



The Far Away Years - 1

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The Far Away Years

TOP SHELF

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CHAPTER ONE

Daniel Chandler lived his life by three rules:

Don't steal from someone with less than you.

Don't pass up a chance to steal from someone who has more than you.

Don't fall in love with your best friend.

For twenty-two years, Danny had fought the good fight and lived by his few principles. Tonight, he admitted failure. He had fallen deplorably and miserably in love with his best friend and if only Jeff had been in love with him, too, it might have been all right. But Jeff had no clue.

He sighed and downed the last inch of his beer from its dusky glass. It coated the inside of his mouth with sour warmth, reminding him he'd been nursing it too long. He might get another drink later, but for now the view across the bar held him riveted.

Trudy's Bar was packed with its typical Friday night crowd. Boys and girls in bright spandex stood along the bar, tapping painted nails on the polished wood and leaving smears of lipstick on their glasses. Their hair was teased up wildly, and glitter arced over their eyes in colorful streaks. A cluster of girls gathered by the jukebox, and its running lights cast crazy shadows across their faces. A few couples found enough space to dance without bumping into the booths that lined the walls of the narrow room. They swayed to the sound of David Bowie's voice as he sang about a star man waiting in the skies.

At the bar, Jeffrey Cruz neither glittered nor swayed.

Danny hunched over the table of his booth and watched.

Perched on a barstool, Jeff gripped the counter with one hand and fended off his wife with the other. Lani clung to his wrist and pulled.

“Jeff, come on!” Her wave of blond hair swung around her petite face as she pouted, and her voice cut through the clamor of song and laughter. “Stop being a baby and dance with me.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head, offering her a crooked smile before his black hair fell around his face.

Danny traced a finger over the lip of his glass. He had seen Jeff dance with Lani at their wedding, and he’d be happy never to see it again. No matter how gracefully Jeff’s fingers moved over the strings of his guitar, he danced like a newborn colt. His feet went one way while his knees turned another, and more often than not, the combination sent him sprawling.

Lani didn’t care. The jukebox had switched over to a Beatles song, and she wanted to dance. She shook her head and stalked away to cajole Jake, the band’s new drummer, into taking Jeff’s place. Jake would do it. Like the rest of Far Cry, he already knew the consequences of incurring Lani’s wrath.

Jeff stared after Lani for a few seconds, then turned back to his glass before motioning the bartender for a refill. Scotch, Danny knew. It was always scotch when he was unhappy, like the night Danny met him two years ago. Danny could sympathize. It hadn’t been his best night either.

Danny met Jeff on a Saturday night in a dive just off St. Mark’s. It was the same night he made the decision to leave New York. Two more beers, and he would have been on his way to Port Authority to catch the first bus back to Pennsylvania.

New York City had not been as kind to him as he’d hoped. When he left his rural neighborhood for Manhattan, he expected to find a dozen bands waiting for the perfect singer and label scouts haunting every bar in the city. New York was supposed to be a city full of dreams come true. But for Danny, it was a city of rats and roaches, bums and sludge, and crushed spirits.

The Scarabs had been a shapeless band before he joined them, just a couple of kids from Queens who liked to jam in the Village on the weekends. Danny had taken them in hand and told them about ambition, about being stars. They repaid him by kicking him out of the band only two months after he joined. He was late for rehearsal four times out of five, they said. His voice was pitchy. His lyrics were melodramatic. He was not a happy person, and the Scarabs couldn’t have him contaminating their Beach Boys charm.

He could have given them reasons for his unhappiness, and he did inform them of a few in the shouting bedlam following their announcement, but after he went hoarse from screaming, he slunk to the nearest bar and started on the first of many beers.

Halfway to not caring about anything in the world, a band began playing at the front of the bar. Their lyrics were shit, blathering stuff about love lasting forever, and the drummer kept falling

out of rhythm. Still, the guitar licks that broke through the disarray were twisting and clever, like nothing Danny had ever heard. He switched his attention to the guitarist, and he stopped drinking.

The guitarist stood a good two inches over six feet, though he kept his head ducked and his mane of coal black hair hid his face. He had a large frame and big hands that looked clumsy, but never were. As Danny watched, he struck into a solo that was all wandering chords, with dips and rises like patches of sunlight on a gray winter day. He closed his eyes and his head fell back, as if he was beyond the bar, a part of something far greater. When he opened his eyes again, they were like tar, mysterious and vaguely Mexican.

In a slow, protracted heart-roll, Danny was lost. The longer he watched, the more his insides itched with the beginnings of obsession. The guitarist was neither pretty nor quite handsome, but he was tall and strong and he made Danny think of gypsies and caravans and golden hoop earrings. Danny thought he might be a god, until he remembered he didn't believe in gods.

Danny hadn't always been attracted to other men. He hadn't even realized he was more interested in boys than girls until his second year of high school, when Ben Cross motioned him into the janitor's closet between classes. Ignoring fad fashions and homework had made Ben the coolest kid in school, and Danny followed without any questions. It wasn't until Ben shut them in the dark and his mouth found Danny's that he realized what was happening, and his heart jackrabbited up his throat. Two years younger than Ben and only five feet tall, Danny hit his attacker with the business end of a mop and fled the closet. No matter how fast he ran, he could still hear Ben laughing.

He went home that night and tried to pretend it hadn't happened. But it came back to him while he choked down his dinner across from his mother, and it dogged his thoughts when he tried to sleep. He thought about it all night and most of the next day. When he passed Ben in the hallway, Ben winked, and Danny went hot and cold at the same time. He blanked out during Carpentry class and barely avoided sawing all his fingers off.

Two weeks later, Ben beckoned him into an empty bathroom. Danny stood in the hall for a full three minutes, staring at the door. Then, he went in. In under half an hour, Danny had smoked his first joint and had his first orgasm caused by another living being.

Seeing the guitarist that night made him think Ben Cross must still be laughing at him somewhere. Within minutes, Danny became infatuated with no hope of returned attraction. He didn't have to ask to know the man in front of him was straight; it was there in his crooked grin and shaggy hair and the way he made Danny's gut clench.

The band played through a short set that ended with scattered applause. Then the members drifted apart. Where the others went, Danny never knew and never cared. He followed the guitarist to the bar and watched him order a straight scotch. He didn't look a day over eighteen, but he drank without a grimace.

The floor tipped and tilted under Danny's feet, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he was able to hold to the edge of the bar for support. He turned his head and saw the black-haired guitarist folded up at the bar beside him. A warm flush spread through him.

"Hey," he said. He felt conspicuously drunk, aroused and embarrassed and too full of hope for his own good. He wanted to spout song lyrics like poetry, but what came out was less brilliant. "You play great."

The younger man--Danny felt wise and worldly beside him, almost twenty-one and high on it--brushed a wave of hair out of his eyes, revealing a too-large nose. "Thanks," he said, and lifted his glass.

"But your band sucks." It was a disease, the inability to stop speaking even when he had nothing good to say. He felt his face turning crimson.

The guitarist glanced at him again with a wry twist of lips. "Yeah?"

"We're better. My band. I've got a band." Not anymore, but Danny felt thick with optimism and beer. Thoughts of bus tickets fled his mind. "You should jam with me sometime. With us. We could be great."

A genuine smile lifted the guitarist's lips, showing white, mildly crooked teeth. He laughed. "Sure. We'll do that." He tossed back the last of his drink. "Why don't you come down to Salvatore's tomorrow? You know where it is? I'm playing alone. We can jam after."

"Yeah," Danny agreed, snatching at the good luck before it disappeared. "I'll be there."

Someone laughed, jolting Danny out of his reverie. He looked up.

Saul Carol smirked down at him, brown curls falling around his handsome, square face and over the collar of his leather jacket. "Daydreaming?"

"Shit, Saul."

Saul slid into the booth beside Danny, eyes glittering in the dull light. "And how is my Daniel tonight?"

"Tired, and no more yours than I was yesterday." Danny made room for him, then propped his chin up in his cupped hands, elbows on the table. "What do you want?"

"What do you think?" Saul moved closer, his leather-clad thigh pressed against Danny's. "You want to get out of here?"

“No.” His gaze slid back to Jeff. The second glass of scotch was down to half an inch. Had Lani upset him enough for a third? She danced with Jake, weaving between tables with her arms around his neck and her body tight against his. Jake, bright red, kept tripping.

Danny jolted when a hand settled over his thigh, fingers splayed over denim.

“Come on,” Saul said. “Forget about him. He forgot you.”

“Fuck you.”

Saul breathed into his ear. “I don’t think you mean that.”

Danny shivered. He wanted another beer, but he didn’t want to be bothered getting it. It was easier to relax in the booth with Saul’s hand on his leg, squeezing and moving steadily upward.

“If you don’t stop staring,” Saul said, “he’s going to notice.”

“So?” Danny murmured.

“So what do you think would happen? Is he going to open his arms to you, and you’ll kiss for the very first time while a heavenly chorus breaks into song? I think it would be his fist and your face. What do you think?”

The same dreams and nightmares had visited Danny too often. He eyed Saul sideways. “I think you’re a dick.”

Saul’s face split into a grin. “You’re too tense, Dan. You should come back to my place and let me loosen you up.”

Saul had been trying to “loosen him up” since they’d begun their half-hearted flirtation months ago, but Danny continued to resist. A few gropes with Saul were harmless, but actual sex had always felt too much like a betrayal of his feelings for Jeff. As if Jeff cared.

The hand on his leg slid up to cover his crotch. Under the shadowed table, no one saw. Danny looked back to the lone figure at the bar.

“It could be good, you know.”

“Right.”

“I could make it good for you.”

“Sure you could.” Danny lifted his hips against Saul’s moving hand. His eyes knew where to stay. What if it was Jeff’s leg against him, Jeff’s hand on him, and Jeff whispering into his ear? Restless heat twisted in his gut.

“I should kiss you right here,” Saul said. “In front of your whole band.”

Danny ducked his head and stared through the curtain of his red hair. Jake danced with Lani. Robbie, Far Cry’s back up guitarist, downed a shot of bourbon and pretended to listen to whatever Ray, their argumentative bassist, was going on about. Not one of his band mates had noticed how close Saul was, or maybe they didn’t care. Maybe nobody cared at all.

“In front of Jeff.”

The words sloshed through him like ice water. Saul’s squeezing hand brought a moan up from his throat, but Danny was already pushing away. “No.”

“Why not?” Saul followed him to the edge of the booth.

If Danny slid any further away, he’d fall on the floor and everyone would stare. He shoved Saul’s hand off him. “Not now.”

“Then when? You are what you are, Daniel. If you have to hide yourself from him, he’s not good enough for you.”

Danny shook his head, hair in his eyes. He yanked the hem of his black T-shirt low enough to cover his crotch. “I don’t care.”

Saul sank against the back of the booth, eyes narrow. “Damn it, Dan.”

“I gotta go.”

“You know where I am if you change your mind.”

Danny stood and edged into the crowd, heading toward the bathroom across the bar. He thought Saul might follow him. For a minute, Danny wished he would, wished Saul would push him harder and force him to cave.

When he glanced back, Saul had already turned away.

Danny was drunk, Jeff decided twenty minutes later. He wasn’t trying to murder anyone though, nor was he hysterical. He sat on his barstool and stared at his hand of cards. Jeff wanted to be reassured, but in his experience with Danny, silence was a prelude to more insanity.

“Straight flush,” he said, laying his hand on the bar.

“Shit.” Danny eyed Jeff’s cards, red hair spilling over brown eyes. His face looked more sharp-featured than usual. When he was loud--and he usually was--it was easy to forget how small he was, just over five feet tall, skinny, and slippery as a fox.

“Come on, Dan. Let’s see the cards.”

Danny dropped two pair on the table.

“Better luck next time.” Jeff swept the pile of victory cashews to himself. “Told you not to bet it all.”

Danny flicked the last cashew at Jeff. “I’m out. This sucks.”

“You’re the one who wanted to play.”

“Not for nuts.”

“You got cash?”

Danny groaned and lay his forehead on his crossed arms. Jeff knew Danny was broke. He had blown his personal allotment of the band’s recording advance two months after he got it, spending the money on pot, alcohol, and a purple shag armchair.

“I’ve got a buck left if you want a beer.” Jeff pushed his hair off his forehead, where beads of perspiration formed. He couldn’t stand how heavy his hair was getting, but Lani would crucify him if he cut it. How could he be a rock star without long hair?

“No...” Danny lifted his head, gaze wandering over the bottles lined up behind the bar.

Jeff bit a cashew in half. The stale flavor soured his mouth. “Have you seen Lani?”

“Why the fuck would I have?”

The venom in Danny’s voice startled him, but when he looked back, Danny rolled his eyes away. Maybe the craziness was starting already.

Through a parting in the crowd, Jeff caught a glimpse of Lani leaning over the jukebox. He wondered if she was the one who’d punched in “Whole Lotta Love,” and if she’d done it to impress the stranger she smiled at now. His hair was longer than Jeff’s.

He looked away before the anger could uncurl in his gut. And she accused him of cheating. He had never cheated, but sometimes he had his suspicions about her. The need for another scotch came quick and hard, but he strangled it. If he drank every time Lani got up to something, he’d have lost his liver already. The best thing was to wait her out, reminding himself she put on the show for his sake. If she wanted to punish him for not wanting to dance, she could try. She could probably succeed.

“Bitch,” Danny said.

“Shut up.”

Danny didn't answer. He leaned his head on the bar this time, hair splaying over the counter in ginger and auburn strands.

Jeff prodded his arm. “You okay?”

The arm under his hand stiffened, and Danny yanked away. He glared up, eyes narrowed, teeth bared. “Don't fucking touch me.”

“What the hell?” He pulled his hand back. “What's your problem?”

“Fuck.” The look faded. Danny scrubbed a hand over his face and raked his hair back. He stood, clinging to the barstool. “I have to get out of here.”

Definitely not a good kind of drunk. Jeff studied him, but Danny moved with more exhaustion than clumsiness. “Are you sure you're okay?”

Danny stepped back. His eyes skipped over the bar, across the floor, but never toward Jeff. “I've got shit to take care of.”

“Right.” Jeff leaned an elbow on the bar. “Maybe you should just sit down again.” An intoxicated Danny was not trustworthy. Two months ago he'd tried to set the bus on fire, though he swore he was just lighting a cigarette. And Lani still hadn't forgiven him for ruining her wedding with a screaming rendition of “Get Off of My Cloud” added to the end of his best man's toast.

But Danny was a grown man, and more stubborn than anyone Jeff had ever met. If he'd determined to do something, no power on or off earth would stop him.

A feminine voice called Jeff's name. Danny fled with a grimace, plowing into the crowd and disappearing.

“Jeff.” Lani sighed and mounted the barstool Danny had vacated. “Let's go home.”

He propped a fist under his chin and watched her. “Okay.”

“Now.”

“Okay.”

She shook a wave of blond hair over her shoulder, bare except for the thin red straps of her dress. Alcohol flavored the air around her. “Are you going to get up?”

He wanted to ask why she'd sat down if she wanted to go, but dismissed the urge. He stood, giving her the signal she was waiting for, the assurance that he would follow her every

command. He held an arm out to her and she took it, let him draw her to her feet and lead her out of the bar.

Danny stood in front of Saul's apartment door and waited for an answer. It didn't come fast enough, so he banged on the door with his fist.

I shouldn't have come here. I should leave. While I've still got the chance.

"Hold the fuck on," a muffled voice called. An instant later, the door swung inward. Saul glared from the entrance, black tank top wrinkled. "What?"

Nerves made bats knock against Danny's insides. "Don't tell me you were sleeping."

"I won't."

"You going to let me in, or what?"

Saul yawned without covering his mouth and held the door open wider. Danny slipped past him into the apartment. It was bigger on the inside than he'd expected. Saul was a rising star on the New York punk scene, and his loft showed just how successful he already was. Polished hardwood floors stretched through two rooms, and huge windows gave a glimpse of nighttime SoHo. Leather couches lined one wall, and piles of records littered the coffee table. Indian statues sat on every clear surface.

He smirked at Saul over his shoulder. "Some punk you are. What would your fans say if they knew you lived like this? Anarchy, my ass."

Saul dropped onto one of the couches. "You would, too, if you could afford it."

Danny nudged a statue with the toe of his scuffed boot. "Wouldn't fill it with Buddha."

"That's because you're a good Catholic boy."

"Up yours."

"You haven't got the balls. What are you doing here?"

Danny sat beside him. "You fucking know what."

Saul laid his arm on the back of the sofa, brushing Danny's shoulders. Live wires sparked and twitched in the pit of Danny's stomach. Saul's touch conveyed an intent Danny wasn't used to, a warning that he wouldn't get off easy this time.

Saul wound a hand through red hair, then pulled away. “Stand up.”

“Why?”

“Stand up.”

Danny obeyed, but it was even harder to stand still than to sit. His muscles flinched and pulled in a dozen directions. The thought of taking a step that couldn’t be retraced made his stomach squeeze tight, but if he backed down now, he’d never recover his pride.

“Take off your clothes,” Saul said.

Was pride worth it? Was getting over Jeff this important? Didn’t he secretly like having Jeff in his mind, owning some small part of him no one could take away?

“Are you thinking about him?”

Danny slanted a look at Saul. “No.”

“Liar.”

“Fuck you.”

“Stop wasting my time, or get the fuck out.”

Danny knew he could get out, go back to the apartment he shared with Jeff and Lani and Linda, the latest in his own string of pseudo-girlfriends. He could watch Jeff day and night, wondering if he’d ever grow the balls to make a move, or he could get on with his own life.

He met Saul’s eyes and found no sympathy. Maybe Saul didn’t care, but he did want Danny. Just once, it would feel good to be wanted.

“Okay,” he said and reached for the hem of his shirt.

CHAPTER TWO

Saul reclined on the sofa, skin bronze against black leather. “You’re leaving?”

Danny looked away, buttoned his jeans and scanned the floor for his shirt. “Yeah.”

They hadn’t made it to the bedroom. Saul hadn’t said anything about the semen stains they got on the sofa, but Danny couldn’t look at them without remembering how the leather felt against his skin. He imagined he could still feel the heat of Saul’s body pressing against him, pushing inside him. The hot urgency of sex had faded though, and now he felt only hollow disappointment and regret.

“You need money for a cab or something?”

Danny yanked his boots on. “I’m not a fucking call girl.”

“Guess not.”

It wasn’t like Saul to pass up a chance at mockery. Danny frowned as he snagged his jacket off the coffee table and shrugged into it, the smell of too many cigarettes rising from the leather. He risked a quick glance back at Saul. At the sight of the sofa, his stomach knotted. “See you around, huh?”

Saul lifted a hand in what might have been a wave. Danny wondered what thoughts shifted behind the dark flatness of his eyes. If he’d gotten what he wanted.

“Sure,” Saul said and dropped his hand. It hung off the edge of the sofa like a corpse’s hand hanging off a coroner’s slab. “Around.”

Danny walked to the door, boots loud as they struck the hardwood floor. He looked back once more, nausea choking the back of his throat, but Saul didn’t move, didn’t speak.

He slipped into the hall, shutting the door behind him. He walked to the elevator, slapped the button, and leaned against the wall. Then his knees turned to rubber, and he slid down until he sat on the tiled floor with his legs stretched out in front of him. He stared at the flickering, fluorescent light overhead, until his eyes burned.

Something besides sex had happened in Saul's apartment, but he'd be damned if he knew what.

Sitting made his teeth clench with pain, but he couldn't gather himself enough to move. He stared at the elevator doors, old fashioned with iron gates. A warning was posted beside them: In case of fire, use stairs.

Partly it had been good with Saul, but mostly it had hurt. When it was over and all he wanted was to be alone, he had to open his eyes and face Saul. Facing him was worse than the pain.

Maybe he'd made a mistake. Maybe he wasn't different after all.

If Jeff found out, would he take it as a betrayal? Except there was nothing to betray outside of Danny's own warped mind.

When he was four years old, his mother had taken him to Whitaker Lake, where he could play in the sand and pretend he was at a real beach by the ocean. He wanted to build a sandcastle, and he had a yellow, plastic shovel to help him.

"Don't build it so close to the water," his mother said, and that was when she still smiled, before Dad left.

Even at four, Danny knew better than everyone else. He set up a sandy construction site only a foot away from the water's edge. He built a sandcastle to be proud of, with paper napkins wrapped around toothpicks and waving at the top of each turret. A dry moat surrounded the walls, and he propped a toy soldier outside the gate.

When the lake tide came in and washed the castle away, he stood back and shouted at the water with all his childish anger.

He should have learned his lesson then, but eighteen years later he was still building beside rising water. Now the tide was coming in to wash away the best sandcastle ever, and he had no anger left.

The elevator dinged and opened. Danny stared at the gates.

A door scraped open down the hall. He knew before he looked that it was Saul.

Danny scrambled to his feet and hurried through the iron gates. He fastened them and jabbed the button for ground level. The elevator lurched down. He closed his eyes and tried not to think of being sick.

He would never see Saul again. Too much had changed in too short a time, and whether or not it was Saul's fault, Danny would always blame him.

The door to Jeff and Lani's room was shut when Danny crept into the apartment, but he could still hear Jeff snoring. How amazing that he thought himself in love with someone whose snores could wake the dead.

The apartment was dark, the only light coming from streetlights that shone through windows. He passed through the shadowy living room, his boots silent against the mustard-colored carpet as he passed the scuffed coffee table and sagging brown couch. He shed his jacket and left it on his armchair, a huge purple shag piece of furniture that took up half of the narrow room. He let himself into his own room and flicked on the light piled on top of the cardboard box serving as a bedside table. The clock beside the lamp read a quarter past three in the morning.

Linda was in bed already, her dark hair splayed across the pillow and her eyes shut. Danny had been seeing Linda since the end of summer and had asked her to move in with him last month. They got along all right, and as long as she was around, he didn't have to worry too much about being lonely. What he did have to worry about was what would happen if Linda ever found out the truth; that he'd only asked her to move in with him to further the illusion that he was a normal, straight boy in a band.

She sighed when he undressed and slid under the covers beside her. "Danny?"

"Yeah." He turned the light off again and wrapped an arm around her from behind, leaning his forehead against her shoulder. She smelled like scented candles. He wondered if he smelled like Saul, like fresh leather and spices.

"I tried to wait up." She yawned and shifted. "Where were you?"

"Nowhere. Just drinking."

"Jeff said you left the bar."

"I went to Salvatore's Place. Didn't feel like hanging out with the guys." He nestled closer to her warmth and let his heavy eyelids close. "Go back to sleep."

He thought she had, until she asked, "Did you meet her at Salvatore's?"

He opened his eyes and stared into the dark swirls of her hair. "What?"

"Your new girl. That's why you left, isn't it? To be with her."

"Linda..."

"She must be better than me."

He groaned. Sleep would be a long way off tonight. "There's no new girl."

"Is she prettier than me?"

Danny pulled away. All he could see in the dark was the glimmer of tears in Linda's eyes as she rolled onto her back.

"I just wish you'd tell me," she said. "I just wish you'd be honest."

"Be honest and say what? That I fucked another girl when I didn't? Jesus." He flipped onto his other side and glared at the shadowed wall. His heart beat hard, and he wanted to run from the room. His own pain combined with Linda's made his head hurt. Sure, he flirted with other girls when she wasn't around, but what would be the point in sleeping with them? He wasn't attracted to other girls any more than he was attracted to her. If he told her he'd been seeing Saul Carol and not another girl, would she believe him? What would she do?

"I never know if you're lying or telling the truth," she said dully. "It's not fair."

"Nothing is."

"You could tell me the truth. Tell me not to bother hanging around here, hoping you'll decide to care."

Her voice whispered in his ear; her arm slipped around his waist. He caught her hand and held it in both of his, felt the softness of her skin and the hard rise of her knuckles. "The truth," he repeated. The truth was she wasn't enough any more than Saul had been enough. If he sent her away, though, he would be alone, the same way he'd been alone for almost his entire life. It was selfish to keep her here. He knew it. But he didn't have the courage to tell her.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the room was still dark, and it was still Linda pressing against him. "The truth is that I wasn't with another girl, and I do care."

"I don't believe you." She kissed the back of his neck and breathed against his skin. "But I love you."

He knew she was waiting for him to respond, but he kept silent. Caring about someone meant you didn't lie to them.

He lay awake in the dark long after she fell asleep, waiting for the guilt and the pain to pass.

"Stop," Ray said.

Danny strangled his voice mid-song and swung a glare on their bassist as dying guitar chords quivered in the air. "What the hell now?" His voice echoed through the empty bar, bouncing off the brick walls and gleaming bar counter.

"Same damn thing it's been all day. You're not concentrating, and you keep going sharp."

“I’m not going sharp. We might sound better if you shut up and played instead of telling me what I’m doing wrong all the time.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d focus.” Ray swept a mop of blond hair out of his eyes and let his bass hang loose from its strap. “We can’t keep covering for you when you fuck up. If you can’t get the song right now, you’re never going to do it at the show.”

Danny fisted a hand around the microphone pole. “I’m not fucking up.”

“Then what do you call going off-key every other word?”

“It’s rock and roll. It’s supposed to be emotional.” In his peripheral vision, he saw Jake lay down his drumsticks while Robbie offered Jeff a cigarette. Their nonchalance set his teeth on edge. “If you want me to stand here and sing like a dickless machine, why don’t you just fucking say so?”

Ray’s eyes looked as cold as ice. “What I want is for you to put some actual effort into practice for once. What I want is for you to sing a single goddamn song on key.”

Danny’s teeth ground until pain stabbed into his skull. “I--am--on key.”

“You’re all over the place. It’s not the fucking National Anthem, Daniel.”

“I am not fucking off-key!” He grabbed the microphone stand in both hands and swung it over his shoulder. Maybe if his ass didn’t hurt like a bitch, he could have handled it. Maybe if the rest of them weren’t loafing around, so used to the fighting that no one bothered to intervene...

He threw the stand like a baseball bat, letting it slide through his hands and sail into the air. For a second, it remained beautifully aloft. Then the cords ripped free from their power outlet, and the stand smashed against the far wall of the bar, striking a small painting of Jim Morrison. The stand bounced away unharmed, but the painting now hung crooked and displayed a long tear through the center of the Lizard King’s forehead.

“Great,” Ray snarled. “Just fucking great.”

Danny stared at the fallen stand, breathing too hard. Chagrin slapped him in the face. Would he never learn to control himself?

“Danny. Man.”

He hooked his chin over his shoulder and watched Jeff through a fringe of sweat-damp hair. He bared his teeth, more angry at himself than he had been at Ray a moment ago. “What?”

Jeff shrugged. “You were off.”

Danny swung away. Exhaustion swelled over all anger. His knees buckled like wet cardboard, and he sank down on the edge of the stage. “Off.” A headache throbbed behind his eyes. “I was off.”

“Here we go again,” Ray said, and Danny heard the sound of his shoes thumping across the stage behind him. “These are the days of our lives, and all the fucking drama...”

Softer footsteps neared, and sneakers appeared as Jeff sat beside him. He eyed Danny, black hair pulled back with a rubber band, leaving his face awkward and too attractive. “Come on, Dan. What’s going on?”

Danny watched their feet dangle together over the edge of the stage. The toe of his boot brushed Jeff’s sneaker. “Nothing.”

“Nothing, like hell.” Jeff slung an arm around his shoulders, oblivious to Danny’s cringe. “You know Ray’s only pissed because of this gig next week. If we put on a good show opening for Hale, we’ve got a good chance at joining his summer tour. Ray’s just afraid you’re gonna screw it up.”

“I don’t want to open for John Hale anyway.”

“Sure, that’s why you own all his records. Now, why are you dicking around?”

Danny ducked his head. “Can’t I just have a bad fucking day for once?”

“You have a lot of bad days. We can’t afford one right now.”

“I know what we can afford.”

“Then you know you should be working your ass off like the rest of us.”

“Maybe I’m sick.”

“C’mere.”

“What now?” Before Danny could pull back, Jeff pushed the fringe of his hair back and laid a palm across his forehead. Danny sat motionless, staring at his boots until the hand withdrew.

“You’re not sick,” Jeff said. “And even if you were, you made Robbie puke into a bucket instead of canceling the Albany show.”

“That was different.” He could still feel the heat of Jeff’s hand on his head, white hot and burning through his skin, into his brain. He was too aware of the arm around his shoulders. “Robbie’s rhythm. I’m front and center.”

“So go be front and center.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Don’t like the attention.”

“Neither do I.” Danny risked a glance at Jeff and was instantly sorry.

Jeff grinned, teeth crooked and nose beaky. “You’re a fucking liar and a brat. You’re just feeling sorry for yourself, and you’ve got no reason. We’re doing the show next week, people are going to love us, and when we get the offer for the summer tour, you’ll be bouncing off the walls. You know you will.”

Danny shrugged the arm off his shoulders and edged away. Sometimes he wanted to hit Jeff for being the biggest idiot in the world. After two years of living together and playing together, Jeff still couldn’t see what was right in front of his eyes, and Danny still couldn’t find the nerve to tell him. Sometimes he wanted to hit himself.

“Danny.” Jeff elbowed him and climbed up. “Come on. Just give it an hour, and we can get out of here.”

Danny watched him walk back to his guitar, leaning against an amplifier. Jeff retrieved his drumsticks, Robbie ground out his latest cigarette, and Ray wouldn’t look at any of them. Danny could take his place, and they’d pick up where they’d left off. Or he could walk out of the bar, and they’d argue about replacing him as a dozen other bands had. He’d leave the apartment, without or without Linda, and start looking for a new band. Maybe he’d forget the reason he left, pretend it had all been his off-key singing.

He’d thought being with Saul was his chance to get over Jeff. But he would never be happy pretending he wanted only friendship from Jeff, and he could never walk away without trying to be more. He had to take the final step, even if it meant falling into a deep place he might not be able to crawl back out of.

“Danny?” Jeff called.

He stood without answering and made his way back to the band, avoiding their gauging looks. They didn’t--couldn’t--know what went through his head. He would sing for them and for himself. Sometimes singing was the only escape.

Later that afternoon, it began to snow. Flakes danced through the air like miniature ballet dancers, drifting down to land on Danny’s upraised face. The white flakes melted into his pale skin and speckled his hair. He blinked when they fell in his eyes, and tipped his gaze back to the pet shop window, ignoring the jostle of last minute shoppers surging down the streets.

The small creature on the other side of the glass stared back with beady eyes set in a masked face. With a twitch of whiskers, it bounced across its cage and prodded at a hanging water bottle.

“Danny?”

The unexpected hailing made his heart lurch in his chest. He shoved numb fingers into the pockets of his leather jacket and eyed the new reflection in the window. “Jeff. Your scarf is disgusting.”

Jeff’s lips lifted in half a grin as he burrowed deeper into the orange folds draped over his woolen coat. “Warm, though. What are you doing here?”

He hadn’t been doing anything really, just wandering, too restless to stay in the cramped apartment. He shrugged. “What are *you* doing?”

Jeff looked in the pet shop window. “Lani wants a puppy for Christmas.”

“I hate dogs.”

“I know. Is that a weasel?”

“It’s a ferret.”

“What’s a ferret?”

“That is.”

“Thanks, dumb-ass.” Jeff watched the animal hunch over a bowl of cat chow. “It looks like you. Little and squirmy.”

Danny wrinkled his nose. “You can’t buy a dog.”

“Why can’t I?”

“I’d have to live with it. I’m allergic.”

“You are not.”

“It’ll shit all over the place.”

“Not if I train it.”

“I hate dogs,” Danny said again. He shivered against the wind and laid his palms on the window, pressing his nose to the glass.

Fingertips grazed the back of his neck. A stronger shiver jarred him. He didn't dare move. Scratchy warmth circled him as he looked at the end of the orange scarf now trailing over his shoulder.

"Do you think it bites?" Jeff asked, still watching the ferret.

Danny shrugged. The scarf smelled like Jeff, like cigarettes and some musky cologne Lani made him wear.

"How come you don't just buy it?" Jeff asked.

"They want forty bucks."

"Fuck." Jeff shook his head. The rustle of his hair caught Danny's attention. He watched snowflakes nestle in its coal blackness. "Probably doesn't weigh more than two pounds."

"Still." He didn't have money to waste these days. He'd never been good at saving up.

"A dog would probably chew the furniture," Jeff said.

"Probably."

"It might bark when we're not home. Piss off the neighbors."

"It might."

Jeff pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. Danny grabbed for him before his better senses stopped him and locked his fingers around Jeff's wrist. The jolt of their skin touching sent thrills through his stomach.

"What?" Jeff asked.

"Don't buy it for Lani."

"But--"

"She'll get bored with it." And it didn't look like Lani. It looked like him. "You know she will."

"She might..." Jeff glanced at the hand on his wrist.

Danny peeled his fingers back. The cold air stung them. "She will."

"Yeah." Jeff sighed and looked away. Then he opened his wallet anyway and fished out some wrinkled bills.

"Where'd you get all that?" Danny asked.

“My parents never know what to get me for Christmas, so they send a check a couple weeks early and tell me to get whatever I want.” He grinned and pushed two twenties into Danny’s hand. “You’ve got to promise to spend it on the weasel and not pot, okay?”

Danny wanted to say no, that he couldn’t take it, but his fingers closed over the cash and different words left his mouth. “I’ll pay you back.”

“Like I haven’t heard that before. Hey, it’s what, two days ‘til Christmas? Happy holidays and all that.”

Was this his chance? Should he say something, do something right now and show Jeff how he’d always felt? His head ached, torn and confused. What should he do?

Jeff stepped back, still grinning, snow melting in his hair. He looked so perfect Danny’s teeth hurt. “I have to go find something for Lani,” he said. “See you at home?”

“Yeah,” Danny agreed. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t make himself move. “Sure.”

Jeff slipped into the surging crowds. Danny watched him disappear. Snowflakes landed on the money gripped in his fist. It was hard to breathe. The chance had been there. He’d lost it, and now he wanted to scream, to beat himself senseless. He wondered if he was going crazy or if he was already there.

Tonight. He’d do something about it tonight. He would tell Jeff everything somehow, and maybe it wouldn’t turn out the way he dreamed, but at least it would be done.

CHAPTER THREE

The way Danny saw it, stars were like dreams. They lingered right in front of you, so close you thought you could stretch out a hand and brush them with your fingertips. But you never did reach out, because deep down you knew the truth: Once you tried, the stars and the web of dreams surrounding them shattered.

Danny could see only a few stars from where he sat in the dark, narrow courtyard running behind their apartment building, but he knew there were thousands more out there just waiting for him to try and touch them. Like sandcastles, stars--and dreams--were destined to disappoint.

He let out a long breath. It had been a bad idea to put a timeline on something this important. Too much pressure and too many variables. Nothing would happen tonight, and maybe not even tomorrow or the next day.

Jeff and Lani were having sex. They'd shut their bedroom door, but Danny could hear them through it. The sound of Lani's voice--her laugh, her moan--burrowed into his mind until he couldn't think straight, couldn't do anything but flee. It wasn't until he was in the alley with half of a stolen joint that he'd been able to stop hearing her voice inside his head.

He took a last toke off the joint, put it out, and dug in his pocket for a roach clip. Returning both to his pocket, he settled deeper into the snow drifts against the brick wall. The apartment manager didn't see why the courtyard should be shoveled between every snowstorm, and Danny liked being able to sit in the drifts, even if the highest was only five inches. Growing up, he had waited all year for the first snowfall. After every storm, he trekked across the hay fields behind the house and made snow angels side by side.

A squeak broke the silence as the building's side door opened and shut. Footsteps sifted through the snow until a pair of shabby sneakers stopped beside him. Danny trailed his gaze up faded jeans and a woolen coat to see a familiar bony face with black hair falling over it.

"So you're trying to kill yourself," Jeff said. "Right?"

Danny took a deep breath. Frigid air hit the bottom of his lungs. "I guess."

“You won’t die, you know. You’ll just get sick and feel like crap while you make everybody wait on you.”

“Yeah.” His lips quirked up. “Probably.”

Jeff dropped into the snow, legs stretched out in front of him.

Danny shifted until their shoulders bumped. He smelled scotch on Jeff’s breath. “What went wrong?”

Jeff shoved the hair out of his eyes. “What are you talking about now?”

“You know what. What’s so awful that you’re drinking? You got in your wife’s pants, and God knows that doesn’t happen every day.”

“Ah, fuck.” Jeff sagged against the brick wall. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, come on, seriously.” The marijuana had mellowed Danny, but knowing Lani had failed to make Jeff happy sent him higher than any drug. He pressed his shoulder tight against Jeff’s. “I’m your best friend. If you can’t tell me, who can you tell?”

“Best friend.” Jeff’s lips twisted. “You’re a fucking weasel, that’s what you are. How’s your ferret?”

Danny shrugged. “It sleeps all the time. Don’t change the subject.”

“Ah, fuck.” Jeff patted his coat pocket--cigarettes came second after scotch--and came up empty. “I’m just tired. It was a fucking long day, and I’m allowed to be tired once in a while.”

A thought occurred to Danny. He let it swim in the gray pot-smoke of his mind. He smiled. “Tired. Might that mean--”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, God.” Danny grinned and let his head roll back to rest on Jeff’s shoulder. “You couldn’t get it up, could you? She offers it to you once a month, and you’re not even up for it.”

“Shut the hell up.” Jeff glared at the fire escape dangling across the alley.

“I told you she wasn’t right for you. I told you before you married her, didn’t I?” Careless bravery drifted through him. He twisted his neck and buried his nose in the shoulder of Jeff’s coat. The gray wool smelled like cigarettes, sweat, and that damn cologne. “You need to find somebody else.”

“Shit. She’d cut my balls off if I ever looked at another chick.”

Errant strands of Jeff's hair brushed Danny's face, making his heart beat a little too hard. Jeff didn't seem to notice. Danny took a deep breath. His head spun, and he didn't know if it was the pot, or Jeff, or both. He felt good. "You smell awful."

Jeff craned his neck, trying to get a better view of Danny. "Sorry?"

"I like it. Except the perfume."

"It's cologne, jackass."

"Whatever." Danny looped one arm around Jeff's shoulders and fisted his other hand in his wool coat.

"Anyway." Jeff shifted against Danny's tight grip. "Why are you smelling me?"

"Because I can." He wished he could close his eyes and melt into Jeff's skin. He wanted to be so much a part of Jeff that he never had to be himself again. There was so much he wasn't allowed to do, but what could smelling hurt?

"Come on, let go." Jeff pushed at the hand clutching his coat. "I'm going back inside. And if you tell anybody about--*that*--I'll kill you."

"No, wait." Danny moved fast, swinging one leg over Jeff's lap and straddling him. He knotted both hands in the coat's woolen collar. "Don't leave me alone."

"Then come in. It's too cold out here. And would you get off me?"

"No." Danny had never felt more comfortable, more certain of himself. To hell with delays. A person had to take what they wanted. He ignored the cold and focused on his thrumming heartbeat.

"Danny." Jeff sighed and leaned his head back against the wall. "Get up."

"If I get up, you'll just go inside and drink more. Lani will yell at you for it, and you'll believe her when she tells you what a worthless piece of shit you are."

Jeff's mouth turned down at the corners. "What's wrong with you?"

If Danny stopped now, it would be all right. He was high and allowed to be strange. Jeff probably wouldn't even remember tomorrow. But he already knew he wasn't going to stop.

"She doesn't deserve you," he said. "I wish you could see that."

Wind filtered through the yard. When Jeff shook his head, black hair tumbled over his forehead. "You're fucking crazy."

“Yeah.” Danny smiled, lips chapped and cold. Every part of him hurt suddenly, and there was only one way to make the pain stop. “But you only get one chance. Got to take it when it comes.”

Jeff peered out from behind his hair. Danny saw the deep brown of his eyes and wondered why they always looked black. “Chance at what?”

“At everything.” For an instant, fear cracked the calm, and Danny wanted to shove away and run so fast he lost his breath, so far Jeff could never catch him.

Instead, he leaned down and closed his eyes.

Jeff’s lips were warm when Danny’s sealed over them. He lingered motionless, mouth-to-mouth, half-formed thoughts drifting through his head. Jeff’s lips were softer than he’d expected. He wondered what was Jeff thinking, and what would happen after this until he forgot to think.

He pulled Jeff’s startled breath into his lungs and let himself drown. Jeff’s pulse echoed in his head, throbbing in his veins until their hearts beat with the same rhythm and force. Heat flooded him like the bursting of a dam. He moaned, sinking deeper into Jeff’s mouth. Just inside, the skin turned slick and sweet. Danny licked at the inner flesh, over and around and between Jeff’s teeth. The flavor crept into his memory and embedded itself there. He kissed Jeff, his lips and teeth and tongue and all his insides, until he couldn’t breathe and his hands shook.

At last he drew back, the shattered ache in his heart hurting too much not to be real. If he only ever got to have one kiss, this was the one he wanted. But he wanted a thousand more of them.

Jeff sat as still as a corpse. The cold of the bricks at his back sank through his coat and into his spine, chilling him inside and out. His mouth felt frozen, like a winter ghost had pressed its lips to his. But it was Danny who had done that. *Danny*.

With an effort, he remembered how to breathe. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. “Dan-- What the hell was that, man?”

“You’re not stupid.” Danny ducked his head, eyes fixed on his hands, still clutching Jeff’s coat. Snow-damp tangles of hair stuck to his pale lips. “Didn’t you ever guess?”

“Guess what?” Cold and shock slowed his brain. “Are you high?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What is this, a joke?” He could smell pot on Danny’s breath, could taste it on his lips, betraying what he hoped was the truth. “It’s not funny.”

"I know that." Danny lifted one hand and slid his fingers along Jeff's jaw, across his cheek and around to cup the back of his neck. Jeff shivered, from the cold and from Danny's next words. "I wanted to tell you every single day, but the timing was always wrong. Not that it's right now. I got tired of waiting, I guess."

"Waiting for what?" Jeff's gut knotted and twisted. Was this really happening?

"For you," Danny said. "I wish this was a dream, and I wish I never had to wake up."

It wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare coming true, a nightmare Jeff tried to pretend he'd never had. He pressed his back into the wall. "Don't joke."

"It's not a fucking *joke*."

Faster than Jeff could react, Danny shifted forward and down and pressed their mouths together again. All he saw was a blur of red hair as Danny's tongue slipped past his lips, tracing the ridges in the roof of his mouth. It tangled with his own tongue, one velvet muscle against another. Jeff felt like he was caught in a riptide, being rolled over and under so fast he lost his breath. Fingers moved up his neck and under his hair, splaying against his skull and pulling him closer.

Danny shifted, pressed his hips to Jeff's and ground down. Jeff felt Danny's hardness trapped behind denim--this wasn't a joke, it really wasn't--but more alarming, shocking, and sickening was the heat clenching in his gut and tumbling lower.

He wrenched his head to the side, breaking the kiss and striking his temple against the brick wall. Red and white starbursts exploded across his vision, color and pain dancing around each other. He shut his eyes and breathed deep.

"It's all right." Danny's hands ran through his hair. He pressed his cold cheek to Jeff's. It wasn't all right. He was a teenager again, feeling things he shouldn't be feeling.

A hand slipped down his front and covered Jeff's crotch, fingers squeezing. His eyes shot open. "Stop. Get off me."

"Shh." Danny kissed the corner of Jeff's jaw while his fingers tugged the zipper of Jeff's jeans down and slithered inside. "Don't worry."

"Fuck--" Jeff brought a hand to Danny's chest, but before he could shove, the fingers found him and wrapped hotly around his cock. His hand flexed and fisted in Danny's leather jacket. It hurt to swallow. "Oh, fuck, Dan, please."

Please what? a voice demanded, rearing up in the back of his mind like a viper. *Please stop? Or please keep going?*

Magical fingers teased him. Danny's thumb rolled across his glans. He was already half-hard from the taste of Danny's lips and the remembered pressure of Danny's erection pushing against

him. He'd never been this close to another man before, never, and the sensations were electric, just as he'd dreamed they would be in the old nightmares. "Fuck," he breathed.

"Relax." Danny stayed close, his hair brushing Jeff's jaw and neck. His lips kissed the skin just below Jeff's ear, teeth nipping. "Let me make you feel good."

"No..." But he wasn't moving; why wasn't he moving? He should have thrown Danny off after the first kiss. He should have run. Why hadn't he?

It wasn't real. That was why he couldn't move. He'd fallen asleep beside Lani in bed, and this was all a dream. In the morning he wouldn't remember it.

Danny slid down. Jeff lost his grip on the leather jacket. He clutched empty air and watched Danny, heart beating fast and hard. Danny nudged his thighs apart and knelt between them, tucking himself up until he seemed to belong in the space.

"God. What are you doing?"

Danny looked up, face pale and lips red from kissing Jeff. "It doesn't have to mean anything. Just... just let me do it."

If this was real, Jeff would have stopped him. But it was all in his head, just like that damn voice. Just like all the nightmares were only in his head, and as long as he kept them hidden there, they didn't matter.

Danny peeled the flaps of Jeff's jeans wide and drew his swollen cock into the cold air. He pursed his lips and blew hot air over the head.

Jeff shut his eyes. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Something soft and wet--Danny's tongue?--passed over the head of his cock. He was hard and hot like he hadn't been for Lani half an hour ago. But Lani's touch hadn't been electric, hadn't crept past his skin and sunk into his bones.

"Don't you want it?" Danny asked, voice as soft as his tongue had been, thick and velvet.

"No." He had to say it, had to believe it, but his hips ached with holding still when they wanted to be pushing up. His cock twitched, begged.

"You fucking liar," Danny said and sank down.

All the breath left his body, belly pulling into his spine. A groan started deep in his gut and rolled up his throat, past his lips. "Please..."

Please, yes. Please, more. It was wrong, and in the morning he'd hate himself, but in the morning he wouldn't remember. He always forgot his nightmares. He made himself forget.

Fingers dug hard into his hips. He realized he was pushing up after all. Danny's hands held him down while his hot lips kissed and caressed and sucked his cock and his soft tongue teased all the best places in all the best ways.

"Jesus. Fuck." Jeff fisted both hands in red hair and pressed his knuckles against Danny's skull, trying to force him down further. Danny obliged, his moans sending vibrations rolling down Jeff's dick.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like this, if he ever had felt like this. Sex with Lani had been good at first; she was the first lover he'd had with any skill. But good wasn't great and this... this was the promise of everything he'd forgotten and everything he'd never had. This was a glimpse of why Adam took that damned fruit from Eve, and just how incredible sex could be, and it was only a fucking blow job.

Thoughts burned away. He felt everything and nothing. Through the damp of the snow, the wind, the darkness, only Danny's lips and tongue mattered, and the beautiful, painful pleasure.

His climax took him by surprise, hard and fast, like a punch knocking out teeth. It shook his body, and he groaned again, bucking his hips, stiffening as he came in the back of Danny's throat.

It fell away too fast, leaving him breathing hard and sagging against the wall. His head spun, and it took a long minute for his mind to return. When it did, he wished it hadn't.

It wasn't a dream.

Danny pulled away, coughing and wiping strings of semen from his lips and chin. He held his hand in front of his face, lips parted and eyes wondering, licking it off his fingers.

Jeff's gut twisted into a hard knot.

Danny rocked back on his heels, one finger drawing invisible patterns on the jean cloth over Jeff's knee. "God," he sighed. "You taste so good."

Jeff swallowed. Saliva hit his stomach like acid, making it lurch. Cold air swept over his spent cock, shivers insinuating themselves in his blood where he'd never get rid of them. He hadn't meant to. It hadn't been his fault.

"I've wanted to do that for ages."

The acid became nausea, rolling up his throat. "Get off," he whispered.

Danny met his eyes, fear written across his face. "Jeff..."

“*Get--off.*” Jeff could move again, now that it was too late. He shoved a hand against Danny’s shoulder and brought his knee up at the same time to connect hard with his midsection. He needed Danny to stop touching him, needed it *now*.

“What--” Danny pitched backward and sprawled in the snow.

“Jesus.” Jeff stumbled to his feet, clawing at the brick wall for support. His knees trembled. “Jesus fucking...”

Danny lifted himself on hands and knees, eyes wide and dark. “I can explain.”

“Explain?” The air left Jeff’s lungs in a rush. He raked a hand through his hair, dragging it out of his eyes and looking wildly back and forth across the courtyard. No one was there; no one had seen. “You can fucking explain?”

“Jeff, please.” Danny started to stand.

“No! No, fucking... no.” He staggered back and realized with panic that he was still exposed, that Danny’s saliva was still on him. He tucked himself into his jeans, cringing at the sound of his zipper dragging up. His face burned, but that was nothing compared to the shame pooling in his gut. What had he done? What had he let Danny do?

He turned fast and plowed through shallow snow drifts, eyes fixed on the building door. He had to get inside, away from Danny, away from this... disaster scene.

His only warning was the sound of snow crunching under boots before Danny slammed into him from behind and he sprawled face-down. He lost his breath for what seemed like the hundredth time, his heart knocking against his ribcage as he felt Danny’s weight on his back. He shivered once and couldn’t stop.

“I’m sorry.” Danny’s breath huffed into his ear. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Jeff swallowed hard. He felt like a rabbit chased by a hound, more likely to die of fright than any lethal bite. “Danny, you’re--you’re a fucking fag?”

Fingers twisted in his hair, and a cold nose pressed against the back of his neck. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Jeff repeated, staring at the shadow of the door leading inside to safety. If he reached out, his fingers would brush the lower corner of the metal frame. “You just... maybe?”

“Maybe,” Danny whispered.

“But Linda...” He had to make sense of it, or he’d be as crazy as Danny. “You’ve always got a girlfriend. And the girls at shows--I’ve seen you.”

“I know.”

Jeff swallowed again. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the door was still not quite close enough, Danny was still on his back, and he could still remember the feel of Danny's mouth on him. His legs felt like rubber; he didn't know if he could stand without help. "How long have you been..."

"A few years. Maybe six years. Maybe seven."

"Fuck." Jeff ground his teeth. "I can't believe you. I can't fucking believe you. All this time you've just been... you've been... why the fuck didn't you say anything?"

"What should I have said?" Danny leaned his head against the back of Jeff's shoulder. "I didn't want you to look at me any differently."

"And I won't now?" Jeff twisted, trying to unwind Danny's arms from his neck. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"So what if I am?" Danny held tighter, voice cracking. "Maybe I want to be crazy. You don't know how hard I have to try not to think about you every minute of every day. I fucking love you, Jeff."

He thought he had been prepared for anything, that he could have dealt with anything. But those five words froze his blood colder than the snow ever could have. "*What?*"

"I love you. I always have."

"Fuck," Jeff said. Love? This nightmare had gone too far. He had to get away before he lost it altogether and started screaming.

You liked it, the voice in his head accused. *You liked it. You liked having him suck your dick, you worthless fucking faggot.*

"Don't hate me," Danny said.

"Shut up! Get the fuck off me!" He rolled, crushing Danny under his weight. The voice echoed in his head on a never ending loop, making him want to shove his fingers into his brain and dig it out. Fury made his legs strong. He yanked away from Danny and got his feet under him again.

"Jeff--"

"I said, shut the fuck up!" His foot shot out before he could think to stop it, and the toe of his sneaker caught Danny in the ribs. Danny grunted and sank into the snow.

Jeff stumbled back, the edges of his vision red with fear and anger, fine tremors running through his body. He grasped the edge of the door and flung it open. The tremors heightened into shudders as he clung to the doorframe. "Don't you ever fucking touch me again."

Danny lifted his head, arms wrapped around his ribs. "Please--" His voice broke on a sob.

"*Ever.*" Jeff backed inside the building. He shut and locked the door and turned down the hallway. Beautiful darkness folded around him.

He heard the crash an instant later. The door's brass handle rattled.

"Jeff!" The door shook. "Goddamn it, Jeff, fucking open the door!"

The front door was unlocked; Danny would figure it out once he calmed down. By that time, Jeff would be in the apartment, locked in his bedroom. Lani would want to know what was wrong, and if she bitched enough, he might be able to forget the smell and taste of Danny.

He walked to the stairs, back stiff and feet slow. He was cold, and he didn't think he'd ever be warm again.

Before the door fell shut on the stairwell, he heard Danny's voice one last time, screaming his name.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Baby?”

Danny shifted his gaze to Linda, watching her slick red color across her lips. Her eyes met his in the vanity mirror.

“Aren’t you getting up?” she asked.

“No.” Sunlight slanted through the window, warming the bed blankets around him. After last night, he didn’t think he’d ever be able to sleep again. Maybe he’d die of exhaustion.

His eyes fell away from Linda’s as the ferret, Cassidy, peered out from under a pair of dirty jeans. It hopped over piles of discarded clothing and paused to sniff a stray chunk of Styrofoam. Sensing undiscovered value, it snatched the foam and darted beneath the bed.

“What about rehearsal?” Linda recapped the lipstick and surveyed her appearance in the mirror.

“Don’t feel like it.”

“Ray called. Everyone’s waiting.”

“So?”

“He’ll be angry if you don’t go.”

Danny propped himself up on one elbow and looked at her again. She’d be almost pretty if she stopped painting globs of makeup on her face. “If you care so much about Ray, why don’t you just go fuck him?”

She swung around, lips thinning into a red line. “I care about you.”

“Then go to work and leave me alone.”

“I don’t know why you think you have to be such an ass, Danny. I’ve never done anything but love you.”

“Shit.” He had no good answer, and lately, lies exhausted him. Hurting Linda was the last thing he wanted to do. Wasn’t that what he excelled at though, hurting people? Last night he’d hurt Jeff; today, Linda. He curled into the blankets and clamped a pillow over his head.

“Danny.”

He didn’t move or speak.

“Fine. Have it your way.”

From beneath the pillow, he heard the bedroom door snick open and then shut. Relief relaxed him for a single moment before it opened again. He pulled the pillow away. “Damn it, Lin-- Oh, Fuck. Jake, go away.”

Jake shook his head, shaggy blond hair swishing as he walked to the foot of the bed. He was wearing the wrist braces he wore for drumming. He was also smiling, a sure sign he hadn’t yet been infected by the constant bickering within Far Cry. “Come on, man, you can’t sleep all day.”

“Fuck you. Who says I can’t?” Danny went under the pillow again. Fuck them all, sending Jake for him. They used to send Jeff. Jeff the peace-maker, the only one who could make Danny behave. Had Jeff refused to coax him down this time?

“We have to practice,” Jake said. “You know you can’t keep doing this shit. The guys’ll only take so much.”

“Go to hell.” What was Ray thinking, sending Jake up? Jake was no Jeff. Jake didn’t deserve to be thrown into the middle of a war he didn’t even know about.

“Fuck, Dan.”

In the ensuing moment of silence, Danny dared to hope Jake had gone. Then the blankets flew back, and hands anchored around his ankles. Cool air hit his bare skin, cracking his anger like frozen glass.

“Come on.” Jake started to pull him off the bed.

“Fuck you!” Danny shoved the pillow away and gave Jake a single moment to recognize his mistake. Jeff would have understood the warning. But if it was Jeff, there would have been no anger.

Jake kept pulling.

Danny whiplashed. He curled his body into a ball and released like a spring. Both bare feet slammed into Jake’s chest, breaking his hold and stealing his breath with an audible rush of air.

“Fuck--” Jake staggered back, coughing. “Christ, Dan, what the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

Danny rolled up and crouched on the bed, every muscle vibrating with restraint. Damn Jake for not being Jeff. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“You’re crazy,” Jake said as he retreated.

Danny waited until the door slammed shut before he slid back under the blankets, cold and shaking, unsure whether he hated Linda or Jake more, or Jeff or himself.

For the first time in two years, the tides had reversed, and Jeff hid in the shadows watching Danny.

Hunched over a table in the far back of Salvatore’s Place, he swallowed the last half-inch of scotch in his glass. It tasted too much like a chemical, with none of its usual bracing reassurance. Fuck Danny. He had managed to poison the very scotch Jeff drank.

