back door did I know that he'd left me, covered me, then lain beside me on the floor rather than leaving me to go back alone to his big, comfortable bed.

I looked down at him, where he lay naked in his blanket, smiling at the sight of his lower half decidedly *out* of the blanket. I feasted my eyes as the morning light glowed on his beautiful, long legs, the light dusting of golden hair, the denser patch between his legs. He was soft, relaxed, just how I loved to find him in the mornings so I could bring his dick to life myself. Dream-induced hard-ons are wonderful, but being the control freak I am, I liked to do it myself.

But this morning, there was no time. I had to get to the airport. I watched him a moment longer, watched his eyes move beneath the lids as he dreamt (of me, I hoped). His mouth was open, just a little bit. He looked so hot with his hair long and unruly. With his beard, which decidedly needed a bit of trim, he looked like a golden wild man.

I wanted to touch him, longed to, but told myself no, it would be easier on him, and on me, if I slipped out of the house while he slept.

I got dressed, wrote him my note, and pulled out the little treasure I'd been dragging around with me for months, a bright blue teddy bear I'd bought for him in New York. I kissed it, placed it on the note, then left, having called a taxi and told them I'd meet them on the road. I didn't want the horn to wake Brandon.

Everything else went without a problem. Got to the airport, caught my flight with time to spare, glancing at my watch often as I wondered if he was up yet. Had he found the bear? Did he understand I was *not* going to let him get away from me again?

The flight was long. I was tired, but it went better than I'd hoped because the young woman with her babies next to me kept my mind off my troubles. I found myself pouring out everything to her, this stranger fate had sent to me. Her quiet understanding, her gentle questions, her encouragement that I was doing the right thing gave me strength.

Then after dozing off and on, which certainly didn't help my exhausted state, we finally landed in LA. I picked up my car, made some phone calls while headed for the vet's to get Barkley.

I don't know why I stopped. I really don't. I guess I was just lost in thought, overly tired and feeling rather sympathetic to everyone else in the world, and so when I saw this poor old man on the side of the road, trying to wave people down to help him, I stopped.

Fucking idiot total shithead me, I stopped, and seconds later felt my head explode as the "poor old man" hit me and stuffed me into his trunk.

I woke up. Not sure when, at what point, but I woke up, to find myself stripped, naked, wet from my own piss, and in a dog crate. I remember now the disbelief I felt, the *whoa, wait a minute, what the fuck is going on here?*

WAKE ME UP NOW, GOD!

He didn't listen.

Oh, man, I was so freaked that when my captor started to take pictures, telling me to spread my legs, do ... do other things to myself, I just stared at him. I mean, have you ever walked into a situation and realized belatedly that oops, you shouldn't have -- like walking in on your parents having sex?

I'd done that when I was, like, ten, and I'd just stood there, not really hearing my dad telling me to *get out, Nicholas, close the door. Now.* I'd just stood there, not really comprehending what I was seeing. Finally my brain snapped and I realized what the heck was going on and I got out of there, fast.

Except this time, as I went through similar processes, there was no turning around and getting out of there, because I was locked up in a dog crate, I was naked, and my head hurt, and I was dizzy, and I was cold, and I stank already. Bewildered and terrified, I almost started to hyperventilate, panic making me cry out first with threats and later ... later ... Later, I begged.

Nothing worked.

I remember how at first I thought okay, I've been kidnapped, the ransom will be demanded and Brandon will pay it, and I'll be freed, and it won't take maybe a day, maybe two. I can handle this shit that long. I am strong. I am tough. I have the music in my mind to get me through the minutes, the hours ...

But when those hours turned into days, the days into weeks, even I, Mr. Optimistic, lost faith. Rescue was going to be a long time coming, if at all. The only real hope I had to hold onto was what my captor had let slip that one time: *Brandon's going to love these*. I knew then the pictures my captor so enjoyed taking of me were going somewhere -- to Brandon.

So I began to formulate my plan, and I began to listen for more clues, and little by little, I realized where I was. Up in the mountains, in Colorado. It was little things, tiny clues, him muttering about this or that, the radio that he'd sometimes listen to and a commercial would come on. And once, I was able to get the blindfold off and I saw a newspaper on the floor too far away for me to reach, but I could just make out a snow report for Durango, and I'd realized that's where I was.

And then I'd blinked. Realized I knew *exactly* where I was. Bewildered, my heart racing and a scream tearing from my throat, I realized we were in a hunter's cabin and it looked like one of the ones Brandon and I had gone to see when I wanted to buy him a mountain.

I could've been wrong. Turns out I sort of was, but I was close enough. Just one mountain off, but close enough for one determined man who loved me to find me.

When my captor came back and realized I'd gotten my blindfold off, he sprayed my cage with water until I got it back on, and then he left me alone for four days.

That was not fun.

When he'd come back, I was barely coherent. I had a fever by then, and was filthy, but I was ready. In the dirt on my side, I scratched a single letter, an A, and prayed prayed he would take pictures of me in such a sorry state, and he did, thank God he did. And Brandon saw it. He saw the A, and by the time the next picture was taken and I got a Y past my captor's eyes, Brandon told me later he knew then where to go. He's used to completing my thoughts, is Brandon. And this time, it saved my life.

But he didn't come for another two weeks, he told me later. It was two weeks after he got the E and finally got the R that he knew for sure. I thought I'd been through hell before, but it only got worse. My captor bought me a little heater, but it was only strong enough to heat one small part of me, so the rest of me would freeze and I shook for hours, for so long and so hard sometimes, it was so fucking cold, that oh, God, I knew I was going to die. In fact, I wanted to.

I bordered on hypothermia all the time, kept just warm enough not to slip into that state. I wanted to kick over the heater sometimes and will it to break so I could. You know how they say it is? You get so cold and slip into hypothermia and you start to feel warm, strangely enough, and you feel all cozy and safe and you fall asleep and just never wake up. I prayed for that. Begged God to let me go like that, but He didn't listen.

Then one day, I don't know after what letter, maybe after the R or the S, I don't remember anymore, I heard a second voice. A female voice.

“Wow, so this is him?”

“Yeah, that’s him. Nasty bastard, ain’t he?”

I felt a presence outside the crate. “He’s shivering. You should give him a blanket.”

“Heater’s good enough. I’ll bring in his food.”

Did I mention all the food I had was dog food? Barkley will never eat dog food again. No dog I ever own ever will. Ever.

He left, and I wasn’t sure if I was alone or not. “Help me,” I whispered. “Please, please help me, tell Brandon --”

“No, shut up. Don’t talk to me.”

“Please, please, I’ve got millions. I’ve got so much fucking money. I’d give it all to you, but please help me, please --”

“Shut up, hear me? Just shut up! I can’t help you!”

I heard her quick footsteps out of the room. I cried then. I broke down and cried, because it wasn’t hate in her voice; it was fear, and unaccountable sadness.

Now lest you be worried, I was never sexually abused. Not once. Sexually humiliated, yes -- kept naked and forced to jerk-off while he watched ... Oh, yeah, my captor got off on humiliating me, but he didn’t once touch me like I’d feared so badly he would.

But what he did otherwise ... I can’t, I won’t think about it, I can’t ...

I can’t.

And then, finally, the day came that the door burst open, and I heard a horrified voice, the one I love above all others. He’d found me, knocked my captor out, and threw open the crate, pulling me out. He’d torn off my blindfold and I’ll never forget ... I’ll never forget his eyes.

Or my own screams as my captor pushed himself to his feet and grabbed a knife off the table. And though Brandon pushed me aside, I was so weak I stumbled into him and the knife sliced through my side. It was sharp, that knife. Very sharp. It went very, very deep.

The rest of what happened is a vague memory. I fell to the floor, darkness edging into my narrow vision and rapidly stealing it away. The pain was incredible. I saw the knife descend again, heard Brandon yell in agony as it sliced his back open. But my captor didn’t have what Brandon had -- he didn’t have anger, hatred, despair fueling him like Brandon did.

The fight lasted for hours it seemed, though later Brandon said it was only a few minutes. My captor picked up a hammer at one point and brought it down on Brandon’s leg. That’s when it broke, I think. Or that might have been later, I’m not sure. But then Brandon dug deep into himself, and somehow, somehow ...

I remember looking at my captor’s sightless eyes as he lay on the floor next to me.

