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To Kris, this one's for you.

CHAPTER ONE

Sitting at an ebony Steinway grand piano, Julian laughed softly as he watched his lead singer, Jesse Alexander, dance across the stage. Conquest's number one single, "Twisted Destiny," rocked the empty arena from the sound system, the drums and Jesse's tenor voice echoing through the space. The *No Fear World Tour* would be larger, longer, and even more of an event than their previous one, which they had headlined only stateside. Even though Conquest traveled internationally when opening for Evan Arden, this time, they were the ones people were truly coming to see.

Julian never knew one band could have such an enormous crew of people to tend their concerts. There were roadies for setting up the stage and managing the equipment. A host of cameramen to film them and project their images through a live feed onto a large screen at the back of the stage. The security staff alone was the size of a small army. Sound engineers, a special team to handle the pyrotechnics, another for the light show. Professional dancers would perform in perfect choreography for some songs, a small orchestra would provide accompaniment in others. And still the list went on and on. All in all, Julian felt the tour would be one of the most unforgettable spectacles to ever travel the world, but it was also fitting with how popular Conquest was now.

Julian looked across the stage to the other band members. Kenny Cooper stood with his black and white Fender Stratocaster hanging from a black leather strap across his shoulder. The guitarist was Jesse's faithful companion, even if teasing Kenny was one of Jesse's favorite pastimes. A grin rose to Julian's lips. It was a pastime he'd picked up also. But the boy made it so easy.

Julian looked up to the raised platform where Brad Delfini laughed behind the drum set. The man was a vision. Stunning smile, glossy black hair, dark brown eyes, lovely olive-tinted skin, a body like a Roman god, and to top it all off, a bright personality.

It was his bad luck Brad was straight, but it didn't hold back on them becoming great friends. Of everyone in the band, he hung out with Brad the most one-on-one. It wasn't that he didn't like hanging out with the others, and he had gone shopping with Jesse many times, but he related best to Brad, maybe because with them both being twenty-six, they had about three years maturity on the other two.

Julian moved his gaze from Brad and looked over the rows of vacant seats. He was well accustomed to performing in large venues even before joining Conquest. His career as a classical pianist had taken him around the world and featured him as a guest with numerous orchestras. But none of those experiences came close to equaling the monumental success he'd gained with Conquest.

Not that making the transition had been easy. Many disagreed with him jumping from classical to rock, his mother among them. She used every opportunity to mention how woeful it was that he was wasting his years of Julliard training to play "simpler music," as she called it. Though, she was supportive of him in other aspects, so he could tolerate the occasional snide comment regarding his choice of career.

Julian saw Jesse dancing across the length of the stage, his moves free and not part of the rehearsed choreography, but it was clear his front-man was no longer focused on a serious rehearsal. The chief choreographer, Darius, who was a beautiful piece of man-flesh himself, laughed at Jesse. The African-American dancer had a body built of solid muscle. Sadly for Julian, when he attempted flirting with Darius, he only got a polite smile in return.

Darius gave Jesse a light slap on the arm. "You got more rhythm than any white boy I've ever seen!"

"Of course I do," Jesse said. "Don't you know the only white boys with rhythm are gay boys?"

Julian joined in with the roaring laughter filling the arena. Never a dull moment when Jesse was around. Of all the laughing voices, Julian caught a baritone more melodic than the others and

turned to see superstar singer, Conquest's manager, and Jesse's husband, Evan Arden, walking across the stage.

Evan made a slashing motion in front of his throat and the recorded music stopped. He stepped behind Jesse and embraced him around the waist. "Alright, Darius, I think he's had enough for today. I don't want him worn out."

Jesse turned in Evan's arms, wrapping his own around Evan's neck. "And what do you have planned for me that you want me full of energy?"

Evan answered him with a kiss.

Julian lowered his gaze. He tapped a couple somber notes on the piano. They had the most beautiful relationship he'd ever seen. He at once loved watching their affection for each other and felt a touch of jealousy. It wasn't that he wanted either of them, but he wanted a relationship like they had, with a man of his own.

Not long ago, Jesse and Evan got married, then came out publicly as a couple after hiding their love from all but those closest to them for two years. When Jesse announced his sexuality, Julian did also, though he didn't get quite the attention Jesse did. People offered sympathy to Jesse and Evan for all the tribulations they went through, but few realized that just as they had kept their sexuality secret, so had he. How could he come out as an openly gay rock performer when his singer was forced to remain closeted for the success of the band? He couldn't.

The stress it put on him was tremendous, even if he did hide it so no one realized just how affected he was. Constant traveling on tour made it impossible to form a relationship that lasted beyond a day. Each intimate encounter was edged with tension as he wondered if he could trust the other man. Worry and stress would linger for days afterward at the fear his one-night stand would out him.

It wasn't as bad when he was a classical performer. That wasn't to say it was any more or less accepted, or there weren't paparazzi on that scene, but the payout for a scandal on many classical

artists didn't compare to what it was for the popular ones. Which surprised him. He knew more than a few sordid stories when the tuxes hit the floor after a concert, one or two involving himself. But the popular artists were the paparazzi moneymakers more than the classical ones.

"Jules!"

Julian blinked and looked up, snapped from his thoughts. He met Jesse's indigo-colored gaze. "I take it you want something, Jesse dear?"