At the bar counter, Danny had his arm looped around a girl who didn’t look old enough to be drinking the beer in front of her. It was the first time Jeff had seen Danny cheat on Linda, and it disgusted him. If the band had been on tour, he might have understood, but Linda was probably home at the apartment now wondering where he was. Would Danny actually sleep with this girl? Was he attracted to her at all? Jeff didn’t know anymore.

Danny’s ability to sell himself so easily mystified Jeff. He never would have gotten past second base where Jeff grew up. Girls in Burston, Ohio gravitated to the tanned young gods of football and baseball and to the boys with access to all of Mommy and Daddy’s credit cards. Jeff neither scored touchdowns nor looked like James Dean, and despite his parents’ moderate affluence, few girls in his school were willing to date a shy kid with Mexican eyes. It had never bothered him much; he could live without a cheerleader hanging on his arm.

In Manhattan, being in a band gave him some appeal with the rock kids, but the girls were rarely fresh pickings. Lani, though... she was just like one of the Burston High girls, beautiful and classy, and Jeff knew how lucky he was to have her. If sometimes he couldn’t help feeling that she wasn’t quite what he wanted, well, that was his problem. A problem he could ignore.

Danny was a different creature altogether, with more emotional dysfunction than ten people put together. Jeff hadn’t realized the extent of Danny’s depression until he saw him onstage for the first time. Watching him perform was like watching him die, writhing and desperate, clutching at the microphone and staggering across the stage. All his pain came pouring out through his voice. Danny’s misery touched the pain that each person in the crowd had hidden deep down in themselves, and the concerts became a communal exorcizing of anguish.

Jeff rolled his empty glass between his hands and watched the figure at the bar. He understood, then, the allure Danny held for a crowd. But for an individual woman--or man?

The soles of Danny's boots hung by stitches and scraps of leather, and the knees of his jeans had long since been reduced to frayed strings. His yellow shirt, like most of his shirts, clung tighter than skin, showing off a narrow torso. Only the square set of his shoulders and hips proclaimed his masculinity.

Sometimes he looked like a girl anyway. Like tonight, with his hair falling over his shoulders in a curtain of burnt ginger silk. Jeff remembered the cool feel of that hair slipping through his fingers. He knew it would turn blood red in the dark, as it had last night in the alley when it was pooling over his lap.

Danny said something--Jeff saw his lips move, but couldn't hear the words across the distance--and the girl responded by placing a hand against his cheek and stroking it, like one lover comforting another. Like a girl who thought she could save a damned soul. Was that Danny's big draw then, his vulnerability? Jeff looked at Danny's profile, at his pale skin and fine features, his eyes as large and inviting as they had been in his dream last night.

The dream had started out like any number of his teenage wet dreams. He was the guitarist of a famous rock band, and when he came back to his hotel room after a show he found a girl waiting for him. She appeared as she always did in the dreams, blurry and indistinct, her face a mystery, her body curving and shifting like wisps of smoke. She sprawled across his bed with one corner of her lips curled up and said, "It's about time."

As usual, the girl was artfully obscene. She knew how to twist her body around his to make him crazy. She told him to take her from behind while she balanced on hands and knees. He obeyed her commands, going deeper and harder when she screamed for it, lost in her tightness and in the feel of her body tucked beneath his. She moaned, "God, yes, oh *God*..." until he didn't think he could hold back anymore.

Then, everything spun out of control so fast he couldn't tell right from wrong. The girl's voice went deep as she groaned, "God, please." When she looked back over her shoulder she was no longer faceless or formless; she was Danny.

Thrills had shot through his blood; he came hard and fast like he'd never come before, not even in the dreams.

He woke up, breathing hard, heart tearing through his chest. He felt ready to vomit or come, until Lani rolled over and told him to shut up and go back to sleep.

He signaled a passing barmaid for another scotch. His head ached, and none of these thoughts helped. If he couldn't sort things out in his own mind, how could he sort them out with Danny?

Far Cry needed Danny. He might show up late for rehearsal, blow off sound check entirely and sing off-key more than on, but who else could seduce a crowd so thoroughly with bare pain? If Danny could be made to concentrate on the band, he'd make them famous. First, though, he had to stop sulking and show up for the Hale gig.

The barmaid slid a new scotch on the rocks across his table. Jeff stared past ice and clear alcohol into the center of the drink.

Yesterday morning's rehearsal had been a waste. They'd played through a few songs, but without Danny, it felt pointless. Jeff kept fucking up, forgetting chord progressions, forgetting chords entirely. They'd called it quits finally, but before Jeff left, Ray had taken him aside and asked him to talk to Danny. "Bargain with him," Ray said. "Think about it, man. He worships you. He'll do whatever you want."

Just like that, the pressure fell on Jeff to straighten Danny out of whatever funk the others assumed he'd fallen into. Jeff sucked his lower lip between his teeth and bit until he tasted blood. The pain was nothing compared to remembering every fucking second of what had happened two nights ago.

He dug in the pocket of his coat and brought out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He tapped one out and lit it. Smoke invaded his lungs, stealing his breath.

So he'd let Danny blow him. It didn't make him a fag.

At the front of the bar, Danny kissed the slut while she wound her arms around his neck. Was his dick hard like Jeff's had been two nights ago?

Jeff's stomach rolled without warning. He'd thought he knew Danny. He'd really thought he knew.

Danny hated Christmas. Christmas meant wreaths and people you wouldn't be caught dead with catching you under the mistletoe. It meant false good will toward men and insipid carols on every radio station.

He'd hate this time of year even if his father hadn't walked out on Christmas Eve and never come back. It wasn't about his father. It was about the fucking hypocrisy of it all. It was about grandmothers getting into fistfights over the last pair of mittens that their grandchildren would despise anyway.

It was about being alone in the apartment while the band and its entourage of wives and girlfriends partied at the record label's holiday bash. Not even Linda had offered to stay with him when he said he was sick. He'd wanted to be alone, but it would have been nice of her to worry about him at least. Wasn't she supposed to be in love with him?

Footsteps sounded in the hallway outside. Curled in his purple armchair, Danny listened to the click of a key entering the lock, watched the door swing inward. It wasn't Linda.

Jeff shut the door after himself and stood with his back to it. Shadows fell over his eyes. Danny wished he could remember how to breathe. He hadn't been alone with Jeff in three nights, and now he wasn't sure how to act or what to say.

Jeff didn't look at him. "Are you coming to rehearsal tomorrow?"

Nerves jittered in the pit of Danny's stomach. "Maybe."

"You're not going to fuck up the band."

If Danny could see Jeff's eyes, he might know how to respond. But through the dark he saw nothing.

"I don't care how bad you screwed shit up between us," Jeff said. "I won't let it spread to the band. If you don't get with it, you're gone."

The nerves fanned out through him. "You think you're going to throw me out of my own band?"

"It's our band, Danny. You're one of five, and no one else is going to fight to keep you."

Danny's fingers tightened on the arms of the chair. None of it mattered. He'd created Far Cry for Jeff, the only way to get close to him, and who knew the band would show such promise? He'd only wanted Jeff. Nerves twisted into anger. "You really would kick me out, wouldn't you? Just so I'm not around to challenge you anymore."

"Challenge." Jeff stepped forward. Outdoor streetlights poured their yellow glow through the window and onto his face. "Is that what you're calling it now?"

"There's nothing else to call it." Irritation twitched through his veins, making him restless. "I challenged the way you think, and you can't take it. That's the only reason you hate me, for making you question yourself. Does it hurt to think you might be a fag?"

"This is bullshit."

"Really?" Danny pushed himself out of the armchair and circled Jeff. "So if I was just some bitch going down on you, you'd still hate me? Like hell. Jesus Christ, Jeff, it's not like I forced you to get a boner. You could have stopped me any time."

Jeff turned, keeping Danny in his line of vision. "I told you to stop. I fucking *told* you."

"When was that? All I heard was 'Jesus, Jesus, fuck, please--'"

"*Shut--up.*" The color bled from Jeff's face. "Shut up. Just shut the fuck up."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Danny stepped closer, narrowing the space between them. "Was I challenging you again? Are you going to kick me again?"

“I should.” Jeff’s lips peeled back over his teeth. “But I don’t hit girls.”

“*Fuck you.*” The words ripped at the lining of Danny’s throat. Fury blazed through him. His fist shot out, knuckles crunching into Jeff’s nose.

“Fuck!” Jeff staggered back, hands clamping over his face. “You fucking--”

Danny tensed, ready for a fist to crash into his head, ready for a kick to topple him. His breath rattled in his lungs.

No attack came.

“Jesus...” Jeff said thickly, eyes wide above his hands. Blood slipped through his fingers, black in the darkness. “You fucking broke my nose!”

“I didn’t punch you that hard.” Danny’s tension ebbed, carrying the anger with it. He let his breath out and reached for Jeff. “Let me see.”

“Fuck you.” Jeff turned his back. “I can’t believe you broke my fucking nose.”

“Stop talking and sit down.” Danny snagged a pillow from the sofa and shook it out of the case. He carried the empty cloth sack into the kitchen and turned on the warm tap water. “Put your head back,” he called, “so you don’t bleed on everything.”

Being angry was too much work, and he was tired of everything. He watched water swirl down the sink drain and wondered where his fury had gone. He just wanted to sleep now and pretend that when he woke up everything would be better.

When he came back, Jeff still stood in the center of the living room. He cast Danny a glare.

“Sit.” Danny perched on the edge of the brown couch and patted the cushion next to him. “I don’t bite.”

“You do.”

“I won’t.”

Jeff sat. Blood spilled over his upper lip and down his chin. It stained the collar of his white sweater.

“Put your head back.”

Jeff gave him a sidelong glance and looked away again, but he scooted back and leaned his head against the back of the couch.

Danny inched closer, careful not to let his knee touch Jeff's. He pried bloody fingers away from the injured area and inspected the damage. Guilt tasted sharply of vinegar in the back of his mouth. "It's not broken. And it won't look any worse than it already did."

"Fuck you," Jeff muttered again, wiping at the blood with his sleeve.

"Just keep your head back." Danny dabbed the wet pillowcase across Jeff's mouth, then pressed it over his nose.

Jeff sucked blood down his throat with a wet, snuffling sound. He stared straight up, never to the side. "There's something really fucking wrong with you."

"Funny." Jeff's hair grazed Danny's knuckles. His fingers itched to tangle in it. He kept his eyes on Jeff's face. "You can kick the shit out of me, but you're so shocked when I give you one little tap."

"That was a tap?"

Danny couldn't resist. He rubbed a lock of dark hair between his fingers, the coarse sensation sending shivery aches down his spine.

"Don't do that."

He pulled his hand away and laid it on the back of the couch. "Sorry."

"You're not sorry." Jeff pulled the pillowcase off his face and stared at the crimson stains. "Are we even now?"

"There is no getting even."

"Why?" Jeff tossed the case on the coffee table. "Why the fuck can't you just say yes, and why can't we go back to the way things were? Why'd you have to go and screw everything up? What about the band?"

Danny stared his hands, at the blood drying in streaks across his fingers. Jeff's blood. "Did you tell them about me?"

"Fuck. You think I want them to know?"

"Neither do I. Not yet."

"Not ever, Danny. Not fucking ever."

Danny swallowed. Jeff was right. He could never tell the truth, not unless he wanted to learn to play the violin and join an orchestra. For the rest of his life, he would laugh and smile and sing,

and the world would never know who he really was. No one but Jeff, and Jeff would only hate him for it.

“You fucked Saul Carol,” Jeff said. “Didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus.”

He wished he could tell Jeff about the hurt and the shame. He wished he could say how scared he’d been that fucking Saul would make his love for Jeff mean nothing. Instead, he stared at his hands.

“I don’t understand.” Jeff shook his head, hair straying into his eyes. “Why would you want to fuck guys? It’s not right.”

“I’m a queer,” Danny said. The word felt worse than all the other insults. What did “queer” mean, anyway? *Strange, abnormal, questionable, suspicious, not right*. Had he been born this way, or had something happened to make him so wrong? Was it because he’d grown up without a father?

“Right. Sure. You’re a queer.”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t be queer and be in a rock band.”

“I know.”

“The band needs you.”

“None of you need me.”

“You keep saying it’s your band, so why aren’t you fighting to keep it?”

“What do you care?” Danny shoved his hair out of his eyes and hunched over his knees. “You’re a great guitar player. Why don’t you just go find a band without a gay singer?”

“Shit. You got a smoke?”

Danny almost laughed at the normality of the request. He dug a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and passed them over. Jeff held a Marlboro between his lips while he fumbled with a match.

“Jeff. Why don’t you find another band?”

Jeff sucked in a deep lungful of smoke and stared across the room. Yellow light from outside pooled on the carpet. Everywhere else, shadows reigned. "You remember the night we met, in that bar, when you told me how famous we'd be together? I guess you were just being a fag then, too. I thought you were nuts. But you dragged me into this band, and I started to believe you. I like writing music with you, and I like playing it with you. I get this feeling sometimes, like we've just got to keep going, because we're so close to getting everything we wanted when we started this band. It's like we're almost there, and if I leave now, who knows if I'll find this again?"

"And you really want it."

"Don't you?"

Danny studied the carpet at his feet, the ashes caught between tufts of mustard-colored fabric, the coffee stains and the occasional patches of clean yellow. He wanted Far Cry to succeed, and he wanted to be happy. He wanted to wake up one morning, every morning, and have Jeff's face be the first thing he saw. He didn't want to live a lie.

"I want one thing," he said, though he felt distant from his words, as if someone else was speaking them. "Give me one thing, and I'll put all of this back the way it was."

The way it was before he found Jeff, before he sat down beside him and made the best and worst mistake of his life.

Jeff took a drag off his cigarette and flicked it over the ashtray on the table. "What do you want?"

"You." Danny kept his gaze on the carpet. If he looked into Jeff's eyes and saw revulsion, his courage would crumble. "I want you. Tonight."

Jeff said nothing. The silence spun out, weaving gossamer spider webs of tension across the room.

"If you give me one hour, I'll do whatever you want from tomorrow on." The air grazing his arms felt cold suddenly; had the building's furnace broken again? Lies stung his tongue like acid. "I'll be straight. I'll show up on time for every gig, and I'll come home every night and fuck my girlfriend. I'll be the perfect front man and the perfect friend, and you'll forget I ever tried to be anything else."

"That's crazy," Jeff said softly. "You're crazy."

"It's your choice."

"And if I say no?"

“You won’t. You love the band too much. And if you say no, nothing will ever be normal. I’ll follow you wherever you go, and I’ll tell you every day how much I love you.”

“Jesus, stop saying love.” Jeff ground out his cigarette. “I could just tell Ray, you know. You’d be on out your ass before morning, and no band would ever take you again.”

“You could do that.” Danny’s heart skittered too fast. He had to remind himself this wasn’t the end of his life. It was the beginning. He’d do things right this time. No more pretending. Maybe after he left, he’d find someone who would make him forget everything that had happened here. It would be heaven to spend a single day without thinking of Jeff.

“What happens during the hour?”

He was going to do it. Danny could hear the decision in his voice, even if Jeff didn’t know it yet. Suddenly, he wanted to cry and take it all back. Tonight would ruin everything, but he wanted it so badly his bones hurt. He couldn’t take it back. “I want you to fuck me.”

“You think I’m going to do that?”

“It’s not difficult. Pretend I’m an ugly chick.”

“You’re not--” Jeff’s teeth ground audibly. “You’re not a chick.”

“You managed the other night.”

“Fuck you.”

“In the morning everything’ll be normal again.”

“Nothing’ll be normal.”

Danny’s lips twisted wryly. “You have to make sacrifices to get what you want.”

Jeff rubbed both hands over his face. His nose had stopped bleeding, leaving dark red smears to dry across his mouth. “It’s pretty fucking sick. You know that, don’t you? You care so much about getting laid that you don’t give a fuck about anything else. You’d destroy the band and all your friends for sex.”

Did Jeff really think it was just about sex? Danny felt ill. But he said only, “You can get drunk again if it helps.”

“Fuck...”

“All you have to do is say yes or no.”

Jeff lifted his chin. His eyes met Danny's. The clock ticked in the background. "I hate you," he said.

"I know." If Danny was wrong, if Jeff said no, he would leave anyway. He would wait until after the Hale show, and then he'd take the next Greyhound west. He was tired of the cold. Maybe people in California were allowed to be gay.

"I need a drink," Jeff said, looking away. "And then I want to get this the fuck over with."

For a long moment, Danny sat still. He stared at Jeff's profile, black hair folded around his blood-stained face. Relief turned his limbs to jelly, while dread constricted his lungs. He wanted to laugh and wanted to run away.

He rubbed his palms over his thighs and stood. "I'll get the whiskey."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jeff was fourteen when his best friend abandoned him for a girl. Her name was Penelope, and Jeff hated her.

“I got tickets to tonight’s game, man!” Jeff complained. “I’ve had them all friggin’ month, and you knew it!”

Patrick shrugged. “Jeez, I’m sorry, okay? Can you just take somebody else?”

“We were supposed to go together, first game of the season.”

“So we’ll go next time. Look, you know what they say about Nell. Third date, man, she puts out.”

“Fucking slut.”

“Shit, yeah, man.” Patrick slung an arm around Jeff’s shoulders. “Come on, we’ll go to the college game next week. It’s not major league, but it’s cool.”

They didn’t go. The night of the game, Patrick arrived hand-in-hand with Penelope. Seething with jealousy, Jeff turned and walked right back into his house. He wanted to go to the game with Patrick, not some giggling floozy.

Patrick called a few times after that, but Jeff refused to talk to him. They’d been best friends since kindergarten. They shared a collection of Superman comics--only to Patrick did Jeff confide his secret desire to be Superman--and later records of Jimi Hendrix and The Doors and Led Zeppelin. They learned to shoplift together. Together, they tried out for the ball team three years in a row and got passed over each time. Then Patrick ruined seven years of friendship over a girl he saw only twice after he lost his virginity to her.

“Forget about that little faggot,” Hector Cruz said. “Get a girlfriend.”

Jeff hated his father more than he did Penelope.

His mother bought him a cheap acoustic guitar to occupy the long summer days. Jeff didn't get a girlfriend, but he found a new best friend, one made of wood and strings that would never desert him for the fairer sex.

Jeff hadn't thought about Patrick since he came to New York. Not until tonight.

He downed his third shot of whiskey and set the glass on the coffee table with a hard crack. Alcohol slow-burned through his veins, shadowed by the softer presence of nicotine as he neared the end of his fourth cigarette.

Forget about that little faggot.

He would, except that faggot was here, and it didn't matter if his name was Patrick or Danny. The two were one and the same, both created for the sole purpose of fucking with Jeff's head.

Sacrifices, Danny had said, and Jeff was making them. He was sacrificing his peace of mind for the sake of the band. He was sacrificing his sanity to prove nothing Danny (or Patrick) did could make him a fag.

"Jeff."

"Okay." He pulled smoke into the bottom of his lungs and held it there until he burned for breath, let out a long stream of gray air, and ground the cigarette into the ashtray. In the back of his mouth, the taste of ash blended with fear. "Let's do this."

Danny unfolded from the corner of the couch and knelt on the cushion close to him. In the dark, Danny's hair looked black next to the whiteness of his skin. His eyes shone. "Jeff..."

Jeff met Danny's eyes, and for a single instant, he wondered if the glitter he saw there was from the shards of a broken heart, and if he had done that to Danny the same way Patrick had done it to him.

He looked away. "Don't talk, just... don't talk."

"Okay," Danny said.

The clock on the wall read 12:04 a.m. One hour, and Jeff was free. One hour and he never had to think about this again. God, he hoped no one came home early.

Danny lifted a hand and placed it on Jeff's shoulder. Jeff felt the weight of each finger burning through the wool of his sweater and into his skin, into his blood. His lungs constricted as Danny laced his hands behind his neck. He stared at the blank television, at the clock. His heartbeat echoed inside his skull. He had to force the air in and out of his lungs.

Blunt fingernails traced the vertebrae ridging the back of his neck. Danny leaned in. Jeff only had time to see the shadows spilling across his face, the lowering of his eyelids and the parting of his lips before Danny's mouth met his.

Jeff's heart tripped and rolled. He shrank from the kiss, but Danny followed him until his back pressed hard into the couch cushions. He kept his eyes open on a childish thought--the monsters don't move when you're watching--while the world blurred into shades of red and gray and white. The kiss came anyway.

Danny's lips grazed his. Jeff tasted his breath, hot and sweet like the gingerbread Linda had made that morning. When Danny's mouth pressed harder against his, Jeff opened up to him without thinking. The tip of Jeff's tongue touched teeth, and he didn't know if they were his or Danny's. The slickness seemed to swallow him down into a black gullet he couldn't escape from. The heat there was awful, burning his blood and scorching what little air remained in his lungs.

Danny eased back, licking and nipping at Jeff's lower lip. "Please," he whispered.

Please, what? Wasn't this enough? He hated the feel of Danny's fingers on his neck, hated the taste of Danny's breath, hated the dry fire eating through his own gut. He broke the contact and turned his head to the side. His voice cracked as he spoke, and his hands fisted at his sides. "Why me?"

Danny knelt over Jeff's thighs. He swept red hair out of his eyes while the corner of his mouth twitched up. "Because you're perfect."

"No." Jeff sat straight up and caught Danny by his wrists. Delicate bones rolled under his fingers. How hard would he have to press to snap them like bird bones? The grind of unwanted arousal wound around a dozen unanswered questions. "Why me, out of everybody else? Why not Saul for real, or even Ray. Why *me*?"

Danny flinched. "I don't know."

Jeff choked and released him. It was all his fault. Even after he realized the woman in his dream was a man, he hadn't stopped fucking him. He'd wanted it more. *Forget about that little faggot.* His father hadn't been talking about Patrick. He'd been talking about his son.

"Don't look at me like that," Danny whispered.

A laugh rolled up Jeff's throat and passed his lips before he could strangle it. Danny cringed back, and Jeff grabbed him again, this time by a fistful of hair. "Don't look at you how?" He grinned. Did he look as insane as he felt? It was the alcohol. It was Danny. It was Patrick and that damn slut Penelope. It was his father.

"Jeff..." Pain darted through Danny's eyes.

“Why’s it always got to be about you?” Jeff murmured, smile fading as he pulled Danny close until he smelled Dial soap and tobacco on his clothes. He wanted to lose himself in Danny, in everything his father would have hated. If he lost himself, the fear would go away. “Maybe this is about me. Ever think of that?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, come on. You said you wanted me to fuck you. Change your mind already? Or was this just a joke to see how far you could get me to go?”

Danny shook his head. Red hair brushed Jeff’s cheek. Brown eyes met his. “You know it’s not.”

“Maybe I don’t know shit.”

Danny’s throat worked as he swallowed. Jeff stared, transfixed by the ripple of the slender column.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” Danny asked.

“What?”

“Stop it.” Danny wrenched his head to the side, breaking Jeff’s hold. Jeff stared at the long strands of hair left wound around his fingers. “Whatever you think you’re doing, just stop.”

“What if I can’t?”

Danny edged back. Jeff wondered if his dream had turned into a nightmare, too.

“Wait.” Jeff pushed a fringe of hair out of his eyes. “Just... wait. I think I’m drunk...”

Danny hesitated. “Are you okay?”

Jeff clenched his teeth around another bray of laughter. Okay? He couldn’t breathe, his mind spun, and his dick was hard for all the wrong reasons. He had never been okay; he never would be. He ducked his head, letting his hair shelter his flushed face. “I’m fine.”

“Jeff.” Danny’s fingers crept under the curtain of hair and slid along his jaw. “Just stop. You don’t have to do it, okay? Just forget about it. It’s okay.”

Relief flooded Jeff, but it was tainted with regret. Maybe he wanted tonight as much as Danny did. Maybe that was why he’d agreed so easily.

“See, you’re all right now.” Danny soothed him like a lover should, combing his hair back and slipping an arm around his shoulders while he pressed a kiss to Jeff’s forehead. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done any of this. I’m so sorry.”

“No.” Jeff shivered, but he didn’t pull away. “If we don’t do it, you won’t stop. You said so yourself.”

“Jeff.” Danny sighed and tightened his arm. “I swear--”

“Don’t swear. You know it’s a lie. Can’t we just get it over with? I can do it. I know I can.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

He pulled away finally and met the shimmering depths of Danny's eyes. "Nothing ever turns out the way it's supposed to," he said, remembering Patrick.

After it was over, Jeff sat naked on the edge of the couch and faced the blank television. The clock read 1:39. Thirty-five minutes too long.

Danny's voice twisted in his brain, a wicked needle point piercing him through and through. *I love you*, he'd gasped when Jeff came inside him, even though the pain stretched every muscle in his body tight, even though Jeff could see tears streaking his face. He'd only said it once, but the words looped endlessly through Jeff's mind.

*I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I
love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you...*

Forget that motherfucking faggot.

Some kind of love.

He looked over his shoulder. Danny lay where he'd first curled when Jeff withdrew from him, wedged in the corner of the couch in a fetal position. Jeff could see only the tousle of red hair, the pale curve of his spine, and the crimson blood staining the backs and insides of his thighs.

Jeff looked back to the television. He hadn't wanted to hurt Danny. Not really.

But maybe a little. Maybe just enough to prove to Danny how wrong this was. And maybe a little became too much, and maybe he knew he should have stopped, should have slowed down at least, but maybe he'd wanted to rip Danny up the same way his world had been destroyed.

He thought he might vomit.

“Danny.” He swallowed. “Dan.”

Danny shifted, but didn't uncurl. "What?"

Jeff traced his tongue around his teeth, stared at the clock. 1:40. Why hadn't Danny stopped him? Had he wanted to be hurt? Jeff hated himself for what he'd done, for not being able to stop himself from hurting Danny, for not *wanting* to stop himself. "They'll be home soon. Lani and Linda."

"Oh."

"You have to get up. Now."

Danny lifted his head, fringes of hair hanging in his eyes. He gripped the back of the sofa with one hand--had his hands always been so narrow and his wrists so small?--and pulled himself up. Jeff glanced back once and away again. He couldn't look at the long lines of Danny's body without remembering the feel of them beneath him, all wiry muscles and jutting bones, nothing like the softness of a woman's body.

"Help me," Danny said.

Jeff turned, alarmed, but Danny was only tugging at the couch cushions. Blood. Blood stretched in dark stains across the fabric, blood from Danny, blood from Jeff's nose. Danny hauled one out and flipped it over, shoved it back into place. The fresh side of the cushion showed no stains, no evidence at all of what had happened tonight.

Danny crossed the room to stand at the curtained window while Jeff flipped the other cushions. He tried not to look at Danny, tried not to see the tremble in his knees or the way he kept his head ducked. Where had loud, impetuous Danny gone? Who was this shivering, little boy?

He scooped his jeans off the coffee table and slipped into them before looking back at Danny. He fought the question, but it left his mouth anyway. "Did you get what you wanted?"

Danny tilted his head. Jeff got a look at his eyes, wide enough that he could see the whites around the irises. His hands, resting on the windowsill, looked skeletal. "Yeah. Sure."

"We can go back to normal, then."

"Sure."

Danny looked like a ghost of a boy in the light coming in from the city's streets--small, fragile, and broken. Within three steps Jeff could be at his side, could lay a hand on his shoulder, and promise him everything would be better in the morning.

Instead, he edged toward the hallway. "Take a shower, Dan. You look like crap."

Danny's lips turned up at the corners in a mockery of a smile. His eyes followed Jeff.

Jeff fled the room without looking back.

Normal. Right.

Lani came home after three and fell into bed. Jeff lay on his side and searched her face, the curves and dips, the shine of her eyes in the dark.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Then stop looking at me like that.”

Don't look at me that way.

He slid a hand across her cheek and traced a finger over her lips. Old lipstick clung like oil to his skin. “You’re so beautiful.”

Her mouth twitched under his touch. “Well, don’t think you’re getting any tonight.”

“I love you.”

“Mmm.” She flipped onto her other side. He followed, hooking an arm around her waist, and burying his face in the back of her neck. She smelled like crushed rose petals and wine.

“Jeff.” She heaved a sigh and pushed his arm away. “I said no.”

“I wasn’t...” His breath hissed out through his teeth. He just wanted to hold her. He just wanted to know one thing in his life remained the same. And maybe that was the problem, that it was the same. He was still pretending to be someone he wasn’t, and he had no idea how to stop.

“I can’t sleep with you hanging all over me,” Lani said, settling into the blankets.

“Fine.” Jeff lay on his back, stared up at the shadowed ceiling, and tried not to think about tomorrow.

Linda slipped into bed and pressed against Danny, her perspiration rubbing off on his shower-cool skin. “Oh, baby, I wish you could have been there. It was so beautiful. Barbie did all the decorating herself, and she had so many trees. There were lights and angels, and they got the China Dolls to play.”

“Yeah?” He linked his arms behind her back and kissed her shoulder. “I guess I should have gone.”

“You should have.” She nodded against him. “But I think they put something in the punch, and I drank so much...”

“You had fun, though.”

“I did. And I caught Ray under the mistletoe and made him kiss me. You don’t mind, do you? It was just a little kiss.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. That’s why I love you. You know, don’t you? How much I love you?” She nestled closer, pressed her face to his chest. “I can hear your heart.”

“I can hear yours, too,” he lied. Some lies were all right. Some broke your heart. He stroked his hands down her back and kissed her cheek. She would stay with him forever if he asked her to. He thought she might cry when he left, but soon she’d realize she was better off. She’d find someone who could say "I love you" without lying.

“It’s Christmas already, isn’t it?” She yawned. “Merry Christmas, baby. I have a present for you under the tree.”

“Go to sleep. You can show me in the morning.”

She sighed, her breath a puff of warm air against him. He tucked her close and shut his eyes. He wouldn’t dream tonight, about Jeff or about anything. He had no dreams left.

He’d get through tomorrow. He’d get through the gig the next day. He wouldn’t disappoint the band. Jeff would believe the promise Danny had made. Everything would be normal; everything would be fine.

Then he’d leave, and the promise would be true.

CHAPTER SIX

*“No one knows how it feels
To be the movie at the end of the reel
When the film has gone gray...”*

Danny faltered, words slipping through his mind like quarters in a slot machine. He closed his eyes and leaned on the microphone stand. The metal pole creaked. It had taken him two weeks to write one hundred seventy-two words, and now he'd lost them. He couldn't even get through four songs without fucking up. He racked his brain for the words, found nothing, and started to panic.

Then, Jeff eclipsed him. Two long strides brought him past Danny to the edge of the stage, head bowed and fingers dancing up and down the neck of his guitar. The strings vibrated and wailed into his solo.

Danny fell back, head pounding. Jeff always fucking knew what to do, except when it mattered most. Or maybe it was just himself being a fuck-up as usual. His mother had been right, and his teachers, and all the bands that had kicked him to the curb. He was worthless. He couldn't even give Far Cry the one night they deserved. He'd never be a rock star.

The closing notes of Jeff's solo quivered in the air. He stepped back, hair hiding his face. Danny burned to rip the veil away from his eyes. *Look at me, you bastard. Look me in the eyes like you wouldn't when you were fucking me.*

Jeff didn't look, and Danny knew better than to wait. He stared into the crowd instead, at the teenagers with raised arms and swaying bodies. Some were biding their time until John Hale took the stage, but others had been mouthing the words to all four songs, even when Danny forgot them. They were here for the band they loved, and they would keep this night locked in their memory for years.

Far Cry might really have been something, if Danny hadn't screwed it all up.

Jake slammed a cymbal, a sharp reminder of Danny's cue. He slid his hands around the microphone and took it from the stand. The crowd's energy shoved against his skin like crackling electricity. He let it sink in, wondering if this would be the last time he felt it.

Finally, he remembered every word of the last verse.

“The way we live--”

He shut his eyes and wailed over the guitars, over the crashing drumbeat. The pain was as strong in him now as it had been when he first put the words on paper.

*“The way we hate
Why can’t you see inside my soul
When I can see inside of yours?”*

John Hale took the stage amid wild applause and the roar of, “Hale! Hale! Hale!” while Danny slunk backstage, unwilling to witness the reception bought by fame.

He entered the dressing room that he and Jake had shared earlier to get ready for the show. All Jake’s things were gone now, leaving just Danny’s duffel bag tucked under the makeup table. The bag held only essentials-- two pairs of jeans, two tees, one flannel shirt, his wallet, and a matchbook which protected a white guitar pick initialed by Keith Richards. Just enough to get him out of New York.

Above the makeup table, Danny’s reflection glared back at him in the mirror. He stared, mildly disturbed that he looked like a stranger to himself. His hair spiked high in some places and lay flat in others. Mascara ran from his eyelashes to join the purple-black circles beneath his eyes. Sweat dripped over his yellowish skin. His ass still ached, though the worst of the pain had come and gone yesterday, dogging him through a dreary Christmas.

He turned his back on the mirror. He’d get a tan in California. A tan would make everything better.

When he rubbed his hands over his face, they came away sticky and black. His legs itched under white spandex leggings, but he didn’t want to ruin a clean pair of jeans with sweat. He’d have to wear the leggings all the way to California. He wondered idly if all the good weather in California meant more sweat.

He sank onto the shabby dressing room sofa, closed his eyes, and drew in a deep breath. Two minutes to gather his thoughts, and then he’d...

The door scraped open.

Danny blinked the world back into focus, shoving damp hair from his eyes with a tired hand. His gaze shifted from scuffed sneakers and tight jeans up to a black Zeppelin shirt that had been through the wash too many times.

“I thought you’d be gone by now.” Jeff shoved his hands in his pockets. He’d looped his hair into a ponytail, showing the unyielding set of his jaw and blank eyes.

Danny sighed. “What are you talking about?”

“You put everything you care about in that bag.” Jeff glanced under the makeup table. “You were just going to take off without saying anything and let us think you were blowing us off until we realized you weren’t coming back.”

Danny looked away. “What do you want?”

“You can’t desert us like this.”

“You’ll be better off.”

“What about the band? You saw that crowd, Danny. We’re on our way.”

“Not with me.” He stared at the scuff marks and dents on the floor. “I can’t do it. I thought I could, and I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

The silence hovered as thick as smoke in the room. “I hate you,” Jeff said. “Do you know that? I really fucking hate you.”

“I thought you might.”

“I would have been happy ‘til the day I died if it wasn’t for you.”

“I thought we were going to forget about all that.”

“I can’t.”

Danny’s lips curled mirthlessly. “Try harder.”

“For Christ’s sake, will you look at me?”

Danny lifted his gaze. Jeff glared at him, but despite his own order, his eyes flickered constantly away.

“Last night,” Jeff said, “when I went to bed with Lani, I thought about you. She said it was my Christmas present. But every time she touched me, I thought about you. Every fucking time she kissed me, I compared her to you, and I fucking hate you for that. I hate you for making me think about you... for making me think about... about... I don’t even know what.” He looked down, tension cording his neck. “I hate you for making me think I’m going crazy.”

The air leaked from Danny’s lungs. “That’s not my fault.” And for the first time, he realized it wasn’t. There was something else here, something he couldn’t quite understand.

“It is.” Jeff’s mouth sealed in a thin line. “You did this to me.”

“I’m not sorry for what happened. You said you wanted to go through with it.”

“If you’re not sorry, then don’t leave.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted, tension parting. Danny could almost see through the gap, into the truth. “Why?”

“Fuck.” Jeff swung away, looking at himself in the mirror. “For the band.”

“That’s not why.”

“For me, then. Because you can’t do this to me and then just leave. I need to know why.”

“Why I did it?” Danny laughed, a short bark that hurt his throat. It was all there suddenly, a glimmer of truth he didn’t know if he could trust. Wasn’t this why he had been so desperate for a single night with Jeff? It had always been a slender hope in the back of his mind, that if he could just show Jeff how he really felt, Jeff might...

Might what? Might suddenly realize he’d been gay all along and Danny was the love of his life? Danny could have died laughing at himself.

“Why I let you,” Jeff said.

Danny’s laughter died abruptly. “Christ, Jeff. What kind of a question is that?”

Jeff’s eyes darted to his through the mirror.

“You act so innocent, but I was there, too.” Resentment stung in Danny’s gut, driving back his exhaustion. So what if it was true, so what if Jeff wasn’t so straight after all? It didn’t change anything. “I know you wanted to do it. And I think you know why.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“What was it, Jeff?” Danny slipped between him and the mirror, hooked his fingers into the waistband of Jeff’s jeans and rubbed his thumbs over Jeff’s hard hipbones. He felt edgy with crushed hope. “Why did you like the sex so much? That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it? Why you couldn’t get it up for your wife, but you couldn’t keep it down for me? Maybe--” His lips twisted-- “it was the fact that I’ve got a dick.”

Jeff flinched. He didn’t back up; he didn’t shove Danny away. He just flinched, a shivery jerk of muscles.

"I don't have time for this." Danny pushed away from Jeff, fighting the disappointment of losing the very last of his hope. He dragged the duffel bag out from under the table, hefting it to his shoulder. *I should be used to rejection by now.* He dug his teeth into the inside of his lip, furious at the burning behind his eyes. "Maybe you're the one who's screwed up. If it's wrong, why do you want it so much? Ever think about that?"

"Danny."

"Whatever you're going to say, just forget it." He stalked to the door, spandex squeaking and itching, shirt damp with sweat and clinging to his chest and arms. "I don't care anymore, okay? I'm sorry if I make you sick. I'm sorry if I screwed up your life. But you know, you would have found out you're gay without my help. It just would have taken longer."

"I'm *not* gay."

"And I'm not throwing my life away waiting for something that's never going to happen." Danny paused with one hand on the door and looked back. "When Ray finds out I'm gone and calls me an irresponsible little shit, tell him I said to tie his dick in a knot and fuck himself with it."

"Danny--" Jeff's voice cracked.

Danny didn't move. He swore he could hear Jeff's heart beating, like he hadn't been able to hear Linda's.

"I love Lani."

Danny's lips peeled back in a grin, or a snarl, that only the door could see. "That's great."

"But she doesn't--she doesn't make me feel like--I mean, when I'm with her--ah, Christ, you know what I mean."

"No," Danny said. "I really don't."

"I love her. But I don't always want her. Sometimes, I..." Jeff swallowed audibly. "I feel like I ought to. Like I love her, and I want to be close to her, and I should just plain want her. But I don't."

"Want her."

"You know."

The air at Danny's back warmed until he could feel Jeff just behind him, almost touching him, but not quite there. His fingers curled into a fist against the door.

“And then I think about you, and...” Jeff laughed nervously. “Shit, Dan. I thought you’d be happy. If I wanted to be with you. You know.”

Danny’s head hurt. Jeff’s hand touched the back of his right shoulder, fingers hesitant before they drew away.

“Can you look at me?” Jeff asked.

Danny twisted, dropping his duffel bag to the floor. Jeff was too close. He had to lean against the door to keep from brushing chests. He stared at the swooping letters on Jeff’s T-shirt. “Why are you doing this?”

Jeff’s smile was dry, a contortion of his lips. His eyes showed nothing but fathomless darkness. He lifted his hand, fast, as if he was afraid he might change his mind, and cupped Danny’s cheek in his palm. “I don’t know,” he said and leaned down.

Danny shut his eyes. Their lips met and stopped. They didn’t kiss; they didn’t breathe. He smelled heat and cigarettes. The scent crawled down his throat, into his lungs, his stomach, and all the deepest parts of his insides. The desire to lean in, to shove his mouth against Jeff’s and kiss him until they forgot to be confused burned until he thought his chest would cave in.

Jeff pulled back. Danny’s lips ached with the sudden chill. When he opened his eyes, he found Jeff’s gaze still on his face, still unreadable.

“Damn it.” Jeff’s voice crunched like gravel. “Just stay.”

Danny pressed against the door until the knob dug into the small of his back. He was choking, drowning in Jeff and in agony. “You don’t even want me.”

“Dan.”

“What?” He shoved fringes of hair out of his eyes and tried to do the same to his frustration, failing. “I can’t make you feel better about what happened, you know?”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m just asking you not to leave.”

Something banged loudly on the other side of the door. Vibrations shot down Danny’s spine. He jumped away. Jeff stepped back fast. Danny watched his retreat with bitterness on the tip of his tongue.

“Danny!” Ray’s voice came through the door, muffled. “Get your ass out here if you want a ride home.”

Danny opened the door. “We’ll be there in a second.”

Ray peered past Danny. “Jeff, man, Lani’s on the war path. Thinks you’re off with some chick.”

“Fuck.” Jeff’s jaw twitched. He shoved his hands in his pockets again. “I’ll be right there.”

Ray thumped his guitar case against his leg, glancing from Jeff to Danny. Danny avoided his gaze. The truth was in his eyes, too easily seen, and Ray had never liked him anyway.

“All right, well, hurry up.” Ray turned on his heel and stalked back down the hall.

Jeff stepped into the doorway and stared after him. Without looking back, he said, “What are you going to do?”

Danny tried to memorize the rigid line of Jeff’s back and the sight of his white-knuckled hand gripping the doorframe. Funny how mistakes seemed so much bigger once they were made.

“Are you leaving?” Jeff asked.

Jeff didn’t even know what he wanted; how could he give Danny what he needed? Danny’s mouth was numb with the memory of their almost-kiss. Some mistakes had to be made.

He picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder once more, rearranging his plans quickly in his head. He could catch a bus in the morning the same as he could catch one tonight. If there was one slim chance to be happy with Jeff, he had to take it. “I’ll be at the Monarch Hotel. You can meet me there. If you don’t, I’ll check out in the morning, and you’ll never have to see me again. Your choice.”

“And if I come? What happens?”

“Whatever you want. Now go take care of your wife.”

Room 19.

Jeff stared at the numbers on the grimy copper plaque. That damn voice popped up in his mind again.

Jeffrey Cruz, come on down! You are the next contestant on Pick--Your--Life! Here’s your first choice, Jeff. You’ve got two doors to choose from. Behind Door Number 1--back to the elevator and out of the hotel--you’ll find the Picket Fence Dream. You’ll go back to your wife, have two children, and find a new singer for your band.

Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. He glanced back at the elevator doors.

And here’s your second choice, Door Number 19! the voice sang out. Behind this door is your best friend, who’d love to be something more, but what? That’s up to you, buddy-boy!

He loved Lani. Always had. It was his own fault if the sex was boring, his own fault for not trying harder. For not being what she wanted. It was his own fault that she wasn't always what he wanted.

Which door, champ? Are you gonna be a rock star or a cocksucker?

Danny loved him. Jeff wasn't sure he liked that, but he believed it. Accepting Danny's offer meant Danny would work to make him happy, to give him anything and everything he wanted. Did he want that?

Jeff took one hand out of his pocket and held it inches from the door. He swallowed hard, throat knotted. Then, he knocked.

The door swung inward as if Danny had been waiting on the other side the whole time, holding his breath while Jeff wavered. Ragged jeans hugged his thighs--Jeff remembered having those legs wrapped around his waist, stronger than he'd expected--and a black T-shirt outlined the sharp ridges of his ribs. His hair hung in a thick wave around his face, freshly washed and gleaming. His eyes seemed wider than usual, the skin below them stained a tired violet.

Danny stepped back, his bare feet shuffling against a carpet that might once have been champagne-colored. "Come on in."

Jeff didn't want to come in, but his legs moved without his permission, carrying him inside. The room looked more like a prison cell than hotel lodging. Ominous reds and browns streaked the white drywall. The bed sheets showed yellow splotches. As he passed Danny, the scent of Dial soap made his gut cinch tight.

"I brought wine," Danny said, shutting the door and standing with his back to it.

Jeff eyed the bottle on the bedside table. It was prom night all over again, only this time he was the one being lured with cheap alcohol and clumsy attempts at romance. "I don't drink white."

"You always do."

"With Lani." White wine was sophisticated, Lani said, while red was too reminiscent of blood. Sometimes all her attempts at being classy made him want to act like the worst kind of animal. "I don't need wine. We're not on a date."

"I know that."

"We've done this before."

"Not like this."

Jeff shrugged and walked to the bed. The mattress creaked when he nudged it with his knee. He smelled bleach rising from the sheets and wondered what stain had been so terrible that detergent couldn't wash it out.

"I didn't think you'd come."

He let his gaze drift over the emptiness of the room, the smudged window without a curtain, then back to Danny. "What do you want from me?"

"I just wanted you." Danny held his hands behind him, eyes downcast. He looked more vulnerable than Jeff ever remembered seeing him.

Jeff stood and walked to Danny, stopping inches away. The space between them hummed with tension, thick with nerves. Jeff lifted one hand and bridged the space, spreading his fingers over the base of Danny's throat. One hard push, and he could crush Danny's windpipe.

Danny swallowed, fragile muscles rippling under Jeff's hand. He felt the heat of skin and the pulse of life.

Danny lifted his eyes, shades of gold swirling through bronze. Jeff wondered how his eyes could have so many different hues he'd never noticed before.

Then, Danny arched up, forcing Jeff's hands harder against his throat, and kissed him. Jeff shut his eyes fast, slanted his mouth, and took control before Danny had a chance.

Their mouths slid together, locking in the heat of their breath. Danny's mouth was wet silk flavored sharply by toothpaste. Jeff slid the tip of his tongue along the slickness beyond Danny's lips, over his teeth, into deeper places tasting of intangible things--fear, desire, insanity. For a wild moment he thought they could stay this way forever, without air or sight, without anything but each other. They would never part; they would die this way.

It wouldn't make him queer.

Danny turned his head to the side, gasping for breath. Jeff didn't want air. He ran his mouth across Danny's jaw and down the curve of his neck, pulling at the black shirt until he could reach the smooth shoulder skin. He set his teeth there and clamped down while he pressed his body against Danny's and shoved him harder into the door.

"God--" Danny's hands fisted in the back of Jeff's shirt, nails scraping through fabric. He hooked a leg over Jeff's hip and pulled them closer together. "Please--"

The rush of power was like nothing Jeff had expected. It awed him and sent hot stabs of need through him. He could do anything he wanted, and Danny would beg for more. *Anything.*

He slid his hands around Danny's back, over his ass and down to grip his thighs, to lift Danny so that Danny wrap both legs around him. He bit Danny's shoulder and his neck, hard, the way he didn't dare bite Lani, until it seemed impossible that Danny wasn't in pain.

Danny made a sound--a growl!--and ground his hips into Jeff's until Jeff knew how much Danny wanted it, how much he wanted this himself.

Quick fingers slipped under his shirt and teased patches of skin he'd never thought could be sensitive while Danny's other hand fisted in his hair. Jeff dragged his mouth from Danny's shoulder, leaving red marks on white skin. His heart slammed against his ribcage. He wondered distantly how much stress a heart could take before it failed.

Danny pulled Jeff up by his hair. Their mouths crashed together again, lips bruising between teeth, tongues thrusting and tangling like vicious animals. Jeff had never kissed anyone like this, never wanted to, but it seemed now he'd been waiting his whole life to do it. Fire burned through his veins in place of blood. By the time they were finished, he'd be nothing but ashes.

He pulled his mouth away.

"Jeff, fuck, don't stop."

"Wait." He thought that any minute now his heart would rip through his chest. He wrapped both arms around Danny and staggered toward the bed. Danny's weight was almost too much and the hand shoving down his pants *was* too much. He tripped and pitched across the bed. The mattress let out a protesting groan. He rolled, pinning Danny beneath him.

Danny stilled, eyes closing. Hot breath gusted past his parted lips and grazed Jeff's face. Danny's skin had turned the color of half-ripe strawberries. Jeff wanted to kiss his face and find out if his skin tasted as sweet as the fruit.

"Tomorrow," Danny said. "What happens tomorrow?"
Which door, Jeffy-boy? Ohhh, wrong choice, sorry, champ.

"There is no tomorrow." Jeff swallowed, staring at Danny's flushed skin and crimson hair.

"There's only now."

Tonight Jeffrey Cruz and Daniel Chandler didn't exist. Tonight they were two strangers without lives, without anything but an awful need for each other. Tomorrow they would be themselves again, but Jeff didn't want to think about that.

"Fuck it," Danny said, groaning and pushing his hips up against Jeff's as if he didn't care after all. "Kiss me again."

Jeff did, kissing him hard and deep until they couldn't catch their breath. As they kissed, Danny pulled open Jeff's jeans and freed his erect cock. His fingers curled and gripped, teasing and rewarding.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” Danny said. Jeff opened his eyes to stare into the darkness of Danny’s gaze. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“Jesus...” The air in his lungs burned away as a thumb rolled over the head of his cock. “Jesus, Danny.” *Jesus*. It was all too much, and yet not enough.

Danny writhed against him, peeling his jeans off and tossing them across the room, then settling back into kissing Jeff. Jeff felt a foreign sort of touch slide along his cock. He jerked, looking down between them. Danny’s cock pressed against his, narrower but nearly as long.

His gaze darted back to Danny’s face, where he found his eyes shut tight, skin furrowed in creases at the corners of his lids. A hint of eyeliner darkened the skin above the lashes of his left eye, somewhere the shower water hadn’t reached. Jeff stared at the spot as the world started to spin.

Before, there had been fear and grinding teeth and blood. Now, the world was reduced to hot friction and aching need, and all the pleasures in the world were unfolding in a squeaking hourly-rate hotel bed.

“Fuck,” Danny breathed, scrubbing one hand across Jeff’s chest and working them both with the other.

Jeff braced himself above Danny and shut his eyes. He thrust against Danny’s fingers and Danny’s cock. Knowing what lay against him, flesh-to-flesh, made the thrills all that much sharper. Breath gusted over his chest as Danny arched up to suck a patch of skin above his collarbone. Danny pushed up, and Jeff ground down.

I’m a fag. I’m a goddamn fag.

It was too much--the frustration of being with Lani last night, the confusing arousal each time he glimpsed Danny, and the unanswerable question of *why, why, why*. Jeff’s pulse thundered in his ears, and while he moved against Danny, while Danny moved beneath him, he imagined being inside Danny again, thrusting in again and again and again, this time with Danny writhing in pleasure, body bowing and soft curses escaping his lips.

His climax consumed him, swallowing him, rolling him over and under. He clenched his teeth around a groan and came until he thought his life was draining out of his body.

He fell back into reality, heart thudding and vision swimming. His arms trembled on the verge of collapse. Beneath him, Danny gasped and strained. He came with a low growl--“*Fuck*”--and his release sprayed over his hands and against Jeff’s hip.

Jeff used the last of his strength to push off of Danny. He collapsed on the sagging mattress and pulled in long, deep breaths. Danny’s hair feathered across the pillow and brushed his cheek.

Sweat dried; skin cooled.

Danny opened his eyes and looked at Jeff. The inside of Jeff's mouth turned to sandpaper when Danny smiled.

Jeff tipped his head back to stare at the water stains on the ceiling. He swallowed. "We got more furniture dirty."

"Do you really think anyone will notice?" Danny murmured.

"Probably not."

Danny shifted. His knee nudged Jeff's thigh. Fingertips fluttered hesitantly against Jeff's hip before settling there. "We can take care of it in the morning if you want."

No, Jeff knew he should say. He wasn't staying the night.

Danny ducked his head and pressed his face to Jeff's chest. Jeff stared past red hair. It would take so much effort to push Danny away. It would be cold without him.

He slid a hand around Danny's back, tracing the bony dip of his spine. He felt dizzy, as if he'd fallen too far too fast, but maybe it wasn't such a bad place he'd fallen into.

"Sure," he said against the top of Danny's head, breathing in the smell of soap and tobacco. "In the morning."

Danny woke with the dawn as pale light filtered past spotted curtains. For a moment after waking, he wallowed in confusion--where was he, how had he gotten here, and why was Jeff asleep beside him? Remembrance came slowly, and belief came slower.

Jeff had come to him last night. No tricks. No bargains. His dream had come true.

Danny propped himself on one elbow and gazed down. Hair tumbled over Jeff's forehead and across his cheek, hiding all but his too-big, beautiful nose, the bridge still swollen from the blow Danny had dealt him on Christmas Eve. Danny ran his fingers through the tangled mane and combed it back. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Jeff's lips, stealing of taste of bitter morning breath. If he could freeze a single moment in time, this would be the one.

Jeff sighed and muttered incoherently. Danny dropped back to the mattress, looped an arm around Jeff's waist, and kissed his shoulder until he stirred.

"Umm." Jeff opened his eyes. "What...?"

"Good morning."

Jeff stiffened. Danny nuzzled the curve of his neck, kissing him. Bit by bit, the tension under his hands bled away. Danny felt the heat of Jeff's fingers spread over the back of his skull. He smiled into skin flavored by sweat. Jeff's sigh filled the air.

They lay entwined for a too-short moment, until Jeff said, "What do you think they'd say if they knew?"

"Who?"

"Everybody. The guys. Lani. Linda."

He curled his fingers into Jeff's hip, amused and dismayed that they'd never discarded all their clothing. He slid his hand under Jeff's sweater to touch bare skin. "I don't care."

"My old man would kill me. He'd tell me what an embarrassment I am, then he'd get out his Glock and shoot me in the head."

"Right." He kissed below Jeff's jaw.

"He would. All he ever wanted was to be a normal, everyday American with the perfect American family. He used to tell me all the time about how hard it was to grow up in this country coming from a Mexican family, how hard Americans were on outsiders when he was a kid. I was supposed to get perfect grades, be the smartest kid in class, and be more American than anybody else. I don't even know what that means, being American. Are you supposed to have a certain hair or skin color? It's all bullshit."

"Fuck him." Danny pushed his hands into Jeff's hair, surprised by the surge of anger welling up in his stomach. Sometimes he forgot how young Jeff was and that only two years ago he'd been a kid still living at home. The idea of anyone hurting him made Danny's muscles tense, wishing that he could leap back in time and protect Jeff.

"I was never what he wanted for a son." Jeff rolled one shoulder in a shrug. "I was supposed to go to college and take the internship my uncle promised me at Cranston House Publishing. Nobody ever asked me what I wanted to do with my life. They just assumed their plans were good enough. When Dad realized I was serious about being in a rock band, he backhanded me so hard I couldn't chew for a week. He told me to get a job or get out of his house."

Danny shifted closer, needy for Jeff's heat, for his strength. "So you came here."

"No." The sound of Jeff's laugh vibrated into Danny's body. "I stayed at home, got a job at a gas station, and joined a blues band. I think I finally left because of the smell. My hands stank like gasoline no matter how many times I washed them. I told my dad I was going to New York City, and he yelled 'til his face turned beet red. He told me I wasn't allowed to take anything but the clothes on my back. My mom felt bad and emptied her savings account for me. I used most of it on my first Les Paul."

Danny's lips twitched. "You never told me you were a momma's boy."

"And you never told me you were a pansy ass." Jeff pulled a handful of Danny's hair. "What about your family? Do they know?"

"No."

"What would they do?"

Danny slid down and pressed his cheek to Jeff's chest to listen to his heart. "My sister's too young to understand. She's only seven, and I haven't seen her since she was three. I don't think my mom would care. I don't know where the fuck my dad is, let alone whether he'd give a shit."

"They're divorced?"

"Since I was five. One Christmas Eve he went out to get eggnog, and I never saw him again." He concentrated on the steady beat under his ear, on the heat of Jeff's skin, and on the calluses on the fingertips grazing his scalp. "I found out later my mom went to meet him a few times to finalize the divorce. But he didn't come to get anything from the house or say goodbye. He didn't want anything to do with us."

Jeff's fingers twisted through Danny's hair, gentle now. "Why?"

"I don't know. I thought he was happy, but I guess I was just too young to see otherwise."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to say that."

"I want to."

"It was a long time ago." Danny would rather think about the present, about anything but the days after his father's disappearance and the long string of men his mother had gone through to get over him.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Jeff asked.

Weird was waking up to find a strange man pissing in your toilet at three a.m.

"We all think we're normal, but we've got such fucked-up lives."

Danny untangled himself from Jeff and sat up. He stared at the fragments of yellow sunlight spilling into the room. "We turned out okay."

"I guess."