Then the blessed warmth I'd prayed for, had craved for so long, came at last. Heat cloaked my body, and all my pain drifted away. Joy soared through me and all my fear dissipated as I floated into the sky. Blessed sleep tugged at me, begged me to accept it, and then I remembered nothing more, until I woke up in the hospital, Brandon at my side, tears staining his strangely pale face.

Brandon ...

"Hey, hey, Nick, you okay?"

I shook myself back to the present, and blinked. I'd all but forgotten Lee was with me. I slowly nodded. "Sorry, Lee. I just kinda got lost there."

"You really did nearly die then."

"They told Brandon I *did* die. Did you know that? Can you imagine that?" I said, unable to keep the horror out of my voice. And he'd very nearly killed himself because of it. So close, too close.

"I know. Marisa told me about the mix-up. I'm sorry, Nick. I'm so sorry you guys went through that."

I took a deep breath, then turned off the Jacuzzi jets. "Yeah, me, too. Mind helping me out?"

Lee jumped to his feet. How I envied his grace, the ease with which he moved. He picked up one of the big, fluffy white towels Katie had bought and held it out. I took a deep breath and hauled myself out of the tub, grinning sadly as Lee wrapped me up like my mom had when I was little. He rubbed my arms briskly, making me laugh.

"Cut it out, idiot. I think I can handle this."

He released me and grabbed another towel, wiped off his legs, and then headed into the bedroom. "Which drawer has your boxers?"

"Top drawer."

"Why am I not surprised?" he said with a chuckle.

I glared at him and finished drying off, then tossed my towel at him when he tossed my boxers at me. I put them on and got myself decent just as Jenn walked in with a tray.

"Excellent timing," she said, nodding toward my bed. "Hop in."

"Two seconds earlier, you wouldn't have said that," Lee said, taking the tray from her.

"Miss something?" she teased.

"Not much."

"Good thing you're holding that tray," I told Lee as I settled into bed. I lay against the pillows, feeling totally wiped out yet curiously lighter. "Thanks," I said as Lee set the tray down. I took a deep breath. "What is it?"

"Chicken stew, and you will eat every bite," Jenn said.

"Yes, Mom." I took a bite and sighed. "Heavenly." Even if it did have chicken in it.

Jeff walked in and handed Lee a bowl. Lee nodded his thanks and sat on the chair next to the bed. "So," he said, dipping his spoon into his bowl. "What did the cops say about the girl?"

I took another bite. "I don't remember," I said, realizing that was true. I *didn't* remember.

"What girl?" Jeff said. I looked up at the edge in his voice.

"The girl who was with my captor one day ..." My voice trailed off as the fire lit in his eyes. I glanced at Lee.

He said, "Nick was telling me about when he was kidnapped, about the girl who came in and saw him."

Jeff reached for the phone and began to dial. "You never told Detective Anderson about any girl, Nicholas." I stared at him, then Lee and Jenn. Jeff held up on finger. "Kevin? Jeff here. I think you need to come over. Yes, right now." Jeff glanced at me. "Nick's remembered something about his captivity. Yes. There *was* a girl there. Yeah, it might have been her. No, he's not going anywhere. Thanks."

"Was that Detective Anderson?" Jenn asked. I hadn't known his first name either.

My bodyguard nodded as he put down the phone, and though every muscle in his body was tense, he couldn't hide the light of excitement in his eyes. I began to shake; I couldn't help it. I stared at him in disbelief. Lee put his bowl down and sat next to me on the bed, put his arm around me.

I found my voice. "What are you saying? I didn't tell him? I didn't remember about her before now?" Oh, my God, how could I have forgotten that? Why hadn't I remembered before now?

"No, this is the first we've heard about a female being there. Kevin interviewed a girl some said your captor had been seen with in town, but she claimed she didn't know anything. Nicholas, I think you may just have given us what we need to find your captor's patron. If we're right, we could be one giant step closer to finding out who's really behind this. This could be *the* step. We could be closer to helping Brandon."

Then my bodyguard did something he rarely did. He smiled.

Chapter Eleven

It was so hard to sleep that night. Or, at least, I thought it would be. After everyone but Lee left, he tucked me into bed, like I was a young boy again.

“Close your eyes, Nick.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

He chuckled. “Try. It’s going to be an early start tomorrow, so you’ll need your rest. You’re beat.”

I hesitated. “I always am, Lee. Tired, I mean.”

“You’re just worn down ...”

I shook my head, then sighed, closing my eyes and pressing my face into my pillow. I was too tired to explain to him what kind of tired I was. A deep-seated, seemingly permanent tired. I’d called the hospital to check on Brandon, hoping he was awake, but had talked to Nurse Goodall instead. She told me Brandon was fine, had woken up for just a few minutes, and that his new bodyguard was in place. I’d frowned at that, but Mutt had felt sick after eating some hospital food, so he’d called in a replacement for the night and hadn’t left until the new guy had arrived. That made me feel a little better. I’d have to check on Mutt in the morning. It wasn’t like him to get sick.

Everyone else had left the hospital, too, including Brandon’s parents and his brother, who promised to be back early the next morning. I nodded at that. Good.

“Lie down with me, Lee.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Please?” I opened my eyes as he got into the bed. I turned onto my side.

“Don’t tell Brandon about this,” he warned.

“He wouldn’t mind. Now, if it were Jon --”

"Jon has the hots for you?"

I eyed him. "You know perfectly well he does."

Lee's eyes widened and he shook his head. "No, honestly. I didn't know. He's got Amanda -- He's not bi, is he?"

"No, I don't think so. He just adores me, that's all. Always has." I grinned sappily at Lee, but sobered again. He turned onto his side, propped his head on his hand, reached out, and touched my nose.

"You *are* adorable. But what's wrong, Nick? You should be excited about this breakthrough, but you look ... sad."

"I am sad." I sighed. "And tired. And weak. I'm so damn weak. I worry that ..." I paused. I was talking about Lee's life here, too. "I worry I won't be able to come back after this. Not like I was before. I'm worried I can't handle being on the road anymore."

He gave me a quirky grin, then rolled onto his back and reached for the remote and turned off the lights. He turned to face me. The night was clear, and the moon shined on us through the window, watching over me. I love the moon. Ever since I was a little boy, as long as the moon was out I felt safe, even in the dark.

I'd go outside at night, when the whole house was asleep, and look up at her, shining down on me, and thank her for taking care of me. During my captivity, nighttime was the only time I dared move my blindfold. The single window into my prison let her in for a brief time each night, but her beams never quite reached my crate. Still, I'd felt comfort from her presence, and on those nights she kept me company, I felt a little deeper sense of hope.

I am a moonchild, Brandon a child of the sun. That's what one article about us had claimed. We'd laughed, but really it was pretty damn accurate. But it'd been a long, long time since he'd felt his sun's warmth, and it frightened me that he might never again. There was so much going on in that head of his that could hurt him, and I didn't know how to fight it. I feared I wasn't strong enough.

I feared he wasn't strong enough.

"Ever thought that's okay, Nicholas? It's a new chapter for you both. You had Dream. You had -- have -- a successful solo career. And now Brandon is back, you guys can dictate what the future will be. You know you could even quit --"

I gasped at that, knowing he'd expect that. "Blasphemy, Lee!"

His laugh shook the bed. "I know you won't quit. You just need time to recover, Nicholas. But it can be different now. After all, you *are* getting older--"

"Said the man still in his twenties."

"Barely," he said wryly. "But you know whatever happens, I'll be there for you. If you do choose to quit, I don't want you worrying about the rest of us."

"I'll always worry about you guys. And I won't quit, Lee. It'll just be different. I can't tour like that anymore. I can't -- I can't ask Brandon to, either. I don't think he could handle it."

"If that turns out to be the case, then you'll figure out what to do. I think you've got many years of music left in you. I sure hope so, anyway." He paused. "You know, Nick, I never told you this, but it's been a true honor to be your bassist all these years. You've made my life richer than I ever thought it could be, and no, I'm not talking about money, either. For a kid whose dad feared I'd be dead before I hit thirty, I've done pretty good. Because of you. Thank you."

I smiled in the dark. I didn't know what to say, but sometimes, I think, the simplest response is the best. "You're welcome, Lee."

"We'd best get some rest. I'll watch over you until you're asleep."

I closed my eyes and smiled again. "You always have."

"And I always will. Watch over the both of you."