He felt Jeff's eyes on his back like insects crawling down his spine. The warmth of moments ago faded. All his life he'd been walked out on or kicked aside, and every time he thought he was used to it, some new agony blossomed. No matter how happy he was right now, he knew everything could change in the space of a few words from Jeff. He braced himself for those words now. "You never told me what happens today."

"I don't know."

Danny knew. They could run away and chase heaven from one sunlit patch to the next. They could be everything to each other. Or they could go home and pretend nothing had happened.

The bedsprings creaked as Jeff sat up. Warm hands spread across the back of Danny's shoulders. "I don't know what last night meant," Jeff said. "I don't know if this is real or not."

Danny kept his eyes on the bright morning. A siren wailed somewhere in the city, and he heard car horns and passing traffic. "If you're a fag or not, you mean."

"Maybe."

"I'll leave if you want me to." Danny didn't breathe. He thought the air in his lungs would freeze and shatter into a million ice chips.

"I don't want you to go."

Danny breathed again. He'd believed he was stronger than this.

"It doesn't have to be over." Jeff wrapped his arms around Danny from behind, chest to back, his hands shy as they came to rest on the flat plain of Danny's stomach. "As long as we keep it a secret, we can do whatever we want."

Danny shivered and leaned into Jeff. For the first time, it was all up to him. Suddenly, he didn't want the choice, didn't want the pressure of knowing right from wrong. Nothing felt better than Jeff's arms around him, and nothing felt worse than keeping it a secret. He tasted coppery fear on his tongue as he realized both choices might be wrong.

Jeff hooked his chin over Danny's shoulder. "What do you think?" he asked. The soft hesitancy in his question twisted through Danny's gut.

"I think--" Danny wished he could see the future and know what really came tomorrow-- "we should give it a try."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Lani wants to take the tree down tomorrow.” Jeff eyed the red and white lights blinking among fake pine needles. Pearl-white angels and silver bulbs bounced when he nudged a low branch with his foot.

“Huh.” Danny chewed his pen cap, eyes fixed on the papers scattered across the coffee table. Lyrics littered the sheets, most of them scribbled over, a few underlined or circled.

Jeff stretched out his sneaker and brushed Danny’s bare foot. It was the only connection he could make with Linda in the kitchen. Her presence frustrated him to the point of feeling bound and gagged. This morning’s sex--under the Christmas tree, needles rustling when Danny closed a fist around a plastic branch as he came--seemed years ago.

Jeff had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Danny. In the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day, they’d been together twelve times, and it wasn’t enough. Jeff thought about being with Danny when he woke up; he tried not to think about sex during band practice and failed every time. The same thoughts glanced through his mind when he kissed Lani, and he fell asleep thinking about Danny. He was starved for what, until two weeks ago, he’d taught himself he didn’t need.

Something in the kitchen sizzled on the stove, and Jeff thought he smelled hamburgers. More annoying than having Linda in the next room, though, was Danny’s ignorance of everything except the new song.

He leaned back into the couch. “You want to go out?”

Danny jotted down a word, two words, and paused. “Drinking?”

Jeff shot a look toward the kitchen and lowered his voice. “Fucking?”

“Oh.” Danny tipped his head back, mouth curled into a grin. The sweep of his lips and the white of his teeth put bad thoughts in Jeff’s head.

“So, you want to?”

“Love to, you know that.” Danny smiled wickedly, as if he knew Jeff’s thoughts and enjoyed inspiring more. “But I’ve got to finish this.”

“You’ve been working for hours. Maybe if you take a break...”

Danny twirled his pen between narrow fingers, smile twisting into a grimace. “I can hear it in my head, all these words. If I can just figure out how they go together, this could be The Song.”

The Song, a concept all of Far Cry was familiar with. The Song would put them on the radio airwaves every day. The Song would turn them from an opening band into headliners. Without it, they were nothing but a garage band that had stumbled into a contract.

Jeff grabbed a cushion off the couch, clamped it over his face, and groaned into it. “One week, and I’m being brushed off.”

Danny looked back at the coffee table and his lyrics. His foot pushed playfully against Jeff’s sneaker. “You’re such a whiner.”

“Fuck you.” Jeff dropped the pillow and stood. “I’m going to Salvatore’s. If you change your mind, come over. I might even buy you a beer.”

“I’ll come, just give me a while.”

He wouldn’t show, Jeff knew. He would stay right where he was until he either finished the song or fell asleep over it. But there was always tomorrow.

“Danny.”

The line of words Danny had been focusing on blurred together into a smear of black and white. He blinked at the dark silhouette standing in the living room doorway. “Hey, Lani.” With the back of his hand, he covered a yawn. “What time is it?”

“Late. Did you finish your song?”

“Almost.” Her tone splintered into him, made his skin crinkle and creep. She was always butting in when he and Jeff worked, trying to tell them which lyrics didn’t fit, and what melody didn’t have enough hook in it. Jeff was patient with her those times, insisting that she only wanted to help, but Danny doubted that she cared for the artistry, or for anything other than the day Far Cry started hauling in the cash. He had always suspected she married Jeff in order to hitch a free ride to fame. “Jeff’s not back yet?”

“Are you worried about him?”

He stared into the shadows, wishing he could see her face. “No.”

“You always seem to be. You’re always asking where he is. Always following him.”

Nerves curled into a twitching ball in his stomach. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means?” She stepped into the light of the living room, eyes as cold as blue ice in her model-perfect face. “Do you think I’m blind? You watch him when you think he’s not looking. You touch him when you think can get away with it, his arm, his knee. And I’m not the only one who’s noticed the strange times you get a boner.”

“Fuck, Lani.” He hunched over the coffee table and turned his eyes to the stacks of paper. Something--vomit or violence--burned in the back of his throat. If Lani knew, what about the Ray and Jake and Robbie? “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Of course. I don’t know anything. I’m just a cunt.”

“I never would have called you that.” His fingers curled tight around his pen. “If only because Jeff loves you. I try not to hurt my friends. But I guess you don’t give a shit about anyone, including the man who loves you more than anything in the world.”

“Love--” Lani’s voice was the sound of glass shards crunching into skin-- “is something you know nothing about. Is that why you’re obsessed with my husband, because you think you love him? That’s not love. It’s disgusting.”

She didn’t know a damn thing, but that didn’t stop his stomach from knotting up.

“You’re right about one thing,” she said. “He does love me. He always will.”

“Good for you.” It shouldn’t hurt so much to agree with her. It shouldn’t put an ache behind his ribs. “So what the hell is this about?”

She advanced on him, lips thin and arms crossed over her chest. “What do you think Jeff would do if I told him about you? He wouldn’t believe it at first, but he’d see sooner or later. I wonder if you’d still be such great friends. I don’t think so. I think he’d run as fast as he could, like the coward he is, and you’d never see him again.”

I think you’re wrong. The words burned behind his lips, but he kept his mouth shut. If she knew the truth, she’d leave Jeff forever. Jeff would hate Danny longer than forever.

“And the band.” Lani laughed. The raucous sound scraped Danny’s eardrums. “They’d throw you out on your ass faster than you could deny it. Word would get around to every rock scene in the city.”

“Fuck you.” *Fuck you, fuck you, why can’t you just stay the fuck out of it?* “What do you want?”

She leaned her hip against the couch arm. Rose-scented perfume spilled over Danny in a noxious wave. "I want you to stay away from my husband."

Never. But he could pretend, make her think he'd play along. He met Lani's eyes, wondering if she could see the hate in his own. "Fine."

"Keep your sick fantasies to yourself, Daniel, or I will rip your pathetic world apart until it's not worth living. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

She straightened. "Don't fuck with me, Danny. I keep what's mine."

"He's a human being." Danny wanted to hurt her so badly he could taste violence on the tip of his tongue. He let the anger shine in his eyes. "You don't own him."

"I do." She lifted her chin, a regal queen bitch unaware of her losses. "Think about Jeff, since you care more about him than yourself. A divorce would kill him."

"He'd get over it."

"What about his baby?"

Danny stared at her, at the curve of her lips, the glow of her eyes. His lungs squeezed tight.

"What?"

"He doesn't know yet. It'll be my birthday present to him next week. His first baby. I hope it's a boy. He'd like that."

A baby. A baby as a gift, Jesus, how could he compete with that? Lani hadn't lost at all. She'd won, beautifully and viciously, in a stunning move he'd never seen coming. A baby.

"If I leave, the baby comes with me. No court would give custody to a faggot musician with his lifestyle. I'll walk away with every penny he's got in that miserable savings account, and I'll take his only child with me."

"No." Danny's teeth ground together, shooting pain through his jaw, into his skull. He stood and faced her. It was so hard not to snatch her by a handful of dyed-blond hair and shake her until she forgot to be cruel. "You won't."

Her upper lip curled back. "Don't bother with threats. You haven't got the balls."

"You'll find out whether I do or not." His voice echoed strangely in his head, too calm to be his, too cold. It betrayed none of the wild anger beating in his chest. "If you hurt him, I'll hurt you worse. I don't know how. But I will hurt you."

For the barest whisper of an instant, he thought he saw silver fear slide through the blue of her eyes before they iced over again. “Don’t make me, then,” she said, turning on her high heels.

Two months passed. Far Cry released their second album, *Asylum*, on the first Tuesday in March, with Danny’s newest song, “All the Pretty Ones,” barely slapped onto the record in time. For a few weeks after the album’s release, the band scattered, everyone catching up on their lives, trying to relax before the spring tour. Ray disappeared to Atlantic City with his fiancé; Robbie set off on a quest to hit every strip club within twenty miles; Jake went to visit his family in Boston.

Only Jeff and Danny declined celebration. While Jeff spent his time slaving to appease his newly pregnant wife, Danny hung around the apartment, listening to Pink Floyd records, dropping acid, and playing solitaire. He was proud of the album, but otherwise had little reason to celebrate. Since Lani announced her pregnancy, his relationship with Jeff had become strained. Jeff swore nothing would change between them, but Danny couldn’t help wondering if that would hold true after that baby was born. He’d been Jeff’s best friend for two years. He knew that Jeff had always wanted to start a family of his own. What he didn’t know was if that dream would trump his desire for Danny.

In the same vein of uncertainty, he kept quiet about Lani’s threat. Telling Jeff of Lani’s suspicions would throw him into a panic, Danny knew, and he’d end the affair in a heartbeat. So Danny said nothing. When Lani was in the room, he guarded his actions toward Jeff, never touching him, barely looking at him. He worried about the future, but he kept those worries silent as well and forced himself to trust Jeff.

Halfway through March, a call from Franklin McPherson, the band’s more absent than present manager, brought them all flocking together for a band meeting at a tiny diner.

“Okay.” Danny slid into the diner booth after Jeff and snagged a cigarette from Robbie’s pack. Sunlight poured through the window, stinging his eyes. “What the fuck is so important?”

Sandwiched between Ray and Jake across the table, roly-poly Frank offered his best shit-eating smile. “Daniel. Lovely to see you.”

“Look who’s talking.” Frank had been to five of the band’s shows in two years, claiming he managed best from afar. Danny claimed he was a lazy asshole, but no one listened. Frank took a cheaper cut than most managers, and once in a while he arranged an incredible gig like opening for John Hale.

“You’re in excellent spirits, I see.” Frank sipped from a steaming cup of espresso. “And Jeff, you look just wonderful.”

Jeff grunted. After three nights of sleeping on the sofa, the purple smudges beneath his eyes were threatening to become permanent. Lani had kicked him out of the bedroom after he told her that weight gain was to be expected with pregnancy.

“Cut the crap.” It took three clicks of a nearly empty lighter for Danny to light his cigarette. “Why are we here?”

“I thought we could use a meeting to discuss the band’s future.”

“About which I thought you didn’t care,” said Danny.

“Shut it,” Ray said between spoonfuls of runny eggs. “This is business. Let’s act like it.”

“What-the-fuck-ever.” Danny took a drag off his cigarette and eyed Ray’s eggs. Dear God, the bacteria must be having a Jacuzzi party.

“Well, I see we’re all turning into typical rock stars.” Frank glanced up as a waitress paused at their table. “How about some French toast all around?”

Danny grimaced. “How about coffee, black?”

“Same here,” Jake put in. Jeff jerked his head in agreement. He’d been in a generally bad mood lately. Compliments of Lani, Danny guessed, biting back his anger. Someday, he told himself, Jeff would realize just how much of a bitch Lani was, and then Lani would be in deep shit. Danny intended to be there on that day.

“Now would be a good time, Frank,” Ray said, shoving aside his empty plate. “We’ve all got a limit to our patience.”

“All right, all right.” Frank settled more comfortably into the booth. “So, who’s looked at the charts lately?”

“Fuck.” Jeff rubbed a hand over his forehead, pushing uncombed hair out of his eyes. “It’s fucking depressing. Goddamn disco and pop.”

“Really.”

“Jesus Christ.” Danny took a breath deep enough to burn the back of his throat. “Who’s on the charts? It’s not like it’s us.”

“Really.”

“Are we on the charts?” Ray asked.

Danny scoffed. Their first record had dropped into obscurity faster than a brick, and he couldn’t imagine Asylum doing much better. “Sure, we’re in fortieth place, right?”

Frank swallowed the last of his coffee. "Eighth, actually."

Danny's hand froze halfway to his lips. Smoke twirled around his fingers and stung his eyes. "What?"

"Asylum," Frank said, "debuted at number twenty-five. This week, it's at number eight. It's the fastest climber this year."

"Eight," Robbie said.

"That's right."

"Holy shit," Jake breathed, grin spreading across his face. "Holy fucking shit."

"Frank." Ray stared hard at the man. "Are you serious? You're not screwing with us?"

Frank sat back smugly. "Why would I do that? You've just become my number one client."

"Fuck." Embers burned Danny's hand. He dropped his cigarette into the ash tray. His hands shook. "This is--this is-- It's not real. Is it?" Eight, fucking eight, the eighth best-selling record in the country. It was too good. It was a dream.

Jeff sat straight up in the booth, skin ashen, and stared at the tabletop. Danny nudged his knee under the table and got no response.

Frank laughed. "As much as I detest you, Daniel, I'll have to take back everything I said about your song-writing skills. 'All the Pretty Ones' has topped the radio charts for the last two weeks. It's the third most requested song on the air."

"Jesus. Jesus!" A laugh rose up Danny's throat like helium. "I can't believe it. I swear to God, Frank, if this is a joke, I'll cut your balls off, but, Jesus, I can't believe it!"

"If you do that," Frank said, "I refuse to tell you about the article *Rolling Stone* wants to do."

"It's surreal," Jeff said later, leaning against Danny's bedroom door. He'd dreamed about this day often enough, the point where he found out all the sweat had paid off and the band had made it. But for all his planning, he couldn't believe it had happened.

"Surreal." Danny shifted to bump their shoulders together. "Yeah."

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, the apartment empty and dark with the gray afternoon. Linda was still at work, and Lani had gone with the rest of the band to celebrate at a new club in Chelsea. Jeff felt dazed enough without getting wasted.

“Are you okay?” Danny asked.

“I think so.”

“It’s kind of weird. You know? Good things don’t happen. It unbalances the natural evil of the universe.”

Jeff shook his head. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“I’m used to it.” Danny shrugged. Jeff found himself mesmerized by chocolate eyes as Danny turned to stare at him. But Danny frowned. He reached out a hand to touch Jeff’s forehead, and his fingers met a shallow gash just below his hairline. Jeff flinched. “How did that happen?”

Jeff turned his head slightly, letting Danny’s fingers slide away from the cut. He felt his face redden with embarrassment. “It was nothing. You know. Just Lani.”

“She did that to you?” Danny asked, his voice gone cold.

A book had done it actually, when she threw it at his head. Jeff shrugged. “You remember when we went out the other night?” They’d had too much to drink at Trudy’s, and then retired to a motel to finish themselves off with a dime bag of pot. They’d come home in the morning reeking of the two. “Lani thought maybe I was out with a chick.”

“Jesus fucking--” Danny raked a hand through his hair. “You should have slammed the door on her face when she came crawling back to you.”

“Not now, Dan.”

Danny turned his face away.

Jeff had fallen in love with Lani the first time he saw her in Salvatore’s and recognized her from the pages of a Sears catalogue. She’d been drunk but still gorgeous, just intoxicated enough to go home with him. That night, she did things he’d never heard of, let him do things to her he hadn’t thought a woman would allow. He wanted to keep going all night, but she fell asleep after the first time. He lay awake, studying the smooth curves of her face, the rosy pout of her mouth, the flutter of her eyelashes. She was everything he thought a woman was supposed to be, beautiful and proud, and he knew she could make him happy.

When he woke up in the morning, she was gone. Her loss hurt--in a single night, Jeff had imagined a future together--but slowly he got over it. Weeks passed, and he turned his attention to the band. Far Cry had just signed their recording contract, they were working on their first album, and Frank was starting to get them a few gigs at better venues.

Two days after they played a Fourth of July show at the Beacon, Lani showed up at Danny and Jeff’s apartment. She was teary-eyed and so sorry for having walked out that morning. She’d

been scared, she said. She'd felt more with Jeff than she'd felt with any other man, and the idea that she could care for someone so quickly had frightened her. But she had to know: Did Jeff feel the same way?

Three months later, they were married.

"Hey," Jeff said, reaching over and lacing his fingers with Danny's. He didn't want to think about Lani now, whether the thoughts were good, bad, or just confusing. "Do you want to celebrate?"

Danny sighed.

"Because I really want to celebrate."

Danny turned to face him again, glancing down at their entwined hands.

"And I was hoping," Jeff said, "that you might have a few ideas on how we could do that."

"I guess I could come up with a few." Danny's mouth crooked upward finally. He elbowed Jeff aside and opened the bedroom door. "Come inside, and if you're good I'll show you a trick."

Jeff stepped through the doorway without taking his eyes off Danny. "I thought you showed me all your tricks."

"I have more." Danny shut the door, then slipped an arm around Jeff's neck. He walked them backward until Jeff felt the mattress at the back of his knees and sat down hard. Danny straddled him, lips hot against Jeff's throat, fingers creeping under his shirt.

Heat slicked Jeff's insides. He forgot Lani, forgot everything but soft skin and demanding hands. He gripped Danny by the hair, pulled his head back and kissed him the way he'd wanted to for days. Finally, they were alone.

"You taste so goddamn good," Danny said when they broke apart for air. He nipped the skin below Jeff's jaw. "All I can think about every day is how you taste, how you smell. I want to eat every inch of you."

Jeff swallowed, mouth dry. "So do it."

Danny growled and shoved him flat on the bed. Jeff breathed hard through his nose and shut his eyes. Shirt buttons popped and cloth peeled away. He clenched his jaw when Danny's mouth settled against his chest, licking and sucking, all wet heat. Lips kissed down his belly, tongue dipping into his navel, teeth scraping the ridge of his hips, fingers tugging at the thin trail of hair leading below his waistband. How could something so wrong feel so good? Colors swam behind his eyes, colliding and exploding, but guilt turned their brilliance ashen.

“I miss winter,” Danny said, opening Jeff’s pants and kissing him on the head of his already erect cock.

“I know.” Jeff pulled in a sharp breath and pushed his hips up. He wished it was January again, when he and Danny were careless enough to disappear together every day, before he found out Lani was pregnant and the shame of betraying her became oppressive.

Danny crawled over him, and Jeff opened his eyes. He saw Danny as a creature crafted of porcelain skin and jeweled eyes.

“Touch me,” Danny said.

Need and resistance beat together in his chest. He lifted his hands to Danny’s shirt and tugged it off, slid his palms across his narrow torso, wiry with muscle.

“Jeff...”

He knew what Danny wanted. He pushed his hand down Danny’s front and cupped his crotch, denim rough against his skin. It was as wrong as everything else, but the hardness beneath his fingers sent blood throbbing to his cock.

When Danny kissed him again, Jeff rose up to meet him, crushing their mouths together. He turned the kiss into a savage act with tangling tongues, clicking teeth and swollen lips. He rubbed the heel of his right hand against Danny’s crotch. Danny groaned. Jeff swallowed the sound into himself.

The ugly voice, never far away, intruded on his thoughts.

What’s next, boy? Gonna be a proud cocksucker? Rainbow-ass queer?

Sometimes he thought the voice was God, and sometimes he knew it was his father. Hector Cruz, who wanted so much to be American that he tolerated no diversity.

Sure, Jeff sucks cock. Eats dick. All the time. Whip it out; he’s on his knees. Chow down, faggot.

His hand clenched into a fist before he could think to stop it, and Danny tore away with a howl of, “*Fuck!*”

“Shit--” Jeff ground his teeth together, opened his eyes, and stared at the ceiling.

“What the fuck?” Danny knelt on the edge of the bed, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry.” Jeff sat up and scrubbed a hand over his face. Was he turning into a lunatic, some kind of whack job? “Are you okay?”

“Fucking fantastic. I love having my nuts crunched.” Danny glared through his hair. “What the hell happened?”

“Nothing,” Jeff said.

“Sometimes I worry about you.”

“I worry about me, too. Sometimes.” Yet he was still hard; he still wanted Danny more than he wanted to breathe. “Come back here.”

Danny crawled across the mattress. “Are you going to try to castrate me again?”

“Not right now,” he promised, his smile wry. He held out a hand and pulled Danny down on top of him. When hot, silken skin grazed his, he forgot about the voice.

They kissed for long minutes, grinding slowly against each other until Jeff’s blood hummed with urgency. He slipped his hands between them, unbuttoned Danny’s jeans, and tugged them down over his hips. As usual, Danny wore no underwear, and his cock stood up proud and swollen. When Jeff stroked him, Danny jerked and squeezed his eyes shut.

With one hand working Danny’s cock, Jeff slid the other around to tease a finger down the cleft of Danny’s ass. When he pressed a fingertip to the puckered entrance, Danny cursed under his breath, his voice ragged.

“Fuck,” Danny said, opening his eyes and locking them on Jeff. “Now, Jeff.”

“Where’s the lube?”

The corner of Danny’s mouth twitched impatiently. He climbed off of Jeff and padded to one of the cardboard boxes serving as a bureau. When he turned back to the bed, the tube of lubricant dangled from his fingers.

Jeff shimmied out of his jeans, wadded them up, and tossed them on the floor with the other piles of discarded junk. His eyes stayed on Danny, watching the way his body moved as he walked, his jutting bones and lean muscles, the slight bob of his cock. It was faintly ridiculous, and unbearably sexy.

Danny tossed the lube at Jeff and slid back onto the bed on his hands and knees.

“Shit.” Jeff’s throat felt dry as dust. He moved up behind Danny, squeezing out a bit of lube and warming it in his hands. His own cock ached. To hell with voices in his head, and knowing right from wrong. To hell with everything.

“Come *on*,” Danny urged, kneading his fingers against the mattress and arching his back like a cat.

“I am.” With the fingers of one hand thoroughly slicked, he began to ready Danny, rubbing at his entrance in gradually deepening circles. When Danny was relaxed enough, he slipped a finger inside him, then two. As he pumped his fingers, Danny groaned and pushed back against him.

Jeff withdrew his fingers and moved into position, his cock glistening with lube. He gripped Danny’s jutting hips, shut his eyes, and pushed in. Danny’s body sealed around him, achingly tight and hot.

“Fuck,” Danny growled. “Fu-uck.”

When Danny pushed back again, heat burned through Jeff like a fever. He eased back and thrust in again, then again. He had to grind his teeth against the urge to simply pound into Danny, had to fight to stay steady. He could hear nothing but Danny’s staccato breathing and the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears.

And the sound of hinges creaking as the bedroom door opened.

Jeff froze mid-thrust, his eyes snapping open. Danny groaned, then stilled when Jeff dug his fingers deeper into his hipbones.

Linda stood in the doorway. Her purse dangled from one hand, and her lips were parted as if she’d meant to say something when she walked in. She stared at them blankly.

Jeff’s brain felt frozen; he couldn’t think what to do. Beneath him--around him--he felt Danny shiver.

“Linda,” Danny said slowly, swallowing audibly.

“Danny.” She blinked, looking confused. “What are you doing?”

When she looked at Jeff, he felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. *Fuck*, was all he could think.

“God.” The confusion cleared from Linda’s eyes, replaced by something too much like horror. Her feet moved back, one step and another until she bumped the doorframe. “God, you...”

“Linda, please, wait,” Danny said, struggling out from under Jeff.

But Linda didn’t wait. She whirled and fled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They broke apart. Jeff knelt on the edge of the bed and stared at the door. Danny scrambled for his jeans. He couldn't find his shirt.

"Christ." Jeff's eyes reflected the dim light like black glass. "Go after her."

Danny snapped the top button of his jeans shut. "Are you okay?"

"Go."

He ran for the door.

Outside, the rain came down in thick bursts. Fat drops landed on Danny's shoulders and rolled down his chest as he cleared the building's front steps. "Linda!"

She stood on the curb a dozen feet down the sidewalk, hand raised to a slowing taxi.

"Linda, wait!" He pounded after her, the cracked cement painful against the soles of his feet, and flung himself against the cab door as she climbed in.

"Get away from me." She yanked on the door, trying to shut it on his fingers.

"Christ, would you stop?" He shoved her hands away and crawled in. "Where the fuck are you going?"

The cab driver glowered at them in the rear view mirror.

Linda slid across the seat and hugged her arms around herself. Wetness glistened on her cheeks; Danny couldn't tell if the moisture was rain or tears. "Leave me alone."

"I can explain."

"What are you going to explain?" The window reflected a gray image of her face, her trembling lips and blank eyes. "Are you going to explain why Jeff was fucking you?"

He sank back in the seat, feeling the driver's eyes on him like spiders creeping across the back of his neck.

"I want to go to a hotel." Linda raised her voice and glared into the driver's mirror. "Somewhere cheap. Anywhere."

The driver clicked on his meter and pulled away from the curb.

"I don't understand," she said. Danny couldn't tell at first whether she was talking to him or the driver. "How could you do that? With him. I just don't understand."

"I'm sorry." He stared at the dirty mats on the cab floor.

"All these weeks you've been saying you're too tired for me, you had a long day..." She laughed hoarsely. "You've been going to him."

"Sometimes."

"How long?"

"Since Christmas."

"Is that what you were fighting about?"

"Yes." The words left Danny's mouth easier than he'd expected, but they stuck painfully in his chest. "I didn't do it to hurt you."

"Then why?" She snapped around to face him, eyes glittering. "If you're a queer, Danny, why the hell did you pick me? Was I your cover? Is that why you wanted me? So nobody would know what you really are?"

"Jesus, no. I just..." His teeth clicked together. "I don't know."

"Was it really just since Christmas, or have you been doing this all along? And Jeff's married! Me and Lani, we're just your fools, right?" Her voice cracked. "We're just pretend. You must laugh at us behind our backs. How stupid we are to think you love us."

"That's not true. You know it's not."

"Do I? Then what does Jeff mean to you?"

"He..." Danny turned away again, stared out the window. Rain rolled in thick rivers down the glass. He tried to think of it as a trade, Linda for Jeff. If he was allowed to keep Jeff, it had to be worth it. "I love him."

"I love you."

“I’m sorry.”

“I love you, and you’re sorry.”

The cab pulled up outside a blocky, gray hotel. Linda dug out her wallet out of her purse and paid the fare.

“What are you going to do?” Danny asked.

“I don’t know.” She opened the door and stepped into the rain. Danny followed. They stood together on the sidewalk as the cab pulled away. Gutter water sprayed up and left gray streaks across the top of Danny’s feet.

“Linda.”

“What?”

“What are you going to do?”

She met his eyes. “You mean, am I going to tell anyone?”

His fingernails dug into his palms. If she let the secret out... if she let the world know... it would be disastrous, but, God, what a relief. “Are you?”

Her lips twisted up in the empty smile of a mask. Rain plastered her hair to her face and made her white blouse cling to her skin. “I love you too much to ruin you, Danny.”

Wetness and cold laid shivery kisses along his spine. “I always cared about you.”

“Caring’s not love.”

“I can’t help that.”

“It’s wrong, you know. You and Jeff.”

Anger swelled in the pit of his stomach. He clenched his jaw. “Why?”

“He’s a man.”

“He’s my best friend.”

“God.” She shook her head. “God, Danny, you’re a fag. I just wasted six months of my life loving a fag.”

The space between them seemed suddenly too close. Dangerous. He stepped back. "You can stay in the apartment if you want. You don't have to go." But if she stayed, he'd never be able to look at her without remember the disgust on her face right now. He'd never stop hating her for it.

"Don't you think you've used me long enough?"

"Maybe."

"I'll come back for my things." She crossed her arms over her chest and watched him, as if something more lingered behind her lips, waiting to be said.

Danny slid further away. "Fine."

Linda shook her head again and turned toward the hotel. If there were things she wanted to say, they could be forgotten. Danny didn't want to hear them.

She disappeared through the hotel doors.

He stood alone in the March rain without shirt, shoes, or enough money to get home. That was where he needed to be. Home. He wanted Jeff's arms around him, blocking out all the bad thoughts, all the fears.

He started walking. He could walk a hundred miles to get home, to get to Jeff, but the cold of the rain and of losing Linda had crept under his skin, and he wasn't sure he'd ever be warm again.

The armrest of the leather couch dug into Jeff's side, but he kept himself pressed hard against it. He imagined himself home, anywhere but in Saul's loft. He hadn't meant to come here. He'd been walking downtown and suddenly, there was Saul's building. Saul, the man who'd fucked Danny first, the one who hadn't felt guilty or ashamed for doing it, the one who *must* have the answers to Jeff's questions.

"So." Saul propped an elbow on the other armrest. "You want to talk about Danny."

Jeff scanned the man's bronzed face for anything more than arrogance. "How did you know that?"

Saul shrugged. "Do we have something else in common?"

"I guess not." He shifted, leather creaking under him. "I, uh, I guess... I guess part of what I wanted to know was about you, though. I mean, how you knew you were... I mean, you know. I don't know anybody else who's gay."

"I'm bisexual."

"Oh." The idea calmed him. "I think I am, too."

“And I think you’re as gay as a Maypole.” Saul smirked. “But that’s between you and God. Or maybe the Devil. Let’s talk about you instead of me, if I’m going to be your fucking psychiatrist. Danny’s the only man you’ve been with, right?”

Jeff moved his gaze to a squat statue of Buddha. Saul had fucked Danny here. Did he take him into the bedroom and spread him out over black silk and soft quilts? “Yeah,” he said. “Danny’s the only one.”

“So you fucked him, and now you care about him. Caring makes you nervous. You’re not sure what it means.”

“I care about him because he’s my friend.”

“Friends don’t fuck friends.”

Heat rose to Jeff’s face in a wash of anger and embarrassment.

Saul laughed under his breath. “What the fuck are you doing here, Jeff?”

“I told you.”

“Who I am has nothing to do with you. I can’t tell you how to live your life.”

Jeff stared at the shadowed bedroom doorway. He wanted to see the bed where Danny had lain, see if there was still some trace of him there. “I’m married to a beautiful woman,” he said, refusing to believe he could walk away without the answers he’d come for. “A model. We’re starting a family. I want to buy a house someday. I want to watch my kids at the playground, and I want a dog that barks at the mailman.”

“And a dysfunctional gay relationship would get in the way of that.”

He glared. “It would ruin my life, but--”

“There are no buts. Do you love your wife?”

Jeff nodded.

“What about Danny?”

“I don’t... I mean, it’s not like that.”

“Because you’re not gay,” Saul said. “Right. So you’re just using him.”

Jeff glanced at him sideways. “He’s the one who came to me.”

“Because he loves you.”

“He told you.” Cold gripped his insides. What was Danny thinking, telling everybody? Was he intentionally trying to sabotage Jeff’s world?

“He didn’t have to tell me. I used to hear it in his voice every time he said your name. You were just too stupid to hear it.” Saul tugged a cigarette out of the pack on the table and lit it. “Look, Jeff, I don’t give a fuck about your wife or your imaginary kids any more than I do about you. But you want my advice, you got it.”

Jeff stared at the open pack of cigarettes. When had he fallen so low that he had to ask life advice from someone like Saul?

“Forget about Danny,” Saul said after a long drag. “Forget about your wife. Take a vacation by yourself. Go hiking, play cards, do whatever the fuck it is that you like doing. Once you start to relax, go to bars. Check out some chicks; check out some guys. Don’t come home until you figure out who you are. By the time you do that, you may not want to come home at all. But if you do, and if you decide you want one of the people waiting there for you, get rid of the other one once and for all. You can’t have it both ways. Try, and you’re just building a hell for three.”

Jeff thought about it that night, when the only light in the apartment came from the flicker of the black and white television set. Danny slept curled in his armchair, bundled in an oversized black sweater with the ferret sleeping on his feet. He had been quiet during the two days since Linda’s departure, no matter how Jeff tried to cheer him up.

At the same time, Lani’s spirits had finally begun to mellow. She’d yelled only once in the last two days, and she’d let him back into the bedroom. Jeff dared to hope the change would last the duration of her pregnancy.

She slept now with her head resting on his knee while he combed his hands through her hair and listened to her breathe. He knew the things that made Lani happy--pretty, expensive things--and he wanted to give them to her. He had failed to be a good husband before, but now, it seemed his career had finally begun. The record was selling, the singles were playing, and money was on its way. When it came, Lani would be what she’d always wanted to be--a rock star’s wife. And she’d love him for it.

Today, Danny already loved him.

With his hands in his wife’s hair, he studied Danny’s face, the ridges and angles and sleep-soft curves. He knew the smooth heat of Danny’s skin, the silk of his hair, the slick dampness of his mouth. He knew where to touch Danny to make his muscles clench, to make him groan and arch and curse. Knowing brought him more pride and shame than he’d ever thought could exist together. But he didn’t love Danny. Danny was a man.

Jeff wasn't sure how to measure happiness. Sitting here now with Lani asleep beside him brought him happiness like a soft summer breeze. On Lani's good days, when she smiled and said she loved him, he was happy. With Lani, he understood himself. He was Jeffrey Cruz, who loved his music and his wife, who wanted fame and a family.

Jeff knew without a doubt that someday he would have to choose between Danny and Lani. But that day hadn't come yet. What did Saul know anyway? If Jeff was using Danny, Danny was using Jeff, too. Danny was the one who had begged for this chance. As long as they were both careful, no one had to get hurt.

For today, Jeff would forget what he knew was right. He would indulge, as he had never dared before, in this harmless relationship with Danny. For today, he would forget what he already knew, that when it came time to choose, he would have to choose Lani.

PART II 1980

CHAPTER NINE

“Danny.” Jeff braced both hands against the bathroom door. A voice echoed in his head, too slurred to be his own. “Dan. C’mon out.”

If Danny answered from inside, Jeff didn’t hear. Van Halen blasted from a crackling stereo. People in the other room were shouting to be heard over it. Ray’s guests were in full-blown party mode, staggering through his posh East Side apartment, braying with laughter, spilling red wine on his three thousand dollar afghan rug, bumping into tables and threatening to send glass statues crashing to the floor.

“Dan.” Jeff slapped at the door. “You’ve been in there an hour, man. Get the fuck out. I gotta piss.” Ray would kill him if he pissed on the rug.

“Jeff...” The sound of Lani’s voice set his teeth on edge. “I want to go home.”

He looked at her through half-shut eyes. He almost thought there were two of her, but her two selves kept overlapping. He couldn’t remember what he’d taken, or how many drinks had followed. “Thought you wanted to party so bad. It’s not even midnight.”

“Well, now I want to go.” She puffed on a twisted white stick. It didn’t look like a cigarette.

“Lani.” The sound of her fingernails tapping against the wall ricocheted through his skull. “What are you smoking?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“You said you weren’t going to do that anymore.”

She laid a red-nailed hand over the swell of her enlarged belly. “Didn’t hurt the first one, did it?”

Anger twisted in his stomach. His fist clenched, but he pounded it against the door instead of her face. "Danny! Get the fuck out of the goddamn bathroom!"

"Oh, come on, Jeff." Lani's voice whined up to a higher pitch. "I want to go home."

"I have to piss." His tongue felt too thick for his mouth, mangling his words. "What part of that don't you understand?"

"Can't you do it in the alley?"

"Can *you*?"

"Don't you fucking dare shout at me!"

He snarled. Fury clouded his vision. He turned hard, before he could do something he'd regret the rest of his life, and slammed his weight against the door. The wood around the lock splintered. The door caved in. He stumbled into the black and white checkered room.

Danny sat on the bathroom floor, wedged between the toilet and the wall, his legs splayed out in front of him. His head lolled back against the wall, and his shirt sleeve was rolled up over his left forearm. The shirt's navy silk set off the bruises and track marks covering his pale skin, making Jeff's stomach turn. An empty syringe rested at the base of the toilet.

"Christ, Dan." He crouched down and peeled Danny's eyelids back, searching for signs of consciousness. "Why do you have to be such a fuck-up?"

"Look who's talking." Lani peered around the doorway. "I'm going to wait in the Mercedes."

He wished she'd call it "the car" just once, but it was always "the Mercedes".

He waited until her clicking footsteps faded, then picked up the syringe between his thumb and forefinger and tossed it in the wastebasket. Grabbing Danny by one skinny arm and the waistband of his leathers, he ignored the soft moan and dragged him out of the bathroom. Danny slid easily over the linoleum, but when they reached the carpet, his weight doubled. Jeff gave up and left him at the edge of the carpet. He stalked back into the bathroom, slamming the door around its broken lock.

When he came back out, still on edge but more comfortable with an empty bladder, Danny lay where he'd been left, looking like an overtired child who'd fallen asleep in the middle of a party.

Sarah stood over him, cigarette dangling from her fingers. Jeff felt a mild stirring of unease. He never knew what to say to Danny's latest girlfriend. Her gaze, when she turned it on him, was too cool and too knowing. He was almost certain Danny had been telling her things he shouldn't. He didn't know why Danny even needed a girlfriend, if he was still so in love as he claimed, but Danny had said he was lonely. Jeff couldn't argue with that any more than he could fix it. He

didn't have time to be with Danny every second of the day, not with Lani and their daughter to take care of, and another baby on the way.

Sarah took a drag off her cigarette before speaking. "You going to take him home?"

Jeff nudged Danny's side with the toe of his boot. "He's fine." Lani would have his head if they had to stop at Danny's apartment on the way home.

Sarah shrugged. "Help me get him on the couch."

They lifted him by his hands and ankles and dumped him on the black velvet cushions of the living room sofa.

"I have to go. Lani's--"

"*Jeff!* Are you coming?"

-- "not waiting in the car."

Sarah lifted her lips in a slow smile.

Jeff left Danny with Sarah and trudged toward his wife's voice.

Danny woke. He thought it was still night, until he saw the pale gray light creeping in past the curtains. His eyes stung. It took him a moment to recognize his surroundings and remember Ray's birthday party, the endless droning party where everyone knew his name but no one cared about what he had to say.

"Feel better?" Sarah asked, tucked between his body and the back of the sofa.

"No." He stretched, groaning as a hundred different aches let themselves be known. "What happened?"

"You locked yourself in the bathroom." She didn't need to say the rest.

He sighed and relaxed into the couch. Velvet scraped his skin where his shirt had ridden up. "Are you coming back to my place?"

"No. We're driving up to Albany for the show, if Mae's van makes it."

"I forgot." He wished they could have toured together, but the record label thought it was a bad idea to pair a glam band like Far Cry with Sarah's all-girl punks. He rarely saw Sarah this way, but he was used to the people in his life being unavailable.

She curled a hand around his shoulder and kissed his cheek. It was a platonic kiss that summed up their relationship perfectly, Danny thought. Just friends trying not to be lonely while waiting for the people they loved. In Danny's case, waiting for the stray moments with Jeff that came only when Lani wasn't looking. In Sarah's case, waiting for Mae to fall as much in love with her as she was already in love with Mae. They were the perfect cover for each other.

"I'll come over when we get back Monday night," Sarah said.

"I'll be at Jeff's. Lani's taking him out, and I'm watching Fran. You can come over if you want."

"Now you're babysitting for him?"

"What's wrong with that?"

Sarah shook her head. "Nothing, Dan. Forget it."

"Nothing to do at home anyway." He slipped an arm around her, regretful that she wasn't larger, stronger. "It's not like I can hang out with anybody but you and Jeff. Ray thinks I'm a fuck-up, Robbie's never home, and Jake's busy with his fiancé."

"Jeff's busy, too, with Lani and his kid."

Discomfort wormed through his insides. He couldn't see her eyes through the shadows, but he felt the judgment in her tone. "He makes time for me."

"When he feels like it."

"When Lani isn't driving him nuts."

"Whatever." Sarah sat up and reached for her boots. "It's your life, Dan. Let's just get out of here before Ray wakes up and kicks us out."

When Jeff's hands were in his hair, pulling until tears sparkled behind his eyes, Danny didn't worry about whether Jeff wanted him. In those moments, he knew Jeff wanted him more than anything in heaven or on earth.

Callused fingertips grazed Danny's scalp, sending hot shivers down his spine. He imagined having Jeff play him like a guitar, holding him closer than close with infinite care.

"Oh, fuck." Jeff groaned, hips bucking up. "Do that again."

Danny obliged with an artful sweep of his tongue. Sometimes he dragged out a blow job for hours, teasing Jeff to the edge time after time. Tonight Jeff was impatient enough that Danny knew better than to play. He swirled his tongue over the head of Jeff's cock once more, then sank

down and down, until his throat hurt and his jaw ached and his nose was shoved into Jeff's wiry pubic hairs. He swallowed, started to gag, and forced himself not to.

The hands in his hair yanked hard as Jeff's hips ground up against his face. Jeff groaned and came down Danny's throat. Danny held his breath and swallowed.

He sucked Jeff's cock dry and waited for it to soften before letting it slip from between his lips. He took a deep breath then, the air cool against the inside of his throat after Jeff's heat. Licking his lips, he slid up the bed to rest his chin on Jeff's shoulder.

Jeff sighed, one hand still tangled in Danny's hair, though loosely now. "I needed that."

"Any time." Danny shifted to kiss his chest, to run his hands over warm, tan flesh. He loved the way Jeff looked after sex, a sated god with glowing skin and lazy muscles. Black hair fell in soft waves over the pillow. The bold angles of his face made Danny think of a conquistador resting after battle. Without thinking, he said, "I love you," and kissed Jeff on the mouth.

When Danny drew back, Jeff was staring flatly at him. Pain knotted in Danny's chest. He never got over the surprise of Jeff's indifference.

Minutes passed before Jeff stood up. Danny watched him walk naked to the closet and slip into a pair of boxer shorts. He pulled out a tuxedo and started to get dressed. White silk swallowed golden skin.

"Come on," Jeff said. "Get up and do something about your hair."

Danny combed his fingers through the tangled mess. It stuck up where Jeff's fingers had pulled on it and something damp had clumped in the hair close to his chin. His dick rubbed against the rough insides of his jeans, insisting they weren't finished yet, but he knew better.

Jeff tucked his shirt into black dress pants and brought a pair of shiny matching shoes out of the closet. Danny looked past him at rows of leather pants and threadbare concert tees that hadn't made an appearance in over a year. He'd liked Jeff better before Far Cry became a multi-platinum band.

"For God's sake, clean up and put your shirt back on." Jeff slid into the tux jacket. "Lani'll be home any minute. You think I want her and Fran to see you that way?"

Danny didn't care what Lani saw or thought. If she didn't know by now that her husband was gay and having an affair, she was blind. Jeff could live in a world of denial if he wanted, but Danny knew the only reason Lani kept quiet was that she wasn't sure anymore if her grip on Jeff was strong enough to keep him.

Fran was a different matter though. Danny sat up and reached for his shirt. "Where are you going?"

“Valentine’s Day charity dinner.”

“Since when does Lani care about charity?”

“It’s a thousand dollars a plate, Daniel. Think of the fucking prestige.”

“Don’t call me Daniel.”

Jeff slipped a bowtie under his collar. “What would you like me to call you?”

“My name’s Danny. You used to call me Danny.” He stared at Jeff’s back. “When you were inside me.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You only say it now when you’re drunk. Is that the only time you want me?”

Jeff surveyed his appearance in the mirror over the bureau. “I don’t have time for this now.”

He looked so good Danny’s stomach squeezed tight. He had to force himself to look away. “You never have time anymore unless you want to get off.”

Jeff glanced at him through the mirror, then turned toward the bedroom door. “Hurry up.”

“He’s not staying with Francesca.” Lani crossed her arms above her pregnant belly. Against the red fire of her dress, her eyes glinted with ice.

“What now?” Jeff raked a hand through his hair and glared.

“There’s no way in hell.”

“Lani, he’s great with Fran, and you know it. What’s the problem?”

“How can you even have the gall to ask me that?” Lines formed at the corners of her frown.

“Two nights ago he passed out in Ray’s bathroom, and you don’t understand why I wouldn’t want him watching a two-year-old?”

“He’d never let anything happen to her.”

“He would if he was wasted.”

“He doesn’t do that around her.”

“Open your eyes, Jeff. He can’t stop shooting up any more than he can stop breathing. He’s a junkie.”

“He won’t hurt her.” It took great effort to unclench his jaw. “She might as well be his daughter, the way he loves her.”

Lani lowered herself onto the sofa. “I’ve already called a babysitter.”

“A babysitter.”

“Kelly Rice from the third floor. You can send Daniel home, or you can go to this dinner alone.”

“I never wanted to go.” He turned in tight circles, paced from the sofa to the doorway and back again, glancing at the bedroom door. He hoped Danny couldn’t hear them.

“For the last time, Jeff, I will not leave my daughter alone with that disgusting, little thing.”

“Thing? Jesus, Lani.”

“I won’t leave her with him.” Her lips thinned. “Not with the way he looks at her.”

Jeff stopped pacing. “The way he-- what the fuck are you talking about now?”

“Are you sure he loves her like a ‘daughter’?”

The idea was so absurd it took him a full minute to understand. When it did register, it was like getting knocked in the head with a sack full of bricks. “What the *hell*?”

“You know what the hell.”

She was a crazy, goddamn bitch. Jeff suddenly he thought he might vomit.

Voices came from the television. “See?” Big Bird said. “Counting is easy!” Fran stared at the screen, the fingers of one hand twirling in her dirty-blond locks of hair. With the other arm, she clutched a giant yellow rabbit with the stuffing falling out.

Jeff crossed the room and stood over her. She glanced up at him, then back at the television, where brightly colored numbers danced in the street. He stared at the baby fat of her cheeks and wondered what he’d do if anyone tried to hurt her.

“You know I’m right,” Lani said.

Jeff kept his eyes on the top of daughter’s head. “Danny would die before he thought of something like that. And I don’t want to hear you mention it again. Ever.”

Lani sighed, the sound heavy with annoyance. "So you're willing to have him pass out and leave her all alone? How scared would she be, watching him go into convulsions?"

"Jesus," he said again. Danny would never hurt Fran. If he was sober. But if he was high... if he was high, he might do anything. All his tearful regrets later wouldn't undo the harm.

The bedroom door opened. Danny sailed out in rip-kneed jeans and a black, bell-sleeved shirt. Red hair fringed into brown eyes as he glanced from Lani to Jeff. "What, you guys are still here? You're gonna be late for your fancy dinner."

Fran climbed up and met Danny, holding out the stuffed rabbit. She offered her most prized possession only to her favorite people.

"Thanks." Danny grinned, scooping the toy up in one arm and her in the other. "Always wanted one."

"Dada." Fran eyed the toy, wary of its well-being.

Jeff watched her curl against Danny's chest and lay her cheek on his shoulder. Shouldn't she be old enough to recognize who her real father was? Danny had no right to be Dada.

Danny dropped to the carpet, cuddling Fran and the stuffed rabbit on his knees. Fran grasped the rabbit by one ear, least Danny steal it away while she turned her eyes back to "Sesame Street".

"Jeff." Lani stood. "I'm going to get my purse. All right?"

He stood frozen between the couch and the television set. She was crazy. But what if she was right? He had to clear his throat before he could talk. "Yeah." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "All right."

She strode into the bedroom. He hoped she didn't smell sex and wondered what it mattered anymore.

"Jeff." Danny rested his chin on the top of Fran's head. "I want one. Can we?"

He wanted to laugh, but his smile felt paper-thin. "It would be difficult."

Danny did laugh.

"Hey, look." Jeff glanced at the TV, anywhere but at Danny. "You don't have to watch Fran. I know you've got stuff to do."

"I've got nothing else going on. Besides, I like watching her."

"Lani already called Kelly."

“Isn’t that the kid who follows you around like a psychotic poodle?”

“Like you do, you mean?”

Danny peered down at Fran. “Baby, your daddy’s a jerk.”

“Seriously. Kelly’s good with kids.”

“So am I.”

“She needs the money.”

“So slip a ten under her door. Come on, Jeff, look at us.”

Jeff looked and hated himself for what he saw.

Danny hugged Fran and turned his lips down in a pout. “Go ahead, Franni. Tell your daddy how much you want me to stay with you. Kelly won’t let you stay up late, will she? I bet she won’t give you candy, either.”

Fran spared a long-suffering look in Jeff’s direction and remained quiet.

Danny sighed. “She gets it from you, you know, this strong-silent shit.”

“Look.” Jeff wedged two fingers under his bowtie and tugged. Damn Lani and her insane ideas. Damn himself for listening to her. “Kelly’ll be here any minute. What do you want to spend so much time around a little kid for anyway?”

“She’s my baby, that’s what for.” Danny kissed the top of her head. “What’s with you?”

“Nothing’s with me. Kelly’s already on her way up, is all.”

“Bunny,” Fran said.

Danny slid her to the ground, handed her the toy, and stood up. Dark lashes veiled his eyes. “Why don’t you want me to watch Fran?”

“God, don’t start something now. Lani’ll kill me if we’re late.”

“Lani’s still in the bedroom. What’s going on, Jeff?”

“You do this every time--”

“Every time you act crazy.” Danny crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not stupid. I want to know what’s going on.”

“Daniel.”

“Call me that one more time tonight, and I swear to God I’ll break your nose.”

Jeff’s teeth ground together. Danny had taken care of Francesca before and nothing happened. Why should something go wrong this time? But... you could drive for years without wearing your seatbelt, and then one day you ended up flying through the windshield. What might Danny think of as fun if he was high?

“Jeff.”

He met Danny’s gaze, and his self-loathing broke records. He tried to think about Fran, tiny and breakable, instead of the hurt confusion in brown eyes. “Responsibility,” he said.

Danny blinked. “What?”

“Responsibility. You don’t have any.”

For the longest moment in time, Danny stared back at him. When he finally spoke, his voice was uneven. “You don’t trust me?”

“Dan, I do, but...” Remorse tangled up his resolve. He yanked on the tie again. “Sometimes you forget to be careful.”

“You think I’d hurt her.”

“Maybe.” His head hurt. “Not on purpose. But maybe.”

“Maybe.” Danny blinked fast, his voice going scratchy. “It’s not like I was going to offer her a hit or teach her to play Russian Roulette, you know?”

Jeff watched Fran as she planted a kiss on the rabbit’s velvet nose. “Things happen, whether we mean them to or not.”

“Right. Right, sure.” Danny stepped back, nearly tripping over his own boot. Half his face twisted into a grin, the other into a grimace. “You’re a stupid asshole, you know that?”

“Dan, don’t be this way.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s fine. I get it. I’m unstable. You can’t trust me. I’m just fucking crazy.” His eyes hardened into stone. “But I never would have hurt her. You should know that.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“You should.” Danny yanked the front door open and fled.

CHAPTER TEN

Danny knew he shouldn't have come home. What had he thought was waiting for him but more emptiness?

He searched the apartment for a piece of himself and found nothing. Through the alcove of the eat-in kitchen, stainless steel appliances gleamed coldly. In the living room, undecorated white walls dared him to hang pictures on their austere faces. Bookshelves mocked him, stacked with gift books he'd never bothered to read. Even the fox statues and figures lining the shelves mocked him. He had started collecting foxes for what they represented; a fox wasn't big or strong, but it was always smart. Danny didn't feel smart anymore.

Sarah stretched over the white leather sofa, smoking. He'd called her as soon as he got home, anticipating loneliness, but now he wished she hadn't come. His mood was too dark for company.

"You want to go clubbing?" she asked.

"Fuck clubbing." He grabbed his bottle of Stolichnaya off the coffee table and took a long pull, the back of his throat burning in protest.

"So we're just going to sit here." She leaned her head against the back of the sofa and stared at the ferret wedged between cushions. "And do nothing. Again."

"Nobody said you had to stay." Vodka sharpened his anger. He wanted to find Jeff and scream at him until he was hoarse, but as usual, Jeff wasn't there.

"Nobody said you had to sulk every time you don't get your way, either."

"Fuck you. What do you know?"

"You're an ass. I don't know why I stay with you."

His teeth clicked together. "Maybe you should leave, then."

"Maybe I should."

“So go.”

She shrugged.

“I mean it. Fucking go.”

“You don’t even know--” She shifted restlessly. “You don’t even know what a brat you are. Whenever something goes wrong in your pretty-perfect plan, you think you’ve got a right to get pissed off at the world. You hide and you drink and you sulk. I want to do things. I want to go places. Not sit around with a drunk who’s in love with his own misery.”

He swallowed around the hard knot in his throat and closed his eyes. Anger swirled in shades of charcoal and black behind his eyes. “Then get out.”

“I’m tired of this, Dan.”

“Fucking go.”

She glared at him. “I’m not joking. I’m not doing this anymore.”

“Fine.” The muscles in his jaw tightened until he thought they’d snap. He opened his eyes and thought about wrapping his hands around her skinny neck and squeezing. “Get out. Get the fuck out and don’t come back. I’m sick of all you goddamn fuckers. Everybody thinks they can get something out of me, use me. I wish you’d all just go the fuck to hell and leave me alone.”

Sarah sighed and stood. “Fuck you, Danny.” She stalked to the door in a blur of leather skirt and long legs. “Fuck it all. Don’t call me.”

The door slammed shut after her. Danny stared at the polished wood and imagined he could see vibrations moving through the grain.

She was right. Fuck it all.

He fisted his hand around the neck of the vodka bottle, lifted it and swallowed deep.

Hidden behind a column draped in pink and white roses, Jeff stared across the reception room of the Plaza. A marble statue of Venus stood to his right, shielding him more fully from view of the suited gentlemen and gowned ladies socializing in the cavernous hall. Lani would be furious when she found him hiding, but for now, her attention was elsewhere.

She cavorted on the dance floor, flitting from one partner to the next like an oversized butterfly hunting for the best nectar in a hall full of flowers and hearts. She smiled, flashing red lips and white teeth at anyone stinking of corporate money.

Jeff didn't know anything about stocks, bonds, starving children in Africa, or any of the other topics of conversation tonight. He knew about licks, riffs, hooks, and how to work a mixing board. He thought that irritated the rich bastards here more than anything, that an ignorant drunk could afford the same Armani and Gucci they wore. *Rock star lifestyle, baby.*

Lani moved on to a lawyer who'd cornered Jeff earlier to talk about the Dow-Jones. The man kept sniffing and rubbing at his red eyes. He'd disappeared into the men's room twice in the last hour, and it wasn't to take a dump.

A slender, redheaded girl slipped past on her way to the bar. She'd tried to flirt with Jeff before he found his hiding place. He watched her, thinking about Danny the last time he'd seen him, eyes wide with hurt. Why hadn't he just tucked a knife in Danny's gut? His act of betrayal had dealt out the same kind of wound.

Two years ago, Jeff had held his newborn daughter in his arms and decided to stop sleeping with Danny. He had what he always wanted--Lani's approval, the beginning of a family, and a chance at fame. There was no need to screw that up, despite Danny's desperate pleas and depression. Jeff and Lani moved into their own apartment.

For the first few weeks, the baby kept him busy. He woke up at night for every whimper and wail. He changed diapers until he could do it in his sleep, and sometimes it seemed like he did. He bought picture books Fran wouldn't be interested in for months yet, and read them to her before bed. He stared into her blue eyes and wondered what she'd look like in ten years, in twenty, and what he'd do when boys started coming around.