If I thought sleep would elude me, I was wrong. Bathed by the moon's loving beams, and Lee's friendship, I drifted into my dreams.

* * * * *

Morning came too soon.

"Nervous?" Lee asked as Mutt parked the SUV. Lee and Jon sat in the back, Lee having decided to come with us. "Just in case," he'd said when we left the house. Just in case of what, I didn't want to imagine. I was just grateful he was there. *Strength*.

I nodded as I looked at the police station and undid my seat belt. The clear night had given way to snow flurries and it was cold. At least, I thought that's why I was shivering. Margaret had watched the weather forecast this morning and reported two to three feet of snow was expected before nightfall. Great for skiers, the pits for me and Brandon. I'd had a silly hope that he would get to come home today, but I wasn't sure I wanted to risk him, if the roads got really bad.

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous. I had hoped not to have to see this again."

"I'd hoped not to see it at all," Jon said.

I glanced back at him as I opened my door. He looked pale. Very upset. He hadn't slept much the night before, from what Amanda had told me. "I know, Jon. I'll be with you."

He smiled wanly at me as we got out. It made me anxious, I guess, Jon not being his usual silly self. He'd been quiet at breakfast, barely answering his mom's questions as to what we were doing that morning. We hadn't told her yet, Jon wishing she'd never have to know he had to look at the video, too. It'd been hard, when she learned about it. I wish I'd been the one to tell her, tell her what had happened to her son.

What had happened to her son, over and over and over again.

But when I did talk to her about it, and told her how sorry I was, that I felt so guilty that I hadn't known, she'd hugged me, fiercely, before releasing me and holding my face between her hands. "No, Nicholas. Never, ever blame yourself. Brandon's always been good at hiding things. A master at it." She'd smiled at me, the sadness in her eyes making me want to cry. So, I had, collapsing against her shoulder.

"But I should've known, should've done something about it sooner, should've insisted sooner --"

But she hadn't let me finish. Just said, "You saved him. He's safe now. That's all that matters. I love you, Nicholas. If you hadn't gone to him when you did, I'm not sure he'd be alive now. He's safe, you understand?"

But, of course, he wasn't safe.

"Come on, Nick."

"I'm coming." I followed after Lee and Jon into the police station, Jeff on my heels. He nodded to a couple of officers we passed, then, when we got inside the building, motioned for us to follow him.

This time, and feeling a bit foolish, we walked right through the reception area where last time I'd waited just like anyone else for my turn, and headed for the same room Katie and I had been in before. Detective Anderson was waiting for us and looked up from the file he was skimming at as we entered.

"We've located the woman."

I gaped at him. "Already? That was fast."

He grimaced and pulled out a picture from the file. He handed it to me. "Is that her?"

I took the picture but shook my head. "I don't know. I never actually saw her." I stared at the photo, at the thin, smiling woman looking out at me. She had long blonde hair, dark eyes. Beaded earrings hung from her ear, which was triple pierced. She was pretty in a faded sort of way. I kept staring at her eyes. How could such nice eyes have seen what they'd seen, and not cared? Not tried to help the horror in front of her?

"What's her name?" I asked, almost not wanting to know.

"Heather Garvey. She's twenty-six, a veterinarian's assistant. She dated your captor off and on for three years. Once tried to commit suicide because the bastard wouldn't marry her." He paused. "They have a son. He's two."

She had a son. And worked with animals.

And willingly left a naked man in a dog crate in his own filth in a cold, cold room, to possibly die. Or worse. I felt sick. Shoved the picture away. Detective Anderson took it. "I want to see her," I said.

He hesitated, then nodded. "Seeing you might help. Are you up to it?"

"I -- I think so." Shit.

"Has she been arrested?" I asked lightly, while feeling the world crash down on me, hard. I couldn't help myself -- I thought of her son, only two. His dad dead and a kidnapper, his mother in serious trouble. I had to wonder, what would happen to him now? All this made me so sick.

"Not yet. Just being brought in for routine questioning. At least, that's what she's been told. But we'll have that hovering over her, that she could lose her son over this. She'll know it's a possibility."

I shook my head, realized I was shaking. "I didn't expect to have to do this, too. I don't know if I can handle this." Jeff gently eased me into a chair, and I rubbed my hand over my face. Lee and Jon sat down, too.

"You don't have to watch this with me," Jon said. "Don't put yourself through this again."

"No, I want to. I might see something I missed."

Jon sighed. "All right. I guess I'm --"

Someone knocked on the door. A uniformed cop poked his head in. "Detective?"

"Yes?"

The cop glanced at the rest of us. "We just brought her in. She's in room two."

"All right. Be right there." He looked at me. "You coming?"

"Now?" I said. "But the tape --"

"This shouldn't take too long. Not when she realizes how much trouble she's in."

I winced. "All right. I'll be right back, guys."

"We'll wait for you," Jon said.

I nodded and followed Detective Anderson, Jeff on my heels. For some reason, between the two big men, I felt like I was the one whose life was on the line here, that I was the one in trouble, headed for my doom.

No matter how I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling.

"So, that's her," I whispered as I watched the woman sitting at the table. Just like on TV, we were watching her through a one-way mirror. The picture I'd seen of her was obviously of her better days. The woman I saw now looked thin, scared, and nervous. Far older than twenty-six. She kept messing with the chipped blue polish on her fingernails -- nails that looked bitten to the quick.

What do you know that makes you so scared, Heather?

The door opened, and two men went in. She looked up, paling visibly. But the two men didn't say anything, just stood to the side, arms folded, and looked at her. She returned to

picking at her nails, then wrapped her arms around herself, closing her eyes, opening them quickly again.

"All right, show time," Detective Anderson said, and left us.

He entered the room where Heather sat. She looked up, and I could see that this time she knew this guy was here for a reason. Then the interrogation began. I watched, mesmerized, as Detective Anderson sat opposite Heather and began to ask her questions, gently at first, giving her time to answer. Patient, like he was just a friend asking questions. He had a tape recorder, which he advised her would be used to tape their conversation and did she have any questions? She shook her head. He told her to answer clearly so the tape could pick it up.

"What's your name?"

"Heather Garvey."

"Age?"

"Twenty-six."

"You have waived the right to have an attorney present, is that correct --"

"I thought you were just asking me questions?"

"That's right. I'm just asking you questions. Are you ready to continue?"

"I guess. Yeah."

I blinked. "That's her," I said to Jeff.

"You recognize her voice?"

"Yes. Oh, yes." Hell yes, that was her all right. Thin, reedy voice, edge of anger, edge of fear. Just like that day.

The questions flew, her answers clipped, short. Her voice shaking. Then the hard questions came. How long had she known Jack Scampenou? I flinched. Had they told me his name before? I couldn't remember, honestly. How they'd met, when he'd told her about his new job, what he'd told her about it ...

"Did he tell you right before he took you up there?"

"I don't know."

"Did he tell you who hired him?"

"No."

"Did he tell you a name?"

"No."

"Did he tell you how much he was getting paid?"

"No."

"Do you know why he did it?"

"I don't know."

"You were his girlfriend; I'd think you'd know."

"He didn't tell me."

"Did you know it was Nicholas Kilmain that he'd kidnapped?"

"No."

"Then why did you have these in your apartment?"

He threw a handful of pictures on the table. Pictures of me. I gasped. Jeff steadied me -- I hadn't even realized my knees were buckling. He stood in back of me, his hands on my shoulders. He's quite a bit bigger than me, his presence solid. Reassuring. I stared at the girl, feeling sicker and sicker, fighting against my natural reaction -- compassion.

But I would not feel compassion for this girl. Not when she'd had the power to save me, weeks before Brandon found me.

"I've never seen these."

"These were under your mattress."

She shook her head. "No."

"These were under your mattress."

"No, I didn't put them there."

"Do you know who Nicholas Kilmain is?"

"No. Yes, I mean --"

"You don't know who he is or you do?"

"I -- I don't --"

"You watch the news?"

"Yes."

"Listen to the radio?"

"Yeah."

"Then you know who Nicholas Kilmain is."

Jeff squeezed my shoulders at that. I looked up at him before fixing my gaze on the girl.

"No," she whispered.

"You had his most recent CD in your stereo." I tensed at that.

"No."

"You had a copy of it in your car."

"Fuck," I breathed.

"Yeah," Jeff said.