When Fran was four months old, they visited his parents in Ohio. For the first time, Jeff had a right to be smug. His father might not respect rock music, but he couldn't argue with the cash in his son's wallet.

When they returned to the city, Lani spent her days at spas and department stores. Nights, she came home and showed Jeff her appreciation. Jeff didn't have the heart or the courage to tell her she was no longer the best he'd had, or that sometimes he wished she was less appreciative. Nor did he tell her their new apartment had begun to feel like a prison. When they watched television in the evenings, he felt the chains wrapping around his chest and cutting off his air. His greatest disappointment was waking up every morning to find Lani at his side.

When the spring tour began, Jeff had never been more glad to say goodbye to his wife. He supposed he'd known from the day the band piled into their shiny new bus that he wouldn't stay faithful to her. Three lonely days and two glasses of scotch in a hotel bar ruined him. Danny was waiting for him when he got to his room, begging on his knees with promises falling from his lips like the tears threatened to fall from his eyes.

Jeff didn't remember what they said to make the months of avoiding each other seem like nothing. He only remembered falling asleep naked and sweaty with Danny draped over him. For the first time in months, he felt the wires of tension ease.

When the tour ended, Danny's apartment took the place of cheap hotel rooms. Sometimes Jeff stayed with him for hours, sometimes all night. Even the times when they did nothing but lie on the couch watching television, the moments of relaxation were worth all of Lani's renewed complaints.

What happened to that comfort? Slowly, the relationship had begun to decay into something less than perfect. Complications arose and strangled the peace. Maybe it was the responsibility of taking care of his family, or maybe it was Danny's fault, always pushing Jeff for more. Even when Danny was silent, Jeff felt him watching and waiting and hoping.

But being without Danny was worse than dealing with his expectations. Being without him was like standing on a Broadway stage, wondering when the other actors were going to wake up and realize this wasn't real life. Real life existed only in the moments with Danny, when Jeff could throw away the script and stop pretending. They were the best and the most frightening moments of his life.

Dear Danny, the letter read in sloppy print. As if he was dear to anyone. As if he had given home a single thought in six years.

He'd read the letter nine times since he picked it up from the secretary at the record label who sorted the fan mail. He should have told her to trash it when he saw the return address. Every sentence left some new flavor of guilt on his tongue.

Dear Danny,

Mrs. Proctor told us to write a letter to somebody important for English. Tina, who's my best friend, says rock stars aren't important. She wrote to the president but I think you're bigger than him. Nobody has got a picture of him on their wall.

Mom said I shouldn't write to you but she won't say why. She has got all the magazine stories about you stuck in the photo book with your baby pictures. She says I look like you, too.

I want to tell you everything that happened since you left, but I'm only allowed to use one sheet of paper so I'll just tell you the big stuff. Mom is getting married next month. She isn't having a party even though I wanted one. She said they are going to the court house. I don't know why she is marrying Bill anyway since he already lives here. He bought me a rabbit for Christmas, but I don't like it much. It bites and it won't play with me. I want a puppy next year.

I keep getting bad grades in math and Mrs. Proctor is making Amy Leonard help me but I hate her. She laughed at your poster and called you a pot head but I slapped her. What's a pot head anyway? I asked Mom if it was like an egg head but she said I didn't need to know. Amy told Mrs. Proctor I hit her and she sent me to the principal's office. He said the next time I hit

somebody he would spank me. I saw him use a wooden paddle on my friend Timothy, and Timothy cried.

I bet you have a lot more fun than me. I saw your picture in a magazine when you were at a party. It looked really fun. You're so lucky. You're so famous I bet nobody tells you what to do. I want to be like you someday so I can slap whoever I want.

I hope you write back even though Mom says you won't. Maybe you can come visit us. Or I could come see you in the city. Will you take me to see the Statue of Liberty?

*Love,
Jersey*

P.S. Mrs. Proctor said this is not a good school letter. She made me write to the governor but I stole a stamp from her desk and mailed it anyway. I hope your fan club gets it to you.

Danny stared at the words until they bled together. He sucked a breath off his joint and flicked away the ash. He hadn't thought about his little sister since he left for New York in '75. Why was she thinking about him? She couldn't possibly remember him.

Jersey had been three when he left, a butterball with carrot fuzz hair and a grin like the Cheshire Cat. She got into everything she was supposed to keep out of and jabbered for hours almost without pausing for breath. The idea of her as a coherent eight-year-old astounded Danny almost as much as the letter itself.

A knock sounded at the door of his apartment. Danny took another drag. He knew who was there before the voice called, "Dan? You home?"

He unfolded himself from the leather couch and stood, toes curling into the powder white carpet. The spotless rugs and walls stared back at him as if wondering why he was here, in his sweatpants and ratty tee-shirt. He wanted to be back in the old apartment, curled in his shag armchair, breathing in the smell of last night's burned dinner. But the armchair had been replaced with a matching set of white leather furniture, and he ordered out most nights rather than cooking. He could afford it.

"Dan?" More knocking.

He ground out the joint and emptied the ashtray in the trash. Who cared if he wasted drugs? He could afford more of them, too.

He crossed the room and twisted the door handle. It swung open, never locked. Thieves were welcome to take what they found.

Jeff stood in the entrance with no coat, only a thick white sweater and windblown hair. On his back, Fran wrapped her arms around his neck and peered out from under the hood of a pink parka.

“Hey.” Jeff grinned, teeth bright against his cold-reddened face. “Can we come in?”

Fran blinked at Danny. “Dada.”

Danny stepped back and closed the door after Jeff came through. “What do you want?”

Jeff lowered Fran to the sofa and clicked the television set on. Then he faced Danny. “Can we talk?”

Danny folded up the letter and stuck it in the coffee table drawer. “Talk.”

“Alone.”

Fran watched a western shoot-out, blue eyes round.

Why not talk? Why not say how silly Danny had been, and wasn’t that funny? Then they could do it all over. Danny couldn’t wait to feel like shit again.

“Danny.”

“Fine.” He turned, listening to Jeff’s footsteps follow him. They walked into the bedroom, where sunlight spilled in deceptively cheerful patterns through the white curtains. A television set sat on the bureau across from the bed, but the rest of the room was bare. Pigeons cooed outside, claws clicking on the window ledges. “Go ahead and talk.”

The door snicked shut. The air in the bedroom shifted into familiar waves of tension as Jeff stepped behind him. Heat radiated against Danny’s back as they stood close together, almost touching.

“I want to apologize to you.” Jeff’s voice slipped over Danny’s shoulder and into his ear like rotten silk. “You were right. I know better than to think you’d hurt Fran. Sometimes I forget how well I know you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t trust you.”

“Sure.” Danny wanted to step away, but his feet remained anchored as if in cement blocks. “Whatever.”

“Not whatever.” Jeff leaned in until his chest brushed Danny’s back. His breath grazed the side of Danny’s neck, raising tiny hairs on end. “I’m sorry. Say it’s okay. Say you forgive me.”

Danny swallowed. Chills fought their way down his spine, one tumbling after another. “Jeff...”

Hot lips kissed the skin below his right ear. “Please.”

He’d never learn. Not when Jeff was here, warm and solid and whispering promises. What did yesterday’s mistakes matter anyway? Jeff always came back.

Danny closed his eyes. "I forgive you."

"Danny." Jeff kissed down the side of his neck, hands sliding over hips and thighs and pulling their bodies into each other.

"Please--" Danny tipped his head back, lost in the uncertainty of what he was asking. He craned his neck, and Jeff's mouth found his. Three years ago their kisses had been all shocks, jolts, and impatience. Now their mouths fit together, warm and comfortable, lips melding and tongues unfurling.

Danny twisted until they stood front-to-front, curling one hand around the back of Jeff's neck. Soft hair grazed his knuckles. He felt the cords of Jeff's neck move under his fingers. He snaked his other hand under Jeff's shirt. While they kissed, he traced ridges of bone and curves of muscle. He kissed Jeff like he'd almost lost him and wondered if it was true.

"Danny." Jeff caught Danny's face in his hands and breathed hard against his lips. "Fran's here..."

"She's fine." Danny kissed the corner of Jeff's mouth and edged along his jaw, while both his hands went to the heavy silver belt buckle at Jeff's waist. "She'll never know."

"God..."

Danny smelled Lani's scent along with the cologne on Jeff's skin. He wanted to scrape it off with his teeth and prove who Jeff really belonged to. "Don't worry about Fran. Think about me."

The buckle clicked free. Danny popped the button on Jeff's pants, unzipped them and pushed a hand into the opening.

"Dan--" Jeff anchored his hands in Danny's hair and tried to pull their mouths together again, but Danny evaded him. He wanted to be closer than a kiss. He wanted to be inside Jeff's skin, looking out through his eyes.

He broke contact long enough to peel off his shirt and sweatpants. Then he was back, skin-to-skin with Jeff, fingers reaching and touching, searching and finding, while they arched and twisted and tried not to groan.

"I want you inside me," he said, pulling Jeff's pants down and dropping to his knees. His tongue passed over the head of Jeff's cock, licking around and under while Jeff's hands tightened in his hair. "I want you to fuck me like I'm the only one you ever wanted. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I can do that." Jeff pulled him up by a handful of hair and leaned to meet him. Their mouths came together hard, hurting Danny's teeth. He moaned and let Jeff suck the sound into his own lungs. For now, it was right. For now, it was good.

They went down on the bed, devouring skin with lips and teeth, loving with tongues and fingertips. Somewhere along the way, Danny found himself stretched flat, the bed sheets cold against his stomach and soft against his cock. Jeff knelt between his legs, lubricant-slicked thumb pressing into the cleft of his ass. With every inch deeper he went, Danny lurched closer to the edge.

“Jesus,” Jeff sighed, kissing the small of Danny’s back. “I wish...”

But he didn’t finish, and Danny couldn’t think to care.

“Do it,” he said into the mattress. “I don’t care. Just fuck me.”

The hands on him, in him paused then the thumb eased gently out. Jeff always worried about hurting him, but never in the right ways.

Jeff braced himself above Danny, his breath ruffling red hair. “Okay.”

Danny felt Jeff at his entrance, hot and slicked-up, and so full of the promise of pain and pleasure that he had to grind his teeth to keep from writhing. “Please,” he said again, hating himself for begging.

“Don’t scream,” Jeff said before he thrust.

The pain came fast and hard, tearing him from the inside out. Danny grabbed white-knuckled at the sheets and squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t scream, and somewhere in the middle of the pain, he forgot Jeff didn’t love him.

Ages later, Jeff stared at the ceiling and listened to his heart slow. Everywhere Danny touched him--the leg hooked around his, the arm at his waist, the lips on his shoulder--his skin burned. Where they didn’t touch, he shivered.

“I missed you,” Danny said.

“Mm.” Jeff reached over him and tapped out a cigarette from the box on the nightstand. He lit it with Danny’s lighter, a clunky thing with a fox etched into the silver. “I didn’t go anywhere.”

Danny kissed Jeff’s shoulder. His fingers trailed over skin and ribs.

Jeff stared at the glowing red end of the cigarette. He hadn’t smoked in two months; Lani couldn’t stand the smell of it in the apartment. He lifted the filter to his lips and sucked in. The first taste swirled over his tongue and filled his lungs, almost as good as the sex had been. He held his breath as long as he could, until it started to seep past his parted lips. Tendrils of smoke curled through the air around his head.

Danny was just another cigarette. Jeff would quit tomorrow.

The mattress dipped as Danny shifted away. Jeff watched him stand and wriggle back into his sweats. "Where are you going?"

"To check on Fran."

"I thought you said she was fine." He wanted Danny here, his warmth and his smell and his touch.

Danny shrugged with his back turned. Jeff couldn't tell if he was smiling or frowning. Sometimes--and Jeff felt ill at those times--Danny seemed to teeter on the verge of understanding that Jeff could never be what he wanted. But always Danny shied back from that brink and said nothing.

Jeff stood and pulled his pants up, buckling his belt. He followed Danny out of the bedroom, still tugging his sweater over his head and wondering where the desperate need of a little while ago had gone.

Fran sat on the sofa where she'd been left, eyes on the television. She ignored their entrance. Why did they bother hiding from her? Lani thought Fran's silence was unhealthy and wanted her to see a doctor, and Jeff had to constantly reassure her that he'd been the same way as a child. The answer didn't satisfy Lani, but seeing the similarity between himself and his daughter made Jeff love Francesca even more.

"You want coffee?" Danny asked, moving into the kitchen alcove.

"Sure." Jeff sat on an oak stool, elbows on the counter that divided the kitchen from the living room, and took a deep drag off his cigarette.

Danny packed a filter with coffee grounds and stuck it in the machine to brew, then perched on a stool across the counter from Jeff. Tangled red hair hung in his eyes. "Come over tonight."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

Jeff tapped his cigarette against a plastic tray and watched gray ashes flake off. Lani had made dinner reservations at Angelina's. She'd called a sitter.

"Jeff."

He shrugged. He'd tell Lani he had band business. She'd be mad as hell, but she couldn't stop him from walking out the door. "Sure."

“Yeah?” Danny lifted his eyes, hope lighting his face. Jeff couldn’t imagine ever saying no again.

“I have to take Fran home,” he said. “I’ll come back around seven.”

“Okay.” Danny stood to get mugs out of the cabinet, but Jeff saw the lip caught in his teeth to hold back a smile. Maybe Danny knew Jeff wasn’t good for him. Maybe everyone knew. Jeff didn’t care.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Damn it, Jeff, stop laughing.”

“Sorry.” Jeff sealed his lips around a fresh swell of humor. He gripped the sides of the couch and lay still.

“Look, it’s all over the place now.” Danny sorted the cocaine back into two straight lines across Jeff’s stomach. “Don’t move.”

Jeff bit his lip when Danny’s hair brushed his skin. Danny snorted, tipping his head back with the heel of his hand pressed hard to his nose and his eyes squeezed shut. After a minute, he leaned down and took the second line up his other nostril.

Jeff sat up, brushing at his stomach. Remnants of the powder dusted the top of his black leather pants. If the cops got ambitious tonight, they’d be busted as sure as hellfire. Better to get rid of all the evidence before the show. He scanned the dressing room. “What did you do with the rest?”

Danny stood, hair hanging in his face. “There isn’t any.”

“Funny. I bet there is.” Jeff stood and folded himself around Danny from behind, running his lips up the back of Danny’s neck. “And I bet you’ll tell me where, too.”

Danny leaned into him. “You think so?”

“Yeah.” His teeth grazed the skin below Danny’s ear. He slid one hand over Danny’s crotch and smiled at the throaty moan. “Where is it, Danny?”

“It’s...” Danny pushed against his hand, twisting his neck to reach for Jeff’s mouth with his own. “It’s in the drawer...”

“Thanks.” Jeff left him wavering by the couch and crossed to the makeup table. He fished a sandwich bag of cocaine out of the top drawer.

“Hey.” Danny tripped after him, boot heels catching on the rug. “That’s not fair.”

Jeff grinned at him in the mirror while he poured a line on the tabletop. He dug through his wallet for a hundred dollar bill fresh from the bank. Using big money just felt better.

Danny hooked his fingers in the back of Jeff's waistband and tugged. "Come on. Please?" His lips ran up the column of Jeff's spine.

Jeff paused, lingering in the sheer pleasure of being with Danny. They'd been closer than ever the last month, since the afternoon of apology in Danny's apartment. Last week they'd started on the first leg of their spring tour, which was just the change of pace they'd needed. Lani followed along on Jeff's private bus as they'd planned months ago when she complained about being left alone for so long, but Jeff always had an excuse to avoid her. If he didn't crawl back to their trailer until dawn most mornings, he blamed it on the tour, on drinking hard and partying late. Lani didn't need to know he was on Danny's bus.

Danny's fingers slipped under the leather waistband of Jeff's pants, bringing him back to the present.

Thinking about Danny's fingers on other parts of him turned Jeff's blood southbound, but his wristwatch read ten to nine. "We've got to get out there."

"Please..."

Jeff slid a hand behind Danny's neck and kissed him hard. "After the show, count on it."

Danny pulled away, mouth split in a grin. His pupils were already starting to dilate, and he moved with restless energy. "Better save your energy then, Mr. Big Bad Rock Star. I want you to fuck me 'til I can't see straight."

Jeff laughed and turned his back. "Get out of here."

"See you on stage," Danny promised. The door slammed after him.

Jeff leaned down and snorted the line through his rolled bill. His nose still burned when he heard the door open again. They'd never get onstage in time, but fuck it. He grinned and looked over his shoulder.

"We need to talk," Lani said.

Anticipation leaked away. Jeff wiped his hand over the table to clean it and stuffed the cash in his pocket, sniffing hard. "Later, okay?"

"Now, Jeff."

He kept his head ducked, hair falling into his eyes, but he could still see her clearly, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. She so rarely went without makeup that she

looked odd without it now, vulnerable. Jeff felt uneasy, wondering what was going on that she would be seen in public this way.

“Jeff.”

“We’re on in a couple minutes. Can’t we talk after the show?” *And after Danny?* He scooped his vest off the couch and shrugged into it.

Lani blocked his way to the door with a hand on his chest. The sharp dent of her nails felt cool, his skin suddenly too warm. He kept his eyes on her hand and not her face.

“Can’t we talk now?” Her voice came out soft as a sad, spring breeze, confusing him.

“Lani...”

“You never talk to me anymore. You only talk to him.”

“Christ.” When had he turned into a fucking tug-of-war rope? Didn’t anyone care that he was starting to unravel? Nerves jittered in the pit of his stomach. “Danny’s my friend.”

“He’s more than that, isn’t he?” She touched her other hand to his face, fingers sliding along his jaw, lifting his chin and forcing his gaze to meet hers.

“He’s my singer.” Jeff clipped the words off, hard-edged with irritation. “We work together. We write; we practice. That’s why you’re wearing diamond earrings, baby.”

“Jeff.” She sighed, and he had only a moment’s glance at wide blue eyes before she moved in and curled against his chest. Her face nestled into his throat. “You don’t know how it feels, sitting alone with Francesca when I know you’re with him. You said it would be different if we came on tour with you, but you still don’t have any time for us.”

Fear lifted its head, a feather-light snake winding through his insides. All those months ago it had seemed like a good idea to bring her along on tour, to finally silence her accusations about his cheating, to soothe her anger at being left alone for months. He hadn’t counted on making peace with Danny that afternoon before the tour started, or on wanting to be with him constantly now.

He put an arm around her shoulders. “You know that’s not true. Things are crazy at the beginning of a tour. Once we get going, there’ll be more time.”

“But there’s time now.” She tangled her hands in his vest and leaned back to face him. “I really thought we had a chance, you and I. But things are going right back to the way they were before Francesca was born. You spend all day with the band and all night with Daniel. Sometimes I don’t even know if you love me anymore.”

He felt the swell of her pregnant belly pressing against him like a cancerous threat. Another baby, another lock on his cage door. He’d always thought he would be a better father than his

own had been, that he'd be supportive no matter what path his children chose. He'd thought he wanted a family. Maybe he'd just wanted to prove himself to Hector Cruz.

He rubbed his hands in circles across her back. "I do love you. I love you both so much."

"You say that, but we need more than words. We need you to be there."

"I'm here."

"What about when the baby comes? Will you have time to be its father, to be Francesca's father and my husband?"

"What do you want me to do?" He looked down at her and the fear thickened, wrapped around his lungs and squeezed. "You want me to leave the band? What about the money?"

"God, no." Her eyes widened. "Why do you always have to make me out to be a monster? I'd never ask you to give up your dream. I just want you to give up Danny."

He itched to pull away from her soft vulnerability. Since when was Lani fragile? Maybe it was his fault for neglecting her, for being selfish enough to put his own base wants above his family's needs.

Lani kept her eyes on his. "I don't understand what he gives you that I can't. It's not like you love him."

He stared at her. "No. No, it's not like that." Because love was... love was love, and this wasn't it.

"Then why--"

He stepped away from her and shook the hair out of his eyes. "I have to go. The show."

"Jeff."

"We'll talk later, okay?"

"Jeff."

He stopped halfway to the door, eyes fixed on the hallway beyond. What would it mean to be in love with Danny anyway? His insides twisted in different directions. Fucking was one thing, but falling in love... that was for fags.

"I need you to think about it." Lani stepped up behind him again, her hands grazing the back of his vest. "Please."

"Yeah." The squeezing sensation around his chest was gone, but he still couldn't breathe. Love. It was crazy.

“I love you,” she said. “But I need to know if you’ll be there for me, for us. Or if I have to find someone else who will be.”

He jerked away from her and turned. “What?”

Lani looked down, hands folded over her stomach. “I don’t want to. But the children have to come first.”

Jeff’s mouth tasted like vinegar laced with a poison labeled love. “Are you threatening me?”

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d just be there for us.”

Anger rose, souring his stomach. Lani didn’t make idle threats. She’d leave him, and worse, she’d take Fran and the baby. What court would give custody to someone with his lifestyle? The drugs and the parties and Danny...

He stared at his wife and wondered when he’d begun hating her, and why the love was still there, wound around the hate like poison ivy choking a young tree.

“Jeff.” She lifted her eyes to his again. “I don’t want any of this to happen. Can’t you see that you’re the one who’s leaving me? Every night you’re not with me, we grow a little further apart. I can’t sit still and watch that happen, not when I have the babies to think about. I only want what’s best for us all.”

“Sure.” His voice echoed inside his head. “What’s best.”

“I’ll give you time to think about it.”

“I don’t need time.” There was nothing to think about. He stepped back, toward the door.

“Jeff?”

Her fear--real fear? false fear? Jeff couldn’t tell--pulsed outward from her wide eyes. Jeff wanted to vomit. Fury knotted his gut. “Don’t worry,” he said over his shoulder. “I always do what you want, don’t I?”

Love, he thought.

*“Yesterday faded fast
And today was no good
You and I can never last
But I’d give you tomorrow if I could.”*

Danny leaned over the edge of the stage as he wailed the last words of Far Cry’s latest hit, fingers laced around the microphone stand. Hands reached up from the front row. The faces of boys and girls, men and women swam in front of him, beautiful and ugly faces, star-struck eyes

glowing as they sang along. Here was all the power a person could dream of, the power to be God until the last song ended.

He straightened, letting the screams and applause flow over him, through him. The cries soaked into his skin and roared along in his blood. He stood with his shoulders back and his chin lifted, a king, a god, and more than all that.

Until he saw Jeff.

Jake stood behind his drum set with raised fists, while Ray and Robbie walked the stage, tossing picks into the crowd. But Jeff stayed by his stack of Marshalls, both hands wrapped around the neck of his guitar. He stared across the arena with empty eyes.

Danny glanced back at the crowd, but the illusion of power dimmed. He'd known Jeff was fighting with Lani since the moment he stalked onstage. He played with none of his usual flare tonight, without any sense of passion at all. His misery drained Danny of all happiness.

"Hey." He lifted the microphone and waited for the crowd to quiet. Exhaustion settled over him in a leaden wave, and he fought it. "I want to thank you motherfuckers for being the loudest, craziest crowd we've seen this tour. You guys are fucking awesome. And ladies, of course."

He turned as if to leave, then paused. "You know, I don't hear anybody calling for an encore. Were we that bad?"

The crowd erupted, everyone screaming the name of their favorite song for the encore.

"Okay, okay. I guess we could do one more." He shot another look at Jeff. Jeff met his eyes with no change of expression, then ducked his head to adjust his guitar strap. Danny swung away.

"Okay, here's an old one for you. 'All the Pretty Ones'."

He kept his eyes on the crowd through the end of the show.

Danny found Jeff sprawled across the bunk in his private bus an hour later. He flopped down beside him and eyed the motionless pile of skin, hair, and leather. "What are you doing?"

"Sleeping," Jeff said, voice muffled by a pillow.

"You are not."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing." Danny stretched against Jeff's side. "Where's Lani?"

"On a plane to New York."

He knew better than to hope. "She's done tagging along?"

"Something like that."

“Good.” He nuzzled against Jeff’s ear, breathing in the smells of sweat and leather. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or do you just miss her?”

“I asked her to go,” Jeff said, opening his eyes. “I told her I needed this tour.”

“Oh.” Danny smiled, but his lips felt numb. What did that mean? The darkness in Jeff’s eyes swallowed all words. He wished it was before the show again, and everything was a game.

Jeff lifted a hand to Danny’s face. His knuckles grazed sharp cheekbones and soft lips. He pushed his fingers into red hair and kissed Danny with open eyes.

Danny’s heart squeezed tight and beat fast. Shivers tiptoed up and down his spine. Jeff’s lips covered his, parting to let their mouths sink together. Danny tried to keep his eyes on Jeff’s, tried to prolong the intimacy of the moment, but the world spun around him. He closed his eyes against the wave of dizziness.

Sometimes Jeff kissed hard, sometimes fast, and sometimes slow and thorough. But this gentleness was all new and more than a little frightening.

Danny broke the kiss. He opened his eyes and shivered again. “What was that for?” Jeff rolled one shoulder. “Need a reason?”

“Yes.” He searched Jeff’s face and found no answers, nothing but tiny lines that belonged on the face of a man much older than twenty-three.

Jeff sat up and stared out the bus window. “Let’s go somewhere.”

Danny hadn’t expected "somewhere" to be a top-floor hotel suite. He kicked his shoes off at the door and shuffled his bare feet against the peach-colored carpet. A thirty-six inch television stood across from a sofa long enough to seat a baseball team. A refrigerator hummed in the corner by a mini-bar with a fruit basket on the counter.

“Shit.” He perched on the foot of a king-sized bed piled high with creamy cushions and comforters. “It’s about time we got to fuck in style.”

“Sure.” Jeff paused in the bedroom doorway. “Why not?”

Danny’s heart wouldn’t slow down, and his breath felt continually lost. Jeff’s seriousness scared him. He couldn’t tell if something wonderful or awful was about to happen, and not knowing scared him.

“Danny.”

He didn't want to meet Jeff's eyes. They were too black, too silent. "What?"

"Come here."

"Why don't you come here?"

Jeff's lips twisted up. "Okay."

Danny watched him cross the room, clothes and hair sharply black against the light décor. He twisted his hands in his lap. Maybe nothing was wrong after all. Maybe.

Jeff stopped in front of him, gripped his shoulders and pushed him down. Danny swallowed a swell of fear and lay in a nest of blankets, pulse skittering and breath coming in short gasps.

Jeff crawled over him, hair hanging around his face. "Jesus," he murmured and laid a hand on Danny's chest. "Are you okay?"

Closing his eyes, Danny fisted a hand in the blankets. "What are we doing here? Is this--are you--?"

For a long moment, there was nothing but silence. Danny didn't breathe. When Jeff spoke, he didn't want to breathe at all.

"Not yet. Not right now."

But soon. The unspoken words hung in the air between them. Danny's fear faded to dull gray. He had known. Of course he had known. He and Jeff could never have lasted forever, and soon Jeff would tell him it was over for good. But they had been so happy. Danny didn't want to believe it. If he didn't believe it, it wasn't happening.

Jeff kissed down the column of his throat. He pulled Danny's hands over his head and tugged off his shirt. He ran his lips over pale skin, set his teeth into soft flesh, and drew patterns with the tip of his tongue. Danny kept his eyes shut, but his hands left the blankets to anchor in Jeff's hair. If he held tight enough, it would all be a lie.

But it was later that the world broke, later when his legs squeezed around Jeff's waist, and Jeff pushed into him in long, slow strokes. Danny fought the rise of his orgasm, thought about anything but the slick pleasure tightening each time Jeff filled him. He concentrated on the shift and sigh of the mattress, not the low groans coming from Jeff's throat. Not on the burn of their skin sliding together and not on the dread that he might never feel this way again.

Jeff's rhythm quickened. His fingers bruised Danny's hips. More than anything, Danny wanted to buck against him, drive him deeper, harder, faster.

Jeff groaned and pushed his face into the curve of Danny's neck. His words came out muffled. "Danny--"

Danny knew what was coming, and that it should happen now seemed the cruelest trick of all. But it shot him closer to the edge, too close--

--I love you."

Danny came, teeth grinding, a thousand curses stinging his tongue. He arched off the bed, fingers dragging across Jeff's back. Fire scorched his blood, his bones, his lungs. He couldn't breathe and couldn't think.

When the fire spilled down his face, he realized it was made of tears.

Afterwards, he felt only numb denial. He pulled his knees into his chest and stared at his clothes, piled neatly on the edge of the bed by Jeff. Jeff wanted him to get dressed. Jeff wanted him to understand.

"I can't," he said.

Jeff stood with his shoulder against the bedpost. He looked old again. "I know."

"You don't know. If you knew, you wouldn't be doing this."

"I don't want to, but it doesn't matter what I want."

"Yes, it does. If you wanted to be with me, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"I'm married."

"That didn't stop you before." Danny lifted his eyes to Jeff's. Shivers prickled his skin into gooseflesh. He was tired. Nothing he said would change Jeff's mind, but silence felt like death.

"Lani will leave me."

"That's a bad thing?"

Jeff slid down the post and sat beside Danny. He looked at his hands, resting on his knees.

"She'll take the kids. I'll never see them again."

"You could fight her." Danny's throat hurt, knowing the answer.

Jeff shook his head. "Even if I got joint custody, what kind of life would that make for Fran and the baby? I can't force them to live like luggage."

"What about me?"

Jeff's eyes stayed on his hands.

"You said you loved me. Not twenty minutes ago, you said you fucking loved me."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry."

"Daniel, you have to understand, I didn't want any of this to happen."

"Shut up," Danny said through clenched teeth. "Don't call me that name, and don't fucking tell me you're sorry."

"Danny, please."

"Please what? Please keep my mouth shut and make this real easy for you? Fuck you. And fuck you again for even asking me to be okay with this."

"Easy." Jeff looked up finally, eyes glittering and lips thin. "I have to choose between you and my wife, you and my kids. But that's easy, right? Everything's just so fucking easy."

"Must be. Didn't take long for you to make up your mind about who had to go." Danny lunged to his feet, away from Jeff. He wrapped his arms around himself and paced in cramped circles. He'd been hurt a hundred times--broken arms, sprained ankles, bruises, and cuts--but no physical pain hurt like this. "I just want to know, I just really need to know, if it wasn't for Fran, and if it wasn't for the baby, would you still leave me?"

"Christ." Jeff passed a hand over his eyes. "I don't know."

Hurt overshadowed all bitterness. Danny backed against the wall and leaned there, too exhausted to stand on his own. Once upon a time, Jeff would have held him up. "You can't keep doing this. Someday I won't wait for you to come back."

"I don't want you to wait."

His knees buckled and he slid to the ground, sat hard. "God, I'm tired." He watched Jeff stand and cross the room, crouching in front of him. He looked into the darkness of Jeff's eyes and wished for yesterday, the yesterday of three years ago when he'd been stupid enough to believe in love and happiness.

Jeff reached for his hand, lacing their fingers together. Danny laughed softly, throat raw. Everything hurt. He ached like he'd run too far, too fast. A day ago he'd been happy.

"Okay." He closed his eyes, opened them with fresh focus. His fingers tightened around Jeff's. "Whatever you want, I'll do it. I can be your friend. We're best friends who don't fuck and don't

love and never even met a queer. But you'll remember how miserable Lani makes you, and you'll change your mind."

"Danny."

"I can wait that long," he said, but when he looked past Jeff's blank face and deep into his eyes, his heart dropped impossibly low.

"I don't want to be your friend." Jeff untangled their fingers. "You're right. I can't be around you without wanting you, and I can't afford to want you anymore."

Anymore. The cold finality of the word clammed up Danny's insides. "Don't." *Don't say it, don't think it, don't mean it.*

"After I walk out tonight, I don't want to have anything to do with you outside of the band."

"But we've always been..." Danny couldn't think through the smash of the sledgehammer hitting his world. Everywhere he looked, he saw cracks.

"I don't want to be like we always were," Jeff said softly. His voice seemed a mockery of hurt, as if he could ever feel a fifth of the pain shuddering through Danny. "This is it. I walk out, and we're finished."

Panic rushed up Danny's throat. A day ago, goddamn it, a *day*. He lunged at Jeff and caught him by fistfuls of his hair. "Don't, then." He gasped for breath, and still he was suffocating. The scent of leather clothing and that damn cologne filled his nostrils, and he was suddenly terrified he'd never smell it again. "Don't leave. Stay with me. Please, damn it, just stay."

Jeff groaned and tore away, stumbling to his feet. Danny fell against the wall, throat too twisted to speak, though suddenly he had a thousand words, a thousand pleas. Stray black hairs tangled around his fingers.

"Fuck," Jeff said, his eyes on the carpet at his feet.

"Please," Danny whispered.

For a minute Jeff didn't move, and Danny knew it would all be okay. No one would walk out. They would stay in this room until the day they died, and they would die together, in the same hour, the same minute.

He stood, knees shaking, one hand braced against the wall, the other outstretched. "Jeff..."

Jeff stepped back and reached for the doorknob. "I can't," he said as he left.

He didn't look back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The mirror wasn't right. The longer Danny stared at it, the more convinced he became. Something swam under the surface like a goldfish in a pond.

He leaned over the bathroom sink and tapped a finger against the glass. Ripples swam outward, distorting the image of his narrowed eyes and sweating face. He drew back. Without his prodding, more ripples formed across the mirror until the whole glass shimmered with blurring colors.

"Damn it." He shook his head and shuffled away from the mirror, out of the bathroom. When Robbie said, "Stick out your tongue," Danny hadn't cared what he got, as long as it sent him out of his mind.

Danny returned to the living room and perched on the edge of a chocolate brown sofa. He hated Robbie's house, the aura of darkness that hung over the place. Robbie rarely parted the heavy curtains and never opened the windows to let fresh air in. Normally, Danny would have turned down an invitation to one of his parties, but he'd been lonelier than usual since the tour ended, trying not to think about Jeff and always failing. So he'd taken the train out to Brooklyn, only to find Robbie had neglected to mention that both Jeff and Lani were there as well.

Most of the other partygoers had cleared out by now, but the smell of pot drifted out of the kitchen. Danny heard Robbie's voice as an occasional, "uh-huh," accompanying Jeff's stream of inaudible conversation.

Danny strained his ears, trying to catch their words, and at the same time trying not to look at Lani, curled on the other side of the sofa. The desire to creep to the kitchen door burned under his skin, the desire to be close enough to breathe the same air Jeff breathed. He stared hard at the doorway, willing Jeff to move into sight.

"What are you looking at?" Lani muttered under her breath.

"None of your fucking--" Then he saw her face, and the words choked off in his throat. Oh, Jesus Christ... It wasn't real, it wasn't fucking real, it was the acid, but it looked real.

Lani's skin dripped down her face like melting wax. Red sores covered her mouth where her lips used to be. Smoke leaked from the end of her cigarette and coiled around her head, in her hair. The sores at her mouth parted, and she laughed.

Danny's heart jolted against his ribcage, fresh sweat breaking out on his forehead. "Lani—"

"Oh, what?" Ashes flaked onto the carpet. Her gaze rolled around the room, then back to fix on Danny with serpentine pupils. "I know you're looking for him. You're always looking for him. 'Where's Jeff?'" she mimicked in a whine. "'Why isn't he with me?'"

Danny turned his eyes to the carpet, tension stringing through his veins. Didn't she know her face was sliding off? But it wasn't real. Was it? His stomach lurched.

She leaned toward him, one arm crossed over her swollen belly, and he looked back to keep track of her. What could grow inside a woman with her face falling off? Something evil.

"I'll tell you a secret," she whispered, hideous mouth smirking. "He never cared about you. You were just an experiment, a boy-toy, fuck-toy. I'm the one he comes home to. I'm the one he loves."

Could the others hear? Danny darted a look at the kitchen, but no one came to the doorway. Her whisper seemed like a scream; why couldn't they hear? His brain ran into dead end after dead end, confusing his thoughts. He wished Jeff would come out and make her stop. He wished a lot of things.

"Did he take it up the ass?"

He swiveled to stare at her again, disgust and fear crushing his insides. "What?"

She lifted a hand and pushed the hair back from her face. Where her nails grazed her cheeks, they left deep furrows. The skin below the gashes sagged away in yellow-red folds of flesh. Bloody lips curled. "I bet he did. He's such a good bitch."

"Fuck you." His voice stuck to the walls of his throat. He pushed off the couch and stumbled back a step. "Your face--fuck you."

"Fuck *you*," she hissed, lunging for him.

Danny's heart shot into his throat as her hands locked on his forearms. Jesus, she had him, and her fingers were icy, digging into his skin. She'd rip his flesh away; she'd eat him whole. He froze, tremors working through his knees.

"I gave him what you couldn't." She pushed her melting face close to his, grotesque lips peeled back over her teeth. "I gave him babies. Can you? *Can you?*"

The need to run beat hard in his chest, but he couldn't stop staring. This was the face of Medusa, the nightmare turning him to stone. Hot fear surged through him in constant waves, turning his pulse to a roar in his ears. He didn't know how much more he could take before his heart simply gave out.

A voice from the kitchen called, "Lani?" Danny's ears strained to hear the voice, but he didn't dare take his eyes off the monster.

"I have another secret," she said. "I know why he wouldn't let you stay with my baby. I told him what you'd do to her. I told him what you wanted."

"What?" Pain pounded at his temple like nails being driven into a coffin. "What did you tell him?"

"That you're a sick bastard. That you wanted to fuck his baby girl."

Frost sealed over every trace of heat in his body. He stood still, eyes locked on hers, ice creeping into his blood.

Lani laughed. Her tongue slipped out of her mouth, long and slim and forked, dripping blood and reaching for him. She laughed louder, a monster, a demon; she was Satan himself, crawled out of hell.

Danny screamed. The wordless sound shattered his eardrums and cracked the stone holding him in place. He wrenched his arm from Lani's grip, fisted both hands in her hair, and heaved. She slipped off the sofa and sat hard on the floor with a heavy expulsion of air.

"Bitch." Danny's teeth clicked hard together. Reds and purples streaked his vision in shades of fury. His heart thundered in his chest, in his throat; he tasted it on the tip of his tongue. He pulled one arm back. "You fucking bitch."

Lani's eyes popped wide. "Jeff!" she shrieked, sore-covered mouth gaping red. "*Jeff!*"

Danny's fist connected hard with the side of her head, sending her down. The back of her skull hit the hardwood floor. Danny's lips curled back in a snarl. She was the Devil, and he was the only one who could see it. He was the only one who could destroy her.

The shout from the kitchen echoed distantly in his ears, but he kept his attention focused on the beast. He crawled over her body and wrapped his hands around her throat. Her gasping cry choked into silence. Her eyes rolled like blue-black marbles in their sockets. He tightened his fingers and watched her face turn bright red under her ruined mass of skin. It was his right to kill her. It was his right to send her back to hell.

Two hands fell on his shoulders. Blunt fingers clenched around his collarbone, sending stabs of pain through the bones. He lost his grip on Lani and whirled with bared teeth. He saw Jeff, saw dark, shocked eyes, and then Jeff threw him.

For the space of a gasp, Danny felt himself flying. Fear rushed through his veins in a dizzying wave, like the air rushing over his body, and he hit the wall. Plaster cracked. Agony crunched down his spine. He collapsed over a table piled high with records, and they spilled to the floor, black discs sliding out of colorful sleeves.

“Lani? Lani, look at me, baby, Lani...”

Danny couldn’t breathe. He dragged in gulps of air, but still his lungs burned for oxygen. Sprawled in the carnage of records and the overturned table, he saw Jeff crouching over Lani, cradling her to his chest. She moaned and pushed her face against him. Her bleeding, rotting face. Jeff couldn’t see it, he just rocked her and closed his eyes, kissed the top of her head.

“Jeff,” Danny rasped, fighting for air. He pushed himself up on hands and knees. “She’s not--she’s--”

Jeff’s head snapped up, eyes open and searing with fire. “You--” His voice caught on a growl. “You stay the fuck away from her. Stay the fuck away!”

No, it was all wrong; Jeff didn’t understand. Danny shook his head, balance spinning just out of his reach. “She’s... she’s...”

She was what? Satan? Danny sat hard, back pressed to the wall. A record cracked under him. Loose plaster and dust rained down on his hair and shoulders. “Jeff.” His breath hitched. “She said things.”

Jeff’s eyes stayed on Lani as he ran his hands over her back and lifted her into his arms. “It’s okay, baby. You’re okay.”

“Jesus.” Robbie leaned against the den doorway. “Is she hurt?”

“What the fuck do you *think*?”

They hovered over Lani, but neither looked Danny’s way. He pulled his knees into his chest. *She said things. Did you believe her?*

“The baby,” Jeff said, face white. “You think it’s--it’s--”

“I’m sure it’s fine, man.” Robbie put a hand on his shoulder. Robbie was allowed to touch Jeff. Robbie wasn’t a threat. “You should get her to a hospital though; make sure.”

“Yeah.” Jeff stood, lifting Lani’s weight off the ground. “Yeah, I--”

Danny couldn’t see Lani’s face, couldn’t tell if she was a monster or not. Had he imagined it all? The acid. He’d forgotten.

“Go ahead.” Robbie held the front door open. “Take care of it.”

“Jeff...” Danny braced a hand against the overturned table and stood. His spine screamed in agony, but he couldn’t let Jeff go like this, not understanding why... “Jeff, please, wait.”

Jeff glanced back once, eyes dark and blank. Then he carried Lani out, and Robbie shut the door.

Danny sagged against the wall once more, staring at the closed door. “Jeff.”

Robbie crossed to stand in front of him, head tilted. “I don’t think he wants to talk to you right now.”

“Fuck.” Danny pressed his palms to his face, tried to rub away the confusion. He thought about melting skin and dragon tongues, but all he saw was the look on Jeff’s face when he’d seen what Danny had done. “Fuck.”

A second letter from Jersey sat on the coffee table, unopened. Danny had called the fan club secretary as soon as he found the letter and told her to stop forwarding all mail from the Hummelstown, Pennsylvania address. He didn’t need the past; he didn’t need the guilt.

But tonight the apartment was dark, and Danny was more alone than he’d been in years. He curled into the sofa with a bottle of vodka and opened the envelope.

Dear Danny,

You didn’t write back, so I guess you must be real busy. Maybe you’re not back from your tour yet. Is it fun touring? Do you make a lot of money? Do you get tired of singing the same songs every night?

My rabbit died. It got out of its cage and I found it under the hedge out back. Something ate half of it. Mom says it’s my fault for leaving the cage unlocked. I’m glad though. Maybe Bill will buy me a puppy now. He and Mom are married now. I bet a puppy won’t get eaten.

Mrs. Proctor says my math is getting better. She said I should thank Amy for helping me. I said I won’t though, not even if they send me to the principal again.

Please write back.

*Love,
Jersey*

Danny read the letter twice before wadding it up and throwing it in the trash. Then he curled into the sofa and thought about Jeff until he fell asleep.

“Are you sorry?” Lani asked.

Jeff leaned back in his leather recliner and stared at the clock. Not even midnight yet. All the good rock stars were off getting drunk, wasted, and laid.

Francesca sighed in her sleep and curled deeper into her yellow bean bag. Jeff followed the rounded curve of her cheek, the stringy blond hair clinging to her damp mouth. He’d carry her to bed in a few minutes, and if she woke up on the way, he’d read *The Day Jimmy’s Boa Ate the Wash* to her until she fell asleep.

“No,” he said. “I’m not sorry.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re doing the right thing.”

Was that why he felt sick to his stomach? He kept his eyes on Fran. “What if I can’t make it on my own? We’ll end up shopping at Goodwill.”

“We won’t.” Lani sat on the arm of the chair and laid a hand on his chest. Purple-blue bruises circled her throat. “You’re Jeffrey Cruz. Any band in the country would kill to have you.”

“Sure they would.”

“You were the center of Far Cry, Jeff. You wrote as many songs as Danny did.”

“We wrote them together.”

“You weren’t together when he tried to kill me.”

He studied her face, the contrast of soft lips and hard eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She leaned down and kissed him. “I believe in you,” she whispered against his lips. “I know you’ll keep our family together, and you’ll find another band. I know because I love you.”

He closed his eyes and put an arm around her. Her hair spilled over his hands and feathered against his face. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t pretend it was red.

Danny mounted the steps of the rehearsal stage and shivered. Despite the burning July heat, the interior of the cinderblock storage building remained cold. He thought with regret of Salvatore’s,

the old bar on Second Avenue where the band used to rehearse, until they got too famous, and crowds started waiting for them outside. This storage building by the waterfront was better for anonymity, but it had no warmth, no personality at all. It was nothing but a big, empty space with closets lining gray walls.

Danny sighed. He plugged his microphone into the outlet and watched Robbie and Ray ready their instruments.

“I want to work on the new songs,” Ray said, slipping the strap of his bass over his head.

“It feels wrong.” Danny avoided Ray’s glare. “Doing this without Jeff.”

“Whatever. Let’s try ‘Back Doors’ first.”

Jake tapped a cymbal with a drumstick. “You want to go with the arrangement we worked out last time?”

“Yeah, on four.”

Danny turned his eyes from the others. How long could they pretend to ignore Jeff’s absence? Couldn’t they feel how worthless all this practice was without him? If Jeff would just return his calls, Danny could fix things and get the band moving again.

“One... two... three...”

The other three began to play. Danny waited for his cue. Then he saw Jeff’s closet, and the cue didn’t matter.

The band stopped.

“Hey, man,” Jake said. “Where are you?”

The closet doors gaped open on a shallow cavern once filled with tangles of cords, amplifiers, packs of strings, scattered picks, and guitars. Now it was empty.

Danny turned on his boot heels and looked straight at Ray. Chills jarred down his spine. “Where are Jeff’s guitars?”

Ray stared back, eyes flat and dull.

“Where the fuck are Jeff’s guitars?” Cold gripped Danny’s stomach, and he couldn’t think beyond the empty closet. “Where’s all his crap? What did you do with it?”

“He took them,” Ray said. “On Friday.”

“Why would he do that? He’ll need them when he comes back. Why would he take them all? One maybe, but...” His thoughts dipped and swirled, and he couldn’t get them straight. “Why everything?”

“Danny. Jeff’s gone.”

“Gone.” His throat constricted. “What do you mean gone?”

“He’s not coming back.”

Danny grasped the microphone with cold hands while the world cracked and crumbled yet again. “How...” His tongue felt too thick for his mouth. “Friday? He was here?”

“We had a band meeting.”

“Without me?”

“Without you.” A muscle in Ray’s jaw twitched. “He gave us an ultimatum. Lose you or lose him. As much as we might wish otherwise, the band has a better chance of surviving with you. Jeff understood. He loaded up his equipment, and he quit.”

“He...” Danny kept breathing; his heart kept beating. But the world died. “He wouldn’t do that. He loves the band.”

“He does,” Ray said. “But he doesn’t love you apparently. We’ve known for years how you’ve been fucking with him, but he knew how to deal with you, so we ignored it. Now he’s done dealing, and who can blame him? You tried to kill his wife. The baby’s going to be fine, by the way. Not that you care.”

“I care.” Danny’s voice pitched up, then down. “You don’t know fucking anything. If I could talk to him--”

“He wouldn’t listen. Bottom line is this.” Ray closed the distance between them until Danny could see the perfect steel gray of his eyes. “We’ve put up with your crap for too long. From now on you’re going to stop thinking about yourself and start putting the band first. No more missing rehearsal and sound check. No more getting wasted before shows. You show up on time, and you do your best, every time.”

“Or what? Are you going to change your mind about whether I’m the one you want to keep?” Did it matter? If Jeff was gone, really gone, nothing mattered. Danny felt his decaying world shrink smaller and smaller. He searched the others for even the slightest support, but neither Jake nor Robbie would meet his eyes. “It’s my band.”

“That’s not what our contract says.”

“Jesus Christ, Ray--”

“Why don’t you try shutting the fuck up for a change?” Ray glared across the stage, solid and immovable. “Don’t give me a reason to get rid of you. Get your act together.”

It wasn’t true. Danny grasped at that slim hope as he turned his back on Ray. He knew Jeff better than any of them. He would never leave the band. He was taking a break, looking after Lani, and then he’d come back. He had to.

“Look. I know you’re up there. Your car’s out front, and you never fucking walk anywhere. Don’t worry. I’m not going to beg you to come down, or let me up. I just...”

Jeff stood in front of the intercom, listening to Danny’s voice crackle out of the box. Danny stood eight floors below. All Jeff had to do was press the buzzer to the front door, and Danny would be beside him again.

“I’m sorry about Lani. About everything. I’m sorry for dragging you into all this, back who the hell knows how long ago anymore. I wish I could have walked away then. I guess we’d both be better off.”

If Danny had walked away then, Jeff wouldn’t know what loss was.

“You can tell Lani she won. She always knew she would. I should have believed her.”

Jeff leaned his forehead against the wall above the intercom. Eight floors below.

“I wanted you to know how sorry I am, and that I’m not going to bother you anymore. I promise. No more calls. I’m going to get on with my own life.” A laugh rasped over the speaker. “As soon as I figure out what my life is. But you don’t have to worry about me anymore.”

Jeff would always worry. Where would Danny go? And what would he do without him?

“I’m gonna go. I’m... I’m gonna go. I promise. I’m sorry. I love you.”

Everything hurt. The buzzer was so close, magnetic under Jeff’s fingertips. His hand hovered over it.

“Jeff,” Lani called from the doorway to the dining room. “Come and have lunch with us.”

Fran banged a spoon on her high chair tray.

“I’m...” Danny’s voice faltered. “Okay. Yeah. Okay.”

Jeff stood by the intercom until Lani called him again, but there were no more words.

PART III 1982

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I want ice cream.”

“Yeah?” Jeff shoved his sunglasses further up on his nose, gripping Fran by the arms she had locked around his neck. His back muscles ached under her weight, and sweat trickled down his spine. “Okay, but it’s definitely going in a bowl this time.”

“She doesn’t need any more ice cream.” Lani yanked at Nicky’s hand when he edged too close to the zoo’s marine pit. In the crystal-blue waters below, harbor seals twisted beneath the surface. “She’ll get sick, and I’ll have to clean it up.”

Jeff wiped a hand over the bottom of his white tee-shirt, where the remnants of the last cone had crusted into a strawberry-colored stain. “Do you ever clean it up?”

Beneath layers of skin foundation, Lani cracked a frown. “Try not to be an asshole.”

“Try not to call me one in front of the kids.” He craned his neck until Fran’s face entered the corner of his vision. “What flavor ice cream do you want?”

“Choc’late.” She held her eyes steady on the seal pit.

“Nice choice. Come on, Lani.” He hitched a shoulder in the direction of the concession stand marked with the zoo’s panda logo.

Lani crushed Nicky’s hand in hers, fixing a glare on the water below and ignoring Jeff.

“Okay. We’re going to get ice cream.” He carried Fran up the paved incline to the stand. There was no line, and he paid for one scoop of chocolate ice cream in a plastic cup. Fran sat on the ground and Jeff lingered in the shade of a ginkgo tree while she ate.

Lani stood in the July sunshine, ignoring every stomp and wail Nicky could muster as he tried to pull her in the direction of his father and sister.

“Daddy.” Fran looked up, chocolate already smearing her cheeks and chin. “I want to ride an elephant.”

“Elephants are pretty big.” He crouched at her side. “How about a pony?”

She blinked. “Not an elephant?”

He smiled and wiped a paper napkin across her mouth. “Not this time, baby.”

“Next time?”

A thick smudge of ice cream wouldn’t come off her upper lip, no matter how hard he rubbed.

“How about when you’re eight? We’ll have a special birthday party here, and you can ride the elephants as much as you want.”

Her rosebud mouth screwed into a frown, but she nodded and stuck the messy cup under his nose. “I’m full.”

“Good.” He gave up on the stain and tossed the napkin into the trash along with the cup of melted goo. “Come on. Let’s get Mom and go check out those monkeys.”

At night Jeff and Lani lay in bed with a foot of space between them. Jeff drifted on the edge of sleep, cooled by cotton sheets and air conditioning.

“Jeff?”

He ignored her, hoping she’d give up.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lani said. “We should have another baby.”

Sleep dropped away. “What?” He twisted to face her, but he could only see the dim shadow of her face through the darkness.

“I want to have another baby.”

“Are you--” *Crazy?*-- “serious?”

“Of course, I am.” The mattress dipped as she shifted. Her lips met his shoulder. “What do you think?”

He bit back a groan. “I don’t know. What’s with wanting a baby all of a sudden?”

“It’s not all of a sudden. I told you, I’ve been thinking about it.” She slid a hand across the hard muscles of his lower abdomen. “Don’t you want more children?”

He struggled with the answer. He loved Fran and Nicky more than he'd thought it would be possible to love children, but they kept him racing from the minute he walked through the door at night to the second he fell asleep. He slipped an arm around Lani's waist. "I don't know if it's a good idea right now, with all the time I'll be spending at the studio next month. Won't you have your hands full?"

"I already thought about that." She kissed along his collarbone, fingering too many places to keep track. "Angela's opening a daycare. We can support her silly project and get help with the kids at the same time."

"You want to have another kid while we ship the ones we already have off to someone they barely know?"

"It's Angela."

"And they've met her, what, twice?"

"Don't sound like that, Jeff." Her teeth nipped at his earlobe, while her fingers snuck under the waistband of his boxers. "They'll be home in the evenings when you're around."

"Christ." Her hands found his cock, and he couldn't ignore the wet kisses she scattered across his chest. He hadn't had sex in a month. It had been easier on tour where he could slip a girl a backstage pass, or hunt the slummier city streets for something of real interest. At home, Lani watched him constantly, waiting to pounce on the slightest indication of unfaithfulness.

He tried to think past the slow motions of her hands. "It's not just... not being able to handle it... so much as... I don't know if I want..." He had to grab her by the wrists and still her. "I don't know if I want another baby right now."

"Oh, Jeff," she sighed.

"No." It was easier to think with her hands away from him. "I know I don't. Maybe in a year or two, but not now."

"All right. I'll give you a year, but then I want another baby."

"Okay." He could think of a new delay in a year. He relaxed until her hand crawled down his boxers again. "Lani, I mean it."

"Baby..." Her free hand slid along his cheek. She kissed his jaw. "Do you know how long it's been since you made love to me?"

All the blood in his body rushed to one aching place. He squinted, trying to see the look on her face through the dark. "What happened to 'Not now, Jeff'?"

She laughed against his neck. “Now, Jeff.”

“I--fuck.” Warning bells chimed, but he couldn’t think why as she lifted a leg over his hips and straddled him. She hovered, hands guiding them together. She must want him; her entrance burned wetly against him. “The pill,” he thought to say. “Are you still on the pill?”

“Yes.” The lush outline of her body crouched over him, and did he really care if a word she said was true? A month was a long time.

“Fuck,” he said again, and she sank down.

When they were packing up to move into the Philadelphia house, Lani threw away Jeff’s shoebox of Polaroids. He needed to forget his old life, she said, both Far Cry and Danny. He agreed, but when she went to bed that night, he dug the box out of the trash. He had nowhere to hide all the photos, and it seemed impossible to choose the few he liked best.

In the end he tucked his favorite four into an Iggy and the Stooges record sleeve, something Lani would never deign to take off the shelf. Every once in a while when he was all alone and the air started to feel thick enough to choke on, he took the pictures out.

He couldn’t remember who took the first photo. The band, in a creative slump, had trekked to the top of the Empire State Building to see if the air up there was more inspirational. Someone snapped a picture of Jeff waving and grinning like a tourist--New York had still had some fascination for him then--while Danny crouched behind him to hold up rabbit ears. Jeff socked him when he saw the picture, but Danny just laughed.

Jeff snapped the other photos himself after Lani bought him a Polaroid for Christmas. He tried to take a shot of himself kissing Danny, but it came out blurry with a fuzz of red and black hair. He kept it anyway.

A third picture showed Danny curled alone in the window seat of his new apartment, staring through the glass with distant eyes. Jeff always wondered what he had been thinking about, but had never known how to ask.

He couldn’t look at the photo of Danny in Lani’s little black dress without spinning back to that last night they’d shared alone in the old apartment.

“Jesus,” he said when Danny came out of the bedroom, slim and trim, the sexiest creature Jeff had ever seen. “That’s scary.”

“Shit.” Danny teetered around the living room in party sandals. “Who invented high heels anyway?”

“Somebody French probably.” He snapped a first shot, a second, a third. “They make your legs look good. Hot.”

“You would think so.” Danny shook his head, ginger-red hair spilling into his eyes. One corner of his mouth lifted. “So are you just going to stand there playing with your camera, or are you going to help me out of this dress?”

Jeff didn’t have time for any more pictures that night.

The phone rang, startling him out of his reverie. He swept the photos back into the record sleeve and snagged the telephone off the kitchen wall. “Hello?”

“Hey, buddy, how’s it going?”

Displeasure washed away the last thoughts of Danny, his mental image replaced with one of David Tarr, the lead singer of the Jaywalkers. Jeff had been playing in the Jaywalkers for almost two years now, and had hated David since the day he met him. David was the son of republican Senator James Tarr, the man who had once warned that homosexuals and rock and roll would cause the collapse of America. David shared his father’s opinion on one but not the other, though Jeff suspected he had only gone into music to stain the senator’s reputation. “What’s up, David?”

“Not much, not much...” David trailed off as he was prone to do. “So, hey, Angela wanted me to invite you and Lani to dinner.”

“Oh.” Jeff wanted to watch the game tonight, though he doubted Lani would let him. She hated baseball and adored David. Not only were his family connections superb, but he was clean-cut, intelligent, political, and boring as hell.

“So are you up for it?”

He’d never been less up. “Yeah. Let me talk to Lani.”

“Okay, buddy. Just come on over at six if you can make it.”

“Right.” If David called him "buddy" once more, Jeff would take the telephone cord to dinner and strangle him with it.

“See you then.”

He replaced the phone in its cradle. Maybe David would have the game on. Maybe Ted Bundy was in heaven.

“I don’t know why--” The front door slammed, rattling the china cabinet and nearly hitting Jeff in the face-- “you have to be so goddamn unsociable.”

He caught the door with the edge of his hand and followed Lani inside the townhouse to the living room, where champagne tones and pale oak furniture reigned. “I told you I didn’t want to go.”

“And that gave you the right to be an ass all night?” She flung her purse on the table, lips tight. “You just sat there like a fucking Neanderthal, guzzling wine like it was cheap beer! You couldn’t pretend for five minutes to be an intelligent being, could you? I think you live to embarrass me.”

“Maybe I do.” He sank onto the velvet sofa, knees aching and eyelids heavy.

“I notice you didn’t have any trouble talking to Angela. Just what were the two of you doing in the kitchen so long?”

“Having sex on the table,” he sighed, “with her husband and my wife in the next room.”

“At least you wouldn’t be fucking your singer.”

“Jesus.” He didn’t think he had the energy to keep fighting.

“I don’t know what your problem with David is,” Lani rattled on, pacing. “He’s a better singer than you ever had before, and a good person. Better than you.”

“You should marry him, then.” He leaned down and pulled a glass and a bottle of scotch out from under the coffee table. “He’d probably make you much happier than I do. And stop yelling. You’ll wake up the kids.”

“The kids.” Her eyes burned. “They’re all you care about, aren’t they? You don’t give a damn about me.”

He downed the first glass in two swallows and poured another.

“Where the hell is the babysitter anyway? Did she leave, the little bitch?”

“Mrs. Cruz?” A teenaged girl stepped from the shadows of the hallway. “I was checking on the kids. Is everything okay?”

“It damn well better be.” Lani stalked into the kitchen. “We’re home. You can go.”

The girl made for the door without a second urging. Jeff abandoned his scotch long enough to slip her two twenties and lock the door after her.

Lani returned with a bottle of seltzer. “She didn’t deserve that.”

“Whatever you say.”

“You’d be happy to give away every cent we made.”

“We’ didn’t make anything. I did.”

“You’re pathetic, Jeff, and you’ve got no ambition. If I hadn’t pushed you to be better, you’d be playing amateur night at the coffee shop.”

He snagged the bottle of scotch off the table--fuck the glass--and chugged.

“You’re going to choke.”

He did, throat knotting up the instant she spoke. He coughed, spewing droplets of alcohol across the room, and hurled the bottle. It smashed against the far wall and rained glass shards onto the carpet. He stared at the mess, wiping a shirt sleeve over his scotch-slick mouth.

Lani tapped the seltzer against her thigh. “And just who do you think is going to clean that up?”

He imagined his hands wrapped around her pretty neck, squeezing until her eyes popped wide and she gagged. He could feel her soft skin crushing under his fingers.

Pain stabbed through his stomach.

“Do it now, or you’ll forget. I’m not taking Francesca and Nicholas to the hospital when they get glass in their feet.”

“No. Of course, you won’t.” His stomach cinched tight; he’d swear she’d put a knife in his gut. He was going to be sick.

He fled to the bathroom just in time, flung up the toilet lid, and vomited into the bowl. When the internal upheaval stilled, he rocked back on his heels, gripping the porcelain rim. The bitter aftertaste of sickness clung to the inside of his mouth.

High heels clicked on the black and white floor tiles. “You can’t even get drunk without fucking up,” Lani said. “God, that’s disgusting.”

He’d been sick in this toilet before. Maybe a dozen times in the past he’d crouched in this same position with Lani standing over him. He’d be sick here again and again and again. For the eternity of his life, it would be this way.

He sank to his knees, still clinging to the toilet. “If I disappoint you so badly...” His insides ached, raw and hollow. “Then why did you marry me?”

She didn’t answer.

He tipped his head back and met her eyes, found them glassy and unfocused. “Lani.”

“I saw you,” she said distantly. “At your Independence Day show the week after Far Cry got signed to Atlas. The minute I saw you play, I knew you were going to be someone. You were going places. I wanted to go, too.”

It wasn’t worth it to look at her. Jeff closed his eyes and tried to figure out how he could have been such a fool for so long. “It never had anything to do with me, did it?”

“Sure it did.” She spoke quietly, as if to soften the blow, or to make it strike all that much harder. “You were easy.”

An easy mark. Was he easy because he was already half in love with her from their first night together? Or had he just been that gullible? He swallowed, but the sickness didn’t leave his tongue. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Of what?”

“Everything.”

Her heels scraped with her step back. “We picked this life together. Don’t pretend you never wanted me.”

“I did want you, once.” Once upon a time, but not anymore. Not ever again.

“Jeff.” Her voice went flat. “I’m pregnant.”

He didn’t look up. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t bring himself to feel surprise. Neither could he stop the fresh wave of nausea from rising. He leaned over the toilet again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1984

“Hey, Jeff. Give me one second.” Angela Tarr waded through a pack of tussling kindergarteners to the sink where she washed gummy bear residue from her hands. She scrubbed them dry on her jeans and, wiping strands of brown hair from her eyes, turned to face Jeff. “You’re early. Good day in the studio?”

Jeff shrugged, lingering in the doorway of the playroom. “Less good, more a waste of time.”

“David’ll be in a great mood tonight then.”

“Safe bet.”

She made a face and looked over her shoulder. “Fran, Nick, your dad’s here.”

Seated at a plastic table, Fran glanced up, then began replacing red and blue Legos in a storage tub. She carried the tub back to the toy shelf across the sunny playroom and made her way to Jeff’s side. He curled his fingers around her hand, surprised anew by her smallness.

“Nicky,” Angela called.

Nicky continued slamming a toy fire truck head-to-head with another toddler’s police car.

“Nick.” Jeff raised his voice. “Get your butt over here, or you don’t get a Happy Meal on the way home.”

Nick shot off the ground with all the speed of a voracious four-year-old. He raced to Jeff, staring up with blond-brown hair falling into wide blue eyes. “With a Hot Wheels car?”

“If that’s what they’re doing now, sure.” Jeff scooped him up in one arm before he could change his mind and make a run for freedom. “Hey, Angie, I keep meaning to ask you...”

“That’s never good.” Angela crossed her arms over her chest and waited with upraised eyebrows.

“Yeah, right. Look, I know you’ve got that age two-to-eight rule, but Lani and I were hoping you might make an exception for Kevin.” Red heated his face at her dry look. Fucking Lani. “We’ll pay double. I know he’d be more work.”

“It’s not the work, Jeff. How can Lani be tired of him already? He’s barely a year old.”

Lani was tired of him the minute he popped out, but even to Angela, he couldn’t say that. He shrugged, juggling Nick when the boy struggled toward the floor. “She doesn’t have a lot of patience. She could use some time alone.”

“Right.”

“Hey, forget about it, okay? I was thinking it might be better to hire a nanny or something anyway.”

“Jeff.” Angela sighed. “You know I’ll do it, and don’t give me any bogus about paying extra. But you are going to owe me one heck of a favor.”

After the kids had been put to bed and Kevin’s wailing faded from the baby monitor, Jeff collapsed onto the sofa. The day’s irritation--bickering in the studio and August heat and children’s tantrums--throbbed inside his skull like the strokes of a sledgehammer. The acrid scent of Lani’s fingernail polish didn’t help. He eyed her gleaming hair and the black satin handbag resting on the sofa cushion beside her. “Going out?”

Lani nodded without looking up from her polishing. Crimson streaked her nails like blood.

“Where?”

“Paris Marceau has a showing at a new gallery in Old City. Tonight’s the opening.”

He found an old copy of *American Outdoors* on the coffee table and flipped through it. He’d been toying with the idea of taking the kids camping. “You didn’t ask me along.”

“You hate art.”

“Still.”

Lani started on her left hand. “I’m going out with a few girlfriends, Jeff. I’d rather you weren’t around to embarrass me.”

He shrugged. He’d never liked Paris Marceau’s photos anyway; too many black and white shots of bird wings and horse asses. Better to let Lani go out with her friends and spend the evening drinking too much and making jokes with each other at his expense. “Angela said she’d take Kevin.”

“I told you she would.”

“She didn’t have to.”

“She did if she wanted to keep our business.”

“She doesn’t need our business. David makes more than enough for both of them with the band.” The Jaywalkers’ success disgusted him in a way a person’s own band shouldn’t disgust them. They recorded boring pop songs with nothing of the artistry behind Far Cry, but that didn’t stop the Jaywalkers from going gold in ten different countries. He dropped the magazine back on the table.

“Angela wanted a hobby; she got one. Now she needs business.” Lani screwed the bottle of nail polish shut. “Are you fucking her?”

Accusation number one thousand eighty-nine. Or was it one thousand ninety? He thought about women who wore faded blue jeans and spent their days playing with kids instead of shopping and preening. He sighed. “No.”

“Did you have to think about it?”

“Yes.”

Her lips twisted into an expression caught halfway between a smile and a grimace. “She’s a dog. You know that, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t have called her that.”

“She’s got no tits. But I guess that’s more your style.”

He shifted and stared at the blank television screen. “I said I’m not fucking her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care.”

She reclined against the back of the sofa, eyes sharp. “Just can’t keep it in your pants, can you?”

He stood up, snagging his wallet off the table.

“Going somewhere?”

“Out.”

After an hour and five shots of Wild Turkey, the boy leaning through the Corvette's window looked like heaven and hell bundled together. Bleached hair wisped around a soft face and silver piercings glittered from his lower lip, right nostril, and eyebrow. Black vinyl pants and a fishnet shirt proclaimed his occupation. For twenty bucks, Jeff could find out what the lip piercing felt like against his dick.

"Am I getting in?" The kid tilted his head and ran the tip of his tongue over his lip. "Or not?"

"How old are you?"

"How old do you want me to be?"

"No fucking games. How old?"

The kid shook white hair out of eyes smeared with liner and mascara. "Eighteen."

He might be telling the truth. Might be. Jeff jerked his head. "Get in."

The kid pulled the door open and poured himself over leather upholstery. "You mind?" He didn't wait for an answer before tapping a cigarette out of the pack on the dashboard and lighting it.

Jeff stared straight ahead. Streetlights made flickering pools of yellow on the sidewalks.

"So." The kid slid his hand over Jeff's thigh and higher. "What's on your mind?"

Jeff sent the babysitter home before he let the kid--Rafe, he'd said his name was, lips curled and eyes inviting--into the townhouse. Through the haze of whiskey, he was still debating the intelligence of bringing a boy home at all, when he realized Rafe had stopped following him. He paused with a hand on the stair banister and looked back.

The kid stood halfway across the living room, eyes fixed on the guitar leaning against the back of the couch. It was Jeff's favorite, a Gibson he'd had painted with a fox stretched along the lower curve, its body shaped wholly by black, tribal lines. He'd been playing it three hours ago while Kevin bounced in his play-chair and made up his own gurgling words to match the chords.

Slippery nerves twisted in his gut. "What are you looking at?"

The kid looked up, cynicism shocked from his eyes. "You're... I mean, I thought you looked like... but..."

Jeffrey Cruz. Rock star. Closet fag.

"I grew up listening to..."

“Leave it alone,” Jeff said.

Rafe shut his mouth. He was the same kid Jeff had picked up on the street corner, jaded and used and too young, but he crossed the living room with no swagger. He stopped in front of Jeff and searched him with dark eyes.

Jeff’s heart beat too hard in his chest. Why should he care what some whore thought of him? Whiskey-flavored defiance burned the back of his throat. But he did care. He had always cared.

“It doesn’t matter,” the kid said. “It’s okay. You know?”

He arched up and kissed Jeff. There was no more defiance or anger or disappointment. Nothing mattered but that the inside of Rafe’s mouth tasted like peppermint candy and that his skin was soft, and that the lip piercing wasn’t cold like Jeff had expected, but warm and smooth and metallic.

By the time they made it up the stairs and into the bedroom, bumping into walls and fumbling with doorknobs, Jeff didn’t care if Rafe’s eagerness was real or faked. Clothes disappeared. Sinking into the bed, their frames fit together like nothing else, and when Jeff came at last, the release was made of both screaming lights and bone-deep relief.

Afterwards, he felt weightless. He sprawled over the bed and rubbed Rafe’s bleached hair between his fingertips, the tension draining from his body. He remembered what it was like to feel good.

While Rafe stood and started to dress, Jeff closed his eyes. He thought he could fall asleep without the help of another drink tonight.

Then, the bedroom door opened.

Jeff’s eyes snapped open. The kid froze, one leg halfway in vinyl pants and the other bare.

Lani stood in the doorway, her hand still on the knob. Her eyes widened sharply, then narrowed. She placed a hand against the doorframe as if she needed its support. “Goddamn it, Jeff.”

“Hey, baby.” Jeff propped himself up on his elbows, offering a snide smile. “How was the show?”

“In our fucking bed?” Lani demanded. She waved a hand in Rafe’s direction and swayed slightly, a sure sign that she’d been drinking while she was out, just as he’d suspected. “In our goddamn, fucking bed?”

“Shit,” Rafe growled, struggling into his pants. A fifty dollar bill stuck out of his pocket.

“I mean, *Christ*, Jeff. You couldn’t just do him in your car?”

“Come on, honey, don’t be a bitch.” Jeff sat up, feet hitting the floor. He reached for the pack of cigarettes on the bedside table and eyed his wife from under heavy eyelids. “By the way, I want a divorce.”

“You... What?”

He lit his cigarette and took a drag. “You heard me.”

“You *bastard!*” Lani’s voice pitched into a scream, every line of her body going rigid beneath the silk of her black dress. She moved faster than Jeff had ever guessed she could while drunk, red nails scrabbling over the gilt frame of the Kandinsky hanging beside the door. It ripped off the nail supporting it, and she threw it like a Frisbee.

Jeff stood fast. The painting missed him by half a foot, smashing into the wall above the bed. The frame cracked; the canvas tore.

“You son of a bitch!” Lani screamed as she grabbed a lamp.

Jeff hesitated for a single instant. If he stayed, she would vent her anger dangerously but quickly. If he stopped her, she’d have him arrested, probably by a queer-hating cop. Or he could hide.

He crossed the room in a heartbeat, snagging Rafe’s arm as he went.

“What the fuck?” the kid howled, but Jeff yanked, and they spilled into the bathroom. Jeff slammed the door, locked it, and leaned his weight on it. A second later, the wood vibrated against his spine as something shattered on the other side.

“I hate you!” Fists pounded on the door. “You fucking bastard! Do you know everything you put me through? Do you know what I did for you? I did everything, you bastard. *I did everything!*”

“What the hell, man?” Wide-eyed, the kid leaned against the shower, the glass door rumbled at his weight. “What the fucking *hell?*”

Jeff shook his head. What the hell? How should he know? He slid down the shaking bathroom door until he sat naked on cold linoleum, legs spread out in front of him. Lani screamed and ranted from outside. He wondered if the door’s lock would hold.

“Jesus Christ,” Rafe said, checking his pocket to ensure the safety of his money. “You’re crazy.”

“Yeah.” Jeff started to laugh, slowly, then harder. “Yeah, I am.”

He didn’t know if he’d ever stop laughing.

“Look.” David Tarr scraped a hand through his short hair. “You know we don’t want to bring personal problems into the music.”

“Then don’t.” Jeff watched him over the rim of a coffee cup.

“What about Angela?”

“What about her?”

“Lani was of the opinion that you were interested in her.”

“Well, if Lani thinks so...” Jeff set the cup down hard; it met the diner table like a gunshot. “I never touched your wife.”

“Maybe not,” David agreed. “But interest’s not the same as action, is it? And you are the one who went to the daycare every day.”

“Lani always had better things to do than pick up her kids. What do you want from me, David?”

“An admission. It’s all right if you’re attracted to her. I’m just looking for your word there’s nothing more to it.”

“You’re a fucking ass.” Jeff dug in his pockets, the need for a cigarette forcing the air from his lungs. “This is bullshit, you know? Who I’m attracted to is none of your fucking business, whether it is or isn’t Angie. Did you talk to her about any of this?”

“She threw a plate at my head when I tried. That pretty much says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Sure.” Jeff laughed, coming up with a Marlboro and a lighter. “One day out of the blue you decided your wife was cheating on you.”

“Listen, Jeff.” David leaned his elbows on the table. “Just because Angela and I are having problems doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. The last thing I want is for her to end up like Lani.”

“That’s not even remotely possible.” Jeff took a deep drag of his cigarette. “Unless you know a hypnotist who specializes in queen bitch complexes.”

“Is that why you feel justified abusing her?”

The white stick dangled from Jeff’s lips as he stared at David. “Abusing...?”

“We all knew you were bored with her, Jeff. That didn’t give you the right to knock her around.”

“Jesus Christ.” He stood fast, the blood rushing from his head in a dizzying wave. “That goddamn bitch.”

“Think about what you’re doing,” David said. “Haven’t you put Lani through enough?”

“Not nearly. David. You’re fired.” He stepped away from the table, then paused. “No. You know what? Fuck you. I quit.”

Angela knew as much as David, but Lani had remained silent about the boy prostitute. She was saving him, though Jeff couldn’t think of a better occasion. Maybe she was just worried about endangering his record sales.

“Do you think you’ll get back together?” Angela asked while they sat on plastic chairs sized for kindergarteners.

“God, I hope not.” Jeff straddled his chair backward, elbows propped on the purple backrest. His eyes trailed over the tangle of kids sleeping on the nap rug, Nick curled between two blond girls. He suspected the four-year-old would throw a fit if he knew he was so close to cootie carriers.

At a table in the back of the room, Fran hunched over a coloring book, dark blond hair hanging in her eyes. Jeff hadn’t realized how much he missed her until he walked through the daycare door and she sprang into his arms. He wanted the divorce negotiations done and wanted to see Fran, Nick, and Kevin every day. But he hadn’t even spoken to Lani since that night, and he suspected a settlement was a long way off.

“You need a lawyer,” Angela said. “My cousin Tammy didn’t think she needed one, and Josh took the house, the kids, even the dog.”

“We don’t have a dog.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll pay whatever she wants.”

“Don’t be a schmuck. Make her work for it.”

“You sound like--” *Danny*. He hadn’t thought about Danny in ages. He watched his youngest son, fast asleep in a wooden-slatted crib. He watched the rise and fall of Kevin’s chest until thoughts of Danny passed.

Angela glanced his way, but if she wondered at the slip, she said nothing.

“I used to think I had friends,” he said, “but everybody I know is jumping on Lani’s rumor train. She’s spreading all these lies about how I yelled at her, how I’d fuck her up if she dared to talk back to me. Did you ever see Lani with a black eye?”

“No.”

“But everybody believes it. My parents believe it. When I called to tell them Lani and I were separating, they already knew. She told them I’m an abusive alcoholic. She’s made me into this

chauvinist monster. Christ.” He scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to rub away the feeling of grit and grime that lingered under his skin. He hadn’t slept in two days. “My dad wouldn’t even let me talk to my mom. He spent twenty minutes telling me how he knew this would happen when I starting living this lifestyle, and then he hung up on me.”

“Jeff.” Angela laid a hand on his arm and squeezed. “Give it some time. Let your parents calm down and then talk to them again. They’ll believe you.”

“You don’t know my parents.”

“I know that if they don’t listen to you, they don’t deserve you as a son.”

“Right.”

“I mean it. Believe me, I know what it’s like to be accused of something you didn’t do.”

Jeff looked up, for the first time noticing the lines of exhaustion etched on her face. They matched his own. “David?”

Her lips twisted up in a wry smile. “Yeah, David.”

“I’m sorry, Angie. I told him there was nothing going on, but...”

“I know. David thinks everything has to go according to the shiny plan he’s got laid out in his head, and when roadblocks come up, he gets frustrated. He doesn’t understand why Lani would lie. Sometimes he can be so naïve, I want to slap him.”

“He said you threw a plate.”

“I missed.”

A laugh rose up Jeff’s throat before he could stop it. “At least we’ve got each other to talk to, with both our lives going to shit at the same time.”

“We’ve both been expecting it, haven’t we?” She sighed and twirled a lock of hair between two fingers. “I’ve been so angry with David lately, all his stupid posturing. Every time he starts talking about his daddy’s campaign for governor, I just want to pour Drain-O on his dinner.”

“I wish I’d thought about that with Lani.” He shifted, limbs cramped after sitting so long. “Are you guys going to be okay?”

“Not anymore than you and Lani. It’s okay, though. The funny thing is, I don’t think I ever really loved David. He’s got no room in his heart for anyone but himself. And if he doesn’t trust me, if Lani doesn’t trust you, so the hell what? We don’t need them. We’re better off without them. Do you want to have dinner with me?”

It took half a minute for Jeff to process the change of conversation. “What?”

“Dinner.” Angela smiled, bangs falling into her eyes. “It’s a thing people do when they get hungry. If they have money, they go somewhere nice like Donnatello’s. Which would be good, since they have a bar and I want to get drunk.”

“Oh.” He glanced back at Fran, carefully moving a red crayon across the page of her coloring book. He had lawyers to hire, an apartment to find, and a new band to think about. Going out with Angela might be a phenomenally bad idea.

“Look.” Angela blinked and rubbed a hand across her eyes. Her smile wavered. “I just don’t want to think about David tonight. Please come out with me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1985

The phone rang during the first commercial break in “The Price Is Right”, as Jeff turned to Angela and asked, “Are we really watching this?”

She laughed. “Get the phone before it wakes Kevin.”

He rose from the couch and padded barefoot into the kitchen to pick up the line. “Yeah, hello?”

A brief pause filled Jeff’s ear with silence. Then a low, male voice asked, “Is this Jeffrey Cruz?”

Fuck, was Jeff’s first thought. Deranged fans insisted on finding his number. No, he didn’t want to meet them for lunch. No, he didn’t need a new bassist. No, he didn’t want to take their teenage virginity.

“Yeah,” he sighed, resigning himself to the awkward conversation. “Who’s this?”

“My name’s Adam. I’m calling about Daniel Chandler.”

The world stopped. Jeff clutched the phone with whitening knuckles while the floor dipped and swirled under his feet. Ice coated the insides of his veins, traveling to his head and freezing his brain.

“Are you there?”

“I’m here,” he rasped. It was all over, his career, his family. Someone knew. In hours it would be splashed across every magazine cover in the country. *Jeffrey Cruz: Gay!* “What do you want?”

“I need to talk to you about Danny. Can we meet?”

PART IV: 1984

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Danny drifted, or maybe the world drifted. The alley he stood in blurred in and out of focus. He braced a hand against the brick wall and closed his eyes. The alley smelled like piss and rotting garbage, and he heard something skittering through the dark.

A few minutes later, a door slammed open and Jack Krueger left the neon glow of his nightclub. The door shut, and darkness covered the alley again.

“Shit, man, I’ve been waiting for, like, I don’t know how fucking long.” Danny pushed away from the wall, hair falling into his eyes. He shivered, though it was unusually warm for a November night. “You got my stuff?”

“Should I?” Jack asked.

“Come on, man, you promised.”

“And you promised cash on delivery. I’m not a goddamn loan shark, Danny. Money, then smack. That’s how I operate.”

“Who says I don’t have the money?”

Jack crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’ll have it Friday. I get my royalty check this Friday, I told you last week.” The checks had been getting smaller lately, and he had rent to pay, but...

“Today isn’t Friday,” Jack said.

“You gotta give me a break.” Danny shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. “I’ve got nothing left. Come on, man, please, help me out.”

“And what do I get out of it?”

He swallowed uneasily. “The pleasure of helping another fucking human being.”

“I’m not a philanthropist.”

“Really.”

“Stop fucking around. You want an extension ‘til Friday, I want a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

Jack smirked and reached down. The zipper of his jeans glittered silver as it clicked down.

“Oh, fuck, man, not again.” Danny’s stomach pitched. A headache surged in his skull. “Come on, I’ll work a night in the club, wash dishes or something.”

“Do you want to get high or not?”

Danny didn’t want to. He wanted to turn his back and go home, but he couldn’t breathe and couldn’t think. “Motherfucker,” he said through clenched teeth.

He went to his knees on the concrete.

Afterward, when Danny was on his hands as well as his knees, trying to spit up what Jack had shot down his throat, Jack pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket. “What year was it,” he said, “when that magazine called you the new sex symbol? Seventy-seven or seventy-eight? I almost feel sorry for you.”

He dropped the bag on the damp street and went back inside the club.

Danny stuffed the bag in the pocket of his jeans and wiped a sweatshirt sleeve over the back of his mouth. It came away sticky. He stood without vomiting despite the spasms in his stomach and leaned for a minute against the wall, then made his way down the alley and toward the subway.

At home, he brushed his teeth three times and gargled the last of a bottle of Listerine.

“Cass,” he sighed, dropping onto the pumpkin-colored couch in the living room, hearing the springs creak beneath him. “We got problems.” He reached for the creature curled up on the cushion, but froze when his fingers met fur. The ferret didn’t move. The chill of its body seemed to seep into the bones of Danny’s hand.

“Fuck...” He pulled away, shivers skittering up and down his arms. “*Fuck.*”

Maybe it was only sleeping. He forced himself to pick the animal up in both hands, nausea creeping up the back of his throat. The ferret's body was as stiff as a plank. When Danny dropped it, it bounced off the cushions.

"Oh, Jesus." Sorrow descended like shadows after sunset, threatening to swallow him. The backs of his eyes prickled, then burned. He wiped a hand hard across his face. He wasn't going to lose it over a pet he'd barely paid attention to. He couldn't.

He escaped to the apartment's kitchen. It was a cramped room, the floor black with spilled food and drink. A roach crawled under the refrigerator when he turned on the light, but at least he was away from the sight of the tiny, furry body.

When he was calm again, he knew he had to get rid of the ferret before it started to smell. He found a plastic grocery bag and went back into the living room. With his eyes closed, he scooped the corpse into the bag and knotted it shut, then carried it out of the apartment and down the stairs.

Jeff had bought the ferret for him eight years ago. Goddamn Jeff.

An Amazon of a girl sat on the fourth floor landing. She curled into the corner as he passed. Danny ignored her.

He trudged outside and left the ferret's corpse in the dumpster. He stood for a minute, staring into the rank-smelling bin. He wanted to say something to the ferret to express his regret over not paying enough attention to it, not emptying its litter pan as often as he should have, not giving it enough toys to play with. No words came, though, and he went back into the apartment building without any closure.

The girl on the fourth floor was gone. Danny continued upward until he got the eighth floor. There, he stopped and stared.

The girl had climbed over the railing and stood with her back to it, the heels of her sneakers gripping the landing where it stuck out a few inches beyond the rail. Her upper body leaned over the empty space above the drop, a curtain of bright gold hair falling around her face and shoulders all the way down to her waist. She was even larger than Danny had first guessed--or cared--tall and big-boned, but rail thin.

Ten steps up and Danny could be on the ninth floor. Home.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

The girl didn't move. "Get away from me."

Her voice was low. Too low. Danny stepped closer, boots silent against the floor. "You could end up paralyzed, you know. Probably you'll just die, but if not..."

Her hands tightened on the rail. She had big hands, too, strong knuckles and long fingers. Rust-colored blood crusted her unpolished nails.

“You might spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair.” He stared at the back of tight jeans and a baggy white tee-shirt, wondering why he didn’t just go home. Let her jump. “I saw a TV show about this guy in a wheelchair. His daughter was always wheeling him places and feeding him green Jell-O. Just green. Never red or orange. Seemed kind of mean.”

“Why don’t you just go the fuck away?” the girl said in her low voice and lifted her head.

She wasn’t a girl at all.

“What’s your name?” Danny asked.

The boy blinked one gray-blue eye. The other was swollen shut in a mass of purpled flesh. Dried blood covered his chin and split lip. “Adam.”

“What happened, Adam?”

“What do you care?”

“If you don’t want people asking--” Danny took another step toward the edge-- “you should go somewhere more private. The roof’s empty.”

Adam’s grin looked more like a snarl.

“You sure you don’t want to come back over to this side?”

“If you take one more step, I’m letting go.”

“Okay.” Danny stopped. “How about telling me what’s so awful that a kid like you wants to kill himself?”

“What are you, a fucking cop?” The boy stared down the stairwell. “You want to know?”

“I’ve got nothing better to do.”

His hands shifted on the railing. Danny tensed. What would he do if the kid did let go? Jump after him? They’d both go over. They would both die.

Adam didn’t let go. He lifted his chin, straight hair swaying around his face. “I swore when I left home nobody would ever hurt me again.”

“Who hurt you before?”

One corner of his mouth curled up. His unbruised eye reflected the light like a shining mirror.

“Who do you think?”

“And now?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He shook his head. “It was supposed to be different here. But it’s not. I didn’t ask to be this way.”

“What way is that?” While Adam looked away, Danny stepped closer. His heart beat in his throat. He’d lost one life today. Boys couldn’t be knotted up in trash bags and thrown in dumpsters.

Adam looked over his shoulder, measuring the shortening distance between them. “If I tell you I’m gay, will you go away?”

Danny held his gaze steady on the boy. “No.”

“Aren’t you noble?”

“I never thought so. What’s so hard about being gay?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“You sure?”

Adam frowned.

“Is that why you got beat up tonight?” Danny asked.

“Maybe.”

“And this person who hurt you before. You think they did it because you’re gay?”

Adam sucked in a breath. His voice came out strangled. “He said that was why. He said...”

“What?”

“He said he did it to show me what happened to little boy faggots.” Adam searched Danny’s face with wide eyes. “I just... I wanted...”

“It’s okay.” Danny didn’t move. He thought about the plastic bag in his pocket. He thought about the plastic bag in the dumpster. “What happened tonight?”

Adam turned away. “There was a guy at the bar. He was an ugly shit. He bought me a drink though, and he said he liked my earring. He told me he had a place around the corner, and then he beat the crap out of me in the alley. He said, ‘Next time why don’t you go to a fag joint?’”

“It’s not worth dying over.”

“You don’t know,” Adam whispered. “You don’t know a thing about it.”

“Fuck you,” Danny said.

Adam swung his gaze back. “What?”

“Fuck you.” Danny crossed the landing and stood inches away, close enough to reach out. But he didn’t. Anger and exhaustion traveled through his veins at the same heavy pace, an awful pain he could never escape. “You think you’ve got such a tough life? Everybody goes through hell in a different way. You’re what, twenty? And you think dying will make you any happier? What if it’s even worse after death? What if hell is everything that ruined your life and more?”

Fear flared in gray-blue eyes. “It couldn’t be worse.”

“It can always be worse. Life’s a bitch. Death might be a bastard. Are you sure you’re ready to find out? If you are, go ahead and jump. If not, stop whining.”

It wasn’t fear glistening behind Adam’s eyes after all. It was tears. He looked down the stairwell, then back at Danny. Crystal drops ran down his face. “Does it get better? Ever?”

Danny glanced down the stairs, then at the flight rising above them. He remembered years ago, climbing the steps to dozens of cheap hotel rooms, only he hadn’t been alone then. “Sometimes,” he said. “Sometimes it’s better than you ever dreamed it could be. And sometimes it’s a nightmare you can’t wake up from.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No.” Danny turned his gaze back to Adam. He held a hand out over the railing. “Will you come back over now? Please?”

For an endless moment, Adam didn’t move. Danny imagined his hands releasing from the railing, his body twisting, falling through the air. Pain hit him hard, jarring him down into his bones, and he thought he should jump, too, and be done with it.

Then Adam took his hand.

“That’s good.” Danny folded his fingers around Adam’s, relief draining the last of his strength. He braced himself against the rail and held tight while Adam swung one leg over, then the other. He had only an instant then to marvel over Adam’s height--a full foot taller than Danny--before the boy caught him by surprise and dragged him into a desperate hug. Long arms wrapped around his neck and blond hair enfolded them both as Adam started to cry. His body shook without sound, his hands gripping Danny’s back like claws.

“It’s okay.” Danny put an arm around the boy, finally catching the smell of alcohol on his breath. “What’s your apartment number?”

“I don’t want to be alone.” Adam clutched him tighter. “Please. I just want to be with somebody.”

“All right. Come on.” Maybe it was the night or Jack Krueger or the ferret to blame, but Danny didn’t want to be alone either. He led Adam up to the ninth floor, into the third apartment. The smell of stale air greeted them as Adam stumbled over a half-full litter pan in the middle of the floor.

Danny took Adam past piles of dirty clothing and discarded junk food boxes into the bedroom. “You can stay here tonight if you want. In the morning you’ve got to go.”

“Wait.” Adam caught his arm as he turned to go back into the living room.

Danny stopped. Hurt sliced through his gut, and the cure was in his pocket. “What?”

“Stay with me.”

Danny turned, staring through the dark of the bedroom. Even with the black eye and split lip, Adam was beautiful. And too young. Danny swallowed and stopped breathing. When Adam leaned down and kissed him, he stood still, tasting blood on cut lips.

Adam pulled back, eyes wide. “I’m sorry. I’m... I thought you were...”

“I am,” Danny said. “But I can’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

Danny reached for the door, started to pull it shut, then paused. He glanced back. “Would you have jumped?”

Adam stared from the center of the room. “Maybe.”

Danny nodded and shut the door behind him.

Adam woke knowing he wasn’t in his own bed. The smell of unwashed sheets and cigarette smoke crept up his nostrils. When he opened his eyes, he saw strips of white paint peeling off the ceiling. When he rolled over, he saw a naked man’s back.

In the two months since his eighteenth birthday, Adam had woken up to more strange men than he could remember. None had looked quite like this. Beneath pale skin, he could count every one of this stranger’s ribs. A black tattoo of a running fox nestled between jutting shoulder blades, half-hidden by tangled clumps of red hair. The design looked familiar, though Adam couldn’t place it.

Vague memories of the night before slipped through his mind. He remembered finding the letter from Cranston House in the mail when he came home from work. The pink slip inside gave a lovely reason why his submission wasn’t suitable for publication at their house. He pinned it on

the wall over his typewriter with the other rejection slips and spent the next two hours poring over his manuscript, wondering if he had wasted three years of his life writing it.

Then, he went out to get drunk.

The man at the bar--he said his name was Leo--was pudgy in the middle and past middle age, but Adam had never been picky. He followed Leo out of the bar, expecting not great sex, but at least a distraction from his disappointment. Instead, he got a black eye, split lip, bruised ribs, and a kicked groin. He made his way home and drank the bottle of champagne he was saving for his first book sale. It gave him a headache and made him vomit twice.

For an hour after emptying the champagne bottle, he wandered the building hallways, unwilling to lock himself in his lonely apartment. At some point--he couldn't recall quite when--the memories of home returned. He thought about his childhood and about his teenage years. When he thought about his mother, the pain was worse than he'd ever known it, a guilty knife blade twisting in his belly until he was sobbing. He realized in a startling moment of clarity that no matter how far from home he ran, he would never forget the past. Only death would erase the agony. Death became a beautiful idea in his mind, a shining paradise of nothingness where all pain was forgiven and forgotten.

Then, a stranger stopped him from jumping.

He stared at the man's back, at the tattoo, at the red hair. He didn't even know the man's name, but he remembered the last question he'd asked.

Would you have jumped?

Adam wished the answer was yes, but if it was, he would have let go of the railing the second he heard footsteps behind him. No, he had wanted to be saved.

He lifted the bed sheets and slid out. He was still fully clothed; the man had done nothing but fall asleep after coming to bed. A novel idea, that someone on the planet wanted nothing from him. But how attractive were blood and bruises?

Adam shoved his feet into his sneakers and crouched down to tie the laces. He watched the bed for signs of movement and saw none. Should he wake the man up? Why bother? The embarrassment of his attempted kiss and the man's rejection stung worse than his swollen eye.

He left the bedroom and the apartment. If he was lucky, they'd never meet again.

Three hours later, Adam returned. He knocked on the apartment door and asked himself why he'd come back. *In the morning you've got to go*, the man had told him. He hadn't told him not to come back.

In eighteen years, no one had ever stood between Adam and harm. At home, his mother had done nothing to stop his father from beating the shit out of him. In high school, the teachers turned a blind eye on the torments his classmates devised. No one at the bar warned him about what Leo really wanted.

But last night, a stranger had stopped him from making the ultimate mistake.

He knocked again, shifting a bag of Chinese takeout from one arm to another. Food seemed as good a way as any to thank his savior.

No one answered after seven knocks. Adam was ready to abandon the idea when he heard the crash. He grabbed the doorknob and twisted, heart jumping up his throat. What was happening in there? The knob turned easily and the door swung inward.

The man who'd seemed so composed last night now knelt on the floor above a wicker waste basket. An electrical cord that tangled around his ankle led to a smashed lamp on the carpet behind him. His ribs hitched, and he vomited into the basket.

Adam froze in the doorway for half a minute, then slammed the door, dropped the food on the coffee table, and crossed the living room in two steps. "Are you okay?"

The man didn't look up. He braced his hands on the carpet, elbows shaking as if he might collapse over the trash basket at any second.

"Jesus." Adam dropped to his knees and laid a hand on the man's back, shocked by the hardness of bones under heated skin. "What's wrong?"

The man heaved again, but it was dry. He pushed away from the basket and sat hard at the foot of the couch, hair hanging in his face. Adam pushed the red locks away and found his skin flushed, pupils pinpointed and seeing nothing.

"I need you to tell me what to do." Adam swallowed and met the man's gaze, willed him to understand. Though he was certain the man's state had something to do with drugs, knowing didn't help. He had grown up on a Wisconsin dairy farm; he hadn't even smoked pot until two months ago. He didn't think this was pot.

The man wiped a hand across his mouth, missing a string of saliva that clung to the corner of his lips. He blinked.

"Stay here," Adam ordered before hurrying into the kitchen. He found no cups in the cabinet and nothing but a carton of chunky milk in the fridge. He fished a dirty glass from the sink and rinsed it off, filling it from the tap.

The man sat exactly where Adam had left him. Adam crouched down and pressed the glass into his hand. The man didn't respond. When Adam lifted it to his lips, water ran down his chin.

“Jesus,” Adam said again, not sure what else to do. *Leave*, he thought. *Get the hell out of here and don’t come back*. He put the glass on the table and backed away a step.

The man looked up so fast Adam thought his neck would snap like a bird flying into a windshield. His gaze wavered before it centered on Adam. “You’re...”

“Adam. My name’s Adam.”

The man lifted a hand a few inches off the floor and reached out. “Here...”

“I should go.”

“Stay...”

“I can’t.” He took another step and felt the door at his back. “You’ll be fine.”

The hand trembled, as if it was a great effort for the man to hold it out.

Adam reached for the doorknob.

The man could have walked past when he saw Adam hanging off the stairs. He could have pretended Adam would be fine.

Adam came to New York to escape. He wanted to find a shining knight, not become one. He didn’t understand why he let go of the doorknob, why he walked back across the room and knelt down. “What’s your name?” he asked, searching dark brown eyes.

“Hmm. Jim.” The man curled to one side, leaning against the couch, head drooping to the cushion behind him. “Jim Morrison. Jimmi... Hendrix. Janis Joplin. Elvis.”

“Sure you are.” Adam hooked his arms around the man’s middle and pulled him up onto the couch. His weight was like Styrofoam, a man’s square frame with none of the flesh Adam was used to.

Adam started to move back, but a skinny hand caught his wrist in a loose grip.

“Stay.” Wide eyes met his. “You’ll stay?”

Adam swallowed. “Yeah. For a while.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1985

The telephone wouldn't stop ringing, and Danny didn't care.

Adam lifted his head. "Answer it."

"They can call back." Danny couldn't take his eyes away from the sight of Adam's blond hair pooling over his hips, grazing his dick.

The phone rang again. And again.

"Come on." Adam teased him with a lick. "Answer it."

"Fuck." Danny grabbed the phone. It clattered against the cradle and threatened to hit the floor before he got a good grip. "Who the fuck?"

"Daniel." Ray's voice lanced through his ears.

Adam sank down on him, and Danny ground his teeth around a groan. The clock on Adam's nightstand blinked 12:48A.M. "Ye--ah."

"Are you sober?"

"Am I--" Danny jerked when Adam's tongue curled. Sober other than the unbelievable sensation of an eighteen-year-old boy's lips wrapped around his dick? And maybe the cocaine from two hours ago? "What do you want, Ray?"

"Robbie's dead."

The next morning Danny sat at Ray's kitchen table, halfway through a pack of cigarettes. He kept his eyes locked on the ashtray. If he looked up, he'd have to meet Mark Craig's curious

gaze. Ray had hired Mark four days before he told Danny the band wouldn't need him anymore. It had been ten months since then, and Danny was now living solely off the royalty checks from Far Cry's first, and ultimately more successful, records.

"It's crazy," Jake said again, shaking his head. "I still can't believe it."

Mark shrugged. "The guy had problems."

"Like what?" Danny ground his cigarette out in the glass tray. Too much nicotine made him nauseous, but he couldn't stop himself from reaching for another.

"Any guy who kills himself has problems, man. He was fucked up."

"Yet none of you noticed. You saw him every day for six months of touring, but you didn't notice anything was wrong."

"Hey, fuck you." Mark folded his arms over his chest. "Why the fuck are you even here?"

"I told him to come," Ray said, eyes cutting to the new singer. "Sit down, Mark."

Mark sat. Danny inhaled.

"Look." Ray rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Everyone in this room was close to Robbie, or as close as he let us be. We all owe him a goodbye, no matter how distasteful we find his method of death. His parents are having his body brought up to Albany for the funeral. I want us all to be there."

Danny flicked ashes off the end of his cigarette. "All of us."

"That's right."

"He deserves it," Jake agreed. "He put everything he had into this band."

"Including his life," Danny said. "Count me out."

Ray turned cold eyes on him. "You were a part of Far Cry for nine years."

"It was my band until you kicked me out."

"I'm not going into that now. If you can't be bothered to show up, I don't care. It was for Robbie, not for me. Christ knows I'd rather see you in a coffin than him any day."

"Shove it up your ass, Ray."

Mark's lips curled. "Isn't that your department?"

White fury flushed Danny's face. "Fuck you, you miserable jerk-off."

"Come on, guys." Jake put a hand on Danny's shoulder. "Like Ray said, this is for Robbie. Can we agree for once, for his sake?"

Danny yanked away and stood, shoving his cigarettes in his pocket. "Robbie's dead. Nothing is for his sake anymore."

"Fine," Ray said. "Don't show up. It's your choice."

"Fucking hell it is." He walked backward and snagged a bottle of whiskey off the counter on his way to the door. "What do you think, Ray? Can you spare it? Should be mine anyway. It was my voice that sold enough records for you to buy this goddamn house."

"Take it and get out."

In the instant before the door slammed shut behind him, Danny heard Mark arguing and Ray silencing him. They wouldn't come after him. They never did.

It would be easy to go Robbie's way. Too easy.

Danny leaned back against the couch cushions of Adam's apartment--their apartment, he had to remind himself every time he walked in and saw the orderly, if simple appearance--and stared at the razor blade on the coffee table. He twirled a capped syringe between his fingers and imagined it. Two quick slashes, one across each wrist. How hard would he have to press to sever the main arteries? What if he cut too deep? He choked on a silent laugh. It didn't matter if he cut too deep. Nothing would matter anymore.

He'd seen Robbie's apartment that morning with Ray, before the rest of the band gathered at Ray's house. The apartment stank of the rotting blood encrusting the bed sheets. Robbie had drunk half a bottle of tequila and slit his wrists. There was no suicide note, and no one remembered him saying anything special that morning. Robbie simply had nothing left to say to the world.

Did Danny?

He splashed an inch of brandy into a glass and set the bottle on the table along with the syringe. He tossed the drink back in one swallow.

If Danny slit his wrists, Ray wouldn't break down the doors to get to him. Adam would find him when he came home from the grocery store, shedding his red apron as he wandered through the living room. What would his face look like when he saw Danny sprawled across the bed with blood on the white sheets, on the hardwood floor, everywhere?

He poured two more inches of brandy, drank it, and picked up the razor blade. The steel glinted cold and sharp between his thumb and forefinger. Would it hurt? Would anyone miss him?

Even after seven months, he still didn't know why Adam stayed with him. The boy was young, attractive, and talented in and out of bed. Every morning when he went to work, Danny expected never to see him again. Adam would meet someone on the subway, someone stronger and handsomer and smarter; he'd wonder why he ever bothered with a wretch like Danny.

Every night, Adam came home. They ate takeout while they watched TV, and when Danny wasn't wasted, they had good--often great--sex. But even in the face of burgeoning contentment, Danny's fear remained. Any day, Adam would see him for what he really was, a washed-up junkie who'd wasted the last of his future chasing a dream he'd killed five years ago. Adam would leave. Danny would be alone again.

"Dan?" Adam called from the kitchen. "Did you drink my Pepsi? I can't believe you drank my last Pepsi."

Danny stared at the razor. He thought he saw the glimmer of his reflection in the steel. "It's behind the fried rice."

"What...? Oh."

Not yet. Danny laid the razor back on the table and picked up the syringe. The milky liquid inside rose above the usual line. Not yet. Maybe.

Adam sat in the lobby and pretended to read yesterday's copy of the *Times*. Sterile hospital scents burned the lining of his nostrils. Down the hallway where paramedics had wheeled Danny's gurney, someone called for a nurse.

Adam had been down similar hallways as often as he had waited in lobbies like this one. He and his mother shared not only blond hair and blue eyes, but broken bones and lies. No matter how hard the nurses prodded, or how understanding the doctors pretended to be, Adam knew what to say. He got in a fight at school. He fell down the stairs. He walked into a door.

Now he was back in the last place he wanted to be. He hated cops and doctors alike, but he hadn't known what else to do when Danny stopped breathing and his lips turned blue. Even now he could remember the feel of Danny's skin under his hand, cold like a corpse while he dialed 911. When the paramedics came, Adam watched them work and tried not to scream with rage or helplessness. All he could do was stay calm, the medics said, but he had already spent so much of his life in inaction.

He couldn't stand to think of losing Danny. Even more, he couldn't stand to think that it might be his fault.

Before they'd moved in together last Christmas, Adam had really had no idea how deeply Danny had sunk into his addictions. He'd known Danny used, but not what or how much. Walking into the bathroom to find him shooting heroin into the thin stretch of skin between his toes was more than a wake up call; it was a blaring alarm. One which Adam had ignored. Danny was a grown man; it wasn't Adam's place to tell him how to live his life. At least that was what he'd told himself. But now he couldn't help wondering if he just hadn't wanted to be bothered.

All through the winter, Adam had watched Danny flounder through days and weeks with little on his mind but his next fix. He'd thought more than once about breaking up with Danny and asking him to move out, but he could never quite bring himself to do it. Danny had saved his life, after all, and he was Adam's first real lover.

He'd hoped things would change in the spring, that with the coming of gentler weather, Danny might cut back as he was always promising to do. But spring changed nothing. It was late May already, Danny was using as heavily as ever, and Adam was still trying to ignore the fact that Danny might not be alive to see summer.

Now he sat where he'd been told to wait, and waiting was worse than feeling Danny's life slip away under his hands.

"Adam Shirk?"

He's dead, Adam thought. She came to tell me he's dead.

Instead, the nurse said, "Daniel's conscious."

He stared at her, numb with relief.

She hesitated. "You're his friend?"

Hatred burned the back of his throat like smoke. He'd held Danny's hand all the way here and he'd begged the doctors to take care of Danny. The nurse knew what he was. But he sealed his lips and nodded.

"The doctor thought it would be good for Daniel to see a familiar face."

He stood, dropping the newspaper on his empty chair, and followed her. Going down the hall past doctors in surgery scrubs and nurses wheeling gurneys was like walking down a tunnel of memories. He looked over his shoulder a few times, searching for the warning on his father's face, the unspoken *keep your mouth shut, son*, but the only faces in the lobby were those of strangers.

The nurse led him into a room halfway down the hall. A thin white curtain hung around Danny's bed, isolating him from the room's other occupant, a grizzled, old, black man. Adam slipped inside the partition, hands in his pockets, and waited for the nurse to leave.

When the curtain fell back into place, he looked at Danny. A blue hospital blanket covered his arms and chest, tubes running out from beneath the edges of the blanket and leading up to IV bags. His lips twitched, no longer blue but still too pale as his eyes rolled to meet Adam's. "Hey."

All the things Adam wanted to say--had he wanted to say anything?--fled his mind. He sank into a chair by the foot of the bed and stared at the tubes.

"Sorry." Danny's voice was softer than usual, empty of his brash carelessness. "About... You know."

Adam slid his hand over the blanket and laced his fingers with Danny's. He didn't mean to say it, but the words crept past his lips before he could cut them off. "You have to stop."

Danny turned his eyes to their entwined hands. "Not you, too."

"You could have died."

"I didn't die."

"If you don't stop with the drugs, you will."

Danny's thumb grazed Adam's knuckles. "Would that really be so bad?"

Adam jerked away. Anger and fear tangled in his gut until he couldn't tell which was which. For a minute, he wished the overdose had been worse, bad enough to scare the sense back into Danny. But how much worse could it get? He'd been legally dead for thirty seconds.

"Come on." Danny sighed. "Don't be like that. I was just joking. But it's not like I'm making the world a better place or anything."

"You made my world better." Adam swept his gaze over Danny's face, searching the pallor and sleepless rings for some sign that the man who'd saved his life was still there. He found none. "I guess I don't count."

"You count."

"Not enough."

"Adam..."

"I want to know one thing." He grabbed Danny's hand again, squeezing it hard enough that Danny winced. "I want to know, after all the bullshit you said to me the night we met, what happened in your life that was so awful you want to die? Give me one good reason, and next time I'll put the needle in you myself."

Outside the curtain, the other patient coughed and called for a nurse.

Inside, Danny looked away. "Not now."

"Fine." Adam dropped his hand. He didn't pick it up again. "Not now."

Danny closed his eyes.

That night Adam called Ray, and Ray gave him a name. Jeffrey Cruz.

The instant he saw Jeff, Adam knew where he'd seen Danny's tattoo. It was the same fox painted on the guitar Jeff wore in all his music videos.

"I guess I don't understand why you came all this way to talk to me," Jeff said.

Adam glanced out the limousine window at the Philadelphia streets rolling past. The last of his paycheck would get him a train ticket back to New York, but he'd better pray Danny hadn't spent the rent money on smack. "You were his friend, weren't you?"

"For a while. Are you tracking down all of Danny's old friends?"

"Ray said you were like brothers." They had been more than that though, or Jeff wouldn't be so guarded now. "He said Danny would listen to you."

"Ray said." Jeff's lips curled back. "I thought he fired Danny."

The streets outside were strange to Adam. He missed the cold, gray atmosphere of Manhattan. "If you'd talk to Danny, tell him to cut back on the drugs..."

"Look, Adam." Jeff leaned forward in his seat to get a beer from the limo's mini-fridge. "You seem like a nice kid, but you don't know Danny very well if you think he's going to stop fucking himself up on my say-so. Drugs have always been his vice."

"It's been worse since Robbie died. He ended up in the hospital last week. And I found a razor in his sock drawer. He says he doesn't know how it got there, but how else..." He trailed off when he saw Jeff's blank expression.

"Robbie what?"

"Robbie... died. Didn't you know?"

Jeff sank back in his seat, jaw slack. "I've been on vacation... Robbie? What happened?"

"He slit his wrists."

“Robbie?” Jeff asked again. “Why would he do something like that? Is this a joke?”

Adam shifted. He hated the limo. He hated Philadelphia. He wanted to be home with Danny, but this time he couldn’t stand by and watch someone he cared about die, not like he’d let his mother die. “He slit his wrists. Does it sound like a joke?”

Jeff stared out the window, eyes distant as Adam spoke.

“And now Danny’s playing with razor blades.” Adam wished he could read Jeff’s face, but the bold angles were calm. He needed something to break the peace, a sign that he was looking for help in the right place. He took a chance. “Danny told me what you did to him.”

Jeff’s eyes cut back to him, the brown shifting to near-black. “Don’t believe everything Danny tells you.”

“What should I believe?”

“It was his own fault.” Jeff rested his elbows on his knees, eyes on his beer as he twisted the cap off. The darkness of his gaze opened, betraying mysteries beyond pain. “Who are you that Danny tells you everything? His latest boy-toy?”

“I guess I’m the only one who cares about him.”

Whatever door had opened behind Jeff’s eyes snapped shut so fast Adam blinked. Jeff took a swig off the beer. “I didn’t know Danny was into pretty boys.”

Adam didn’t need the door. In an instant, he understood. Danny had loved Jeff, who wasn’t pretty at all, but something more striking than handsome could ever be. Jeff had hurt Danny, and maybe how or why didn’t matter anymore. Jeff wasn’t going to make amends, and Danny refused to get over him.

“If Danny dies,” Adam said, “will you forget about him the same way you just forgot about Robbie?”

“I will.” Jeff met Adam’s gaze full on. “Whatever kind of friend Danny was, I already forgot him. I made my life what I wanted it to be. Danny had a chance to move on, too, and he blew it. So fuck him. Fuck you for thinking it’s my fault.”

“I never said--”

“The hell you didn’t.” Half the beer disappeared as if by magic. Jeff wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Try to understand. Danny gets what he wants, no matter what the cost. If he’s set on killing himself, he’ll do it. Nothing you or I say will make him think twice, so stop wasting your time.”

“You won’t even try to help him.”

“Why should I?” Jeff’s lips peeled back from his teeth in an expression caught between a grin and a grimace. “If I fucked him over, he did it to me first. I don’t owe him a goddamn thing.”

The last of Adam’s hope leaked away. He stared straight ahead, as Jeff knocked on the tinted window separating them from the driver. The limo rolled to a stop, and Jeff shoved the door open. Across the street, the bus station was lit even at midnight.

“I’m sorry for wasting your time.” Adam slid across the seat and stood on the street. “Good luck on your tour.”

He had failed. Again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The only light in the apartment came from the black and white television, flickering with changing scenes. Stretched on the couch, Danny leaned his head on the armrest and ran his hands through Adam's flaxen hair.

"Do you ever think about Far Cry?" Adam murmured.