She shook her head. "No, I don't, I didn't --"

"You have a son, Heather?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"How old is he?"

"Two."

"When you saw Mr. Kilmain in the crate, you knew who he was."

"Yes. I mean, no, I didn't know --"

"You saw Mr. Kilmain in the crate, knew he was hurt, naked, freezing, that people were looking for him. You told Scampenou that he should get a blanket for Mr. Kilmain."

"No."

"You told Mr. Kilmain to shut up, you wouldn't help him."

"No, no, no," she said, dropping her head into her hands. Detective Anderson waved at me.

"Come on," Jeff said. "You ready?"

"Fuck no," I whispered, but went with Jeff anyway.

He opened the door and held it for me. When I walked in, Heather looked up, saw me, and gasped. I did as Detective Anderson had told me, stood by the side, the other cops in there hovering protectively next to me. Like this girl could hurt me anymore. *Yes, she could.*

Detective Anderson didn't even acknowledge me.

"You have a lot of cash in your apartment. Where'd the money come from?"

"I don't know."

"You have over a hundred fifty thousand dollars in your dresser, and you don't know where it came from?"

"No," she whispered. "I didn't, I don't --"

She avoided my gaze. I watched as the questions continued. Relentless. Hard. One after the other. She shook, started to cry, and then Detective Anderson asked, "Do you know this man, Heather?"

She looked at me, her eyes wide with fright. "No."

"I think you do."

"No, no, no ..."

"When did you see him last, Heather? Think about this, Heather. I can help you, but I can't until you tell me. Do you know this man?"

She nodded. He pointed at the tape recorder. "Yes."

"Who is he?"

"The man in the crate."

"What is his name?"

"N-Nicholas Kilmain."

"Who put him there, Heather?"

"I don't know."

"Are you frightened, Heather?"

"Yes. Oh, God, yes."

"Have you been threatened to keep quiet, Heather? Been bribed? Is that why that money was in your apartment?"

"He'll kill him," she whispered.

Detective Anderson leaned closer to her. Put his hand on her arm. "Kill who?"

"My son! Dammit, he said he'd kill my son if I told! I can't! I can't, don't you understand? I'm sorry!" She stood and whirled on me -- Jeff stepped between us, but it was as if she didn't see him. "You don't understand. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, seeing you like that, what *he* did to you. Jack's dead, but the -- He said he'd kill my son. That I had to take the money and that would be it. And don't you understand, I can't let him hurt my baby; he'll hurt my baby. Joshua is all I have, don't you see?"

She sat down and started to sob, covering her face with her hands. Detective Anderson motioned to one of the cops. I heard "son, get him" and "daycare." The cop nodded and left.

I couldn't take any more of this. Despite myself, the compassion came -- protecting her son, that's what she was doing.

But I warred with myself. She knew who it was. She knew who had raped Brandon, and she wouldn't tell. I wanted to leap across that table and shake her, demand she tell me, force her to give up the name of the bastard who had ruined Brandon's life, possibly forever.

But she was protecting her son, and I knew she wouldn't tell.

"Get me out of here," I whispered. Detective Anderson nodded. Jeff took me out into the hallway and closed the door. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. "Oh, my God."

"They'll get her son here safe, and then she might talk, Nicholas."

"He's still out there. Whoever did this to Brandon. Whoever planned this, plotted this, spent fucking years on this! He's out there right now. Blowing up my friends, hurting Brandon." I couldn't go on. I Covered my face. As Heather had done. "What am I going to do?"

"We need to get back to the others. The tape --"

I dropped my hands. Sniffed. Steeled myself. "I know. The tape." I took a deep breath and headed down the hallway, Jeff following behind me.

"You ready?"

"Yes," I said.

I sat between Jon and Lee and watched Jon's brother and Lee's friend and the love of my life being raped.

I've always loved movies, have always been a firm believer that you should see a movie twice at the very least (unless it was really, really crap), to fully take in all that's on the screen. First time, the excitement and anticipation draws your attention to the most vivid parts of what is before you. Your focus is sharp and keen and fixated on those things that the director wants you to notice first.

The second time, however, you start to notice little things, maybe even start to notice the mistakes that creep in, despite the director's care. Like all those things in *The Two Towers* -- Lee and I had a great time finding all the mistakes. Of course, PJ put a bunch of silly stuff in on purpose; that was part of the fun.

But this was no fun. Seeing this tape again, the second time, just like with movies I did begin to notice little things. The terror in Brandon's eyes. The tears. How each time he came in to be raped again, he got into position more and more quickly.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck," Jon kept saying, over and over again. "Brandon, oh, my God. Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you? Why didn't I ask you? Why?"

Tears streamed down Jon's face, and I felt his pain, knew it well as he berated himself for not being there for his little brother. Not there to protect him, like a big brother should. Lee stayed silent -- only the pressure on my hand spoke of his reaction.

I watched, numb, able to study the film a little more easily this time. I guess I'd cried all the tears I could cry. So I watched Brandon's face, trying to understand what he could've been feeling at the moment Seth Green brutally forced himself into him.

At first I'd thought it was fear. But now, this second time, I knew it was because he'd shut down -- the minute he'd entered the room, Brandon had become not himself. Closed in. Hidden. This was why he didn't remember -- he'd shut it all deep inside him, the only way to cope. The tears were gone, the fear. His gaze was vacant, as if he wasn't there, enduring what he was being forced to endure *for me*.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck," Jon said again.

And then we reached the part where Brandon had walked in while Katie, horrified, stood frozen before the screen, watching as her boss was terrorized by not one man, but two.

The third man watching.

"This is when Katie said Brandon came into the bedroom," I said as the second man passed in front of the camera, took off his clothes, and he and the first man jacked around with each other, getting hard, getting ready --

And then the blue-jeaned man pulled the first away, and the second man raped Brandon while the blue-jeaned man brushed his hair back from his blindfolded face. And I remembered my thoughts of before ...

Brandon jerked, spreading his hands in surprise -- as if he knew something was different. But he held his position. His attacker dug his fingers into Brandon's hips, finished,

then pulled out, and the blue-jeaned man slapped Brandon, hard, across the back. He collapsed onto his stomach, writhing in agony --

"Rewind it!" Jon cried out, getting to his feet.

"Jon?" I asked, getting to my feet, too, my scar screaming at the sudden movement. I ignored it.

"Rewind it!"

Detective Anderson did so. "How far --"

"There!" Jon said, walking up to the TV. "Stop!"

The camera was focused on the second man as he raped Brandon, his motion hideously frozen for us to examine.

"What is it, Mr. Ashwood?" Detective Anderson said.

But Jon shook his head. "No. No, oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God --"

"Jon!" I said, grabbing him by the arm. "What is it? Who is it? Tell me, please!" I was freaked now, angry, frightened. And scared. So fucking scared. *He knows!*

"It's ... it's ... the one in the blue jeans ..." He turned to me, the horror in his eyes vivid, tangible, frightening. He reached out to the TV screen and pointed to a mark on the man's backside, just above his waistband. Then he said one word that chilled me like nothing I'd seen or experienced before in my life.

"Adam."

Chapter Twelve

“Good morning, Mr. Ashwood,” the nurse said as she set down my breakfast tray.

Morning? Didn’t seem like it. *Cold, so cold, blankets weighing me down.* I couldn’t move, didn’t want to. Safe ... no, not safe. I never felt safe anymore. *Why?*

“So dark outside,” I said as I turned my face to the window.

“It’s snowing,” Adam said.

He sat in the chair, cleaning his nails with his pocketknife. A habit that had always annoyed our mom.

“How long?”

“About an hour or so. Expected to reach two to three feet.” He grinned at me. “I may go skiing this afternoon if it lets up. Nothing like fresh powder. You’ll have to join me once you’re well. Remember Sweden that time I went with you guys? How Nicholas got stuck in the snow and it took three of us to dig him out?”

I smiled briefly at the memories, which *did* mostly consist of Nicholas floundering around in the snow. He just never was that coordinated, though sometimes I wondered if said floundering wasn’t designed to get my attention. To make me help him -- touch him -- because by then we’d stopped sleeping together. Stopped touching. Stopped loving.

I closed my eyes. So tired, and it hurt, remembering. So much pain, so much sorrow. So much regret.

“Yeah,” I said. “Is that why Nick’s late? Because of the snow?”