Danny's chemical high buzzed in his head, vibrating through his fingers and toes. Time seemed to creep by at half-speed. "No."

"Never?"

He pressed a kiss to the back of Adam's head. "Sometimes, I guess. Not much."

"Do you miss being famous?"

He considered. In the back of his head he remembered screaming crowds, blushing fans, autographs, interviews, and fat royalty checks. Mostly he remembered the rush of being onstage, the thrill of being God for an hour and a half. "Yes."

"What about Jeff?"

Danny's hands stopped midway through blond hair. "What about him?"

"I saw him on TV the other day." Adam shifted. "He was... cold."

"He wasn't always."

"And arrogant."

"He wasn't always that, either."

"Tell me about him."

Danny stared at the black and white television. Some small part of him hesitated, afraid to fall back into the trap of remembering Jeff. But he realized, with a clarity that came only from

intoxication, he had fallen into that trap years ago and never climbed out. It was impossible to fall deeper.

“When I first met Jeff...” he began, the buzz in his head becoming an ache. “When I first met Jeff, we were both still kids. He didn’t know how to keep a secret, and he liked to pretend he didn’t care what anyone else thought of him. He said he just cared about his music. Maybe he did. When he played, he was--” *perfect, beautiful*-- “like fire. You stare too long, and it’s all you can see, even after you look away. Jeff never knew it. He was innocent at his brightest. He really had no idea how vicious the world could be.”

“He doesn’t look innocent.”

Danny’s lips twisted upward. “Not anymore.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

Adam pulled away and sat up on the edge of the couch. “I think you’re lying.”

“Does it matter?”

Blue eyes cut deeper than razors. “He’s the reason you’re so miserable, isn’t he?”

Danny caught a lock of Adam’s hair and wrapped it around his fingers. “Maybe.”

“Did you love him?”

Did he? As if Jeff was in the past and not in Danny’s thoughts every day. “Yeah. I loved him, but he wasn’t like that. He had a wife and a kid.”

“Is he the reason you want to die?”

“I want to die because I don’t know how to live.” Jeff was a phoenix, rising from the ashes of the life Danny had destroyed. But Danny didn’t have wings. He didn’t have anything. He released Adam’s hair. “I wish you could have seen what it was like when I thought I was dying. It was white light exploding in my heart until everything went dark. I couldn’t feel my body, but my mind was rushing down and down, deep into the darkest place I’ve ever seen. It was so good, like everything I ever wanted, but I can’t stop wondering if I was going to hell.”

“Danny.” Adam leaned down again and slid his hands along Danny’s face. “You told me life can be good, remember? Sometimes it can be better than you ever dreamed, you said.”

“My life hasn’t been like that in a long time.”

“What changed?”

Danny smiled with tired lips. "You did."

Adam's eyebrows furrowed.

Before Adam, Danny had hope. He imagined the day when he would move on and find someone to transcend everything Jeff had been. It would be a fresh start, a new beginning. Then Adam came, beautiful, gentle, and intelligent, and Danny still wasn't happy. If Adam couldn't make him happy, no one could. There would only ever be Jeff, who would never come back. Life slid through Danny's fingers like sand, every grain the same as the last, and he had no desire to hold onto it.

"You should go." He looked past Adam, into the shadows of the room. "Find somebody else. I'm ages too old for you anyway."

"Why don't you let me worry about that?" Adam closed the space between them and kissed Danny, his lips soft and his breath warm. "I'll stay a little longer."

For weeks, Danny avoided Adam's questions about his birthday, wary of a surprise party. The surprise would be when no one showed up.

On June 23, he woke up before dawn and lay in bed listening to the pigeons outside his windows and the traffic on the street below. Like every year before, thirty felt no different than twenty-nine. Today felt no different than yesterday.

Beside him, Adam slept. His hair spilled over the pillow, bright as polished gold. He looked younger than eighteen, and his youth stabbed Danny with guilt. Adam should be getting ready for college, heading out at night to party at the new clubs with a boyfriend his own age. He shouldn't have to spend his nights guarding Danny from self-harm. But he wouldn't have to anymore.

Danny dressed in a pair of old jeans and a worn flannel shirt, and left the apartment while Adam slept.

Outside, the city had begun to awaken. Danny kept his head down and followed the early morning crowds to the subway. Only when he stepped into the first car of the express train, boots squeaking against the dirty floor, did he realize he'd forgotten to leave a note. Would Adam think he'd been abandoned? No. He'd think Danny had gone looking for his dealer. Where else would Danny go?

He sat in the far corner of the car, against the wall where the vibrations channeled into his bones as the train began to shudder and jolt down the tracks. He curled there and waited for the other passengers to leave.

It took two hours for the car to empty, but it seemed like minutes while Danny drifted in and out of reality. Was he here, or was this another dream?

He'd dreamed of Jeff last night. They were together in the old apartment as if they'd never left at all, arguing over how to cook dinner. Jeff wanted his steak rare, and Danny preferred it just shy of burnt. He was waving a butcher knife in the air and ranting when Jeff turned and walked out of the kitchen without another word. The front door slammed. Danny ran after him, but when he opened the door, the hall was empty.

When the last person stepped off the car, Danny fished the pack of razor blades out of his shirt pocket. In the yellowish light, the blade he selected looked dull and utterly without menace. A harmless sliver of steel.

He brought the razor to his left wrist, pressed down, and dragged it across the flesh. The sting made him flinch, but there was none of the pain he'd been worried about. The train shuddered, lights flickering.

At first, the cut looked white, and Danny could see layers of inner flesh. Then a line of blood appeared. The wound went from white to red in half a breath. Crimson liquid slid down and pooled in his palm, branching out to trace the length of his fingers. He watched as blood dripped from his fingertips and hung suspended in the air for a bare instant before splashing to the ground.

He slit his right wrist. First the white, then the red, then the ruby stream.

Adam would call him a hypocrite. Saving depressed boys one day and committing suicide the next. At least Danny wouldn't have to listen to his accusations.

Weightlessness swam inside his skull. He swayed in his seat. Was this how it was supposed to be, like losing your balance, like falling asleep? Death was easier than he'd thought. Exhaustion pulled his eyelids low. Was he going to hell? Did hell even exist?

The train curved on the tracks and his shoulder hit the wall. A vague sense of pain unfolded in his arm, overpowered by the leaden desire to sleep.

He wondered if Jeff would know why he did it.

He closed his eyes and slept.

PART V: 1985

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jeff dreamed of razor blades in a factory. Cold, loud machines stamping out the shape, other machines sharpening the tiny blades, more machines sealing them in plastic packets. Trucks driving thousands of packs to grocery stores, and the trucks were driven by machines, too, squat robots with blinking red lights for eyes.

The packs lined pharmacy shelves, red writing emblazoned across the front: Danger, Sharp Objects, Poison. Shoppers ignored the writing, snatched pack after pack and dropped them in their carts, or handed them to their children to hold.

A voice said, “Don’t worry. It’s not your fault.”

Jeff barely had time to recognize the voice, to think, *Danny*, before a thousand razors cluttered his vision like a badly made collage, each blade stained bright red.

He shot out of the dream and into consciousness, still reaching for what was on the other side of the razors.

“Jeff,” Angela said, running her hands over his shoulders and back. “Wake up.”

“I’m awake.” His lungs ached. He drew in a deep breath, surprised to find himself sitting up with one foot already out of bed and on the floor. He pulled it back under the covers and willed his heart to slow.

“It was just a dream.” Angela kissed the back of his neck.

What if it wasn’t? What if it fucking wasn’t? He hated her hands on him, fingernails cold and sharp as the razors. He shrugged her off and lay down again, sheets pooling around his waist. Air-conditioned currents swept over sweat-damp skin, sending shivers down his spine.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He stared at the shadowed ceiling, barely visible in the dark, and tried not to feel her eyes boring into him. She wanted to know what the nightmare was about, but he’d rather hang himself than tell her.

He’d told that boy whatever happened to Danny wasn’t his fault. And it wasn’t. Was it? People began and ended relationships everyday. If the other person couldn’t move on, it was their problem.

But Robbie had killed himself, and not one person bothered to stop him. Not one of the band members or the people who called themselves his friends. Once upon a time, Jeff told Danny he was more than a friend. Love, wasn’t that what he’d said?

He didn’t love Danny anymore, and they hadn’t been friends in years, but when he thought about picking up a copy of Rolling Stone and seeing Danny’s obituary in tiny print at the bottom of some page most people didn’t even read, he felt sick and light-headed and sweaty.

“I’m here,” Angela said, “if you want to talk. And if you don’t, that’s fine, too.”

Just talk. It couldn’t be that bad. Go to New York and just talk.

Last Christmas he’d bought an engagement ring. He slipped it in his pocket Christmas morning, biding his time while the kids sent scraps of wrapping paper and bows flying into the air. After the excitement calmed, he told Angela he had another present for her, and reached for the ring. They knelt together in front of the tree, lights blinking on and off, and Jeff saw the shift of expression in her eyes, the curiosity, then the quick flare of breathless knowledge. And he froze. He held her hand in one of his, the fingers of his other hand in his pocket, folded around the ring box, and he thought, *what am I doing?*

The expectation in Angela’s eyes wavered. Jeff released the ring like a red hot coal, and folded both hands around hers. He leaned close to kiss her cheek and told her about the trip he’d booked to Aspen.

After the New Year, he returned the ring. He never could figure out why he hadn’t been able to propose to Angela, or why he suddenly didn’t want to. He wondered now if Danny had been the reason all along. If he had talked things out five years ago instead of running, would he be able to love Angela now? Was it all the untied strings hanging around his life, keeping him from succeeding with a woman, with a band?

“Angie.” He spoke before he could find a reason not to. “I’m going up to New York tomorrow.”

She slipped an arm around his waist. “I thought you might be.”

Adam opened the door expecting Chinese delivery food and found a rock star. He stood blankly for a moment, staring at Jeffrey Cruz and wondering how he'd found out.

"Hey. Adam, right?" Jeff lifted one corner of his mouth in something like a smile. "Is Danny around?"

"He's..." Of course, he didn't know. How could he? "No. He's in the hospital."

The smile vanished. "What happened?"

Anger rushed up the back of Adam's throat. He'd told Jeff what would happen two months ago. Had Jeff forgotten? Just decided to show up in his shiny black boots, silk shirt, and sunshades?

"What happened?" Jeff asked again.

Jeff stopped walking two feet into the hospital room. Adam went on and sat in a chair beside the bed, long limbs sprawling out as if he would have collapsed after much longer. He looked sideways at the unconscious man in the bed.

All Jeff could think was that it wasn't Danny. It was so far from Danny he wanted to scream with laughter, although no sound passed his lips. Because it was Danny after all.

His skin was the same white as the hospital sheets, stretched tight over the narrow framework of his face. Only at the corners of his mouth and eyes did the flesh fold into lines. Beneath his eyes, color smeared in a horrible array of navy and plum, while his lips remained nearly bloodless.

"Something wrong?" Adam asked under his breath, eyes angry.

"Is he...?"

"He sleeps deep. Try not to wake him up unless you've got something important to say."

Jeff didn't know what, if anything, to say. He'd known Danny would be in bad shape, strung out maybe, still bitter about the band, but this was beyond anything he'd expected.

IV bags hung on metal poles beside the bed and dripped liquid down clear tubes. White bandages circled Danny's wrists. Was this what kept him alive, legal drugs and bandages?

Jeff forced himself closer to the bed. He stopped beside Adam. "He did this to himself."

"I told you he would."

Jeff hadn't believed, not really. The Danny he knew would have screamed, sulked, and fought, but never given up. The Danny he used to know.

“He wouldn’t wake up when they brought him in,” Adam said, eyes on the floor. “He got a blood transfusion, and they gave him all this shit, and he still wouldn’t wake up for two days. The doctor said he gave them a hard time, like he was doing it on purpose. Maybe he was.”

“Is he that miserable?”

“Fuck.” Adam’s lips twisted, and he stood. “Apparently. I need coffee. You want anything from the cafeteria?”

Jeff shook his head, and Adam brushed past him and out the door.

Jeff sat in the abandoned chair and watched the rise and fall of Danny’s chest, the only proof of Danny’s life. He listened to the sound of deep breaths, the beep of a monitor in a room down the hall, and knew that nothing was going to happen the way he’d wanted it to.

He slipped his hand over the bed and found Danny’s fingers. He laced them together the way Danny used to do when they kissed. He wondered why he had ever stopped kissing Danny.

He lifted Danny’s hand and brushed his lips across the back of the knuckles. “Hey,” he said. “It’s me.”

Danny was dreaming. In his dream, he heard a voice from too many yesterdays ago. He tried to sink into a deeper sleep where dreams couldn’t touch him, but the voice wound through his mind and tugged him to the surface of consciousness.

“You always said I’d come back. Here I am.”

He didn’t remember the voice being this sad in his other dreams.

“I’m sorry it took so long.”

Sure. Sure he was. Danny surrendered sleep and blinked his eyes open. Splinters of fluorescent light stung the back of his eyeballs. He swallowed, mouth dry and tasting like sawdust, body heavy with exhaustion and cold.

A large hand squeezed over his fingers. He rolled his head on the hospital pillow. When his vision focused, his heart contracted so sharply he thought it would stop altogether.

Danny’s veins seemed to ice over, blocking all blood flow to his brain. He stared at the man in the bedside chair, tall, broad through the shoulders and golden-skinned. His short crop of black hair looked strangely tame, but Danny knew the sloe eyes too well. “What the hell--” His voice cracked.

Jeff smiled, half his mouth crooking upward. “Nice to see you again, too.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Why?” Danny yanked his hand away from Jeff’s. Jeff was here. Why now? Why at all? Why?

Jeff shrugged. “I missed you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Same old Danny.”

Every muscle in Danny’s body bunched tight, ready to spring. A dozen dreams and a hundred nightmares danced in his head. *Why was Jeff here?*

Jeff’s eyes dipped to Danny’s wrists, then away. “What have you been doing to yourself?” “I haven’t been doing anything *to* myself.” Danny bared his teeth. His stomach jerked; he thought he might be sick all over the hospital bed. “And if I had, it wouldn’t be any of your business.”

“It used to be.”

“Well, not anymore.” He told himself the pain lancing through his torso was all in his head, but that didn’t stop tears from burning the back of his eyes. Once upon a time, he would have done anything for this chance. Now it shredded at his sanity. He kept his eyes away from Jeff’s. “How could you come back here? Do you hate me that much, you had to see how fucked up I am?”

Jeff stared at the wall across the room.

“Then what *do you want?*”

“I don’t want anything.”

“No. Of course you don’t. What the fuck was I thinking? You just show up here, at the fucking hospital... and you don’t want anything.” Danny sucked in a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. Jeff didn’t deserve to witness his upset--but Danny suspected it was too late for that.

“There’s a kid. Tall, blond--”

“Adam went to get coffee.”

Danny’s mouth snapped shut, and the wash of shame burned him. Jeff knew.

“I met him last month in Philly.”

“Adam was in New York last month. With me.”

Jeff shrugged and spared a glance at Danny. “He cares about you. I’m glad you have him.”

“Just tell me what you want.”

“I want... to know if you’re okay.”

Danny forced a raw laugh up his throat. “Oh, Jeff. Can’t you tell? I’m on cloud nine.”

“Danny.” Jeff reached for his hand.

“Don’t.” Panic flared behind Danny’s eyes. He pulled away, and needles he hadn’t known were there jerked out of his arms, leaving tiny wounds. He ground his teeth and climbed off the side of the bed away from Jeff, clung to the rail. His knees shook; he didn’t know if it was the blood loss--hadn’t they pumped him full of some other loser’s fluids?--or Jeff’s presence weakening him.

“Be careful.” Jeff rose to his feet, already reaching halfway across the bed.

“Why don’t you just get the fuck out of here? You never had a problem walking away before.”

“Don’t be this way.”

“Fuck you. And don’t touch me.” Danny edged around the bed and grabbed for the closet door. He had to get into something more protective than this damn paper gown. His street clothes lay on the top shelf, his jeans more white than blue after a hundred washings, and a black tee-shirt. What had they done with his blood-drenched plaid shirt? Thrown it out? They should have thrown *him* out.

“Can we please talk?”

“No.” He shook out his jeans and stepped into them. He felt like he’d been drinking; his sense of balance tipped and whirled. He had to cling to the closet shelf with one hand to keep from falling, and he couldn’t get the jeans past his hips. Pain prickled along the undersides of his wrists.

“Let me help.”

“No,” he said again, and started to turn, but then he felt the warm heat of Jeff’s body at his back. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling Jeff behind him, beside him, all around him. Hands took hold of his jeans, and as the cloth tugged over his hips, lifting the hospital gown, warm knuckles grazed his skin. Shivers attacked his spine and stole his strength. He stopped breathing.

Then the hands circled to the front of his jeans, fingers pulling at the zipper the same way they used to when Danny's lips were swollen from the press of Jeff's mouth, when he was hard with anticipation right behind the zipper and already imagining the callused warmth of Jeff's hands.

Danny's heart hurt as if it had ripped through his chest. He lunged away from Jeff. Dizziness shot through his head like a tranquilizer dart and he stumbled, slamming his shoulder hard into the wall.

"Dan..." Jeff's hands grabbed at his arm.

"I said don't touch me!" His breath rasped in his throat. He wrenched out of Jeff's grip. "Don't ever fucking touch me."

Jeff drew back. "I was trying to help."

"Don't help. Go home. Go back to fucking Philadelphia and leave me alone." Danny shoved away from the wall, furious at the trembling in his arms and legs. He ducked past Jeff and reached for the door at the same time as it swung inward.

"Danny?" Adam grabbed his arms with one hand before he could lose his balance again. He put a Styrofoam coffee cup on the bedside tray and guided Danny back inside the room. "You shouldn't be up."

"The fuck I shouldn't be." The dizziness wouldn't go away. He clung to Adam, grateful for his height and strength. "Let's get out of here."

"What?" Adam looked from Danny to Jeff. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened." Nothing, but Danny was still stuck in the paper gown, and he could still feel Jeff's hands on his skin. "I just... I've got to get out of here."

"Look." Jeff shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm going to take off, okay? You don't have to go anywhere."

"What the hell is going on?" Adam's arm tightened around Danny's waist, but he seemed oblivious to Danny's flinch, glaring at Jeff. "You were just supposed to talk to him."

The words cut through Danny's mind. His insides sank. "Philly," he said slowly, twisting his head to look up at Adam. "You went to Philly to bring him here."

Adam sealed his lips.

Danny jerked away, stumbled, and caught himself. His lungs squeezed all the air from his body. "You son of a bitch. You couldn't stay out of it."

"He was trying to help," Jeff said.

“Help.” The words passed his lips like acid. “Everybody wants to fucking help me.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“You want to help?” Each step he backed away took him closer to the door, away from Jeff and Adam and their poisoned good will. “Then you should have left me on that goddamn train. I knew what I was doing. I fucking knew, and I’d be just fine right now if you hadn’t--” His throat choked up. He grabbed at the door knob. “Oh, just fuck you. Fuck both of you.”

“Danny,” Adam said, but Danny looked at Jeff instead. Jeff’s gaze, dark and blank, was the last thing he saw before he staggered through the doors. He forced his feet to keep moving, closing his eyes and breathing deeply when the hallway spun around him, and kept going.

Nurses clipped past; machines beeped; patients called for help. Danny passed through all of it with no thought but escaping this living cemetery and all its ghosts.

Before he turned the corner, a voice called, “Danny, wait!”

He glanced over his shoulder, the pain around his heart cinching tight. But Jeff wasn’t with Adam.

Jeff sat alone in his hotel room. The television remote rested next to him on the bed’s comforter, but though he stared at it, he didn’t turn the set on.

Jeffrey Cruz had moved beyond Daniel Chandler. Their love, if that was what it had been, was nothing but a memory.

A room service menu sat beside the TV. He had glanced at it briefly before letting it fall there, and now it fluttered in the gentle current of the air conditioner. He’d been hungry when he came back to the hotel, but now exhaustion overpowered every other want.

The pain he felt inside was for a dead relationship. He couldn’t believe what the Danny he used to know had become.

He had tried to talk to Danny and failed. But he had tried. That was all he could do. Wasn’t it?

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was his son's fault Angela found out about Jeff.

It was afternoon Jeff had left for New York, and she was sitting at the kitchen table helping Francesca with her homework, learning to separate nouns and verbs. Every few minutes, Fran's golden retriever, Lucky, let out a soft whine, and Fran handed him down a piece of Chex mix.

"What about 'she'?" Fran asked. "Is 'she' a noun?"

"'She' is a pronoun," Angela said. "You're not quite up to that yet--"

A crash sounded from down the hallway, followed by a sharp cry.

"Nicky?" Angela stood quickly, pushing away from the kitchen table and rushing toward the bedrooms where the crash had come from. "Nicky, are you okay?"

In the master bedroom, five-year-old Nicky stood outside Jeff's closet, surrounded by a pile of fallen records. Both his hands held fast to the handle of the case that held Jeff's favorite guitar, the Gibson with the fox.

"Nicky." Angela went to him, crouching beside him and examining him for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head, glaring balefully as if the accident had been her fault.

"What were you doing in Daddy's closet? You know you're not supposed to be in there."

Fran peered in from the doorway. "He thinks if he has Daddy's guitar he'll be a rock star, too."

Angela sighed. "Fran, will you take him out of here while I clean this up? I'll be back in a minute and we'll finish your homework."

When they were gone, she turned her attention to the records. Half of them had slid out of their sleeves, and it took longer than she'd expected to replace them all. Then, as she started to put an Iggy and the Stooges record back, she saw something else stuck in its sleeve. Photographs. She

tugged them out, curious. Then, when she saw what the pictures showed, she went numb with disbelief.

Most of them were harmless. They all showed Daniel Chandler, but hadn't he been Jeff's friend years ago? Yet the shot of Daniel in a dress disturbed her. Jeff had told her stranger stories of things the band did for fun, but the look in Daniel's eyes showed no humor. It was a dark, hungry look, and it cut through her until she shivered.

Then there was the photograph of a kiss, blurred and barely recognizable. Whoever Jeff was kissing had the same ginger-red hair as Daniel, and Angela couldn't convince herself it was a woman.

She didn't know how Jeff had arranged the stack, and it suddenly seemed important that they be placed exactly as he had left them. Instead, she threw down all the records she'd fixed, tossing them out of their sleeves and into disarray. When Jeff got home, she would pretend it had just happened and she had never noticed.

If only Jeff hadn't hidden the pictures, she might be able to forget them. If only he'd stuck the damn things in the family photo album and laughed about them. But the idea that he didn't want her to see them made a dozen puzzle pieces snap into place.

Jeff had left Far Cry because of Daniel Chandler. That was why he never talked about Daniel, not as he did with stray mentions of Ray or Jake or Robbie, or even David, her ex. That was why his lack of enthusiasm in the bedroom made her wonder if he actually wanted to be having sex, and it was the reason he came home late at night smelling of sex with strangers, and why he hadn't been able to propose to her on Christmas morning.

She lay awake that night thinking about it. When he said he'd be at the studio late, was he having sex with other men? Did she know them, or were they strangers he met on the street? Did he even want to be with her?

Jeff had promised to return from seeing Daniel in a few days, but doubts nagged at her. He kept those photos for a reason. He didn't have pictures of anyone else, just Daniel. He had--dared she think it?--loved Daniel. He had never loved her.

She could have competed with Lani, or with any of the cheap sluts throwing themselves at his feet. But a man, a man he had loved... She wasn't even the right sex.

The day Angela found the photos was the day she realized she had lost Jeff forever.

Someone kept knocking on the door. Danny wished they would stop.

Rap, rap, rap.

“Who... the fuck...” He groaned and curled deeper into the sofa. “Adam...”

“I’m coming.” Adam came through the kitchen doorway with a steaming mug of coffee. When he set it on the coffee table, his hand trembled. “Drink some.”

Rap, rap, rap.

“The door...” But Danny’s mind drifted to the coffee, swirling in caramel colors. His eyes unfocused. Caramel loops filled his vision.

He heard Adam’s footfalls in the back of his mind and heard the chain jangling on the door. “He’s wasted,” Adam said.

Caramel... circles... dizzy. Danny shut his eyes and floated.

“If you want to wait a couple hours...”

“No,” a deeper voice said. “This is perfect.”

Danny opened his eyes. The swirls were gone. “Fuuuuuck.”

“Your manners get better each time we meet,” Jeff said, striding close and nudging Danny’s leg where it hung off the edge of the couch. “Ready to go on vacation?”

Danny groaned. “What... what do you want?”

“I just told you.”

Vacation? He stared up at Jeff, and it felt like he was looking up for miles. Jeff wore fitted black jeans and an indigo silk shirt. Danny imagined fashion models playing guitar on the runway.

“Do you have his bags ready?” Jeff asked.

“No,” Danny said. “What...?”

Adam appeared behind Jeff, hands clasped around the strap of a brown canvas duffel bag. Danny squinted before he realized it was his bag.

Jeff took it and slung it over one shoulder. Then he leaned over, hands braced on his knees, and peered at Danny. Danny shrank into the back of the couch. Jeff’s face--was there only one? There seemed to be several--swayed in front of him. “You look like crap,” Jeff said.

“Fuck you,” Danny whispered. “Fuck you... go to hell.”

“Not yet.” A grin split Jeff’s face, teeth startlingly white against the tan of his face. “And not without you.”

“Please, Danny.” Adam stood behind Jeff. His eyes looked like gaping circles of blue to Danny. “What if your life could be good again? What if you realize you actually want to live? Isn’t that worth a chance?”

The tears welled up from somewhere deep inside him. Danny pushed his face into the couch cushions, but he couldn’t stop the silent sobs from wracking his insides. Blue tears swam in front of his eyes. He floated in a blue ocean. He was dead and blue.

“Please...” He could barely talk past the constriction of his throat. “Please... leave me alone... please...”

Hands combed the hair back from his face, and lips kissed the nape of his neck. He thought it was Adam, but Jeff’s voice said against his skin, “Not this time.” Arms slid under his shoulders and knees, turning the world upside down.

“No...” He meant to fight the arms, but nausea left a foul taste in the back of his mouth and he clung to them instead. “Wait...”

“Don’t worry,” Jeff said. “I’ll take care of you.”

Then he was in Jeff’s arms, cradled against Jeff’s chest where he hadn’t been in so long... The breath left Danny’s body in a slow exhale. He laid his head against Jeff’s shoulder. He didn’t believe Jeff. But he could stay here for a minute, for an hour...

“It’ll be okay,” Adam said, lingering by the couch.

“It won’t be,” Danny sighed. “I can’t... Not again.”

The ocean he drifted on pitched from side to side as they began moving; he clung to the arms holding him. Jeff carried him from the apartment, Adam trailing behind them. They wound down the stairwell and out of the building. The sky opened up above, gray-black like volcanic ash, and at first Danny thought it was fire raining down on him but it was water that pelted his skin and slid harmlessly away.

Adam opened the passenger door of a big, black Ford truck, and Jeff dumped Danny inside. He spilled onto the seat and started to slide to the floor--it smelled sharply of new rubber--before Jeff grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him back up.

“My shoes,” Danny said, watching his bare feet settle on the floor.

“There are boots in your bag.” Adam filled the doorway as Jeff crossed around the hood of the car, shoulders hunched against the rain.

Danny stared at him. “You went... to Philly.”

“I did it for you.”

“You went to Philly.”

“Danny.”

Danny closed his eyes.

“Danny.” Adam’s fingers gripped his knee hard, forcing his eyes open again. He watched the column of Adam’s throat ripple as he swallowed. “My dad--”

Danny sighed.

“My dad said he’d rather die than have his son be gay.” Adam’s lips sealed tight and colorless between words. “So I understood why he beat me. But he didn’t have any reason to hurt my mother like he did. He beat us like we were dogs, like he owned us. When I was sixteen, she told him she was pregnant again. It pissed him off. He pushed her down the basement steps. I think he meant to scare her, but she cracked her head open at the bottom of the stairs. He told everybody she fell. When the cops asked, I said I didn’t see. But I did. I was right there. I watched her die, and I didn’t do anything to stop it, and I didn’t do anything to make it right.”

The words drifted in and out of Danny’s hearing. Sometimes he thought he grasped what Adam was talking about, and other times it just seemed so far away...

Rain hit the windshield in pinging drops. Jeff got in the driver’s side and slammed the door.

“I’m not letting anybody else die while I stand around watching.” Wetness plastered Adam’s hair to his face. “You saved my life. Now I’m saving yours. Hate me if you want to, but I’m sick of death.”

The truck engine bellowed awake.

“Are you going to be okay?” Jeff asked, and Danny started to answer no, but once more Jeff looked past him.

Adam ducked his head and backed out of the doorway. “Just take care of him.”

“We’ll call.”

Adam swung away, shoving at the door. Danny flinched at the crash of it shutting. He stared through the window, streaked with rain, at Adam’s blurry form. He lifted a hand and put it against the cold glass. “Wait...”

“We’ve got to go,” Jeff said. He shifted the truck into gear, and they pulled away from the curb.

Danny twisted back to watch Adam until he became a part of the rain and the gray concrete, undistinguishable from the rest.

“Do you love him?”

He looked at Jeff, but Jeff’s eyes stared over the steering wheel. His face was blank, as if he hadn’t spoken. Maybe Danny had imagined it.

He forgot the question anyway in the whirl of rain and cars and volcanoes and oceans. He curled against the door, head knocking into the glass in time with the truck’s vibrations, and he slept.

The windshield wipers swished back and forth, catching each fat drop of rain as it splattered across the glass. Even so, Jeff could barely see the narrow road through the darkness and fog banks. He kept his eyes on the double yellow line separating the single lanes.

The headlights bounced off a thick wall of white. Jeff lost sight of the line and the truck tires jounced over the crumbling edge of the asphalt. He jerked the wheel to the right, back on the road, and took his foot off the gas. The speedometer sank from forty to thirty.

Danny’s head jarred against Jeff’s knee where it had come to rest when he fell asleep, and Jeff tugged him away from the window. Now he curled on the seat, toes pushing against the door as he slept.

Watching Danny, Jeff almost missed the turn. He swung the truck off the main road and onto a dirt track. The tires settled into deep furrows leading through the darkness cast by towering pines.

He cast quick looks at Danny every few minutes, watching for signs of waking, but there were none. Twenty minutes later he took another left and pulled up in front of the house.

The second he opened the truck door, he heard the ocean roaring over the storm. He stood for a minute staring into the dark beyond the house’s silhouette, but he couldn’t see the ocean or the beach. Couldn’t see anything but rain and fog.

He left Danny in the truck, taking the duffel bag with him to unlock the house door and turn the power breaker on. Lights flickered to life. The refrigerator began to hum. He set the clocks for eight minutes after ten o’clock. The kitchen smelled like a dead mouse; as soon as the rain stopped, he’d open every window in the place. For tonight he dug a can of aerosol out of the cabinet and sprayed lilac scent in the air, then went back to put sheets on the beds.

When he returned to the truck, he found Danny as he’d left him, still sleeping. He didn’t stir when Jeff peeled him off the seat and carried him into the house. He brought him to the master bedroom and laid him on the king-sized bed. Danny sprawled across the mattress, his damp,

tangled strands of hair splaying across the pillows. His skin seemed almost the same shade as the pale violet sheets.

Jeff stood in the doorway for a long moment, staring at Danny, wondering what he'd done and why he hadn't done it sooner. Then he shut the door and went to unload the rest of the truck.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Danny woke at dawn. He sat up in a huge bed he didn't remember falling asleep in, surrounded by light purple sheets and thick pillows. Golden-pink light spilled through a six-paned window and lit a large bedroom. On top of a pale white bureau rested a silver lamp with Japanese women holding umbrellas sketched on the shade. The paintings on the wall, random and lop-sided, matched his opinion of Picassos.

A thin layer of sweat clung to his skin. He shoved the tangled sheets away. Nausea attacked him the instant he stood and he held onto the mattress, waiting for it to pass. Christ, he could use a hit.

His memories of yesterday blurred much like the Picasso, barely recognizable as anything real. He thought he had been floating on an ocean of blue death, and then there was fire coming down from the sky, only it hadn't been fire after all. Then there was a father--his father? He didn't think so--he never wanted to meet. He thought he'd heard heads cracking open. The last thing he remembered before his recollection went dark was watching gray buildings whip past.

The feeling of illness passed. He walked barefoot to the door--where the hell were his boots?--pushed it open, and started down a long hallway. He took a detour to the bathroom, then continued into the living room.

It was enormous. A cold fireplace nestled into the right wall, iron pokers to one side and a stack of kindling in an open box on the other. Between the fire and a sand-colored loveseat was a glass coffee table with two books on it, *Exploring Wildflowers* and *Fender Guitars*. On the left side, a doorway led into another room, from which drifted a faintly rotten odor. To the right of the door, a tan leather armchair was set between two tall gold lamps resembling upside-down orchids. To the left of the door was a packed bookshelf, and built into the wall over it, a liquor cabinet. Against the back wall was another sofa, this one L-shaped and fully ten feet long. It faced a large television and stereo system.

Danny turned in a slow circle, shivers tumbling down his spine. He'd never seen anything so big, so perfect, not even in Far Cry's glory days. He thought about each four-star review Jeff's albums had garnered--one with the Jaywalkers and two solo--and realized for the first time what that meant.

Outside was worse. He opened a sliding glass door and stepped onto a wooden-slatted deck. He passed between patio furniture and a barbeque grill, padded to the eastern railing, and stared.

A beach spread out below in soft, sandy shades of yellow and white. The dawn ocean crested in white foam over the shore, the water turning dark gray further out to sea. To the right and the left, the beach stretched for miles. Danny saw nothing but ocean, sand, and further inland, a thicket of pines. He saw no people, no houses, and no trace of human civilization.

He knew then why Jeff had brought him to this deserted place, and the knowledge sent a pang of desperation racing through his insides. His head hurt and he felt ill again. It was his choice to make, but Jeff had taken it out of his hands. He needed something to numb the anger--better yet, to numb the pain.

The rising sun turned the ocean silver. In a few minutes, the view would be worth a million dollars. Danny didn't have a million dollars to waste.

He padded down the deck stairs. Gritty sand cushioned his bare feet. He started walking. Around the side of the house, the black pickup truck was parked under an overhang. Behind it, tire tracks cut through the sand and led to a dirt road disappearing into the trees. He followed the road into the woods, away from the beach and away from Jeff.

"Danny!"

The glass door was wide open when Jeff stalked through the living room, still pulling a T-shirt over his head and berating himself mentally. He'd meant to wake up early, anticipating Danny's confusion. But yesterday's stress--should he be doing this? What if the plan backfired?--weighted him down in sleep, and by the time he dragged himself out of the guest bed, Danny was gone.

He went onto the deck, shading his eyes against the bright disk of light hovering inches above the ocean line. He saw no trace of Danny. But he did see footprints in the sand.

He leaped down the steps and followed the prints around the side of the house. By the truck, they veered off toward the road.

Fuck. He raced back into the house for his keys. What if Danny went off the road and got lost? He was a whiz at navigating the concrete confusion of New York, but an honest-to-God forest? He imagined Danny lost and sick in the woods where every tree looked the same. Worse, what if someone came along the deserted path and offered him a lift?

He found his keys on the bureau where he'd left them last night, jogged back to the truck, and climbed in. He revved the engine and threw it into gear, kicking up a cloud of sand as the truck roared away from the beach.

The truck clock ticked off less than five minutes before Jeff spotting the figure trudging down the middle of the road. He slowed, creeping after Danny.

With three feet of space between him and the nose of the truck, Danny walked without looking back. His hair was yanked into a ponytail with messy strands waving around his face, and his bare feet were crusted with mud.

Jeff leaned out the window. "Where do you think you're going?"

Danny's pace faltered.

Jeff tapped the brakes to keep from rear-ending him. "Dan."

Danny stopped. Jeff stomped on the brake pedal.

"Where the fuck are we?" Danny whirled with bared teeth and glittering eyes. "Where the fuck did you take me?"

Jeff grinned. "Virginia."

"Fuck you. Take me home."

"Get in, and we'll go back to the house. You hungry?"

"New York, Jeff, you shit. Are you going to take me back or not?"

"Oh." He leaned his elbow on the open window. "Not, I think."

"You fucking son of a bitch." Danny kicked at the dirt, sending pebbles skittering across the road. "What am I, your prisoner? Are you keeping me here until I agree to have some heart-to-fucking-heart conversation and open up to you? It's not going to happen, and you can't fucking do this to me."

"Why not?"

"You kidnapped me! It's illegal."

"So is heroin." He had anticipated Danny's anger, but not his own disappointment. "Just let me drive you back to the house."

Danny grabbed the truck's grill and glared over the hood. "That piece of shit house. You love rubbing my face in it, don't you?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? I'm not rubbing your face in anything."

Danny stood still, and for a minute Jeff thought he'd have to get out and force him in. But after glaring for another minute, Danny slammed his fist against the hood and came around to the passenger door. "Fine," he growled, climbing in and slamming the door, while he curled onto the seat. "Drive."

Jeff glanced sideways at the muddy streaks Danny's feet left on the upholstery, then maneuvered the truck back the way he'd come. "So. How've you been?"

"How the fuck do you think? I don't want to talk."

"Yeah, okay. I guess you hear enough about me from the gossip rags."

"I don't read that crap."

"Oh. I got divorced. Did you know?"

Danny turned, and Jeff saw only the back of his head. "I knew."

His fingers shifted on the steering wheel. "I've got three kids. You remember Fran? She's got two brothers, Nick and Kevin. Nick's five. He takes after Lani. And Kevin's only two, so who knows who he takes after? But he does sing. Don't know any singers in my family. Maybe Lani's."

"Jeff. What makes you think I give a shit about your litter of rug rats?"

"I thought you might be curious about my life. I'm curious about yours."

"I got fired from the band." Danny sighed. "Nobody else'll hire me. When I need shit and I'm between royalty checks, I do favors for people. Mostly they involve getting on my knees. I live with a little kid who doesn't know any of that, and apparently likes plotting against me. My life is a ball of crap rolling down a mountain the size of Kilimanjaro. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

They remained silent the rest of the way back to the house.

Danny jumped out of the truck before it rolled to a stop and bounded up the deck stairs, into the house. His eyes wouldn't stop watering. A dull ache had settled into his joints. He stormed back to the bedroom and searched the closet, the bureau, and even under the bed. Finding nothing, he returned to the living room where Jeff was sliding the glass door shut. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"My bag. Where is my fucking bag?"

“Down the hall, first closet.”

He hauled open the closet door and dragged the brown duffel bag into the well-lit living room. Ripping through the contents, he found jeans, shirts, his cowboy boots, a toothbrush, a pack of Basic cigarettes, and six sets of underwear and socks.

“Fuck.” He rocked back on his heels. Of course Adam left out the one thing he needed. Dear, sweet Adam.

Jeff peered over his shoulder. “Looking for something?”
“Phone.”

“In the kitchen.”

He stood and made his way into the other room, pausing in the doorway as the hideous smell, stronger now, assaulted him. “What in God’s name is that?”

Jeff followed him in and circled the room, eyeing the ceiling. “I think a mouse died over one of the drop tiles. I’ll look for it later.”

“Jesus.” Danny snatched the white phone off the hook above a polished breakfast table and jabbed at the buttons. “Where in Virginia are we?”

“At the beach.”

“That’s so fucking informative. What beach? What city?”

Jeff shrugged and leaned against the counter.

“Hello?” Adam’s voice said, tinny over the long-distance line.

“It’s me,” Danny said. “And I’m doing just fucking fantastic, thanks for asking, sweetheart. How did you know how much I love being held prisoner?”

After a pause, Adam said, “You’re not a prisoner, Danny.”

“Then why don’t you come the hell down here and get me? I’m in Virginia, and I bet you know exactly where. So get your ass here now.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. Just take the bus, or rent a car, or something. Come the fuck and get me.”

“I don’t have any money for that.”

“What?” Danny turned in a tight circle, the phone cord twisting around him. He felt Jeff’s eyes on his back, quiet and studying. “You’ve always got money.”

“You borrowed my paycheck last week, remember? I don’t get paid again until July.”

He didn’t remember. “Can’t you--”

“No.”

“Adam.” Was that his voice, whining in his own ears? He hated himself, hated Adam and Jeff more. He spread his hand flat against the wall, closing his eyes and blocking out the bright kitchen. “Don’t leave me here. I need to be home, I need... Please, I need you. I miss you. Please.”

Silence.

“Adam...?”

“I have to go to work, Danny.”

“Oh, come on, Adam--”

The line clicked.

“Adam? Fuck.” Danny’s fingers clenched around the phone, tighter and tighter until the plastic creaked. His breath left him in a furious gust, and he slammed the phone onto the hook.

“*Goddamn* it.”

“He cares about you.”

He turned to face Jeff, his insides contracted and heavy. “You don’t know fucking shit.”

“I know he’s not coming to get you, and he doesn’t know where we are any more than you do. You’re stuck here. Get used to it.”

“I don’t have to get used to anything.” His hand squeezed into a fist. He had to remind himself Jeff was too tall and too strong to fight. He looked like he’d booked serious gym time. “I can walk the fuck out of here.”

“Sure.” Jeff crossed his arms over the chest of his black T-shirt. “But unless you know how to hotwire a truck, you’ll have to walk a good twenty miles. Now let’s talk about how things are going to be.”

“Let’s talk about this.” The cold raised gooseflesh along Danny’s arms, and he wrapped them around himself. “There’s shit I need, and I need it pretty fucking soon.”

“Rule number one: no drugs.”

“Christ.” His lips peeled back. “Get it through your thick head. If I don’t get a fix, I’m going to start jonesing bad, and I don’t think you really want to deal with that.”

“That’s exactly what I want to deal with.”

Disbelief blossomed into panic. He’d suspected it before, but actually hearing the admission from Jeff was shocking. “You’re not serious.”

Jeff pushed away from the counter and stood in front of him. Sunlight poured through the window behind him and illuminated his short hair in shades of purple-black. “Yeah, I am.”

“You’re crazy.” Danny’s voice cracked, and he swallowed. “You can’t do this.”

“Can’t I?”

“No!” He shook his head, so cold suddenly he wanted to curl up and cry. “You can’t force me into something like this. It’s not right. It won’t work. Jeff, I *can’t*.”

“Unless you want to walk those twenty miles, you don’t have a choice.”

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen!”

“How what’s supposed to happen?” Jeff’s laugh rolled out rough and low. “How you get clean? You had a hundred chances to do this on your own, and you didn’t. So now I’m making you do it.”

“But it’s not your decision! It’s got nothing to do with you!” The fear crept up Danny’s insides, gelling in the pit of his stomach. “Why are you doing this to me? Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Danny.” Jeff took another step, eyes heating to pools of near-black. “You told me once you loved me. If that was true, then do this for me.”

It wasn’t fair, and Danny wanted to scream. Things with Jeff had never been fair; why expect anything different now?

Jeff’s breath drifted across his face, warm and unsettling like a ghost. He wanted to lean in and find out if Jeff still stank of that old cologne.

“No.”

“I guess it wasn’t true then.”

Danny tried not to look at Jeff, trying not to see the short sweep of black eyelashes, the golden-tanned jaw. Had Jeff always been this gorgeous? His anger melted like wax. "You're an ass," he whispered.

"Am I?"

Danny had time only to see the quick curl of Jeff's lips, and then the space between them closed. His heart jolted into his throat as Jeff came at him. Jeff was going to kiss him, and he hadn't had the taste of Jeff in his mouth for so long, he'd lost the memory--

But in the last instant, Jeff veered left. One arm slid around Danny's waist, and even while he tried to pull away, Jeff's other hand slid around the back of his head. Hot lips pressed below his right ear. Danny stopped breathing. The shock of arousal unfocused his vision. The kitchen swam around him in shades of sunshine and bright white. He remembered suddenly that Jeff tasted like cigarettes and often like scotch, and that when Jeff was fucking him, he was never sure if he was dying or being born again.

Jeff kissed down the curve of his neck until he was at Danny's collarbone. He drew back, lips parted and eyes heavily lidded. "Do it for me."

"Do what?" Danny breathed in uneven gasps. His hands hung at his sides, useless.

"Just think about it."

"Think--" He understood then. Comprehension hurt more than the aches eating through his joints. "I can't..."

"Danny."

He edged out of Jeff's arms and backed toward the door. "I'll think about it. I promise. Just--leave me alone."

Jeff didn't smell like Lani's cologne anymore.

Eleven fifty-nine, the clock on the bureau said.

Danny paced in circles around the bedroom until the carpet wore his bare feet raw. Sweat beaded on his forehead, yet every few minutes a shiver jarred down his spine. Sometimes there was a succession of shivers, coming so fast and hard the shivers became shudders.

The clock hands still pointed at eleven fifty-nine.

He perched on the edge of the bed and chewed at his fingernails until his cuticles bled.

Still eleven fifty-nine.

He gripped a sliver of thumbnail in his teeth and yanked. The nail ripped away and a ruby drop of blood slid over his thumb. His stomach rolled, and he clenched his jaw against the nausea.

The minute hand joined the hour hand on twelve o'clock.

He held his hand in front of his face and studied the fine tremor. He wondered when Jeff bought this place, if Lani had been around, and if she had trembled when Jeff fucked her on this bed.

"Danny?" A knock sounded against the bedroom door. "I made lunch."

Danny shut his eyes and wiped at the sweat over his lip.

"I hope you like salami and American cheese," Jeff said from outside. "You hungry?"

"No," Danny said.

"You should eat something."

"I said I'm not fucking hungry."

"You should still eat. You might feel better."

Danny closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing calmly. He knew what would make him feel better, and it wasn't cheese and salami.

"You want me to put it in the fridge for later?"

"I want you to shove it up your ass."

"Guess I asked for that one."

Was he laughing out there? Danny opened his eyes in disbelief. His own image stared back at him from the mirror. Purple ringed the swollen flesh beneath his eyes, and his skin shone with perspiration. Christ.

"Danny?"

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

A laugh choked his throat. "I'm on top of the fucking world. Go away."

"Yeah, okay. I'll put the sandwich in the fridge anyway, if you change your mind."

Pain rolled through his veins in a cascade of icy razor blades. Danny gasped and stood. “Jeff, wait.”

“Yeah?”

He hated the hope in Jeff’s voice, hated himself for wondering if he could use it. He swallowed hard and crossed the room to stand on the other side of the door. “You never told me why you brought me here.”

“I did tell you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I want to help you.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to die. I care about you.”

“You care so much...” Anger would hurt his purpose, and Danny swallowed the bitterness. “Everything you said before. In the kitchen. Was that just to make me want to do this drug thing?”

“Part of it.”

“What part?”

“Christ, Dan.”

There was a light thump on the other side. Danny imagined Jeff laying his hand on the door, and he laid his own against the oak grain. They could almost be touching.

“I still...” Jeff said. “I mean sometimes... Oh, fuck, what do you want me to say?”

“Say what you mean.”

Silence. Then: “I still want you. I always have.”

“I want you, too.” Danny turned his cheek against the door, cool wood to heated skin. Was Jeff lying? Were they both lying?

The doorknob turned and caught on the lock.

“Danny, open the door.”

“No.”

“Why?”

He wondered if Jeff had the balls to break it down, just to be with him. Hot arousal slid through his gut and hardened his dick. “Do you remember the way it used to be with us? You always said my name when you came. Why? Were you afraid it wasn’t me there with you?”

“I don’t know. Open the door, Dan.”

“Why should I?”

“Don’t ask me why.” Jeff voice sharpened. “I don’t know why.”

Danny laughed under his breath, wishing the laugh didn’t hurt. “You just want to fuck me.”

“Maybe.”

“I always wanted to know, what was it we did? Did we have sex, or did we fuck? I don’t think we ever made love. What do you think that feels like? Is it as good as fucking or better?” He stepped back from the door and watched the knob rattle again.

“Goddamn it,” Jeff sighed. “What do you want from me? Open the fucking door and talk to me.”

“Do something for me first.” An itch started in Danny’s shoulder and crept down his arm. He dragged jagged fingernails over it, but the discomfort was inside his blood where he couldn’t reach it. He itched harder, flinching when his nails threatened to break the skin.

“What?”

“Tell me if you were lying that night when you said you loved me.”

In the long stretch of silence, Danny knew: Everything Jeff ever said to him was a lie. He stopped breathing, and he wanted a fix so bad he could scratch his eyes out, so bad he’d rather be dead than in this living agony. He raked at the itch under his skin, and the flesh gave way with a dull pain, blood wetting his fingertips.

“I wasn’t lying.” Jeff’s voice barely carried through the door. “I loved you. I still do.”

Then why did he leave? Cold and pain twisted through Danny’s muscles. Jeff was still lying.

“Let me in, Danny. Please.”

“If I let you in--” Some lies burned like acid. Some lies cut like razors. He swallowed and leaned against the door once more, palms braced against the wood. He imagined himself leaning against Jeff. “If I let you in, are you going to fuck me?”

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

Against the door, his hands couldn’t shake. “I want you to fuck me.”

“I will.”

“But first I want you to take me back.”

“Back...?”

“Home, Jeff.” His voice grated in his throat. Pain grated in his bones. He couldn’t take it anymore. “You’ll take me back to New York, we’ll fuck, and then we’ll work through this like normal people, okay?”

“Like normal people,” Jeff repeated flatly. “How’s that?”

“Oh, Christ, Jeff, there are places to do this! This isn’t real, what you’re trying to do here. People don’t get clean by being kidnapped. It’s more complicated than that.”

“If I took you to rehab, would you stay?”

“Of course I would.” Rehab clinics had drugs, methadone, things to ease the way. Things to get him through until he could find real shit.

“I don’t believe you. I think you’d go home and find your dealer and shoot up ‘til you saw stars.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Jeff.” Anger surged back in a hot wave, and Danny slammed a fist against the door. “What did you think was going to happen? I get clean out here and we live happily ever after? We never fucking could. You’ve got your goddamn kids, and I’m already dead. Why can’t you just let it the fuck go?”

Quietness settled. Danny heard his heart beating in his ears, beating so hard his chest hurt.

“Because,” Jeff said finally. “I was happy when I was with you.”

Danny’s knees buckled. He sank to his knees, forehead against the door. “Please...” Hurt shimmered behind his eyes, and it was so hard not to cry. “Don’t you understand? I can’t do this. Please... please, God, Jeff, don’t make me.”

He shut his eyes and waited.

And waited.

“Jeff.”

Nothing.

“Jeff?”

Goddamn you, don't leave me again.

He scrambled up, fingers fumbling at the lock. He saw blood crusting under his nails. The door swung open, and the empty hall gaped back at him. “*Jeff!*”

No answer returned to him. No dark figure entered the hall.

He slid down the doorframe, and the tears came at last.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

When Danny was seventeen, the star quarterback of Lower Dauphin High School and his best friend cornered him in the locker room to ask if he was a motherfucking faggot. When he said he was--Danny suspected he hadn't been the smartest teenager--they spent the next half an hour slamming him into lockers. He was taken to the emergency room with a snapped collarbone, a dislocated shoulder, a fractured rib, a black eye, and three loose teeth. For thirteen years after, he'd believed physical pain didn't get any worse.

Withdrawal was worse. Withdrawal was sweat and shivers at the same time. Withdrawal was jagged bits of metal in the center of his bones and all his muscles cramping up. Withdrawal was the itch of wool running through his veins where he couldn't scratch it out. Withdrawal was never being sure whether the pain was real or only in his head.

By four o'clock the bedroom walls were getting tighter and tighter until he didn't think there was enough air left in the room to breathe. He slunk into the living room. Each step made him want to vomit, though he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning.

Jeff glanced up from where he sprawled across the L-shaped sofa. His eyes, flat and blank, followed Danny for a moment before returning to the television screen. Through the speaker system, an announcer droned on about how many home runs a ballplayer had this season.

Danny dropped onto the far end of the couch. A salty breeze rolled in through the open door, making it easier to breathe. He thought he might be able to sleep here.

Until the damn ball player hit another home run, and the televised crowd erupted in wild cheers. The sound rang in Danny's ears, dug into his brain.

He glared at Jeff. "Can you turn it the fuck down?"

Without looking at him, Jeff stood and twisted the volume knob lower.

Danny could still hear the cheers echoing inside his skull, joined now by the announcer's excited voice. He couldn't sleep here.

"Where are you going?" Jeff asked when he stood.

Danny crossed the room and stepped through the door onto the deck. "I'm running away."

"Don't go far."

"Just watch TV." He padded down the steps. Sunlight warmed the sand and burned against the bottom of his feet. He pushed his toes into the sand, scratched absently at an under-the-skin itch along his forearm. Pain blossomed where his nails scored too deep.

He wandered toward the shoreline with his hands shoved in his pockets. The breeze dried his sweat-damp face, and the sun kept the chills at bay.

Before him, the ocean stretched on forever in a glittering spread of crystal blue and white-capped waves. Sunlight reflected off the water, blinding him even when he shaded his eyes with one hand. God, it was beautiful, so gorgeous it put a knot in his throat. Why was he here?

At the water's edge, he stopped and let out a long sigh. He lowered himself to the sand, legs stretched straight out in front of him. The surf washed up and wet his feet before it receded. Shivers tiptoed up and down his spine. The next time the surf came up, it tugged at his feet. He imagined being dragged into the ocean, drowned in the dark depths. Jeff would never know what had happened.

He lay down in the sand and closed his eyes against the sun.

The surf had crept up to his waist when a shadow fell over his face, blocking out the sunlight. He opened his eyes and stared up at Jeff. "Take me home," he said.

"Nope." Jeff sat, legs crossed beneath him. "You like the beach?"

"I hate it." It reminded him too much of the lake his mother used to take him to. "I hate your hair, too."

Jeff's lips twitched upward. "Yeah?"

Danny eyed the dark strands. When Jeff's hair was long, it hung in wild waves. Now, short enough that it barely brushed the nape of his neck, it framed his face in lazy waves. "Why'd you cut it?"

"I never liked it long."

"Oh." He turned his eyes to the flaming sphere of sunlight, lowering behind the house. How could Jeff have secrets? Maybe they'd never known each other at all.

"Hey." Jeff leaned over and put a hand across Danny's eyes. "You're going to go blind, and then what good'll you be?"

“Stop it.” Danny peeled Jeff’s hand away, blinking at orange spots. He sat up.

“I’ll grow it back if you want. My hair.”

“I don’t want you to do anything for me.”

“Will you do something for me?”

“No.”

“Not even take a shower?”

Danny swung a glare on him.

Jeff grinned. “You stink.”

“I can’t believe you’re still such an ass.” Danny scrambled to his feet, spraying sand over Jeff. “Fine. I’ll take a shower.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Jeff surged to his feet and caught Danny around the middle.

“Fuck you.” Danny twisted, shoving at the arms anchored around his waist. Jeff’s heat radiated against his back and he hated it, wanting the contact gone. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to give you a bath.”

“Hey!” Danny dug his heels into the sand as Jeff started to drag him backward. Water splashed around his ankles, up to his calves. “What the fuck? Let me go!”

A wave shoved against his waist, lifting him off his feet and threatened to tear him from Jeff. Panic surged up his throat. “Jeff!”

“Hold your breath,” Jeff said and heaved him sideways into another wave.

Danny gasped and twisted to squeeze his arms around Jeff’s shoulders. Water engulfed them, rolled them. Still open, Danny’s eyes stung, and he saw nothing but darkness. Pain flared along his skin where the salt water covered his scratches and burned at his healing wrists. He felt as if his entire body was on fire. His heart throbbed in his chest. His lungs ached.

They broke the surface, and he gulped in fresh air. Jeff laughed, his hair plastered in short strands to his forehead, eyes glittering.

“You fucker!” Danny scrubbed salt water from his eyes, keeping one hand knotted in the collar of Jeff’s shirt. The shifting water pushing against him on all sides. His earlier nausea returned. “I can’t swim.”