“It’s only ten-thirty now. He’s not that late.”

“Will you call and see if he’s left the house? Maybe he should just stay home today.”

Though I knew he wouldn't. And I didn't want him to. I wanted to see him. I didn't feel so good. So tired, my head filled with weird, chaotic thoughts. I knew they'd given me more drugs this morning. Drugs to make me sleep. To make me not think. Not *let* me think.

Why?

"Sure. I'll call."

Why was I so tired? I could barely keep my eyes open. Could barely lift my hand. I just wanted to sleep. Maybe when I woke up, he would be here ...

I watched as Adam got up from the chair he'd been sitting in and reached for the phone. He dialed. Someone answered. "Hey, has Nicholas left yet? Oh, where did he -- Why?" He glanced at me. "Well, that's interesting. Yes, thanks, Jenn. No, don't worry, I won't. I won't. Hope you feel better."

He set down the phone. His jaw clenched. Darkness pulled at me, exhaustion weighted down my eyelids, but I frowned, puzzled by the expression in my brother's eyes. The anger.

The hate as he looked at me.

Why hate?

I closed my eyes, heard the door open as I drifted off to sleep. Heard Adam's voice, another's voice stroking my consciousness. I didn't recognize the voice.

Sleep, soft warm darkness, taking me into her arms ... a muffled groan, something heavy falling to the ground.

Something soft cloaking me, covering my face, can't move it, can't see, can't breathe, pushing down ... holding me down ... panic ... racing ... heart ... can't breath ... can't fight ...

Nicholas ...

* * * * *

"Nicholas," Lee said to me, his eyes dark with fury. "Adam said he'd be there first thing this morning."

"I know. Oh, God, I know. That's what the nurse said last night, and I didn't even think about it. Detective?" I pleaded, whirling to him. I felt sick. Sheer terror ratcheted through me, followed by dread. *Too late, they'll be too late Brandon's dead Brandon's dead Brandon's dead ...*

But the detective was already heading for the door. Which, just as he reached it, burst open. One of the cops who had been in the interview with Heather Garvey said something to the detective. He nodded briskly, as did the other cop, who took off.

Detective Anderson turned to me and glanced at Jon. "Heather Garvey just confirmed it once she knew her son was safe. She named Adam Ashwood. I've got cops en route now to the hospital. Jeff --"

"I'm on it," he said, motioning for me to follow, pulling out his cell. He dialed as we ran to the car. "Mutt, get in with Brandon, now -- What? Fuck! Call him! We've got a name. Adam Ashwood. Yes. Hell yes. I'll hold."

"Jeff?" I said, my voice thick with the panic racing through me. He held up on one finger.

"Hospital security, yes." He snapped his phone shut. "We've got to go. Now. Follow me."

I did as he said. As I've said, there are times to obey Jeff. We ran out of the police station. Snow had fallen hard the whole time we were inside. It lay thick on the ground, covering the cars. With a snarl, Jeff swept the snow off. I started to help, frantic, my heart racing, pushing the snow aside, as did Lee and Jon. I couldn't just stand there. My helplessness was killing me. I had to do something. It was something. Why hadn't I just gone to the hospital? Why hadn't I known?

Why didn't I see the hate in Adam's eyes ...

But I had. It'd always been there, always, from the time I first saw Brandon, the day my beautiful golden boy fainted when I walked back into his life. And later, when I came to rehearsal that first time ... no, every time. It was always there, darkening Adam's eyes whenever he looked at me. But it was okay; I could handle it. He didn't bother me, and it was directed at me, not at Brandon.

I shook, so cold. My scar screamed. I felt like throwing up. Terror held me in its grip, but I pushed it aside. This was no time to collapse in fear. I had to be strong.

Be strong, be strong, be strong ...

"Get in," Jeff barked, and we did as he said. Seconds later, almost before I could get my seatbelt fastened, we were out of the parking lot and heading for the hospital.

"What did Mutt say?" I asked. "Is Adam there? He was supposed to be there. Jeff!"

Jeff looked at me grimly. "He's not at the hospital, Nicholas. He got sick, he called another one of our friends in, and Justin didn't answer his phone just now."

"Oh, my God," I whispered, and stared out the windshield while the snow fell harder as if it knew I had to get to Brandon. I had to, fast -- and it didn't give a fuck. Panic made me breathe too fast. I felt dizzy. Like I was going to faint. The cars moved too slow. They wouldn't get out of the way. I wanted to scream, hang out the window and scream at them to move, move, you idiots, *move!*

By the time we neared the hospital, more than twenty minutes had passed and I was almost in tears. Lee and Jon were little better; no one had said anything as we all willed ourselves to the hospital, prayed that we were in time. Prayed that someone had already gotten there ahead of us and Brandon was okay, that Adam had been stopped, and Brandon was okay, wasn't hurt, he'd be fine.

That he wouldn't be dead.

Jeff's phone rang just as we pulled into the hospital parking lot -- a parking lot filled with police cars, their whirling blue and red lights lighting up the snow.

"Why are they just sitting there?" I cried out.

"I'll find out." He parked the car as he flipped open his phone. I undid my seatbelt, my hand on the door handle, but he shot a hand out, grabbing me.

"I've got to get to Brandon!"

"No," Jeff barked at me. I fell back against the seat and stared at him. Hating him. Tried to pull away from his grip, but his damn massive paw held me fast.

"Easy, Nicholas," Lee said in my ear.

"Jeff here," he said into his phone. Then he closed his eyes. Lee held on to me from where he sat behind me. Jeff released me, snapped his phone shut, and looked at me. "All right. We need to get you up there, now." When I opened my mouth to beg him to tell me what had happened, he just shook his head. "Now."

* * * * *

Please, Brandon, please, please fight. Fight! Don't die, please don't die ...

I sat in the waiting room, staring at a spot on the industrial carpet beneath my feet. Only sheer determination kept me from falling onto the floor in fear, in grief. I was cold; the room was cold; my heart was frozen. They'd taken Brandon into surgery, to try and stop the bleeding, to mend the stab wounds caused by Adam's knife.

He'd gone into shock, they'd told me. I knew that wasn't good. Wasn't good at all.

Adam was in surgery, too. Adam had hit Justin over the head, but he'd shaken himself out of his stupor just in time to realize what was happening. Realize that the man hurting Brandon was one he'd been told was okay to stay with Brandon because he was his brother and brothers should be trusted. Why wouldn't they, of all people, be ones a guy could count on?

Right?

Oh, God, Brandon, what did you think when you looked up and realized Adam was the one?

Adam had had a knife, was pulling his hand back up again to take one more stab at his brother's chest. To kill him. Justin had pulled out his gun and yelled at Adam to stop. He didn't. Justin fired. But still, Adam hadn't gone down. He'd gotten to his feet, somehow, bleeding, and stumbled from the hospital room. Justin went after him, into the stairwell, where he shot Adam again.

That time, he didn't get up.

Later, they would tell us that Adam had first tried to suffocate Brandon, but for some reason it either hadn't worked or, my psychiatrist told me, it wasn't dramatic enough.

Brandon wasn't suffering. Adam wanted him to be in pain, to see him writhe in agony -- so he made sure that happened by taking his pocketknife and trying to kill his brother with that.

What had prompted the final attack? The telephone call, Brandon asking Adam to call and find out where I was, why I wasn't there yet -- and Jenn telling Adam about the woman I had remembered, and that I was at the police station, and they were bringing the woman in.

Adam had to have known Heather would talk. That she would tell them his name, a name she should never have known had my captor not felt compelled to brag to his girlfriend about his new "job." I could just imagine Adam's thoughts -- it was over, his long reign of terror ended at last. Had he thought "might as well go out with a bang?" Or had the temptation of having a helpless Brandon at his mercy one last time just been too much to ignore?

Now we sat in the waiting room as, yet again, Brandon fought a battle for his life.

Adam was in surgery, too.

* * * * *

"How much longer, Lee?" I asked.

He sat next to me. I leaned against him, desperately wishing that his presence comforted me like it had the night before, but there wasn't anything that could. Brandon's parents had made it to the hospital at last, only to learn both of their younger sons were in surgery, and that one had put the other there. That Adam had tried his best to kill Brandon - - and might ultimately have succeeded.

We just didn't know yet.

Jon had been the one to tell them everything. I left when he did that, walked the hallways, Jeff following behind me, watching over me. I couldn't be there to witness them finally learn the terrible truth.