“Loosen up, Dan.” Jeff leaned down--too fast, too fucking fast--and pressed his lips to Danny’s.

Danny was still blinking in shock when Jeff’s grip around his waist tightened, and they went under again. Water rushed into his mouth before he could seal it shut, and he tasted salt on his tongue. His lips stung with the memory of Jeff’s mouth. For a moment it made perfect sense; Jeff had brought him here to kill him, to end things once and for all.

Then they came up again.

“I’ll kill you first.” Danny spit salt water back into the ocean. He grabbed Jeff’s shoulder and dug his jagged nails past cloth and into skin. “I’ll fucking kill you first.”

“Dan.”

“You son of a bitch.”

“Danny.”

Danny lost his breath again, without the water’s help. Jeff stared back at him, lips curved into a half-smile, hair dripping into his eyes. He looked the same as he had five years ago, the same as he had ten years ago when Danny first saw him.

“I missed you,” Jeff said.

Danny’s heart beat too fast. Jeff’s arms held him up, kept him safe from the cold, tossing water. If he leaned in right now, if he kissed Jeff and begged to be kissed back, Jeff would do it. But that was right now. Jeff never wanted him the morning after.

A shiver jarred his bones. Danny wrenched out of Jeff’s arms.

“What’s wrong?” Jeff asked.

Danny floundered in the water until his feet found the sandy bottom. He stood, discovering that the water only came to his shoulders. Salt stuck in his wounds, and he groaned from the pain.

“Stay away from me.”

“Danny. I’m sorry, okay?” Jeff reached for him.

“I mean it.”

“Dan...”

Danny sloshed toward the shoreline. Jeff had broken him too many times, and he was all out of glue.

Jeff sat on the edge of the sofa and watched Danny shiver. The white blanket seemed to do no good; every few minutes he edged closer to the licking flames in the fireplace.

“Eat something.”

Danny shook his head. Strings of hair clung to his face, still damp from the shower. “Not hungry.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday morning. I think. I don’t know.” Danny slipped another inch nearer the fire and rocked on his heels. Every now and then, Jeff caught the quick motion of his left leg twitching.

He slid off the couch to sit cross-legged beside Danny. “Tell me about Adam.”

Danny faltered in his rocking. He stared into the flames. “What do you want to know?”

“He’s your... You’re with him?”

Danny nodded.

“That’s good.” It didn’t feel good. It stuck in his gut like a wad of gum accidentally swallowed.

“He takes care of me.”

“I guess you told him about us.”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Danny glanced sideways at him. “Did you tell that woman you live with?”

Jeff looked into the fire. “I thought you didn’t read the magazines.”

“I lied. Did you tell her?”

He hesitated. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. I thought we were finished.”

“So you didn’t bother to tell her that for three years of your life you were a fag.”

“No.”

“I didn’t tell Adam either.” Danny rested his chin on his knees, visibly fighting a tremor. “It doesn’t have anything to do with him, just like it doesn’t have anything to do with your girlfriend. They don’t need to know who we were then.”

“I didn’t mean I’d never tell Angela.” Didn’t he? “I just never expected us to be together again.”

“We’re not together,” Danny said. “We’re just in the same place at the same time.”

“Right.” Jeff swallowed the bitter taste coating his mouth. He reached back to the coffee table and tapped a fork against the bowl of spaghetti. “You really should eat. I made it for you.”

“Aren’t you just the chef of the year? I’ll bet you didn’t even make the sauce.”

“Ragu.” He leaned back and propped an elbow on the table. “What would you rather have?”

“Cheeseburger and a small fry. Coke classic. Better yet, dope classic.”

“Sure. I’ll take a milkshake. What’s the special flavor this week, chocolate Jack Daniels?”

“Strawberry scotch.”

“Stick one of those paper umbrellas in mine.”

“Shove a syringe in mine. And a plastic tombstone. RIP, baby. He was born a rock star. He died a junkie.”

“Rock in peace.” Jeff shut his eyes and focused on the blackness of not-seeing. Were they really doing this? It was morbid. It gave him a headache.

“He wanted the world and lost his soul.” Danny rattled off a laugh. “Sold it all for rock and roll. Lost his heart in a needle. Found his life in the grave. The road to hell is paved in marijuana leaves. Now he rocks in peace.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Jesus.” Danny sighed and stood, bracing on the edge of the table to get off the ground. “I’m going to my--to the room.”

“You’re not going to eat?”

Danny ducked his head and looked back through frizzing bangs. “You know, I hate you.”

Jeff’s mouth crooked into a smile he couldn’t make himself feel. “No, you don’t. That’s the whole problem.”

“No.” Danny shook his head. “It’s that I really wanted to. Hate you. I really did.”

Sleep didn't come. Danny turned one way and then another, shifting and twisting his body into a hundred positions, and still the aches remained. The kink in his shoulder wouldn't straighten and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stretch out the cramp in his left calf muscle. The itch in his blood grated on his nerves; if he could just get under the skin, he knew he could scratch it out. But he ached where he'd rubbed himself raw.

Through the open window came the sounds of leaves and grass rustling in the wind. If he strained his ears, he could hear the surf washing over the beach. Inside, the bedroom was in a constant state of shift. One minute, clouds covered the moon and left the room dark. The next, wind parted the clouds and the bedroom flooded with ivory light. The changes, as much as the buzzing in his ears, set Danny's teeth on edge. He burrowed under the blankets to block out the light, but his sweat made the cocoon rank and sticky.

Through layers of blankets, the click of the opening door sounded like a gun being cocked. Light from the hallway pierced the covers; Danny had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep it out of his head.

After a moment, the door tapped shut, and the light faded again. Danny sighed his relief.

Then he heard the footsteps, soft against the carpet but ever nearing. The mattress dipped and shifted, stilled again. Danny clawed free of his stuffy cocoon and came into the salt-scented air of the bedroom, shoving damp hair from his eyes.

Darkness covered the room now. It pooled in shadows around the furniture, and around the long shape that Jeff's body made on the other side of the bed. Danny saw the glimmer of his eyes, but the rest of his face remained hidden by the blackness.

Danny rested his cheek on the pillow and kept his eyes on Jeff. "What do you want?"

Jeff let his breath out in a long sigh. "Nothing. Go back to sleep."

He wanted something, or he wouldn't be here. Chills attacked Danny's spine, and he felt his nerves as a sudden cramping in his gut. He pulled the blankets closer around his body.

The clouds parted; moonlight spilled into the room. The light swept over Jeff's face and left it smooth and without expression. His hair remained dark against the violet pillow. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, unwavering.

The clouds returned.

"I'm sorry," Jeff said.

Danny lifted his head, wishing he could still see Jeff's face.

"Those three years when I was with you. I wasn't a fag. I was gay. I still am."

"Oh," Danny said.

"I'm sorry."

"You said that."

"I know."

The cramp tightened and rolled through Danny's gut. He wrapped an arm there and sealed his lips around a groan. The cramps had been coming and going for half an hour, so bad sometimes they left him breathless. He thought about heroin as a gorgeous syringe full of shimmering moonlight. His stomach squeezed too tight.

Jeff turned his head, cheek to the pillow, eyes meeting Danny's. "I used to think I was wrong about being in love with you. I thought I loved Lani. And you were just convenient. You were the one who was there when I finally realized who I was. Maybe I only thought I loved you, like a person thinks they love their first crush. Then you complicated everything. Every day I was with you, I thought about leaving you. But I couldn't forget about you. I tried to move on, but no matter how far away from you I was, you were always there in the back of my mind. You made me crazy. I guess that's how I know what we have is real, because it makes me crazy."

"Had." Danny ground his teeth, shut his eyes. The fucking pain. "What we had."

"I love you."

"That's what you said before you left me."

"If I leave now--" The bed shifted again, and Jeff's breath grazed Danny's face-- "I'll do it because you tell me to. But if you tell me to stay, I will. As long as you want me to, I'll stay."

He was too close; cracks weakened Danny's will. He turned quickly to the other side, dragging the blankets with him. It was a lie. Jeff always left in the end, and Danny didn't want to break again.

"Is it Adam?"

"No." He opened his eyes and stared into the dark. An itch ran down the left side of his ribcage. He wanted to scratch at it with his nails, to leave bloody streaks and to scream until Jeff left him alone.

Fingers brushed the back of Danny's neck. "Then what are you scared of?"

“Scared?” Danny wrenched away, shoving the blankets back in a flurry of darkness. His throat tightened; he couldn’t tell if the knot in his gut was anger or desperation or just cramps. His hands fisted in the sheets. “Why can’t you see anything? It’s you. It’s not Adam or me being scared, *it’s you!*”

Moonlight shone through the window. The calm of Jeff’s face broke as he pulled back and sat up.

“Fuck.” Danny scrubbed a hand across his eyes and gritted his teeth. Agony pounded behind his eyes until he thought his skull would split down the middle. He quieted, crouched on the bed, illness creeping up his throat. “It’s always been you, Jeff. You and your worthless promises. Do you know how sick of them I am? I used to believe you, and every time I did, you just fucking burned me. I’m through trusting you, can you understand that? You’ll never stay. You’ll hang around and things’ll be great, but then it’ll get tough, and you’ll take off again. Why don’t you just fucking shoot me now? Why don’t you leave me the fuck alone?”

For an endless moment they sat across from each other. The wind rustled outside. The sound echoed in Danny’s ears, harsh like sandpaper. Worse was the look on Jeff’s face, the sudden depth of his eyes, the wrench of his lips as he struggled not to surrender to some deeper emotion.

Then the clouds returned. Danny held his breath. The bed shifted. Jeff stood and turned to the door.

“*Stay.*” Danny’s breath left him in a hiss, and he turned his face quickly away when Jeff looked back. He ducked under the blanket and ground his teeth until they creaked. “Just fucking stay,” he said, muffled, knowing Jeff wouldn’t.

But Jeff said, “Okay,” and the bed dipped once more as he lay down. Under the blankets, Danny shut his eyes once more.

“Dan?” A hand touched his shoulder.

He shrugged it away. “Sleep. Stay. But just sleep. Please.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Jeff tried to stay awake until Danny slept, but exhaustion overwhelmed him. He fell asleep in minutes. When he woke, sunlight filled the bedroom, and Danny was gone again.

Still blurry, he threw the covers off the bed, pulled on a sweatshirt, and stumbled barefoot into the bathroom to empty his bladder. Then he followed the scent of cigarette smoke into the living room.

Danny was curled on the loveseat under two throw blankets. He stared blankly at the dark fireplace, even when Jeff dropped onto the cushion beside him. Shivers made the blankets tremble, but his face glistened with sweat. The puffy skin below his eyes was smeared with all the colors of exhaustion.

Jeff yawned and leaned against the back of the sofa. “When did you get up?”

An especially violent shudder jarred Danny’s body. His eyes flickered over Jeff, then quickly away. “When you fell asleep.”

“You should have tried to rest.”

“I did.”

“Are you hungry?”

Without answering, Danny reached for the pack of Basics on the coffee table. Only two cigarettes remained after Danny pulled one out and lit it. The fingers gripping the filter were bone-white and trembling as he took a deep drag and closed his eyes.

“They’ll make you sick,” Jeff said. “Smoking that many.”

Danny’s laugh rattled in the back of his throat. The throw blanket fell away from one arm, and Jeff saw purple-black bruises clouding his skin from wrist to elbow. There were scratches, too, jagged gouges and raw patches crusted with dried blood.

“Christ.” He caught Danny by the hand and pulled his arm out. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed this damage before. He’d been so worried about Danny’s emotional state, he’d completely forgotten the physical toll withdrawal must be taking. “What happened?”

Danny yanked his hand back, buried it under the blanket. His eyes skittered away from Jeff’s. “It... it itched.”

“Jesus.” Jeff shook his head and tried to banish the fear building inside him. What if he’d done the wrong thing bringing Danny here? What if he was in over his head? Why couldn’t he do anything right when it came to Danny?

Danny sucked on his cigarette.

Jeff stood up. “Would you rather have eggs or pancakes for breakfast?”

“I’m not eating.”

“Danny.”

“I’m not.”

“Fine.” Jeff snagged one of the last cigarettes and lit it with a quick flick of the lighter.

“Hey!” Danny’s hand shot out expectantly. “Put that out. I need it.”

“You don’t need to die of a nicotine overdose or cancer.” Jeff pulled smoke into his lungs and padded barefoot into the kitchen. “I’m making eggs.”

“Bastard.”

Jeff ignored him.

Danny couldn’t stop vomiting, even after his stomach was empty of the two eggs he’d swallowed. He clung to the porcelain toilet bowl, shivering at its chill, his stomach spasming, his throat raw from acid.

His stomach clenched violently, and he lurched forward, leaning over the bowl. Another rise of acid scraped at the walls of his throat. He gagged and couldn’t stop gagging, but nothing came out. When the spasm passed, he collapsed to his knees, still clinging to the toilet. He breathed deep, clean air brushing the foul taste that coated the inside of his mouth.

The sickness wouldn’t go away. Every hour that passed brought some new torment. He thought only about the pain slicing through his bones, muscles cramping in ways they’d never been designed to twist.

“Dan?”

He listened to the creak of the bathroom door opening, but the strength to lift his head evaded him. His forehead rested on the toilet’s icy rim.

“Are you okay?”

What the fuck do you think? He couldn’t force the words out past the thickness of his tongue.

“Jesus.” Jeff entered the bathroom and knelt by the toilet. He wrapped his arm around Danny’s waist. Danny shivered at the heat. He shivered and couldn’t stop shivering. Jeff’s hand rubbed over his back in slow circles. “Your hair...”

Danny stared at the locks hanging in his eyes, damp and rank smelling. He’d thrown up on himself. He smelled. He was dirty. He was disgusting.

“Danny,” Jeff sighed, fingers gathering the hair and pulling it back.

“Don’t.” Danny turned his head, ashamed of the mess he’d made of himself. Jeff shouldn’t see. He certainly shouldn’t have to touch. “It’s... I threw up.”

“I can see that.” Jeff took his hair anyway and held it away from his face with one hand. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” His throat hurt; every word scraped him raw.

“Don’t think about it. Do you want a drink? Water?”

Water didn’t matter. Only one thing would stop the pain.

Danny braced every muscle in his body, lifted himself, and knelt facing Jeff. His stomach stuck to the back of his ribs. “Please... Please. Take me home.”

Jeff stared back at him, expression frozen in impassivity.

“Please.” He put a hand on Jeff’s shoulder, fingers gripping tight to keep his balance. “I know you think this’ll work, but...” A smile twisted his lips against his will, and the acid in his throat tasted like giving up. “I’m not the person you think I am. I... I changed, Jeff. I’m sorry. I changed.”

Jeff lifted a hand and cupped Danny’s cheek. Danny turned his face into the caress, his callused warmth shoving away the chill. He wished it had been this way years ago, that Jeff had never left. He wished he’d been strong enough to hold himself together while he waited for Jeff to come back. He wished a thousand things, and he shut his eyes on the wishes and breathed in Jeff’s scent, still of leather and musk.

“You’re not going home,” Jeff said.

Danny opened his eyes and met his depthless gaze. “Jeff...” The strength left his back. He slumped and hooked an arm over the toilet. Jeff caught him before he slid to the ground. Danny sagged against Jeff instead of the toilet. The warmth of his body was burning, like a bright fever chasing away all the cold in the world.

“It’s okay.” Jeff pushed a hand into Danny’s vomit-damp hair and cupped the back of his neck. The heat behind his fingertips made Danny shiver. “It’ll all be okay.”

“It won’t be.” He pressed as tightly to Jeff’s body as he could, until Jeff’s heat burned through him. Burned him, but didn’t warm him. “Please.”

“Shh.”

“Jeff--” His voice rasped and cracked. The sobs rose up from deep in his gut and wracked his already-pained bones. He clenched his teeth around them. He couldn’t get warm, and couldn’t get clean, and nothing would ever be okay. He’d give up Jeff and every last chance at happiness with him for a single shot to end his misery. Tears mingled with the clammy sweat on his face.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Jeff detangled himself and stood. Danny tried to follow, but his knees folded like rubber, and he couldn’t get off the floor.

“Jesus,” Jeff said between his teeth.

Jesus, he was such a failure. Jesus, he was worthless. Jesus, couldn’t he even stand up?

“I’m sorry.” Danny ducked his head. He thought he might throw up again. The shivers progressed to nervous tremors. He became certain that his body was an empty shell, and there was nothing left inside.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.” Jeff knelt again, washcloth in hand. “Stop saying it.”

Danny kept his eyes on the floor as the cloth passed over his forehead, his cheeks, and his mouth. Tears and sweat lifted. The warm damp left by the cloth turned cold, sending fresh shivers to the back of his neck where Jeff’s hand had been such a short time ago. He wished it was there again, holding him.

The cloth washed away the dirt, the traces of vomit at the corners of his mouth. But it couldn’t wash away the filth inside, couldn’t cleanse the sour taste.

“Do you hate me?” he said with his hands clasped in his lap and his eyes closed.

The cloth slowed as it smoothed over his mouth again. Then it pulled away entirely. He didn't dare open his eyes. He didn't want to see the truth.

"Christ. No. Never."

He tried not to cry. In the end he failed, but it didn't matter. Jeff's arms came around him again, pulling him close, and Danny pressed his face against a strong shoulder and cried until he ran out of tears.

At night, they lay together on the bed, neither sleeping. Jeff held Danny, as if locking him tight enough in his arms would dull the violence of his tremors and chase away the moments when Danny seemed to forget where he was, who was with him. When Danny retched he held the waste basket and kept Danny's hair out of the way. When Danny was quiet, he talked in hushed tones, and told him everything he'd wanted to say since he saw him lying in the hospital.

"I'm leaving Angela," he said, rubbing slow circles across Danny's back while he stared into the dark of the bedroom. "I'm tired of living a lie, living the way the world thinks I should. You know what would be funny? If the world doesn't even give a shit what I do or what I am, and I've wasted so much of my life for no reason at all."

The silence of the room sank in between his words. He could barely hear Danny's breaths, soft and airy. He couldn't even remember what Danny's voice sounded like when he wasn't high or strung out.

He ducked his head and buried his face against the top of Danny's head. His hair smelled rank, as if he hadn't just showered last night.

"It's strange," he murmured. "When I was a kid, I always imagined I'd grow up and have kids, and I'd be so much better than my father was. But when I was married with kids, I hated it. I thought the kids had ruined my life and trapped me in this prison of obligations and expectations. Then I left Lani, and I realized I really did love my kids, all of them. I want to be a good father, and I want them to be happy. But I want to be happy, too."

Against his chest, Danny pressed closer.

"I keep thinking I can keep the kids happy by pretending everything's normal. But maybe if I stopped pretending, and if I could be myself, maybe it would make them happy, too. You know?"

"Yeah," came a soft, unexpected voice. "I know."

Jeff kissed his forehead in thanks for the answer and held him tighter.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The beach was cold in the mornings before the sun rose and chased away the fog banks. Danny came out anyway and sat cross-legged on the sand, tucked into one of Jeff's sweatshirts. He craved the solitude as much as he had before wanted Jeff's company. It all seemed too much lately, the hovering concern and unending questions about how he felt. He was tired of telling Jeff where it hurt, the same as he was tired of telling him he felt better. He rarely felt better. Mornings were a hell of agony; nights were worse. Midday offered refuge from his more suicidal thoughts--*there's rope in the garage, you could hang yourself and end it, just end it, why are you even bothering, you know you'll never make it*--as if those thoughts couldn't survive the brightness of the sun. But he never felt good.

On the seventh morning of his forced detoxification, Jeff intruded on even the beach's peace. The sun had risen in a shimmering pool of gold and pink over the water when Danny heard footsteps shuffling over the sand and turned to see Jeff approaching. One of the sweatshirts that hung loose on Danny's frame fit Jeff perfectly, sparking new worries in Danny's mind. He had always been thin, but only recently emaciated. Would he regain his normal weight without the drugs? What then was to stop the pounds from climbing on and on, until he was as fat as his mother had been? Then he realized that for the first time, he was thinking in the context that there would be no more drugs even after he left the beach house. The thought was more complex than comforting as he turned it over in his mind.

"Hey." Jeff lowered himself to the sand beside Danny. Black stubble lined his chin, jaw, and upper lip; purple rings colored the skin beneath his eyes. Despite all that, he still made Danny's breath catch when he smiled. "Aren't you cold out here?"

Danny shrugged and turned his eyes back to the ocean, where it was safe to look. The waters seemed made of sparkling golden chips, rising and falling with the waves.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm *fine*."

"Oh. Would you rather be alone?"

Danny rubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, tasting his own morning breath and the sharp flavor of guilt. "You can stay."

They watched the sun rise. It climbed the sky in a flaming ball as the waters below shifted from golden to blue. The last wisps of fog melted away. The cold eased into warmth. Danny felt the glow of the sun on his face, pinkening his skin. He closed his eyes and saw orange behind his darkened vision.

"It would be great," Jeff said, "if we could stay here."

"Forever?"

"Sure. Forever."

Danny opened his eyes. The sunlight blinded him until he turned to Jeff again. He reached out with one hand and pushed a lock of hair back from Jeff's forehead.

Jeff watched him. "If you don't like it, I'll grow it back."

"I'm getting used to it this way." With long hair, Jeff had been wild, but short-haired, he had a new handsomeness. He frowned at Jeff's smile. "What?"

"I missed your voice."

"My voice." His frown tipped upward at the edges, until his lips had almost found the curve of a smile. "Are you joking?"

"No. It's different. Deeper. I like it."

Danny shook his head.

"Hey."

"What now?"

Jeff slid an arm around Danny's waist and edged closer, bumping their shoulders together. Danny tensed, nerves and eagerness twitching in the pit of his stomach. Jeff's eyes were as dark as they had been years ago, dark and hot; Danny wanted to burn himself on the heat again. Wanting didn't stop the fear.

"I have this fantasy," Jeff said.

Danny could taste Jeff's breath across the short distance, sharp with toothpaste and coffee. His arm came around Jeff's shoulders without a second thought. The closeness pushed his fears away for a moment, as if they'd never been apart at all. "What kind of fantasy?"

“You and I live together, and everyone in the world knows, and it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s it?”

Jeff shrugged.

“Hmm.” Danny leaned his head on Jeff’s shoulder. It felt right. “Is that what you want?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Think it’ll happen?” Maybe he was breaking the spell by asking, but he needed to know. He was tired of wasting hope on pipe dreams.

“It will,” Jeff said, “if you say yes when I ask you to give me another chance.”

This time Danny remained silent, staring down the beach at the waves rolling in. He felt the warmth of Jeff’s body under his cheek and in the arm wrapped around his waist. They could stay this way forever. Or just until Jeff came to his senses. He sounded sincere, but he always did when he made promises. It was his breaking of them that was the problem.

“You don’t have to answer now.” Jeff’s voice came out soft with disappointment. “If you need time...”

“I do.” Danny untangled himself and stood up. “Need time, I mean.”

“That’s fine.”

He shivered in the last of the morning’s coolness, afraid to look at Jeff, afraid to think about the question. He was afraid of a lot lately. He turned toward the house.

“Are you going in?” Jeff asked.

“Yeah. I’m hungry.”

Danny’s beard was growing in.

With his hands braced on the bathroom sink, he stared into the medicine cabinet mirror and eyed the red scruff. The coarse hairs scraped his tongue when he swept it over his upper lip, and he winced. He looked more like a bum than he had during his worst days of addiction.

He finished washing his hands and shuffled back into the kitchen. Jeff had come in from the beach. He sat at the table with a mug of coffee and the newspaper opened to the sports page.

Danny opened cabinet after cabinet and found bare shelves. “There’s nothing to eat.”

Jeff glanced up. "There's pancake mix."

"I don't want pancakes."

"What do you want?"

"Hamburgers. Lots of hamburgers."

Jeff propped an elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "Look in the backyard, and let me know if you find any cows."

Danny poured coffee into a white mug and leaned back against the counter, watching steam rise in curling tendrils. "Ramen noodles. Pop Tarts. Coca-cola. Shaving cream. You don't have any of those things. Go to the store."

"I guess we could get dinner at the Burger Shack in Shermanstown."

"Bring me cigarettes. Menthol."

"No cigarettes."

"And lube. I don't care what kind. Surprise me." He sipped his coffee, grimaced, and reached for the sugar.

"Why am I surprising you?" Jeff arched a single eyebrow. "You're not coming with me?"

"No."

"I thought you wanted to get out of here."

"I have things to do."

His eyes narrowed. "Such as...?"

"Don't do that," Danny said flatly. "Don't look at me like I can't be trusted, and don't talk to me like I'm a little kid."

"I didn't mean to."

"And--" He snagged the newspaper and flipped to the arts section. "If you don't bring back cigarettes, don't bother with the lube."

The sky clouded over while Jeff shopped. By the time he parked the truck in the garage and unloaded the flatbed, fat drops of rain were plopping down on the beach. A chill came with the

storm, rolling in off the ocean. He shivered and carried the fast food and two paper bags full of groceries into the kitchen.

“Dan?” He flicked on the light, set the bags on the table, and started digging for cold items. A box of condoms fell out when he grabbed for a carton of milk. They’d never really thought about using condoms in the past. Jeff didn’t want to use them now, but there were diseases popping up all over the place, and they had been sleeping with other people, after all. “I got your burgers. Fries, too.”

There was no answer. He glanced toward the living room as he carried milk and eggs to the fridge. Golden-orange flickers lit the doorway, but the light was off. He shut the fridge and went toward the shifting light. “Danny?”

Flames crackled and danced in the fireplace. In front of the fire, everything was bright and glowing. Beyond it, shadows pooled across the room. Jeff held onto the doorframe with one hand, while he scanned the area in front of the fireplace. A bottle of red wine sat on the coffee table beside two glasses; he recognized the label as a ‘69 merlot from his rack in the cellar. The cork lay beside the bottle, but the level looked full. Staring at the wine, he didn’t see Danny at first. When he did, his heart took a slow, tumbling roll.

Danny stood in the darkness to the right of the fireplace, gripping the mantle with both hands. He stood in profile to Jeff, his hair falling long and soft to his shoulders, firelight dancing off the angles of his naked body.

He lifted his head and faced Jeff. His eyes were deeper and darker than the shadows; his face was smooth and white. He tilted his chin up but said nothing, only stood watching Jeff.

“Jesus.” Jeff felt suddenly hot and cold at once. The passages of his brain tangled up with half-coherent thoughts. “Danny.”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?” He cringed at his own words; what did he care what Danny was doing? He was there, naked and perfect, and Jeff already wanted him.

“You asked me to make a choice,” Danny said, his voice lower and deeper than it had been all those years ago. “I did. The answer’s yes.”

“Yes.” Jeff couldn’t think. *Yes, what?*

“You wanted another chance.” Danny shifted and stared down into the flames. “It’s not really that simple. We both did things wrong. But, yes, I’ll give you one last chance, if you’ll do the same for me. Will you?”

Relief felt like drunkenness; Jeff’s knees wanted to fold. He held tighter to the doorframe and fought a laugh. “If-- Christ. What do you think? Of course.”

Danny kept his head ducked as he let go of the mantel and came toward Jeff. His bare feet made no sound against the carpet. Each step closer took more of the air from Jeff's lungs. He stood silent and waiting.

Danny stopped inches away. The air between them vibrated with static and heat from the fire. Danny lifted his head finally. His face was clean-shaven; Jeff saw a nick on his upper lip and one at the corner of his jaw where the dry razor must have cut him. His skin prickled and smarted as if the razor had cut him instead. Without thinking, he looked at Danny's wrists where he knew the other scars would be.

A hand on his jaw brought his attention back to Danny's face, to Danny's eyes. He saw a thousand emotions swimming in the dark, but he couldn't pick out one to name.

"I missed you," Danny said. "I missed you so much."

He rose up on his toes and kissed Jeff. Jeff forgot about scars, forgot about everything but the feel of Danny's mouth on his. He tasted coffee; he tasted the syrupy sweetness that he'd almost forgotten was peculiar to Danny. Thinking that he'd forgotten things about Danny only made him more desperate. He wrapped an arm around Danny's waist and crushed him closer while his other hand fisted in red hair. He slanted his mouth and drove the kiss deeper. He felt his teeth bruising Danny's lips and didn't care, didn't care about anything but being sure he remembered everything about Danny.

Gradually he became aware of Danny's hands thrusting between them and pulling at his shirt. He twisted away long enough to yank the sweatshirt over his head, then brought Danny back against him. He kissed Danny's mouth; he kissed the scars on his jaw; he kissed his throat where his pulse throbbed. But when he felt Danny's fingers slip under the waistband of his jeans, he pulled away again.

"What?" Danny stared at him, his face golden with firelight and his lips already swollen. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He grasped both of Danny's hands and held them away from his body as he walked Danny back behind the coffee table and pushed him down until he sat on the sofa.

"Jeff--?" For a second, Danny's eyes glittered amber and confused in the light.

"Shh." Jeff knelt on the sofa above him, one knee on each side of Danny's thighs. "Don't talk--" He leaned down and licked behind the shell of Danny's ear. "And don't move."

Danny sighed as Jeff ran his lips down the side of his neck. He traced the line of Danny's collarbone with his tongue, scraping his teeth across Danny's shoulder. He pressed lower, sliding his mouth over Danny's chest and abdomen in wet circles. Then, he backed off the sofa, spreading Danny's legs as he did, and crouched between them. He looked up.

Danny leaned against the sofa cushions, eyes half-lidded and lips parted. His hands rested beside him, palm up, and Jeff saw the reddened lines crossing the blue-green veins at his wrists. He realized with a sense of frantic fear that those lines were the proof that he had almost lost Danny. With fear came panic and urgency. It was so close, the imagined loss, the knowledge that he might never have seen Danny again, might never have touched him or heard his voice.

“Jeff.” Danny lifted a hand and touched Jeff’s hair. “What’s wrong?”

I’m sorry, he wanted to say. *I’m sorry for everything*. But he had already said that. He looked down. Danny’s cock rose from a nest of dark, curling hair; it was already long and stiff. There were other ways to apologize.

He settled down, the carpet soft and warm against his knees. He glanced up once more at Danny’s face, at his drugged expression; he leaned down and closed his lips around the head of Danny’s cock.

He had imagined this act a hundred times, a hundred ways. He had imagined disgust and sickness; he had imagined the voice in the back of his mind whispering slurs. *Cocksucker*, he could almost hear it saying. *Dirty fucking cocksucker faggot*.

But it was nothing like what he’d expected. There was no wave of revulsion climbing his throat; there was no shame; there was no voice mocking him. There was only the thick, musky taste of Danny. He held still for a long moment, getting used to the feel of having Danny in his mouth, while Danny’s thigh muscles tensed beneath him, and his hands slid into Jeff’s hair.

He began to move, alternating between quick sucks and slow licks, lowering down along the shaft, then rising back to the glans. Danny’s fingers tightened in his hair until his scalp ached, but it was a good ache, tunneling down his spine like a hot chill. He lingered in the taste and texture; what he couldn’t take into his mouth, he explored with his hands and fingertips.

When Danny’s hips began to jerk in restrained thrusts, and when Danny’s knuckles pressed hard against the back of his skull, Jeff sank down as far as he could and swallowed hard. Danny came with a sharp expulsion of air, grinding himself against Jeff’s face. Jeff held his breath and did his best to swallow.

Slowly, Danny relaxed against the sofa, hands slipping from Jeff’s hair. Jeff drew back even slower. Where was the change? He felt the same as he had half an hour ago. There was no great clanging bell announcing what he had done. He hadn’t crossed the invisible line. Maybe there was no line after all.

“Come here,” Danny murmured, beckoning with one hand.

Jeff sat beside him, and Danny curled instantly into him, pressed his cheek to Jeff’s shoulder. Jeff put an arm around him, dizzy with the realization that everything was all right; it might be all right forever. And there was the change after all. He had pleased Danny, satisfied him, and he had never been more proud.

“Not bad,” Danny said. “For your first time.”

Jeff laughed deep in his throat. “You’re such an ass.”

“Yeah.” Danny hooked a leg over Jeff’s knee and sighed. “I know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

In the morning, they went fishing. Danny sat in the center of the motorboat with his arms folded tight over a bright orange lifejacket. He tried not to look at the water sloshing against the hull of the boat, but instead kept his eyes fixed on the house as it faded to a white speck on the beach.

“If you’re going to be sick,” Jeff called over the engine’s growl, “do it over the side.”

Danny turned and glared at him through windblown hair. “I’m not sick.”

“You’re turning green.”

“Shit.” For the tenth time, he checked the tie on his lifejacket.

Jeff cut the engine, and the roar of silence was deafening. The boat drifted over low swells. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Danny couldn’t see the house at all anymore. “It’s just that if we capsize, are you sure you can tow me all the way back?”

Jeff’s mouth curved into a half-smile. “Are you telling me you don’t know how to swim?”

“I thought you knew. You kept trying to drown me in the surf.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.”

Jeff laughed, silencing only when Danny swung another glare on him. “We can go back if you want.”

“We’re out here now.” He peered over the side, into the blue-gray water. “With the sharks.”

“There are no sharks.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jeff leaned over and dug a Styrofoam cup full of dirt out of the tackle box. “Do you know how to bait a hook?” he asked, lifting the fishing poles up from the bottom of the boat.

Danny rolled his eyes and grabbed his pole and the cup. “I grew up near a big-ass lake. In the summer, you swam or you fished.” Or you sat on the shore and built sandcastles. He dug out a worm, and while it squirmed, he jabbed his hook through its head--or ass, he couldn’t tell which. “I had nightmares about the turtles biting my toes off, so I fished.”

“They must have been big turtles.”

“I don’t know. I never saw them.” He swung his pole back and cast his line out. The nylon string sailed through the air for a long moment before hook and worm plopped into the water a good ways out. “But I knew they were there, dreaming about my toes like I was dreaming about their beaks.”

Jeff baited his hook. “You’re crazy.”

Danny squinted at him through the glare of the afternoon sun. “That’s why you love me.”

“Probably.” Jeff lowered the anchor, careful not to let the chain clank against the boat’s hull, then cast his own line. For a few minutes they sat in silence. The boat bobbed on gentle waves; the breeze rolled in, cool and salt-scented.

“You know,” Danny said finally, tilting his head up to let the sun bake down on him. “The thing about fishing is that it’s boring as all hell.”

Jeff smiled. “What do you suggest we do about that?”

“Ever fucked on a boat?”

The next morning Danny woke to the feel of Jeff’s hands smoothing across his back. It was the best way he’d awakened in a long time, and for a few minutes he lay still, letting Jeff trace patterns on his skin. Finally, he lifted his face from the pillow and rolled over onto his back. Jeff lay beside him, propped up on one elbow and staring down at him with wavy hair tumbling over his forehead.

“I like your tattoo,” he said.

Danny yawned and scrubbed at his face with both hands. A thin layer of dried sweat clung to his skin from last night’s exertions. The sky had still been light when he’d gone to bed with Jeff, but they hadn’t slept for hours. He didn’t feel dirty, though; he felt fresh and clean and alive.

“When did you get it?”

“Hmm?”

“The tattoo.”

“Oh. A few years ago.” He arched his back and stretched out the kinks, writhing against the mattress. Early morning sunlight came through the windows and warmed his skin. Basking in it, he smiled. For a single moment in his life, everything was good; no tainted memories could touch him. “I saw you on MTV, debuting some video. You had this guitar I’d never seen before, the one with the fox. So I went out to the first tattoo shop I saw and told them to put the same thing on me. The next day I thought it was the stupidest thing I’d ever done.”

“I thought dating a lesbian was the stupidest thing you’d ever done.”

Danny laughed. The sound felt good, rolling through him like melted caramel, and he kept laughing. “She said she was bisexual.”

“Right.”

He let the laugh die slowly and closed his eyes. The sun turned the darkness behind his eyelids golden-orange. When Jeff’s hand settled on his stomach, just over his navel, he shivered. The feel of Jeff’s fingers on his skin was delicious, like hot butter and sex in front of the fireplace and a thousand other things that made him think of heaven.

“It was for you, you know.” Jeff’s thumb stroked back and forth across his skin. “The guitar. You used to have all those foxes in your apartment, the statues and the paintings... I wanted you to know that I was thinking about you, even if I couldn’t be with you.”

Danny opened his eyes. The light made a halo around Jeff’s head, and his tanned skin glowed. It felt entirely natural for Danny to lift one hand and slide his fingers around the back of Jeff’s neck, to pull him down. His eyes were open when Jeff’s lips met his. He saw the golden color of Jeff’s skin and the sooty darkness of his eyes and the soft black of his hair. He tasted sour morning breath and didn’t mind it.

Then he heard the knocking.

He pulled back at the same time as he felt Jeff tense. “What the hell?”

Jeff’s eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t know.”

“I thought there was nobody around for twenty miles.” He stared at the open bedroom doorway as the knocking came again from down the hall, sharp and insistent.

Jeff stood and grabbed a pair of jeans from the closet. “Stay here,” he said and, still pulling the pants on, headed out the door.

“Like hell.” Danny scrambled up and threw on yesterday’s dirty jeans and tee-shirt, then took off after Jeff. When he made it to the living room and saw Jeff pushing the sliding glass door open, he froze.

It was Lani. He would have recognized her anywhere, would have known her if he hadn’t seen her for a hundred years. She wore a mauve dress suit with big, black sunglasses, her blond-dyed hair tucked under a matching scarf. She looked older than Danny remembered, a little more mature, but ultimately the same. He knew too well the harsh pursing of her lips, the impatient tap-tap of her high-heeled foot.

As the glass door opened, she stepped inside without removing her sunglasses. “It’s about time.” Her voice fell like ice chips, waiting for no preliminaries. “Do you know what week it is, Jeff?”

Jeff stood to the side of the door, silent, a muscle in his cheek twitching.

“Of course you don’t.” Lani’s lips pursed a little more, and she brushed past him into the center of the living room. Three children clustered around her.

For a minute as he stood in the shadows of the hallway, Danny forgot about Lani. He stared with wonder at the kids, at the tiny, perfect creatures who called Jeff their father. When he had thought about them before, they had been faceless in his mind, nothing more than names. Now and then he’d remember Francesca’s face, round and dimpled, but he could never quite recall the color of her eyes, or the way she’d looked at him.

Francesca wasn’t dimpled anymore. Her seven-year-old face was smooth and freckled, with Lani’s pale complexion. Her dirty blond hair edged more toward brown now. It hung down to her shoulders, while long bangs fringed over her eyes. Her eyes were blue, staring out from behind round eyeglasses. She said nothing, only gripped both her brothers’ hands in hers.

The boys were like nothing Danny could have imagined. The elder was maybe five, a smaller replica of Fran, though he wore no glasses and his face had Lani’s sharp-chipped beauty. Only the youngest bore any resemblance to Jeff. He couldn’t have been much older than two, but his hair was already thick and black and wavy, long enough to brush the tips of his ears. His skin was light brown; his eyes were great smudges of near-black.

It was the youngest that Danny couldn’t stop staring at, this tiny miniature of Jeff. Kevin, Danny thought his name was, though he couldn’t remember for sure. For a minute he felt the old rip of pain in his chest. This was why Jeff had left him, for Fran, and eventually for all of them. For these little pieces of himself. And Danny understood at last how important they were; he understood that they were tiny and beautiful, that they were made to be protected and loved. It was almost enough to make him hate himself forever, thinking he could be as important.

He missed the morning, suddenly; he wished it was ten minutes ago and he was still in bed with Jeff.

Jeff shut the door. “What are you doing here, Lani?”

“Isn’t that a wonderful way to greet the mother of your children? I don’t suppose you realized that this was your week to take them.”

“Shit.” Jeff scrubbed a hand over his face. “Shit, I forgot.”

“I’m sure.” Lani took off her sunglasses and tapped her red lacquered nails against the frames. “And why exactly are you here, Jeff? Angela refused to say. No trouble in paradise, I hope.”

“Do we have to stay here?” The older of the two boys--Nicholas, Danny thought--jerked away from his sister and stared up at Jeff. “There’s nothing to do, and Toby’s birthday party is on Saturday, and you said I could go. You *promised*.”

“You can go, Nick.” Jeff reached down and ruffled his hair absently. “Don’t worry. Mom and I just have to talk about some things.”

Kevin trotted across the floor to wrap his arms around Jeff’s leg and beam up at him. “Go in ocean?”

“Maybe later.” Jeff scooped him up and, balancing him in one arm, spiraled him in a slow circle. As he turned, he glanced toward the doorway to the hall. His eyes met Danny’s, brimming with apology.

Then Lani turned. Like an arrow, her gaze penetrated the shadows where Danny stood. He had to fight not to shrink back into the darkness as his courage withered. Instead, he stepped into the living room.

“Daniel.” Lani’s voice was flat.

“Hi, Lani.”

Her eyes skipped back and forth between him and Jeff. “Oh, isn’t this just lovely. No wonder you’re hiding here. I should have guessed. I absolutely should have guessed.”

“It’s none of your business,” Jeff said quietly, setting his son on the ground again.

“I think it is, if I’m expected to leave my children here.”

“They’re my kids, too.”

“They’re your kids, but you can’t even remember when you’re supposed to pick them up. I had to drag them all the way across town, and then guess what? You’re not even in the fucking *state*.”

“You could have left them with Angela, and you damn well know it. The only reason you’re here is because you wanted to know what was going on. We’re divorced, Lani. When are you going to stay the hell out of my life?”

Lani’s lips curled into a smirk. “Is that what you said to Angela when you told her you were bringing Danny here? Or does she even know she’s been replaced with a washed-up fag? How long have you been cheating on her? Maybe you were doing it while we were still married. Is that it, Jeff, have you and your little faggot boyfriend been meeting up all these years?”

Jeff’s face seemed set in stone. Danny took a quick step toward them, then hesitated and paused a few feet away. “It wasn’t like that, Lani,” he said, and it was a struggle to face her. “You know it wasn’t.”

Her smirk flattened as she tossed him a look of disdain. “Oh, shut up, Daniel. No one cares what you think. No one’s cared in a long time. You’re just another used-up has-been. Now you want to leech onto Jeff, so you can pretend somebody still wants you. And lucky for Jeff, he’s just fool enough to let you.”

Danny stared at her, and the world seemed to fill with an awful silence. In the back of his mind, he was aware of the television flicking on and the boys fighting over the remote. Lani’s words echoed in his mind. Yes, she was right, of course, she was right; he had known that since he first saw Jeff again. But hearing the words spoken aloud made it real. The accusation struck him hard. Christ, no wonder he’d tried to bury himself under a mountain of drugs. Emotions were hellish things.

“Enough.”

Jeff’s voice was a thunderclap. It jolted right through Danny’s bones. Lani must have felt it too; Danny watched her eyes widen a fraction of an inch as she looked back to Jeff.

“Enough,” he repeated, keeping his eyes on Lani. “Leave the kids. We’ll be happy to have them here. You, get out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get out, or I’ll put you out.”

For the first time in his life, Danny saw Lani dumbstruck. She gaped, her eyes bulging.

“Now,” Jeff said.

“You bastard.” Visibly collecting herself, Lani shoved the sunglasses back onto her face. Her mouth pinched into a tight line. “Threatening me will look awful when I reopen the custody case.”

She made for the door, ignoring Kevin's shout of "Momma?" The glass door thundered down its tracks, accompanied by the fast click of her high heels as she clipped down the deck stairs.

"Jesus," Jeff breathed.

Danny stood still for half a second. Lani was doing it again, butting in and ruining everything. Was that the only thing she enjoyed in life, forcing other people to live as she wanted them to? And just like before, he was going to stand back and let her do it.

Except he wasn't.

He darted to the door.

"Danny?" Jeff called.

"I'll be right back." He went down the stairs two at a time and made it to the bottom just as Lani revved the engine of a black Mercedes parked in the sand. He tapped on the driver's window. "Lani."

The tinted window rolled down to reveal a pair of sunglasses staring back at him. "What do you want now?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

Lani didn't speak.

"If you think I ruined your life, or stole your husband. I'm sorry."

"Is this the part where you tell me you were only following your heart?"

"No. I just thought you should know that I never wanted to hurt you, and neither did Jeff." He put his hands on the silver window trim. "But I want you to know, too, that nothing you do is going to tear us apart. I won't give up this time. No matter what you do, I'll still be here. So get used to it or get lost."

Lani tossed her head. Danny caught a glimpse of her tight-lipped smile, before she faced forward. "Get off my car, Daniel."

He stepped away, shoving his hands into his pockets. The window rolled up and an instant later the Mercedes lurched ahead, tires spraying up gales of sand. The car shot up the beach incline and spun onto the dirt road, disappearing between rows of hemlocks.

Danny watched until he could no longer hear the growl of the engine, then padded back up the stairs.

Jeff stood in the doorway, watching. "What was that about?"

“Nothing.”

“Really.”

Danny glanced past him, into the house. The boys had progressed to a wrestling match over control of the remote. Every time Nicky knocked Kevin down, the toddler got right back up and flung himself at his brother.

Fran had sat down on the sofa and was watching TV with solemn eyes. Danny remembered suddenly what it had felt like to hold her when she was Kevin’s age. He remembered her quietness and the way she’d called him Dada. Yet when she looked at him now, there was no recognition in her eyes, only the wariness of a child looking at a stranger in her father’s house. Five years was long enough to forget a lot of things.

“Dan.” Jeff laid a hand on his arm. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He glanced over the deck at the tire tracks in the sand, then back to Jeff. “Come inside and introduce me to your kids.”

Two days later, they left the beach house, and everything changed.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Angela sat on the sofa and listened to the truck pull into the driveway. She knew it was Jeff; who else would it be? She knew, but for a long minute after she heard the noise, she sat still.

The golden retriever bounded up from his dog bed beside the television and stood for a second with his ears pricked forward and his tail swishing. Then, he raced for the front door and began barking.

Jeff had come back. For all her trust and love, Angela hadn't believed he would.

Vehicle doors slammed. She heard Nicky and Kevin shouting already.

She stood and walked to the door, careful of her shaking knees. Lucky whined and jostled against her as she peered through the curtain and the glass. She saw the truck parked in the driveway, Jeff standing outside the passenger window with his arms propped on the rolled-down window. Sitting in the truck seat was Daniel Chandler.

He was more ragged than Angela had expected. His hair was dragged back into a ponytail, with tangled, ginger-colored bangs hanging around his face. He was nothing like the cocky, pretty boy in the photographs. He had become a man between then and now, hard-edged and wary-eyed.

Jeff reached through the window and touched Daniel's shoulder. Daniel smiled with a wry twist of lips. He didn't want to be here, Angela thought, any more than she wanted him here, but when Jeff opened the door, he stepped out.

Angela let the curtain fall back into place. She took a step back and breathed in. She stilled the tremble in her hands and knees. Was it a blessing or a curse that Jeff had come back? She didn't know.

She unlocked the door and opened it. Lucky shot through the gap and tore across the yard with his tail flagging wildly. He bowled Nicky over halfway across the yard, and they went tumbling together in the grass. Angela walked down the front steps and headed for the truck.

Fran climbed out of the backseat and crossed the lawn, barely glancing at Angela as she passed, calling the dog after herself. Fran had never accepted her, though she showed no love for her

own mother, either. Angela was glad now; it would make the separation that much easier. Maybe Fran had known all along that Angela wouldn't last.

"Hey, Angie." Jeff turned away from Danny with a smile that looked too much like a paper mâché construction.

"Hey." She forced false joy into her own smile. "I'm so glad you guys could stop here. I was afraid I wouldn't get to meet you, Daniel."

Daniel took the hand she offered and shook. His own hands were narrow but strong. "Yeah," he said, glancing back at Jeff. "I guess you're Angela."

"That's right."

"Great to finally meet you."

He was the worst actor of them all, Angela thought.

Jeff slung an arm around Daniel's shoulders. It might have been a friendly gesture, or something more. Angela couldn't tell. Suddenly, she didn't want to know any more than she'd already guessed.

She took a quick step back. "Well, I'd better go and add more spaghetti to the pot so I have something to feed you. Jeff, you'll show Daniel to the guest room?"

"You bet."

"Great. Dinner'll be ready at eight." She left them by the truck and fled back to the house.

"It's not fancy," Jeff said, switching on the lights in the small room. "But there are extra blankets in the hall if you get cold. Take whatever you want."

Danny glanced around. A twin-sized bed with a blue comforter stood against the far wall beside an oak bureau and an armchair.

"So, make yourself at home."

The irritation that had been building all day--the long, long truck ride with the boys screaming at each other the whole time, the realization that Jeff was taking him *here* of all places--reached a pinnacle. "This," he said, slinging his duffel bag onto the bed, "isn't home."

Jeff stood against the door. "I know that."

"But you brought me here anyway. Why?"

"I wanted you to meet Angela."

"So you could compare us side by side? Jesus, Jeff."

"I don't need to compare. I know who I want."

"Right." Danny started to unzip his bag, then stopped when he felt Jeff moving up behind him. "What?"

Jeff's arms slid around his waist. "You know I love you. Why are you being like this?"

"Because..." Danny closed his eyes. Without sight, he lingered in Jeff's scent, in Jeff's warmth. "You said you were going to help me through this, and instead you bring me home to meet your girlfriend."

Jeff sighed and leaned down, pressing his forehead to Danny's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind. I had to drop the kids off, and I thought we could just eat dinner... I wanted you to see what my life has been like."

"Did you ever think I might not want to know?"
"I'm sorry."

Jeff was always sorry, and he always made the same mistakes. Danny didn't want to know what Jeff's life had been like without him. His own life had been hard enough.

"Do you want me to take you home?" Jeff hugged him close. "We can go right now and be in New York by ten."

Danny wanted nothing else. Except for Jeff not to resent him. He pulled away. "We're here now. Just forget it."

"Danny."

"It's fine." He finished unzipping his bag and rooted around inside for cigarettes.

"Danny," Jeff repeated, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Go get in the truck. I'll tell Angela, and then I'll be out. Don't argue. Just go."

Danny stood still, staring at the bag. Only when Jeff's hand left his shoulder did he turn. "Jeff."

Jeff paused in the doorway.

"Thank you."

"Yeah." His grin stretched all the way across his face. "Sure."

After he left, Danny zipped his bag shut and went straight to the truck. It was locked. He slung his bag in the back and stood leaning against the door, watching the front door of the house. But it wasn't Jeff who walked out a few minutes later and came toward him. It was Fran.

She crossed the lawn with slow, deliberate steps, her head ducked down and her hair swinging around her chin.

"Hey," Danny said.

She stopped beside him and stood staring down at the grass.

"So..." Her silence was more disturbing now than it had been when she was two. His own sister had been nothing like Fran. Jersey had talked so much he'd had to duct tape her mouth shut to get any quiet.

Guilt crept up the back of his throat like a cough that wouldn't come out. He hated thinking about Jersey and all her unanswered letters. God, she must think he was such an ass. And he was. He should have written her back. No, he should have gone back to see her, but he'd been so afraid to go back to the place where he'd been a no one.

"My dad really loves you."

Fran's voice shattered all the thoughts of fear. Danny looked quickly down at her, but she was still studying the grass. "What?"

"I don't think he ever loved Mom or Angela this much. He never kissed them like he kisses you."

"Fuck." He bit his lip against the curse and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You know, friends kiss sometimes. And your dad and I are good friends."

She looked up at last, blue eyes solemn behind the lenses of her glasses. "I won't tell anybody if you don't want. I just want to know if you love him back."

Christ, he needed a cigarette. It was his turn to stare at the grass. He heard Fran's dog barking from inside the house.

"So do you love him or not?"

The front door swung open, and Jeff came out and strode across the yard. The wind blew his hair back as far as the short strands would go. When his eyes met Danny's, he grinned.

"Yeah," Danny said. "I do."

Fran nodded, as if she understood completely.

The Lincoln Tunnel was packed. By the time Jeff pulled the truck up outside Danny's apartment building, the light on the dashboard read 11:28 P.M. Danny stared up at the building but didn't move, even after Jeff parked. The building looked taller than he remembered; the concrete wall was gray-black and menacing, spiked with fire escapes.

"Are you sure you don't want to check into a hotel?" Jeff shut the engine off. "I could wait until the morning to head back, and drop you off here before I go."

"No. I'm fine."

"I'd stay longer if I could."

"I know." Part of him was glad Jeff had to get back to the kids. He wanted time away from Jeff, time to sort things out in his own head. He had to deal with Adam first, though.

"Danny."

He glanced back at Jeff.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." Why shouldn't he be? He had Jeff; he had everything he'd ever wanted. He leaned across the seat and kissed Jeff, then drew away just as quickly. "Just make sure you come back for me."

"First thing next week."

"Good." Danny opened the door and stood on the pavement for a moment, staring up at the building. Then, with one last look at Jeff, he slammed the door and jogged up the steps, opened the door, and went in. As he mounted the first flight of steps, he heard the truck pull away.

The sound echoed in his head as he went up each level. Jeff was coming back, he reminded himself. Jeff had promised. It was hard to believe that though, and even harder to believe that this might be the end of the hard times. He'd gotten used to hating life; what would it be like to have a life worth living again?

He made it to the ninth floor and fished in his pocket for his key. He opened the door silently. Adam went to bed early most nights, and if Danny didn't wake him, he could delay the dreaded conversation until tomorrow. What was he supposed to say anyway? *Thanks for caring about me. Thanks for saving my life. I'm in love with somebody else.*

He crept into the living room and cringed inwardly. The light was on in the kitchen, spilling brightness into the other rooms. He heard a rustling in the kitchen; he imagined Adam hunting

through the fridge for one of his colas. But when he slipped through the kitchen doorway, that wasn't what he saw.

Adam stood with his back to the kitchen counter, his hands reaching behind himself to grip the ledge of the sink with white knuckles. And in front of him... All Danny saw of the tall figure embracing Adam was a curtain of raven-black hair, and the side of a long face.

They broke apart as if they could sense him there.

"Danny--" Adam's face went a shade whiter than usual. Traces of blood red lipstick were smeared across his face; when Danny looked at the other man, he saw the origins of the lipstick along with artful strokes of black eyeliner and shadow. He wore a sleek suit--and a smirk.

Danny stood silent and motionless in the doorway. His brain registered everything his eyes saw, and the rational part of him understood exactly what was going on. But another part of him stumbled over disbelief.

"Danny..." Adam wrapped his arms around himself and stared at the linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor. "I... You should have told me you were coming home."

"Yeah." Danny heard his own voice echoing in his head, strangely hollow. "I guess I should have."

Adam looked up quickly, eyes bright with unhappiness. "I'm sorry. I didn't want... But it was just a kiss. I swear to God, Danny, it was just a kiss."

Beside him, the black-haired man quirked a crooked smile. "It was just a kiss," he agreed in a suave voice. "But you know where to find me if you'd like to make it more than that. Any time, Adam."

He slipped past Danny, and the only sound Danny heard after was the front door shutting.

"It was just a kiss," Adam said again.

"It's okay," he words looped endlessly through Danny's mind. *It's okay, it's okay, it's okay... It's okay, Jeff, I'll be fine. It's okay, Adam...* He thought about all the things he was supposed to tell Adam, and none of them seemed important anymore. He stood in the kitchen doorway and stared at the lipstick stains on Adam's mouth.

"I'm..." Adam looked down again. "I'm going to stay somewhere else tonight. I just... can't be here right now. I'm sorry."

"Right. Fine."

"Danny, I'm sorry."

“It’s okay,” he said once more, repeating the only words he could.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Jeff woke up on Saturday with a plan fixed in his mind. It was the perfect plan, the simplest plan, and he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before.

Ten years ago, Daniel Chandler, drunk off his skinny ass, had talked him into starting a band. That band had gone beyond Jeff's wildest dreams; they had packed arenas and sold millions of records. But more than that, Jeff had found in Danny the perfect creative partner. The best songs were the ones they wrote together; the best shows were the ones where they fell into sync with each other and ran with their whims.