That it'd been Adam who had tormented Brandon all these years.

That the men raping Brandon in the video were doing it because of his own brother.

That it was Adam, who had *so faithfully* stood by Brandon's side during those terrible weeks while I was kidnapped -- a kidnapping he had fucking planned! -- no doubt gloating to himself over the misery he put both of us through.

That it had been Adam who had sent Brandon into his downward spiral.

That it had been Adam -- and none of us realized it -- who had known his brother so well, his weaknesses so intimately, that it'd been easy for him to exploit them, creating and sustaining the ultimate hell.

No. I couldn't be there to witness them learning that.

Lee had finally come and found us and told us to come back to the waiting room. And when I had, Margaret had met me at the door, taken me in her arms, and held me for a long moment, saying nothing -- what could she say?

I couldn't say anything, either. I had no words, no comfort to give. I was too scared, too angry. Too sick. So I'd held on to her, hugged her, grieved.

And now I blinked, watching them across from me as they held hands, the mother of the man I loved and who had always loved me, too, and the father -- who looked up at me from time to time, his expression not angry, hard, full of hate and blame like I would've expected, but full of bewilderment. And, perhaps, shame.

How did a mother bear learning one son tried to kill another -- and that that son had planned, *for years*, the torment he'd put his brother through? I looked at Jon. How did a brother handle his helplessness? How did he handle the self-blame?

I didn't know. I wondered, too.

Jon stood apart, so alone, so lost, but I didn't have the strength in me to comfort him beyond hugging him and telling him I loved him. He'd nodded at that, then isolated himself again. "To think," he told me, looking at me with haunted eyes. I understood. We would talk, later, once we knew the outcome of the day.

Amanda had stayed with Jenn -- she didn't feel well already, and learning Brandon had been hurt because of this only made her feel worse. She blamed herself, she told me later, believing she'd failed Brandon.

"No," I told her. "You never failed him. You were the only one who didn't."

Which was true. So true.

All along, it'd been Adam. That thought kept hitting me over and over again, pounding relentlessly at me. It seemed so obvious to me now -- who else could it have been? His hate for me, had it caused this? Led to this? I'd never understood why Adam had despised me so ... and despised Brandon, as well. Sweet, beautiful, kind Brandon, who only wanted to have a good life, help his family the best he could. He'd never asked for the dizzying fame, the millions we made -- yet he'd reached the heights Adam had always aspired to and never achieved. Never could.

The angry, vindictive side of me took comfort in that. Yet had Adam found success, would none of this have ever happened?

I just didn't know anymore. I was sick, tired, worried, scared to death. Now that I had Brandon's love back, was I just going to lose it again ... and this time, forever?

How would I bear it? I didn't think I could.

Icy calm stole over me, but it quickly dispersed as Brandon's voice filled my mind.

Promise me, Nicholas. If anything happens to me, go on. Make me proud. I am proud of you, but there's so much more you can do.

I'd promised. I'd fucking promised him!

When Lee answered my question, I'd almost forgotten I'd spoken out loud. "Been two hours. It can't be much longer."

"I'm scared," I whispered.

"Me, too, Nicholas. Me, too."

* * * * *

The inevitable finally happened -- the waiting room door opened. A weary-looking surgeon walked in, his gaze searching the faces turned toward him. I saw blood on his scrubs. Brandon's? He glanced my way; my heart stopped. I stood. Then his gaze settled on *the parents* as he took a seat across from them, his practiced compassion turned on full so we could all see.

"I have bad news."

No.

NO!

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

I think I screamed, and then my knees buckled. I felt an explosion of pain in my head, and my world turned black.

* * * * *

Rippling pain, darkness and strange smells. Strange sounds ...

"... heart rate dropped ... holding steady now ... another hundred cc's ... let's get another blanket on him ..."

"Can you hear me, Mr. Ashwood?"

Warmth, reassurance. Touch of gentle hands ... "Can you hear me? Try to nod, try to ..." *Can't. Hurts.*

"... go get his family now ... his partner's Nicholas Kilmain ... yes! I feel so sorry for him ... said he freaked out ... didn't realize it wasn't him; it was the brother ... stitches in his forehead. He'll be okay, now." A laugh. "Yeah, of course I have all their CDs. I loved them. Still do."

Nicholas ... hurt. He's hurt? Where is he? Where's ... Throat hurts ... "Nicholas?" *Sounded bad, what happened?*

"There you are, Mr. Ashwood. Can you open your eyes?" *It hurts -- bright lights, too bright --* "That better? Now try." Smiling face, dark hair, blue eyes -- not Nick's.

Where's Nicholas?

"Need something to drink? Hold on, now just a little ... easy ..." Cool liquid. *Yes, feels so good ...*

Nicholas?

* * * * *

I followed the nurse down the hallway, Mutt a few steps behind. My head still throbbed, but it was a small price to pay, considering I woke up from my violent faint to discover that it was Adam's surgeon, not Brandon's, who'd delivered bad news to their parents.

When I'd opened my eyes, I'd discovered myself on the floor, Margaret cradling my head in her lap, holding something to my head where I'd fallen against a chair. I'd cut my forehead, necessitating stitches. I'd looked up into her eyes and known the truth. Known because I could see the joy lighting them, though her face remained pale.

How could it not be? Adam was her son, too, and she had the right to grieve for him.

But she also had the right to be glad her youngest son had survived.

She'd stroked my face, bent over me, and said, "Brandon's going to be okay, Nicholas. It wasn't him. He'll be okay now. It's going to be okay, son."

"He really asked for me?" I said again now, happiness surging through me as I followed the nurse into the post-op room. It bustled with activity, all the bed stations filled. Which one was he? Where was he? And then I saw Mutt, hovering protectively in the corner by one bed, though for all intents and purposes the threat was gone. Still, they let him remain. As if they could make him leave Brandon's side now.

"He did. But he's asleep again, which is what we want. So don't worry if he doesn't seem to know you're here, all right?"

"I understand," I said. Then with a brief smile to Mutt, who clasped my shoulder with his hand and nodded to Jeff, I moved to the side of Brandon's bed and looked down at him. For a long moment I just stared at him in disbelief. *He's going to be okay.* But he'd been hurt again, badly. And that was just the physical -- what about inside his head? Had he realized it was Adam trying to kill him?

I touched him on the face, a soft moan of dismay escaping me. *Brandon ...*

"He lost a lot of blood, so he's very pale. He'll look better by morning. I promise."

I nodded. I knew that, of course, having seen him through surgery before, so recently. I took in all the IVs, the breathing lines, heart monitor, the little temperature thing taped to his finger, its red glow making me think of *E.T.* and my own attempts when I was a kid to make my finger glow. And I shook my head at the unfairness of it all. That he should have to go through this yet again.

I sighed, stroked his face, along his jaw line, across his bare chest above the bandages. They'd shaved his chest. He'd be prickly. The thought made me smile. He didn't exactly have that much hair to begin with. Not like me. So it wouldn't be so bad.

I bent over and touched his cool lips with my own, sad at the lack of response, but thankful for the feel of his breath on my skin, the gentle rise and fall of his chest. I took his hand in mine -- not the *E.T.* hand but the other -- and brought his fingers to my lips. I closed my eyes as I kissed each one, knew I was being watched by the nurse, didn't care. I held his hand against my face, silently begging him to wake up enough to cradle my face the way he liked to do in our most intimate moments. But he didn't.

I laid his hand down again, brushing the tears from my eyes.

He was naked in the bed, covered from the waist down with a sheet and blanket, neat, stark white bandages covering the wounds on his chest. Adam had gotten him four times before Justin had managed to stop him.

Four times in the chest, and not one had struck his heart.

"Bastard didn't know what a heart is," Lee had muttered to me when we learned these latest details.

I'd agreed.

"Can I stay with him?" I asked the nurse, but she shook her head.

"Just a couple more minutes. We'll be moving him down to NCICU in a minute. If all goes well, he can go to a room in the morning." She touched me on the shoulder, her expression compassionate. "He'll be all right, Mr. Kilmain. He's a fighter. He has a huge will to live, and believe me, having you to come back to will help him. Believe it. When you see him in the morning, a lot of these IVs will be gone, and he'll look much better and be more awake."

I smiled at her. "Thanks. I hope you're right."

She looked at me sternly. "I know I'm right. It's time for you to go now. And --"

"I know, go home and get some rest myself." I sighed, then bent down and kissed Brandon once more on the lips, lingering this time, then pressing my face against his so I could whisper into his ear, "I love you, Brandon Ashwood. See you in the morning."

The nurse gently tugged me away from Brandon. I didn't want to go, but knew she was right. Brandon would be okay.

He had to be.

We were walking out of the hospital when I got another phone call. This time it was Amanda.

Jenn had gone into labor, and they were on their way in.

* * * * *

"You're beautiful," I said to Jenn as I bent and kissed her.

"See if you say that after I have Bubba."

I laughed and held her hand. Rex stood next to me, puzzling over his video camera. He looked a little pale, but the excitement in the room was contagious, lifting all our spirits.

"Want an ice chip?" Amanda asked.

Jenn nodded, then waved her away. "Oh, shit --"

"Here we go again," Amanda said. "Rex!"

"Coming!"

He set the video camera down, and I traded places with him. I'd started to move away, when Jenn grabbed my hand. "Shit!" she said as another powerful contraction ripped through her.

Fuck! I thought as she about broke my fingers. But I loved it. She amazed me. *Life* amazed me, that after such a terrible day, something truly beautiful was about to take place and I was to be a part of it.

"Easy, babe, it's almost over. It's almost over ..."

I watched, mesmerized, awed, overwhelmed as Rex helped his wife through the contraction. They'd been at this for three hours now, and as promised, Jenn had insisted I be a part of the birth of her firstborn child. I would tease Brandon later about his excuse for not being there, which he laughed about, but right then I felt so honored, so blessed, to be there for us both.

It was nearly midnight when Jenn's doctor checked her for once more and pronounced it time to push one last time. I tried to escape, again, figuring surely Jenn wouldn't want me there for *that*, but once again she said, "No! Stay!" She was exhausted, her hair a mess, her skin glowing with sweat -- and she was beautiful. And very insistent.

So I stayed, and witnessed the emergence of Brandy Kilmain McCauley into the world, her lungs proving they were strong and healthy as her cries of protest filled the room.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard, and I rejoiced that she came two minutes after midnight. The day *after* ... after I nearly lost Brandon.

I got to watch it all, from her birth to the nurse cleaning her up. I went with her and Rex when she got weighed and measured, and Rex made me cry (I cried more than Brandy) when he gave me the honor of putting on her first diaper. And hat.

"Why?" I said to him.

He grinned. "Well, it's not like *I* know how."

"Yet," I said with a wry chuckle. It really wasn't *that* hard.

Then I hugged Rex, shocking him a bit. "Thank you for letting me be a part of this. It means so much to me."

He hugged me back -- a little unusual for the normally solemn man, but he did pretty good. Since his wife had dragged him to Colorado, refusing not to be there for her beloved cousin when he needed her most, even if she was almost eight months pregnant at the time,

he'd thawed quite a bit. Good thing, especially because I planned to be around him, his wife, and my godchild a lot and I liked to hug. A lot.

"Thank *you*. I wish Brandon could've been a part of this, too."

"He was," I said simply. "He's always with me."

I'd left Rex with his wife and baby to enjoy becoming a family. An overwhelming sense of peace filled me as I let Jeff lead me away -- peace and, I had to admit, exhaustion. It was two in the morning by then, and I could barely keep my eyes open. But when we got back to the house at last, I found sleep hard to come by. My mind wouldn't shut up, which it does sometimes, like when I'm trying to compose new lyrics. The words just wouldn't leave my brain, saturating it, so that even though I was exhausted, I couldn't fall asleep.

I lay in my bed, alone, for a long while, staring out the window. The moon had found her way through the last of the clouds. Sometime during the long day and evening, the snow had stopped, and the sun had had a few moments of glory before leaving the sky. I thought about what I'd told Rex. That Brandon was always with me. It was true.

And I was always with him.

Always had been, since the moment we first met. I thought back to that day again, that amazing day I'd walked into that mean little room off that bar, my gaze searching the roomful of hopeful singers, and remembered the instant I first set eyes on Brandon.

He'd been so beautiful, lean and tall, standing there looking at something. Some music, I think. He had on faded jeans and a somewhat holey t-shirt. He'd looked fantastic. Brandon looks good in anything, which I always envied -- an envy he always laughed at as being silly.

He stood with his head bent, his golden hair falling into his eyes, his head bobbing up and down a little to some inner music. Someone called his name. He'd lifted his head. That was the moment I saw his face for the first time. *Beautiful*.

I remember watching him answer the other guy's question, saw a flash of his room-brightening smile. I remember, though, after his smile faded, how I'd thought, *That boy's so sad. I wonder why? I hope he's okay*.

Little did I know he was far from okay. Little did I know it would take me more than twelve years to truly understand the depths of his sadness.

At that moment, as I stared at him, I fell in love with that beautiful boy on sight, not knowing whether he was straight or what, and figuring oh, man, Kilmain, you're doing it, falling in love with a straight boy, headed for instant heartache.

Then he'd turned to face me, whatever he was saying forgotten as he stared at me, his eyes widening, a look of shocked recognition on his face as his gaze locked with mine. Only for a moment, but it was enough.

In that moment, I knew I'd found the love of my life, and he knew it, too. When he'd collapsed on the ground seconds after, I'd been a bit shocked, needless to say.

Now, all these years later, the memory made me warm and happy, and I tucked it away with all the others we had, both the good and the bad. I closed my eyes, snuggling into the blankets, knowing that in just another day or two, I wouldn't be alone in my bed anymore. Brandon would come home.

For the first time in a long while, I dreamed not of the past, the horrors Brandon and I had experienced, but of the future. Our future -- mine and Brandon's. And though I knew it was uncertain, I knew it would be wonderful, because he was mine and I would never let him go again.

I think I fell asleep smiling.

Epilogue

"You know, you're really getting into that," Nicholas said as he looked over at me.

I smiled up at him and nodded as I tilted the bottle up a little more. Brandy sucked greedily, making the cutest sounds I'd ever heard. No one had ever told me that the simplest act -- feeding a baby, *this* baby -- could be so ... healing.

But it was. And I was, too. Healing.

Nicholas propped his chin in his hand as he frowned at the papers Marisa had handed him that morning before she left. He sat on the chair opposite the couch on which I lay, Brandy tucked into my arms, a blanket covering us both. She started to fuss a little, so with an ease that amazed even me -- and made Nicholas grin -- I took the bottle away from her and set it down, then put her over my shoulder and began to pat her back. Pretty soon I was rewarded with a nice burp in my ear.

"Takes after you," Nicholas quipped.

"Bastard."

"Don't cuss in front of the baby," he admonished, grinning. He waved the papers in the air. "This schedule is going to kill me!" he exclaimed. "Marisa's a beast!"

"You love it and you know it," I said, smiling at my lover. "You'll do great."

He sat back in the chair, his hand automatically going to his scar. "Yeah, I know. You sure you'll be okay without me?"

"Absolutely," I said, knowing it was the truth. "But I'll miss you."

"Like the dickens?"

I chuckled. "Yes. Like the dickens."

Brandy went limp against me, and I realized the little bugger had fallen asleep. At five weeks old, she'd put on several pounds already. I really loved the feel of her lying on me and

snatched her from her mom every chance I got. I loved holding her against my chest even though I wasn't allowed to do more than that. I was still pretty weak. Shock, blood loss, surgery twice within a week -- it'd all taken its toll on me. My wounds were pretty well healed on the surface, but I had much healing to go yet. Which meant I couldn't join Nicholas as I wanted to.

No, I'd be stuck here in Colorado a while longer, while he would board a plane in the morning to head for London, along with Lee and Marisa, to start work on promoting the new album. It'd been delayed long enough, and I'd insisted he get started, though I knew Nicholas worried about us being apart.

"Hey, she asleep again?" Jenn said as she walked into the room. She bent down and kissed me on the forehead, then kissed her daughter. "I don't know how you do it, Brandon. No one can put her to sleep like you."

"Probably because he's so boring," Nicholas said.

I stuck my tongue out at him, making him and Jenn laugh. "Nick's rubbing off on you, Brandon," she said.

"I'd like to rub something of mine on him," Nicholas said beneath his breath.

I felt my face heat at that. Jenn caught my gaze and smiled in understanding. She took Brandy from me, then left me and Nicholas alone.