None of his projects since had come close to that perfection. Writing songs with David Tarr in the Jaywalkers had been like sliding splinters under his fingernails. He'd stopped collaborating after that band. When he'd started working under his own name as a solo artist, he'd written his own songs, and he'd paid musicians to help record them, to help play them live. He hadn't felt like wasting time or hope looking for someone who knew his mind like Danny had known it.

He had known for years that he wanted that relationship back just as much as he wanted Danny himself back. Why, he wondered now, had he never considered that it might be possible? Danny was here--or he would be soon--and they were together again. The things that caused Far Cry's break-up couldn't affect them now; why not begin a new band? A fresh partnership with Danny, a brand new band they would construct however they saw fit?

He wanted to call Danny then and there, but he forced himself to be patient. He did the things ordinary people did on Saturdays. He mowed the lawn and walked the dog. He dropped Nicky off at his best friend's birthday party and took Fran and Kevin to the park. He went grocery shopping with Angela.

Finally, with the kids settled in front of the television after dinner, he locked himself in his office and dialed Danny's number.

Danny didn't pick up until the sixth ring, and when Jeff spilled out the plan in all its glory, the response was not what he'd hoped for. It was, in fact, silence.

"Danny?" He forced himself to sit calmly in the brown leather chair in front of his desk. "You still there?"

“Yeah.” Danny’s voice sounded small and flat. “I’m here.”

“Well, what do you think?”

“Listen, Jeff. I don’t sing anymore.”

“What do you mean you don’t sing? What, ever?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s crazy.”

More silence filled the telephone line.

“So, you took a break,” Jeff reasoned. “Everybody does that. The point is that you’re ready to get back into it now.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The way Ray treated you was fucked-up, I’ll be the first to say, but this band is going to be different. We won’t put up with anybody trying to take charge. It’ll be our band, yours and mine. Nobody else tells us what to do with it, not other members, not record companies, managers, nobody.”

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

The sound of his voice, the utter wrongness of his tone, made Jeff frown. “What’s going on, Danny? Are you okay up there?”

“I’m fucking peachy.”

“You sound like shit.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

“I said nothing was wrong, didn’t I?” A heavy breath made static on the line. “So did you tell Angela?”

Jeff faltered. “I haven’t had time yet--”

“Right.”

“I’ll tell her, Dan, I swear. I’m taking the kids back to Lani on Monday. I’ll tell Angie before the weekend’s over, and then I’ll come up to see you.”

If Danny answered, Jeff didn’t hear him. There was a knock on the office door, and Fran appeared, blinking behind her thick glasses and holding a mathematics text book.

“Hey, Dan, I gotta go. Look, just think about what I said. I’ll call you Monday, okay?”

“Fine,” Danny said, and the line clicked dead.

Danny did think about it. He thought about it that night as he walked the gray, concrete streets of the city. He walked for hours with no aim, up and down the avenues, past museums and parks, past bars and clubs and memories.

On a street corner in the East Village, he paused under the streetlight. He had scored a quarter of smack on this corner a few months ago. It had been darker then, rain coming down in a steady drizzle, the city deserted for blocks in the early morning hours.

Jack Krueger’s club was a few blocks away from here. Jack always had shit for a good price-- and a favor. It would be easy to slip into the black light of the club, have a drink or two, then go into the bathroom or the alley with Jack. He could stop this endless wandering; he could go home and feel good again.

But it wasn’t his home, was it? It was Adam’s. Sooner or later Adam would come back, and Danny would have to go. Where, he didn’t know.

He edged away from the yellow pool of light and, in the shadows, rested against the wall of a closed tattoo shop. He just needed to breathe, that was all. Breathe in, breathe out, relax. Cool night air filled his lungs. He didn’t feel any better. A cramp worked into the calf muscle of his left leg, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The feeling would go away. It had to. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

He opened his eyes again when he heard the sound of voices nearing, happy, laughing voices. He looked and saw two men coming down the street. They were barely more than boys, two ordinary young men out on the town. But their hands were clasped together, and as they passed, Danny saw the laughter in their eyes.

Aching jealousy set into the marrow of his bones. Those two were just kids, and they already knew enough not to hide their happiness. Why had he and Jeff been so stupid at that age?

And now Jeff wanted to start a new band. Maybe it was a good idea, or maybe it was an awful one. Danny hadn’t done anything musical since Ray replaced him with that twit Mark. Music was meant to change the world, and he’d stopped trying to do that a long time ago.

But what if... what if it could be like it used to be?

It couldn't, he was positive.

But...

He realized with surprise that part of him wanted to do it, start up a new band and do what he had always loved doing. Good idea, bad idea; when had that ever stopped him before?

The hand-holding boys disappeared around a corner. Danny pushed away from the wall and started walking in the opposite direction, toward the subway entrance. He'd have to think about the band, but he knew one thing for sure; he wasn't going to see Jack Krueger tonight or any other night. He'd promised Jeff, and what was more, he'd promised himself.

"Angie. We need to talk."

Angela straightened her toothbrush in the holder. Two days since Jeff had returned from Virginia. Two days that she had let herself hope she'd been wrong about everything. She should have known better; hoping only made the pain worse now.

"I... ah..."

The towels hung askew on the rack. She tugged them to perfect straightness. "I know," she said.

Footsteps padded across the floor, and Jeff appeared in the bathroom doorway. "What does that mean?"

She looked away. If she looked at him for long, all her resolution to make a clean break would fail. "It's you and Daniel. That's what you want to talk to me about."

"Angela."

She could sense his frown without looking, and it twisted her insides in knots. When Jeff frowned, his eyes seemed to go entirely black. God, she was going to miss his eyes.

Something else in the bathroom was out of place; she tried to decide what. The hamper. The lid popped up an inch, too full of dirty clothing to close right.

"Will you look at me?"

"Look--" She smiled while she spoke, while she jammed the hamper lid down. "You don't have to explain. I understand. Daniel must be great, really great. So it's all right. Do what you have to do."

Jeff took another step into the room. "What is it exactly that you think you understand?"

Her smile vanished. She pressed her hands flat against her thighs as she straightened and faced him. "Don't play with me," she whispered. "Please."

"I didn't mean to."

"You're in love with him."

Jeff stared back at her, his face empty of all emotion. In the silence, Angela heard the tiny plip-plop of water dripping into the sink. She turned the facet off, twisting the crystal knob until her fingers hurt.

"It started before you," Jeff said.

Did that mean it should feel like less of a betrayal? She shook her head. "I know."

"How do you know?"

"It doesn't matter." She swallowed hard. She wouldn't fall apart. Not now. "Just tell me. If you love him so much, why did you leave him in the first place?"

"Because..." Jeff raked a hand through his hair. "Because of Lani and the kids. It was something I thought I had to do for them. And because I thought I could pretend it had never happened."

"And now you're going back to him."

"Jesus." He stepped close and took her hands. "I don't know what to tell you. I never wanted to hurt you. The last year with you, it's been better than I thought it could be. You mean so much to me, and I need you to know that. But I'm never going to be able to give you what you deserve."

She stared down at her hands, small and fragile clasped in his. "And how do you know what I deserve?"

"Angie..."

"Don't." She pulled her hands away. "I'm not asking you to stay with me. I wouldn't do that. And I'm not angry. But you can't expect me not to be hurt."

He moved away and sank down on the hamper. "I'll take care of you. Whatever you need, I'll make sure you have it."

"I can take care of myself. I have the daycare."

"You have the house, too. It's yours."

The charity stung, but she said nothing. She would take the house. She had nowhere else to go. "Are you moving back to New York?"

"I don't know." His eyes followed her as she moved deeper into the bathroom, further away from him. "I'm going up for a while after I drop the kids off tomorrow."

She looked at him as she had looked at him a hundred times before, but this time she did it with the knowledge that he belonged to someone else. He would never be hers again; maybe he had never been hers at all. She would never see the kids again. She would never lie beside Jeff in the dark, wondering if he loved her the way she loved him.

"I'm sorry, Ange. I'm so sorry."

"I know," she said again. "Thank you for the house. But I'd rather you not sleep in my bed again. You can stay in the guest room."

Monday afternoon, a knock on the door woke Danny. He sat up on the couch, groaning as he stretched the kinks out of his back. He checked his wristwatch. Four-fifteen. Adam was early; Danny wished he hadn't come at all. They were going to talk about things. They were going to finish things.

He crossed the living room and opened the door without bothering to look through the peep-hole.

Jeff stood in the hallway in blue jeans and a black polo shirt.

Danny stared. "What are you doing here?"

Jeff smiled, but his eyes were bloodshot. "I said I'd call today."

"But... you didn't call." Danny opened the door wider and glanced down the hallway as Jeff came in. Adam was nowhere in sight.

"Surprise." Jeff dropped onto the couch and threw an arm up over his eyes. "Christ, I've had a hell of a weekend."

Danny shut the door and came to sit beside him. "You told Angela?"

He nodded without taking the arm away from his eyes.

Danny sank deeper into the couch. He thought about his own weekend, about walking in on Adam, about the hours of wandering, but said nothing. He slid his arm around Jeff's shoulders. "What happened?"

“She knew.” Jeff lowered his arm finally and turned his face toward Danny. “Are we that obvious? Am I?”

“I didn’t think so.”

Jeff sighed. Then he laughed. “Do you want to know something funny?”

“Sure.” Danny nestled in closer to him, laying his head on Jeff’s shoulder.

“I went to Lani’s this morning to drop off the kids, but she wouldn’t take them. She’s going out of town. Hell, out of country. She’s leaving for Europe on Wednesday. And guess who was at her apartment with her.”

“Who?”

“Saul Carol.”

Danny pulled away and sat straight up. “What? Why?”

Jeff’s lips curled into a sarcastic smile. “They’re dating.”

“No fucking way.” He shook his head. He’d always known Saul liked women as well as men, but the idea of it, the irony...

“I’m telling you, I walk into her apartment with the kids and he’s coming out of her bathroom in a towel. He’s taking her along on the last leg of his summer tour.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“No shit. I had to beg Angela to watch the kids so I could come up here for a couple days. Then Saul walks me out--”

“In the towel?”

“In the towel. He walks me out, and he tells me, right in front of the kids, ‘Jeff, your problem is you never knew how to treat Lani. She’s a starfucker, not a housewife. You never should have married her. She’s a bitch, Jeff, but she’s predictable. Tell her you love her, and she’ll take you for granted. Treat her like crap, and she’ll crawl out of her fucking skin to please you.’ And the craziest thing is, I think he’s right.”

“I could have told you that. I think I did try to tell you.”

“Yeah.” Jeff leaned his head against the back of the couch and laughed again.

Danny smiled. He wondered if Lani knew all the people Saul had been with--all the *men*. Miracles still happened.

“You have had a hell of a weekend.” He looked back at Jeff, laying his hand on Jeff’s knee and sliding it up his thigh. “I could make it up to you. If you want.”

Jeff’s laugh quieted, but his lips remained turned upward at the corners. “You know, I would. I really would.”

Adam’s hands trembled at he searched for the right key to the apartment door. Why the fuck did he have so many keys? Two for work, one for the lobby, one for the mail...

He hadn’t mean to kiss Sebastian. All he’d wanted to do Friday night was get out of the apartment and have a few drinks around other people. Somehow he ended up at a tiny club with dim lights and slithering music. He’d sat at the bar drinking rum and cokes and watching a magician onstage pulling rabbits out of hats and turning them into doves. He hadn’t noticed until later how outlandishly attractive the magician was, with snow white skin, ebony hair, and silver eyes. The magician bought him drinks and introduced himself as Sebastian Devaroux.

When Sebastian had asked Adam to come back to his hotel, Adam had said no. He wasn’t about to cheat while Danny was going through what might be the hardest trial of his life, four states away. There was no harm in letting Sebastian walk him home though; it was only polite after all the drinks. But that had been before Sebastian asked to come up, before he cornered Adam in the kitchen, and before Adam found out that Sebastian’s mouth tasted like sugar cane and crackling magic.

But it had just been a kiss. One kiss. And the magazine tucked under his arm showed a hell of a lot more than one kiss.

He found the key and slid it into the lock. With a click and a twist, the door swung inward. Adam stepped through the doorway, and in half a heartbeat, the nerves jittering in his stomach clenched into cold fury.

Jeff was here, and he was sitting on the couch--on *Adam’s* couch--with his head thrown back and his eyes closed and his hands fisted in Danny’s hair.

“You son of a bitch.” Adam’s fingers fisted around the magazine, and the pages crinkled. “You son of a *bitch*.”

Danny, kneeling between Jeff’s spread legs, jerked his head up. His eyes were wide and blank; his lips were red from doing things Adam didn’t want to think about.

“Shit,” Jeff groaned, grabbing a pillow and covering himself with it.

“Adam.” Danny scrambled to his feet. “It’s not--”

“What it looks like?” Adam’s voice echoed in his own ears, sounding too deep, too gravelly to be his. It sounded like his father’s voice. With that thought burning in his mind, he hurled the magazine. It struck the coffee table’s edge and fluttered to the ground by Danny’s feet, glossy pages splayed open on the photos that had driven him here an hour early. “Don’t bother.”

Danny tucked his hands behind his back and looked away.

Adam took two steps toward him, until he could see the red color staining Danny’s cheeks. He wondered if it was embarrassment or shame. “I came here to apologize for what you saw. But then I found that--” He flung a hand at the crumpled magazine-- “on the newsstand. So I don’t think I’m sorry after all.”

“I am.” Danny met his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Adam’s lips peeled back over his teeth, and his hands, empty now, clenched once more into fists. Suddenly and more than anything, he wanted to hit Danny, and the strength of the urge was like being struck in the side of the face with a brick. Just like that bastard, just like his father.

He faltered, forcing his hands to relax. “Fuck you, Danny. Fuck you.”

Danny stood still. Jeff didn’t move. Adam stepped up to the couch. “This--” He snatched the pillow out of Jeff’s hands and backed away with it-- “is mine.”

“Sure,” Jeff said softly. “No problem.”

Adam didn’t look at either of them as he retreated. “Unless you feel like paying the rent,” he tossed over his shoulder, opening the door, “both of you need to get the fuck out of my place by tomorrow morning.”

He slammed the door without waiting for an answer. As he descended the stairs with the pillow tucked under his arm, he tried to tell himself that he had succeeded finally; he had saved someone’s life. But the bitterness in his mouth tasted like failure.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Jeff leaned down and picked a magazine up from where it had fallen by Danny, who now sat on the floor with his forehead on his knees.

“I should have told him the night I came back,” Danny murmured, his hair hiding his face. “But he had somebody here, and if he was the one doing something wrong, it didn’t have to be me.”

Jeff stared at the cover of the magazine and said nothing. Splashed across the glossy cover of *Celeb Style*’s July issue was a photograph of the beach in front of his Virginia house. But what the camera had zoomed in on was his face--and Danny’s. Their foreheads rested against each other; their noses almost touched. Their hair tangled together in strands of red and black.

Brotherly Love? asked the caption.

His breath hissed out between his teeth.

“What is it?” Danny asked, lifting his head. “Jeff?”

Someone, some *shit*, had been spying on them. How had they known? How could they possibly have known? And what did it matter, when this was the cover of the number one gossip rag in the country?

Danny climbed onto the couch beside Jeff and peered over his shoulder. “Shit,” he said softly. Then, louder, “*Shit*. How...?”

“I don’t know.” Jeff flipped through the pages until he came to the feature article. More photos leapt out at him like open-handed slaps. He saw a picture of Danny sitting astride the deck railing with Jeff behind him, his arms wrapped around Danny’s waist and his head ducked. His hair was just long enough to hide the kiss.

“Oh my God. What do we do?”

Another photo showed another kiss, this one in full view. Jeff remembered the morning of that kiss, remembered the exact moment. The kids had still been asleep. Danny had wanted to make breakfast; Jeff had argued with him about how much skill it took to fry eggs. While they’d

bickered, the bread in the toaster started to burn, sending spirals of sour, black smoke into the air. Danny stalked to the sink and stared out the window, sulking. The light from outside spilled around him, radiating off his skin and making him look young and irresistible. Jeff forgot what they were fighting about. He came up behind Danny, turned him halfway around and caught his mouth.

Danny had tasted like honey and morning dew.

And through the window, someone had been watching them the whole time.

“Jeff.”

“What?” He stared at a thumbnail picture of the kids running on the beach. Some bastard had spied on his kids. His jaw clenched.

Danny put a hand on his knee. “What do we do?”

“What do--” He glanced up. “What do you think? It’s too late to do anything. This could have been on the newsstands for days. Do you know how many people have seen it?”

“Jesus.” Danny wiped a hand over his pale face.

Jeff scanned the article.

Source says... relationship began when Far Cry first came together... Cruz went as far as to marry model Lani Wright to allay suspicion... brought three children into this less than heartfelt marriage...

“Christ.” Jeff dropped the magazine. It flopped onto the floor. “It’s Lani. Lani did this.”

“You think she took the pictures?”

“I think she tipped the magazine off. She fed them this whole bullshit story and told them where to find us.” Anger burned in a white-hot ball in his chest. “She did this.”

“But we have to be able to do something. Can we sue her? Or the magazine?”

“For what? It’s true. At least, it’s her version of the truth.”

“What about our rights?”

“What rights?” Jeff laughed, and the sound hurt his throat. “Lani went to a magazine, and she made sure she told enough truth to keep herself safe. I can’t prove that I didn’t marry her as a cover, just like we can’t prove that we weren’t having an affair from the time the band started. And what does that really matter anyway? They’re just technicalities; no one would care. We’re celebrities. We don’t have a right to privacy.”

Danny stood and paced toward the kitchen, paused, and came back again, his forehead wrinkled and creased. He stopped in front of Jeff and looked at him. "Maybe it's good. You said we wouldn't hide who we are. So this isn't exactly what you meant. At least... everybody knows now. The whole world knows."

Jeff leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees. Sure, the whole world knew. But Lani had spun it all the way she wanted to. They were the villains, he and Danny. The ones who cared nothing about the people they hurt as long as they got what they wanted. How was he supposed to get a new band together with this kind of publicity?

"Jeff."

He lifted his eyes to Danny's.

"You changed your mind," Danny said. "You'd rather keep us a secret."

"No." He reached out and hooked a finger through the belt loop of Danny's jeans and pulled him closer. "I just wanted to do it differently. But you're right. It's done now; everybody knows. We just have to set a few things straight. Lani told her story; we have to tell ours."

Danny stepped closer still, sliding his hands into Jeff's hair. Jeff heard him swallow. "How?"

"Interviews. *Celeb Style* all the way up to *Rolling Stone*. Everybody who'll listen."

"They're going to want to know all about us."

"So we'll tell them." He tipped his head back and stared up at Danny. "But for tonight, why don't you pack up your things, and we'll check into a hotel."

Danny stood in the hotel shower with his hands braced against the wall, water pounding down on his arms, his back, and the top of his head. He thought about Adam and Lani, about Jeff in the next room, and as he thought, the words came. He ran them through his head first, then mumbled them into the hot spray.

"I was born in the land of the free and the brave--"

He stumbled over the melody, searching for the right notes. Water dripped over his closed eyelids.

"Where love is love until it's hate, and hearts don't break, over chances we don't-- Damn." He shook his head, sprayed water droplets. "Over chances we *never* take."

He straightened, opened his eyes, and shut the shower off. He wrung the water out of his hair before he left the stall.

“I was born in the summer of ’65, when we were all glad to be alive, unless we were crying. The sad and the dying, we left them all behind.”

He wiped the steam off the mirror with the palm of his hand and stared at his reflection. Was that really him? His skin glowed pink, damp from the shower. The lines of his face seemed softer, his eyes brighter. He planted both hands on the mirror, one on either side of his reflection’s face.

“And I saw you,” he whispered, “before I opened my eyes. It was some surprise. I lost you when I came alive.”

Jeff was waiting in the next room. They would sleep in the same bed tonight, and they would pretend the clerk in the marbled lobby hadn’t arched his eyebrows when they checked in. They would pretend they were alone in the world, and they would pretend they were happy.

Maybe they weren’t pretending.

“Now the ending takes us back--”

Fresh words slipped into his mind and slid around in the shadows of his soul, came together finally in a chorus.

*“Now the ending takes us right back to the beginning.
I can’t see past the static lines;
I can’t see past the parts of me I left behind.
The tape flips back to rewind,
And the ending takes us right back to the beginning.
Will you wait for me there?”*

He ran his hands through his hair, tucked a green towel around his waist, and opened the bathroom door.

The air in the bedroom was cool with air conditioning and smelled faintly of cinnamon potpourri. Jeff sat on the edge of the king-sized bed, phone in hand. “No,” he said into the receiver, while his eyes flickered over Danny. “Make it noon.”

Danny stood in front of him, gooseflesh rising on his chilled skin. His eyes drank in the sight of Jeff’s hair, tangled in disarray, hanging over his forehead. He studied Jeff’s hands, big and strong, gripping the phone, and imagined how the callused fingertips would feel on his body. Was it so wrong that people know this was how he thought of Jeff? It didn’t feel wrong.

“I meant it, Pete, no boundaries. I’ll answer any question you come up with. Great. See you Thursday.”

Danny waited until Jeff replaced the phone in its cradle, then he crawled onto the bed and straddled Jeff's knees. "Hey," he said, ducking his head and running his lips down the side of Jeff's neck.

"Hey..." Jeff drew back, looping his arms around Danny's waist. "What's up?"

"Me." He didn't let Jeff put space between them. He took Jeff's hand and guided it up under the towel. "Do you know--" He kissed down Jeff's throat, across his collarbone, over his chest-- "it's been four days since I had you inside me?"

Jeff laughed, soft and deep. "I had no idea it had been that long."

"It's been an eternity." He closed Jeff's fingers around his cock and stroked up, down. A sigh caught in his throat.

"We should do something about that." Jeff's free hand trailed down the ridge of Danny's spine.

"We should." Danny leaned down, and their mouths met, lightly at first, then deeper as they fell into the taste and touch of each other.

Jeff shifted, flipping Danny onto his back on the mattress. The blankets were soft and cool, warming slowly as Danny rubbed against them. With his hands anchored in Jeff's hair, he spread his legs wide.

Jeff settled there and kept kissing him, across the line of his jaw. "I set up an interview," he said against Danny's skin.

"Mmm." Danny arched his back and pressed himself to Jeff. "What are you going to say?"

"The truth. That's what we're going to say."

"We?"

"You're coming with me. Unless you don't want to."

A shiver threaded down his spine. The chance to stand up and tell the world exactly how he felt about Jeff? "I want to." He hooked a leg over Jeff's hip and pushed their groins together. "But right now, I just want you."

Jeff drew back. He braced his arms on either side of Danny's shoulders and looked down, tousled hair framing his square face. "Like this. Just you and me; nothing in between."

"Any way you want it." Danny tugged the towel out from between them and let it slide off the edge of the bed.

Jeff rose, slipped out of his clothes, and retrieved the lube and a condom from his suitcase. Then he knelt, taking hold of Danny's knees, and pushing them into his chest, began to open him up.

Danny groaned softly at the feel of Jeff's fingers sinking into him, then louder as Jeff moved into place. He closed his eyes.

As Jeff entered him, Danny reached down and gripped fistfuls of the blankets. Jeff hadn't opened him up quite enough, and he saw the pain like tiny, red flower buds exploding into blossoms behind his eyelids. It was all right, though. It would always be all right, as long as he could feel Jeff's hands against his skin, as long as he could feel Jeff's breath drifting hotly over his face.

They began moving together. Danny forgot the pain and wound his arms around Jeff's neck and shoulders. He felt muscle and bone shifting beneath his fingers, all the beautiful movements of Jeff's life.

He didn't know how long it lasted. Seconds, minutes, hours... None of it mattered. When he came, the red flowers returned, but this time they shimmered crimson and scarlet. He tasted them on the tip of his tongue, sharp and sweet with nectar, and there was no pain.

Afterwards, he fought the tiredness and continued to move with Jeff until Jeff groaned into his ear, stiffened, and shuddered. He relaxed over Danny, and they lay entwined, skin heated. Danny combed his hands through the short strands of Jeff's hair, content.

"I was thinking," he said after a while, speaking against the warm damp of Jeff's shoulder, "about the new band. How do you feel about Veritas? As a name, I mean."

For a long moment, Jeff said nothing. Danny set his teeth into his lower lip and gnawed. The worry crept in, brushing against his happiness like an eel around a swimmer's ankle.

Then Jeff shifted and kissed him on the lips, but before their mouths met, Danny saw his smile.

"I think," he said, pulling back an inch, "it's a perfect name."

Danny dreamed of his home, the home where he'd grown up. He dreamed of the old farmhouse on the edge of town, its white paint peeling and the roof of the porch sagging. He dreamed of his bedroom with its dented walls and tears in the wallpaper from where he'd taped up posters of the Beatles and later, Led Zeppelin. He dreamed of high school, kissing Ben Cross in the janitor's closet, making out under the bleachers, getting beaten up in the locker room. He dreamed of Jersey the day he left home, how she'd run in circles on the porch and wailed, "Don't go, don't go, don't go!"

He woke at dawn with the dream fresh in his mind and guilt hovering behind it. Jersey's face, round and freckled, stuck in his thoughts. He sat up and scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to rub away the traces of the dream.

Beside him, Jeff stirred. "You okay?"

Danny looked at the room around him, the plush carpet, the lacy curtains at the windows, the huge television. The last time Jeff brought him somewhere like this, it had been to break up with him. That wouldn't happen this time. He knew it, but his mind kept forgetting the present, and remembering the past.

"Danny?" Jeff pushed the blankets away and put a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

He could say nothing was wrong, but he'd been repeating those empty words for so long. He looked down at Jeff instead, studied the concern in his eyes. "Do you ever wonder if this is a dream, and we're going to wake up any minute and it'll all be gone?"

"No." Jeff's hand tightened on his shoulder, pulled him down. "Because it's not a dream. It's real. We're real."

Danny nestled into the blankets again, his back against Jeff's chest, feeling the heat caught between their bodies. Strong arms slipped around his waist, and Danny covered Jeff's hands with his own. "How do you know?"

"It's too complicated to be a dream."

The answer made more sense to Danny more than any other could have. He relaxed, letting the tension ease away.

Jeff buried his face in the back of Danny's neck. His breath puffed against Danny's skin. "Move in with me," he said.

Danny thought he should probably tense up again, but he didn't. "Live in the same house?"

"The same house, the same room. Sleep in the same bed."

He pictured it in his head, waking up beside Jeff each morning, drinking coffee together, watching TV on the couch, falling asleep every night in the same bed. When the nightmares came at night, all he'd have to do was open his eyes and see Jeff there beside him, the final proof that the nightmares weren't real.

"What do you think?"

He slipped his fingers through Jeff's. "Where would we live? You said you gave the house to Angela."

"I saw a real estate agent yesterday morning. There's a townhouse for rent in Germantown, a four bedroom with a kitchen, study, and living room. I know it's not New York, but with Lani living in Philly..."

"I don't mind," Danny said. He loved Manhattan, but he loved Jeff more.

“Then you’ll do it? Live with me?”

Danny twisted in Jeff’s arms. He slid his hands over Jeff’s shoulders, down his back, and kissed him. “You should know,” he murmured against Jeff’s lips, “I’m a terrible slob.”

Jeff held him tighter. “You can trash my house anytime.”

Danny pulled back after a minute, fighting the need to use the bathroom. He lingered in the musky scent of Jeff, the crisp smell of linen sheets and cotton blankets. “Jeff,” he said after a minute.

“Mmm.”

“If I asked you for a favor, would you do it?”

“What’s the favor?”

“I need... to borrow money. Two hundred dollars, I think.”

Jeff propped himself up on his elbows. “Why? I mean, you can have it, you can have anything, but what’s it for?”

Danny looked around the room again, out the window this time at the sunshine slipping past the gaps in the curtains. “I have to go somewhere. Alone.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Danny took the train to Lancaster and hitched rides down Route 322, all the way to Hummelstown. By Tuesday evening he was settled in a tiny room at the Main Street Inn. He stayed awake half the night, watching a black and white television with snowy local channels. In the morning he bought a breakfast Danish from the gas station across the street and returned to his room. All day Wednesday he stayed in, staring out the window at the traffic bumping down the rutted road. He pictured the way home, down the street, left at Walnut Trail, three blocks out.

He had spent eighteen years of his life in this town. He'd thought he'd never escape. When he finally got away, he'd sworn he would never come back. But here he was.

He wondered if his mother even still lived here. He wondered what Jersey looked like, if she was a bookworm like Fran or a bubblegum-blowing cheerleader. He wondered if either of them remembered him.

Gas station pies and coffee took him through the day. Again he slept.

Thursday morning, he got up at eight o'clock and set out without eating. Down Main Street, past the Ladybug Café, past a pet store, past Cross's Garage. As he passed the latter, he caught a glimpse of Nate Cross ducked under the hood of a Volkswagen, older and more grizzled than Danny remembered. What had ever happened to his son, cocky Ben?

The hay fields rose up three blocks down on Walnut Trail, still green, rustling in the cool morning breeze. And there, before the fields took complete control of the land, stood the battered farm house.

He stopped a good hundred feet away and gazed at the house where he'd grown up. Cheap vinyl siding had been added on, dull grayish-white in color. The flower beds out front were overrun with browned weeds. Even the squat azalea bush planted at the house's corner was wilting in the heat of summer.

His feet were heavy as he walked up the front steps. He wished he was in Philly with Jeff, looking at the townhouse.

The screen door squeaked when he opened it. He knocked on the wood of the door three times, harder than he'd meant to, hard enough that pain shot through his knuckles. He stepped back and waited.

A full minute passed before he heard shuffling footsteps inside. A bolt slid back; the door creaked open. A woman appeared in the entrance, a short, round woman with pasty skin and large, round brown eyes. Piles of messy red curls were piled atop her head.

"Well." She took a drag off a cigarette and flicked ashes onto the porch. "If it isn't the prodigal fucking son."

Danny tried to smile and failed. "Hi, Mom."

"Great to see you again, Jeff." Pete Boswick shook Jeff's hand and settled into the diner booth. "How've you been?"

"Just great." Jeff smiled smoothly. They were all motherfucking vultures, these journalists, but you couldn't let on that you knew. Knowing ruined the game. "You?"

"Not bad, can't complain."

"How was the Kate Kantrell tour?"

"Let's say... surprising." Pete laughed and glanced up at the approaching waitress. "Just coffee, sweetheart."

"Same here, thanks." Jeff focused on Pete, watched him tap his pen against his notepad. "What do you say we get this started?"

"Just dive right in, huh?" Pete slid on a pair of eyeglasses. "Okay, you got it. So, Jeffrey. There's a rumor going around that you fired your backing band. Any truth in that?"

"You could say so. I work with musicians on a yearly basis. Their contracts were up; I opted not to renew."

"Any reason for the change?"

"I'm having an early midlife crisis."

Pete voiced the appropriate laugh. "How old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

"That is early. Do you have your eye on any special replacements?"

"Actually, I'm starting a new band. With Danny Chandler."

“Uh-huh.” Pete’s eyes glittered. “You know, there’s another rumor that you and Danny are gay lovers. Anything you’d like to say about that?”

Jeff shrugged. *Keep it cool.* “These rumors of yours are pretty accurate. Kind of like truth.”

“Really. Then you are... involved with Danny?”

“Yes.”

“Romantically, sexually, or both?”

“That’s kind of personal, isn’t it? But both.” How many more questions? Jesus, he hated interviews. It would have been easier if Danny was here like he was supposed to be, smart-ass quips on the tip of his tongue. But he hadn’t heard from Danny in two days. He could be dead. He could be lying in a ditch on the side of the road, and Jeff wouldn’t even know where to find him.

“How long has that been going on?”

“We got together about two years after he dragged me into Far Cry. We went on hiatus after I left the band, and now we’re back together.”

“You’ve kept your relationship secret a long time. Why come out with it now?”

“There comes a time when you realize you’re sick of lying to yourself and everybody around you, and you just want the truth of who you are out in the open.” He smiled wryly and patted his pocket for a cigarette. “When your ex-wife starts selling stories about you to the tabloids, you know it’s that time.”

“So.” Elaine exhaled a deep lungful of smoke. “What are you doing back here?”

Danny tucked his legs beneath him on the faded yellow armchair. It was the same chair they’d had the whole time he was growing up. The springs were broken now and the seat sagged beneath him. He picked at stray threads poking out of the fabric. “I wanted to see how you were.”

She shrugged. “Could have just called.”

“Sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“So how have you been?”

“Good enough.” Her heavy-lidded eyes made him think of dragons. “And you?”

He shrugged, then stiffened when he realized he was mimicking her. “I heard you got married.”

Her expression soured, lips pouting. “A few years ago. He’s gone now.”

“What happened?”

“Not really any of your business, is it?”

“Guess not.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Did you ever hear about my band? Far Cry?”

“Sure. One minute everybody thinks you’re a piece of trash, then your son gets a hit song and everybody wants to be your best friend.”

Danny could relate.

“We were just starting to get some peace around here, and then you had to go and stir things up again.”

“How’d I do that?”

“Oh, come on, Daniel. Town’s not that small. Just about every gas station’s got a copy of that magazine with the pictures of you and your boyfriend.” She ground out her cigarette in a red, plastic ashtray and lit another. “Tate’s got me washing dishes in the back of the diner, says customers feel uncomfortable being served by somebody like me. Somebody like me, you get that? What did I do, that’s what I want to know. Not my fault my only son’s got to go and turn fag, is it?”

Danny swallowed. He sat motionless, staring across the room. Everything was the same. The same redwood cabinet with water stains on the top, the same ugly red and blue and green doilies. Dusty curtains drawn against the sunlight, cluttered dining room table, and un-vacuumed floor. Time hadn’t touched this place at all. If he’d stayed, would he be the same, too? Would he still be the pothead teenager telling everyone he met that he was going to be a star?

“Boy.” Elaine laughed, her voice rough from twenty years of smoking. “I don’t care who you go home to at night. I guess you got what most of us dream about, a tough hunk with money and a future. Just makes things a little harder on the rest of us here.”

He glanced at her, but he couldn’t hold her eyes for long. Looking at her reminded him of summer days at the lake, when the sight of her smile and the sound of her laugh had been comforting.

The screen door slammed open in the kitchen. Danny looked through the doorway, saw who was coming in, and sat still as a statue.

Jersey stomped through the kitchen and came to a dead stop in the doorway. Her eyes, brown and almond-shaped, narrowed.

Elaine took a drag off her cigarette.

Jersey had changed in ways Danny had never bothered to consider. She was already as tall as he was, and all the baby fat had melted from her bones, leaving her long and skinny. Her chest had started to develop into a woman's shape. The carrot fuzz of her hair had straightened and darkened; now it hung in an auburn sheet down past her shoulders. Her black T-shirt was hand-painted in sloppy red letters: *Shout at the Devil*.

For a long minute they stared at each other. Then Jersey sneered.

"Jesus Christ." Her lower lip, swollen and crusted with rust-colored blood, cracked open again and spilled a fresh trickle of bright red. "What is this, a fucking family reunion?"

"Hey, Jay," Danny said slowly, wonderingly. This was his sister? This bedraggled woman-child with blood drying on her knuckles?

Elaine heaved a sigh. "Goddamn it, Jersey, what did I tell you about picking fights? Your principal calls me one more time, I'm gonna skin your ass, girl."

"I didn't pick it," Jersey spit, but her eyes stayed on Danny, burning holes through him. "I just finished it."

Elaine shook her head, tapped her cigarette on the ashtray. "Come say hello to your brother."

Jersey's jaw clenched visibly; her pointed chin tilted up. "I don't have any motherfucking brother," she said, and turned, then raced up the stairs.

The house shook with the force of a door slamming from the second floor.

Elaine smiled. "You should have answered her letters."

It took ten rounds of knocking to get Jersey to open the door. When she did, she stood in the entrance with a snarl and a glare. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Christ." He brushed past her into the room, not sure if he wanted to be there with her at all. If she was just a baby, he could smile and everything would be all right. But what was he supposed to say to a sister he'd walked out on ten years ago, a sister whose letters he'd never answered? The thought of apologizing exhausted him, so he said only, "You've got a foul mouth for a kid."

"I'm not a kid. I'm thirteen." She slammed the door after him and watched as he circled the room. "What do you want?"

He eyed the ratty quilt on her bed, the bookshelf in the corner that had once belonged to him. It still had tiny black circles from where he'd put cigarettes and joints out on the wood. Posters were taped to every wall, most showing four boys with spray-stiff hair and flashy makeup. Motley Crüe, angry red letters said. One of the four seemed to be a favorite; she had magazine pinups of him tacked up between the posters. Danny jerked a thumb at the kid. "Who's he?"

She glowered. "Nikki Sixx. I thought you were in the music business."

He shrugged. "Crush?"

"Maybe." She folded her arms over her chest. "Do you want something, or are you just going to stand around?"

"Thought I'd try to annoy you some more." He sighed and sat on the edge of her bed. His head ached. Christ, this was hard. He wished Jeff was there with him. "Look, I'm sorry I never wrote back. It was a dick move. But things were really difficult for a while--"

"For ten years?" She laughed shrilly. "You're not the only one with problems."

"Come on, Jersey. You're just a kid. You have no idea how bad things can get."

"And you don't know shit." Her lips twisted back over her teeth. "You've been gone ten years, Danny, ten fucking years. So don't tell me what it's been like here. You weren't here. You don't know."

"No," he said quietly, taken aback by her fury. "Maybe I don't. And I'm sorry for that, but I can't take it back, either. I can't just snap my fingers and make it ten years ago. I left, I was an asshole, and I'm sorry. But I want to try to make up for at least some of that, if I can."

"You can't."

"Jersey..."

She turned her back on him; all he could see of her was the narrow length of her back and the glossy red hair. It was brighter than his, less ginger and more fire, more like their mother's. He felt a sudden surge of sympathy for her. She knew where she got the hair color, but what about her height? At least Danny knew who his father was, even if he hadn't seen him since he was five, but Elaine had never been able to pinpoint who her daughter's father was.

"You could take me back with you."

He watched her, waiting.

She turned back to him. Her face was smooth and hard, betraying no hope. "If you really wanted to make it up to me, you could take me back to New York."

“Jay...” He shook his head slowly. “I couldn’t do that. Besides, I’m not even going back to New York.”

“Wherever you’re going, you could take me.”

“What about Mom?”

“What about her?”

“She loves you.”

“She loved you, too. Didn’t stop you.”

“Jay, I can’t.” He stood up and stepped closer. “I would if I could, but it’s just not possible. I can’t take care of a kid.”

Her teeth ground audibly. “I told you before, I’m not a kid.”

“I don’t even have a place for you.”

“Maybe you just don’t want to have a place for me. Maybe you want to be alone with your fucking boyfriend and keep pretending I don’t exist.” She jerked back as he neared. “Well, fine then. You don’t care about me, who needs you? I’ll get out of here on my own.”

He stopped moving toward her, more hurt by her words than he wanted to admit. He told himself he was doing the right thing. All he wanted was to get out of this room and this house, and go back to Jeff. But he couldn’t depend on someone else for the rest of his life, even if Jeff was that someone. “Just stick it out five years, and you can do whatever you want. You can go to college across the country if you want.”

She shook her head, hair whipping like a horse’s tail. “Five years is too long.” For the first time, her mouth trembled. “You don’t understand. If I stay here, I’ll *die*. I have to get away.”

He ached for her, for her youth and her vulnerability. He’d felt the same way when he was her age; only vodka and pot had helped dull the crazy need to escape, to get out of this dead-end town and be somebody. Anybody.

“You’ll be stronger,” he said. “I know you don’t think so now, but if you just tough it out, you’ll be so much stronger for it. If you go now, you’re just running away. I can’t help you do that.”

“Then what good are you?” She wrenched the door open and fled.

The phone rang eight times before Jeff reached for it. He'd debated not answering; someone--Lani--had been handing out his new phone number like a revival meeting flyer, and he'd gotten nineteen calls from newspapers and magazines today alone. But he picked it up anyway, hoping.

It was Danny.

"Christ." Jeff sat straight up on the sofa, leaning his guitar against a cushion. "Where are you?"

"Hummelstown."

"I was worried."

"I bet." Danny's sigh huffed over the phone line. "I miss you."

"Yeah? Then maybe you should come back."

"How does tomorrow sound?"

"It's not tonight." Jeff relaxed against the cushions again. "But it'll work. How was your visit?"

"Generally shitty. My sister hates me, and I don't blame her. I just wish there was something I could do to make it up for her."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. She wants to come live with us."

"Oh," Jeff said carefully.

"I told her no."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't uh-huh me. I know it's a bad idea. We're not even moved in yet. I'm not stupid. But she's really good at making a person feel guilty."

"What about your mother? How did she take the news?"

"Which news? That her son was a junkie, or that he's gay?"

"Both, I guess."

"She kind of uh-huhed about the drugs, and I honestly don't think she gives a shit whether I fuck pussy, ass, or cocker spaniels as long as it doesn't interfere with her life."

“You’re lucky.” Jeff frowned. “All your talk about going home made me want to talk to my parents again. I called, and my mom picked up, but as soon as she heard my voice, she handed the phone over to my dad so he could give me an earful about how disappointed they are.”

“They’re assholes. Fuck ‘em.”

“That’s what I said. It’s the first time I ever told my dad to fuck off.”

“How’s it feel?”

He smiled. “Pretty damn good.”

“This should be a proud moment for you. When I come home, we’ll celebrate.”

“When’s your train get in?”

“Three fifteen.”

“I’ll be there.”

Danny found Jersey on Friday morning, lounging on the front steps of the old farm house. The sun shone down golden-yellow, turning her hair to flame, darkening her eyes.

She flicked a contemptuous gaze at him as he sat on the lowest step. “Back again?”

“I wanted to say goodbye.”

She shrugged. She looked younger with her face clean of blood, but the hardness in her eyes was the same.

“I can’t take you with me right now.”

“You said that already.”

He sighed. Jeff would kill him for not talking it over with him first, but he owed this to his sister. “But not now doesn’t mean not ever. What are you doing for Christmas?”

Her eyebrows lifted. “It’s July.”

“So you don’t have plans, good.” He dug a cigarette and lighter out of his pocket. “You can come to Philly and have Christmas with me and Jeff.”

“You and your boyfriend.”

“Yeah. Got a problem with that?”

“Let me bum a smoke, and I’ll think about it.” She held out her hand, nails glinting in the sun with black polish.

“Fuck that. You want to die of lung cancer before you’re eighteen?”

Another shrug.

“Look, it’s the best I can do right now.” He leaned back, inhaling smoke, blowing it out away from Jersey. “You come for Christmas, you can stay ‘til New Year’s, and we’ll take it from there.”

“So you want to put me on trial. Like a new toaster with a thirty day guarantee against defects.”

An unwilling smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. She was his sister, and he loved her, but he hadn’t expected to respect her. He’d been wrong when he thought she was like him. She was so much stronger, and he wished he had half her strength. “You’re pretty sharp for a kid.”

“Fuck you.”

“Watch your fucking mouth.”

She rolled her eyes, the first thirteen-year-old mannerism Danny had seen from her.

“Go to the amusement park much?” he asked.

“Hershey?” She sat up and leaned over her knees, hands dangling. The skin had been scraped off the knuckles of her right hand, leaving bare patches of pink inner flesh. “I got better things to do with my money.”

“Well, maybe I’ll come back before summer’s over, and we’ll go. You like roller coasters?”

She shook her head. “What’s with you, anyway? How come you want to come back all of a sudden and be my big brother?”

He lifted his head and stared off across the hay fields. The sky stretched cloudless and blue above the golden-green acres. “Because I should have done it a long time ago.”

Jersey stood and climbed up the steps, heading for the front door. She paused before she went in, looking back with her hands shoved in her jean pockets. “I guess I’ll go the park with you. If you really want. And if you bother to come back.”

“I will,” he promised.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Close your eyes,” Jeff said.

Danny groaned, leaning his head against the back of the truck’s passenger seat. Nicky was arguing with Kevin in the backseat--Kevin did little more than whimper--and the sound cut right through his eardrums and into his brain. “Do you have any idea how tired I am? I just want to go the hotel or wherever the hell we’re going and sleep for the next week.”

Jeff spared him a scathing glance before steering the truck onto a cobblestone street. “The sooner you close your eyes, the sooner you can do all that.”

“Fine.” He huffed out a sigh and squeezed his eyes shut. He might be in a better mood if Jeff had been on time picking him up from the train station, and if Nicky hadn’t decided to be a brat all the way home. Danny almost--but not quite--wished Lani had decided to re-open the custody case after all, but Jeff had told him the good news already. Lani had decided Jeff would have to pull his own weight caring for the kids, which Danny took to mean she didn’t want them around full time.

The truck jounced over cobblestones and came to a slow stop. The engine quieted as Jeff shifted into park.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Nope.”

Danny heard doors creak open and slam shut; he heard the kids scrambling out of the truck. “Jeff?”

“Here.” The door beside him opened, and a large, warm hand took Danny’s. “Get out, but keep your eyes closed.”

With another sigh, Danny obeyed. When he was standing on the ground--it was uneven under his feet--Jeff came around to stand behind him.

“Okay,” Jeff said. “Open your eyes.”

For a minute, he was almost afraid. But what was there to be afraid of? Surprises were supposed to be good now, and Jeff was right there with him.

He opened his eyes.

They stood directly in front of a set of stone stairs with ivy crawling along the iron handrails. The steps led up to a two-story stone house, the last in a row of five townhouses. The windows were six-paned; the front door was solid, dark wood. Around the side of the house, an iron fence blocked a shaded alley with a line of young birch trees.

“What do you think?” Jeff asked.

“What do I think?” Danny stepped away from Jeff and walked up the stairs. He brushed the ivy with his fingertips and felt the metal beneath it, chill even in the summer heat. He stood with the kids, clustered around the door, and looked back. “Can we go in?”

“It’s ours, Dan.” Jeff came up and held out a key. “We can do anything we want.”

Danny took the key hesitantly and turned it in his fingers. It was a trick; this beautiful house wasn’t theirs. Any minute the real residents would storm outside and demand to know what they were doing on the stone porch. He was afraid now. It was all too much, the house, Jeff, happiness. Any minute now it would all disappear.

“Come on.” Nicky scowled up at him. “Open it already.”

He inserted the key in the lock, listening to the musical sound of the lock clicking. He opened the door, let the kids rush past him, and in the peace of their absence, he crossed the threshold.

The living room was floored with polished oak boards; the walls were creamy white. A futon sat against the wall, facing a small television set--Nicky had already turned on Nickelodeon--but otherwise the room was bare. Toward the back, there was a hallway on the left and a staircase on the right.

A dog barked, and Fran’s golden retriever came barreling out of the hallway. He circled Danny for a minute, sniffing with his tail wagging, then turned to the kids.

“You like it?” Jeff asked.

Danny walked away from him, down the short hallway. He glanced at a smaller room--the study, he guessed--and into the kitchen, dappled with afternoon sunlight.

He went back down the hall and up the stairs, ignoring the sound of Jeff’s boots on the steps behind him. He looked at each of the bedrooms in turn, the small, square spaces with one window each, all except the back bedroom. It was twice the size of the others, a corner room

with two windows looking out at the backyard, and two viewing the alley. There was a magnolia tree in the backyard; its lush, green leaves brushed one of the windows.

Jeff came up behind him as he stood at the window. "If you don't like it, we'll break the lease. I don't care. We'll find somewhere else. I should have let you see it first."

"It's fine." Danny turned, leaning back against the window frame. Maybe it really was fine. Nothing was disappearing. The floor wasn't falling out from beneath his feet. Jeff was still here. He glanced at the inflatable mattress on the floor and smiled. "It's more than fine. It's perfect."

"You don't mind that it's not right in the city?"

"It's close enough." He studied Jeff's serious expression. "Am I really that picky?"

Jeff took another step, until he was close enough to balance his hands on both sides of Danny's hips. "I want you to like it here. I want you to be happy."

"Houses don't make people happy." Danny hooked an arm around Jeff's shoulders and arched up to kiss him. "But it's a beautiful house, and as long as you're in it, I'll be happy. I love you."

Jeff ducked down and rested their foreheads together. "I love you, too."

"What did you say in your interview?"

"The truth."

"The whole truth and nothing but?"

"Something like that."

Danny sighed, tired, and thinking ahead to all that they would have to deal with as a result of the interview. It would be hell, but he couldn't bring himself to regret having the truth come out. In the end, it didn't matter how the world reacted. As long as he had Jeff, he had everything he'd ever wanted. "Come feed me, will you? I'm starving."

Danny woke to the sound of the shower running. He opened his eyes, lying still for a moment as his vision adjusted to the half-darkness of the master bedroom. Moonlight and streetlight mingled together to shine in pools on the floor, bordered by violet-black shadows.

The clock on the floor beside the inflatable mattress read 9:18. Danny had gone to bed at eight, as soon as dinner was over. An hour ago he'd thought he could sleep for a year; now, he'd had all the sleep he wanted.

He pushed back the blankets and stood up, ignoring the squeak of the mattress. The ping of water striking porcelain drew him into the bathroom. He opened the door, the humid air enveloping him like a glove. He saw the shape of Jeff's body blurrily through the bubbled glass of the shower door; he smelled shampoo, along with hints of the Dial soap he'd washed with earlier in the evening.

The last traces of sleepiness spiraled away like smoke. He stepped out of his underwear, left them lying on the white-tiled floor, and slid the shower door open.

Jeff looked up, blinking through the hot spray pelting him. Shampoo dripped from his dark hair, and he rubbed it out of his eyes. He said nothing as Danny slipped in and shut the door again.

Danny stood beside him, sharing the water, lingering in the heat. He smelled Jeff in the humid air, winding all around him. Arousal pooled thick and hot in his gut. He ducked his head down, letting the water roll over the back of his neck, down between his shoulder blades.

"Hey." Jeff's voice was a murmur barely heard over the running water. His hand settled against the small of Danny's back. "Are you-- you're not okay. Are you?"

Danny closed his eyes and opened them. He saw beads of water clinging to his own eyelashes; he watched soapy water swirl down the drain. He shook his head slowly.

The air around him went cold. Against his back, Jeff's fingers felt like icicles.

When he looked up and met Jeff's eyes--the darkness, the exhaustion--realization stole quietly over him. None of it was a lie, not the house, not Jeff. Jeff would never leave him. He would be there forever, and if Danny could never remember what a real laugh felt like, Jeff would still be there.

He smiled, blinking water--not tears--and said, "But I will be."

He moved into Jeff, wrapping his arms around him, pressing himself to hard muscles and hot skin. The heat chased the chill from his bones. It could be this way forever if they wanted. It could be any way they wanted.

"Christ." Jeff's face pressed against the top of Danny's head; Danny felt his breath there, gusting and warm. "I'd take it all back if I could. I'd go back and do it right this time."

"No." Danny pressed his lips to Jeff's shoulder. "This *is* right."

He pulled back and kissed Jeff on the mouth, kissed his face, down his throat, over his chest again. Then he turned and ducked under the water, braced his hands against the shower wall, and arched his back. He looked back over his shoulder.

Jeff stepped forward, leaned over Danny and kissed the nape of his neck. Danny shivered and ducked his head down again, staring at the draining water, at the foamy suds clinging to porcelain walls.

He felt Jeff's hands moving over his back, slick with water. He felt the coolness of conditioner drizzling down the line of his spine, felt Jeff's hands slide down over his ass, slicked up fingers dipping toward his entrance, rubbing there. He shivered with the sensations.

When Jeff came into him, the way eased by warm water and stinging conditioner, Danny held his breath and forgot about lost dreams. The past was gone and could never be reclaimed; the future was too far off to touch him. Only the present mattered; only the here and now caressed him.

They moved together under the water. Jeff stroked slow and deep, deeper, until he was so far in Danny knew he would never stop feeling him there. With Jeff inside him, with Jeff's hand on his cock, Danny threw his head back and came. He gasped, wordless, fingers clawing at the shower wall, as nameless emotions swept through him.

His strength left him with his release. His knees began to tremble; he thought he might not be able to stay upright if it wasn't for the arm Jeff wrapped around his waist. He felt himself drifting; he watched water go down the drain and imagined himself swirling away with it.

Jeff came, groaning and thrusting in deeper yet. Danny felt the hot gush inside himself. The white porcelain of the shower seemed to pulsate with sudden, shining color, every color in the world.

Jeff pulled out of him and loosened his grip. Danny tipped off balance. He grabbed at the wall, found only smooth porcelain, and stumbled. Jeff tried to catch him, but instead they fell together, tumbling, splashing to the floor of the shower.

Danny laughed softly despite twin stabs of pain where his kneecap and elbow had hit the shower wall. He wrapped both arms around Jeff's waist to keep from him rising again. "Wait."

Jeff paused, then relaxed against the corner of the stall. Danny curled into him, and they sat together in the run of warm water. Danny buried his face in the curve of Jeff's shoulder, breathed in the scent of human musk and clean soap.

Minutes passed. Steam filled the shower.

Danny sighed. "I wish we could sleep here."

Jeff combed one hand through Danny's soaked hair, rubbed the other along the narrow length of his back. "We're going to run out of hot water soon."

"Oh."

"Come on." Jeff shifted, kneeling first and then standing, lifting Danny to his feet.

There was only one towel. They shared it, and when they climbed into bed, they were both still dripping. Danny shivered and tucked his body closer to Jeff's, enveloping himself in blankets and skin.

He lay awake long after Jeff's breathing slowed with sleep. He watched the moonlight shift outside; he listened to the leaves rustling against the window. He thought about his mother and sister, about the home that wasn't really home anymore, about the old band, about the new band waiting to be made. He imagined happiness, and realized it might not be so far off.

Finally, as the moon disappeared behind the clouds and the room went dark but for the glow of the streetlight, he slept.

EPiLOGUE

DECEMBER 31, 1985

The New Year's Eve bash started at eight p.m. The smaller bands played first, the bands that were new to Duat Records, or the ones the label had the least interest in.

At nine, the bartenders hired for the evening started to earn their pay, mixing more drinks as the evening went on.

By ten, still more had people arrived and the better bands started to play.

At eleven, Kate Kantrell played a half an hour set, and at eleven-thirty, the latest band to sign with Duat, Veritas, took the stage.

Jeff hung back, watching the new bassist, Raphael, go on with Jake Hobbs. Jake had been more than willing to forget the disaster of Far Cry; he didn't care who he was drumming for as long as he was getting paid. But Jeff suspected the rest of the world wouldn't forget as easily.

"Relax."

He glanced back when he felt Danny's hand on his shoulder. "Hmm?"

"Relax," Danny repeated, and in the darkness backstage, his teeth shone white with his grin.

"We're going to be great, they're going to love us, and if they don't, then fuck them. Besides, my sister's out there watching. If we suck, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Right. You think it's that easy." He hadn't played a show since early summer, and he hadn't played live with Danny in five years. He glanced out at the camera crew in the corner of the room. They were feeding footage live to CBX's television station; at midnight, the entire country would get its first view of Veritas. Who could say how people would react?

“I do think it’s that easy.” Danny pulled his hand back and slipped toward the stage wing. He held out his hands, palms up, fingers teasing. “Come with me.”

Jeff followed.

To hell with the country; the room was on its feet cheering, clapping, whistling, before they ever started playing. Jeff ripped into his guitar--the painted fox gleaming off the surface--while Danny strutted as if he’d never stopped doing it.

*“Anything goes on a night like this
I’ve got a cigarette smile and whiskey kiss
And if you set your lips to mine
You just might be my kind
Of lover.”*

They played old songs; they played new songs. At midnight, while silver confetti exploded all around them, while champagne glasses chinked and the camera crew filmed on, Danny crossed the stage to stand beside Jeff. He slung his arm around Jeff’s neck and stretched up and kissed him.

The world didn’t stop. The camera didn’t pan away; the room didn’t fall silent. Danny kissed Jeff, the world saw, and the world went on.

END