He continued to frown at his schedule. He started to make notes, shaking his head, then nodded, singing beneath his breath. I turned on my side on the couch and watched him, enjoying the simple pleasure of seeing my lover fuss over something I knew he was excited about, ecstatic about, really, so his fusses were just a bunch of noise. He could hardly wait to go, though he hadn't told me in so many words.

But I know Nicholas. And I understood. It was time to get on with our lives and begin living for the future, doing that which made us happy. For Nicholas, it was performing. His sales for the new album were amazing, the drama that had been our lives these past months doing much to assist it in its rocketing climb up the charts. That and the fact it was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

The concert tour was sold out. It was a smaller, shorter run than he'd done in the past, but that was necessary. His fans, fortunately, understood. He and I had both become regulars on the bulletin boards, freaking out his fans by our new openness. We'd kept them apprised of our progress, and our plans. Without doubt, Nicholas has the most loyal fans I'd ever seen.

"*Our* fans," he'd insisted when I mentioned my amazement to him one day.

But he knew, and I knew, that he would go on as he had been, his career as a solo artist firmly established at last. I would not be returning to the stage. To writing with him, yes, absolutely, but not to the stage. I couldn't.

He understood.

He was still recovering himself, though he'd regained much of the strength he'd lost and had feared he'd never get back. I, on the other hand, was having a slower time of it. Physically, I was still weak, and would likely be for a few weeks yet. We both understood that, but the limitations my body imposed on me made me frustrated, especially since his schedule would keep him from me for the next four weeks.

I watched Nicholas now, my eyes half-hooded, willing my body to respond as it used to, before I nearly died. Nicholas had been incredibly patient, more than understanding that I'd been unable to make love to him.

When I got home from the hospital, we'd taken to going to bed early each night, lying naked in each other's arms and talking for hours before we finally got so tired we'd fall asleep. We talked about all sorts of things -- everything from what I'd written for him and never finished, to what happened to me, to us.

We talked about other things, too, turning bad memories to rest, replacing them with the resurrected good. I'd pleased him often, holding him as I brought him to climax, unable to will my body to want to do the same.

"It'll take time, Brandon," he'd tell me. "We have all the time in the world."

Time to put my demons to rest, so I, too, could get on with living. But I was beginning to wonder if Adam would have the last laugh on me -- robbing me of what I wanted most. To make love to Nicholas, as we were meant to love.

I closed my eyes as the memories smacked me in the brain again. In a way, I was getting used to it, the sudden rush of horror, the sensation that I was back *there* again. That Adam was standing there watching me get raped, again. Yes, I remember it all now.

Fortunately Nicholas had been with me when my memories returned. If he hadn't been, I'm not sure I would be here to talk about it. It still seems surreal, like it happened to someone else, though I knew that wasn't the truth.

The truth was, my brother hated me so much, for what I achieved before his eyes -- that which he'd wanted for himself -- that he'd hurt me where he could do the most damage. And he'd done a brilliant job of it. Nearly succeeded in his quest to drive me into the ground.

But he hadn't succeeded. Because of Nicholas.

Nicholas.

My beloved, Nicholas.

"Hey, you," I heard him say.

I opened my eyes. I smiled at him, not wanting him to know where my thoughts had turned. But Nicholas being Nicholas, he knew. "Hey."

"You thinking about him again?" He smiled tenderly at me, then came over, sat next to me on the floor. He took my hand and kissed it. I held tight and nodded.

"Yeah," I said.

He stroked my face with his free hand. "Anything new?"

"No." I blinked, then reached out and cradled his face with my hand. He closed his eyes, leaning into my caress. He kissed my fingers, then took one in his mouth, sucked gently on it. Seeing him do that, feeling the hot wetness of his mouth, made me want him never to stop.

Then I felt it. For the first time in weeks, I felt a wave of heat come over me. Flood my groin. His eyes shot open when he heard my breath quicken as he suckled my finger. With a soft smile, his eyes lighting up with hope, he released my finger, leaned over me, and gently kissed me. And this time, a moan escaped me as I opened myself to him. He got to his knees, moving slowly, so afraid to scare me -- *I love you so much, Nick* -- and kissed me again, his lips warm, soft, hopeful. My tongue met his. He captured it, sucking on it as he had my finger.

I groaned again, grabbed his hand, and pushed it down to my arousal. He pulled back, blinking away the tears in his eyes. "Brandon?"

I nodded. "Help me," I said.

He got up, helped me to my feet. Led me by the hand to our bedroom, leaving the door open because he knew I could no longer bear a door closed behind me -- *he* might be there, even though I knew it was impossible, I wasn't trapped, he was dead, they both were, my brother and Seth, I wasn't being forced ...

"Brandon," he said.

I blinked, looked down at him. Forced the terror from my mind. We were by the bed. I smiled shyly at him, and he grinned, reached up, and kissed me. Then, with such gentleness as to make me smile, Nicholas undid my robe, pushed it from my shoulders, helped me get my shirt and my boxers off.

"What if Jenn comes --"

He smiled. "She won't. She'll know what we're up to when I start moaning."

"Who said I was going to make you moan?"

"Oh, you will, Brandon. You will."

I grinned at that and said, "Take off your clothes and let's get to it, then."

His eyes widened, and he obeyed. Quickly. Then we got into bed, hiding under the covers, just in case. Though I expected he was right -- Jenn wouldn't interrupt us.

It wasn't easy. I didn't have the strength to take Nicholas like I wanted, but he helped me. Lying behind him, inside him, my arms wrapped around him as I slowly, gently, lovingly fucked him while he encouraged me, brought us both to climax, my body shuddering against his as I finally released myself into him -- those moments were sheer heaven. Afterwards, I couldn't move, didn't want to move, and we lay together like that for the longest time, basking in the simple afterglow of reuniting our bodies, our hearts.

When we came out of the bedroom much later, both in our bathrobes, Jenn did have dinner, *with* champagne, ready for us. “To celebrate!” she exclaimed, embarrassing me, making Nicholas laugh with delight.

I love Jenn. So much, so very, very much.

Jenn, Rex, and Brandy were the only ones still left in Colorado with us. Everyone else had gone home. Mutt and Jeff had (reluctantly) returned to their lives, though we’d asked Mutt if he and his lover, Greg, would travel with Nicholas. They’d both agreed, Mutt as Nick’s bodyguard, and Greg as Nick’s private chef. Jeff had no wish to relocate, but would forevermore watch out for me as long as and whenever I was in Durango. Which, for now, would be a bit -- I didn’t want to leave. Couldn’t. I was seeing my psychiatrist every day, sometimes twice a day. I had a lot to deal with and needed to be here. I just couldn’t leave, not yet. Not yet.

But I could let Nicholas go. I had the strength now to do that -- to know, even as I kissed him goodbye the next morning, that even though our bodies sometimes had to be apart, our hearts never would be again.

Never again.

* * * * *

It was some months later, when we were in Spain for the first of Nick’s shows there, that I picked up my computer and found the file I’d started nearly a year before and never finished. As I sat on the bed in our hotel room, Nicholas singing in the shower a few hours before that night’s performance, I began to read, shaking my head at the lost, lonely man I’d been then.

I’ll never forget the first time I saw him -- the wild shock of black hair, the beautiful blue eyes, the full lips with that perfected pout. Such a diva, even from the beginning. I was entranced, smitten, mesmerized. He had the face of an angel, and the voice of one, too. And almost from the start, I began the pattern of losing Nicholas. I was good at that. I guess I never believed I really deserved him, what he would bring to us both. What we would experience because of him. What we could be because of him. What I could be because of the strength and belief he had in me.

I smiled as the memories flooded me. No longer did the past control my life, though I realized that it still had the tiniest hold on me. It was time to let completely go.

I scrolled to the end of the file and added a few lines. Once I was done, I closed my computer, set it aside, and joined my lover in the shower.

But in the end, I didn't lose Nicholas. In the end, I knew I deserved him. I believed in the love that he brought to my life, and believed in the love he held for me.

I love you, Nicholas.

~Brandon

 THE END 

Carolyn Gray

Carolyn Gray lives with her two teenagers in Fort Worth, Texas. If not working for her employer -- an engineering firm -- writing, or spending time with her family and friends, she can be found happily planning her next trip to anywhere she's never been before.