Lightly swinging Evan's hand in his, Jesse smiled at him. "Well first I wanted your attention. You really spaced out there, I called your name three times. Is everything okay?"

Julian nodded. "Yeah, I was just lost in my thoughts."

"I'm glad you found your way home. I wanted to let you know I'm heading out for the day. We've got two weeks to rehearse before hitting the road, so cutting out early one day won't hurt us." Jesse bumped his shoulder playfully into Evan's shoulder. "And since my vertical dancing pleased him so much, we're going home to do a little horizontal dancing."

Evan rolled his eyes. "If I would've said something like that, you'd be ranting about my horrible sense of humor."

Jesse winked at him. "It's all in the delivery, sweetheart."

Grinning, Evan leaned close to Jesse and whispered, though Julian still caught the gist of his joke about delivering something else to Jesse once they got home.

Laughing softly, Jesse walked away, leading Evan by one hand and waving at Julian with the other. "Later."

Evan glanced back at him. "And don't forget I've got that interview and photo shoot set up for you with *Keyboard Magazine* this Friday."

Julian gave him a thumbs up. "I've already got it programmed into my calendar. You boys have an enjoyable afternoon."

"We will," Jesse called as he disappeared from the stage.

Julian watched as the team of dancers also filed past, Darius trailing behind them.

Darius stopped beside the piano and smiled down at him. "I hope you know I'm going to get you out there before this show goes live. I'll work you into one of the routines."

Julian chuckled. "I don't think there's any reason to be so cruel to all the people who've spent their hard earned money to come see us."

"Nah, you heard what Jesse said."

"Well, I'm afraid that's one of the rare instances of Jesse being wrong. This gay boy has no rhythm. Though, I suppose I could improve with private lessons from a dedicated instructor."

Darius laughed and turned to leave. "Yeah, I'm sure you could. Catch ya later, man."

Julian stared at Darius's departing back. Nothing like all out rejection to sober one's mood. His gaze dropped to Darius's ass in the light blue, nylon workout pants. And yet he was half-hard regardless. He looked down to the piano keys. If he kept staring at him, he wouldn't be able to get up from the piano for an hour without pointing at everyone using something other than his fingers.

"ey, Jules!"

Julian smiled at Brad's cute Brooklyn accent. He never grew tired of hearing it. He looked over his shoulder at Brad and Kenny approaching, though he didn't notice Kenny as much as Brad, who in all his glory, was wearing a black tank top and sinfully tight jeans. Now that was a sign it'd been far too long since he'd gotten laid; the body of his dear friend finished sending his cock up. Of course, with how long it'd been, just about any warm male body would do the same for him.

"Hey, Brad."

Brad propped a hand on the piano and pointed at Kenny with his thumb. "Since it looks like we're done for the day, we're going to grab some beers and wings. You wanna come?"

So very badly, Julian thought, then shook his head in response. "No, I think I'm going to play for a little while more. It's not often I get an entire arena to myself."

"Man, we'll be living in arenas for the next eight months," Kenny said.

Julian met Kenny's honey-brown eyes. "We'll also be living off restaurant food, so I think I'd like to do a home-cooked dinner. And sucking on a grisly chicken bone for a scraggly little strip of meat isn't my idea of a good meal. Why don't you both come over to my place instead? I'm making spaghetti."

Brad turned to Kenny. "That sounds like a better plan."

"Will there be waitresses dressed in shorts so tight and small you know they don't have anything on underneath?" Kenny asked.

"No, but I could make a few phone calls and get a couple *waiters* dressed in a similar fashion if that'd help."

"Uh, no. It wouldn't." Kenny turned to Brad. "C'mon. You said you'd go with me."

Brad looked at Julian and shrugged. "Guess I have to. Maybe I can stop over tomorrow and we'll hang out."

"Sounds like a plan."

Kenny shoved Brad on the back. "Now let's go before all the hot waitresses are taken."

"Man, wherever we go, the hot chicks follow." Brad looked at Julian again. "You sure you don't want to join us?"

Julian nodded once. "I'm sure, but thanks."

"Alright, later."

As Brad walked away with Kenny, Julian opted to deny himself the pleasure, or torture, of looking at Brad's ass, and focused on the piano keys. He took a deep breath and sounded the first notes of Beethoven's *Fur Elise*, hoping the gentle melody would distract his emotions from the desire to have someone to share his evenings with as more than friendship.

CHAPTER TWO

“Okay, so there’s really no point is showing you around the arena. We’ll be at a different one every night. What’s important for you to know is stage setup, so get it down. Learn fast or get out of the way, that’s how things go here.”

Morgan turned his head away from his new boss since he couldn’t restrain himself any longer from rolling his eyes. He’d known Kurt Holt for less than five minutes and already wanted to punch him. How the hell was he going to make it through an eight month concert tour with this clown as his boss?

“So listen here, Matt—”

“Morgan”

Kurt’s head snapped toward him. “What?”

“My name is Morgan.”

“Right, Morgan. Morgan Conner.”

“Morgan Chandler.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Listen, I got about a hundred names I need to remember, you can’t expect me to keep track of everybody, and you’re new, so it’s going to take a while. Now like I was saying, you don’t have concert experience, right?”

“No, I don’t, but—”

Kurt interrupted with a snort. “Don’t know how the hell you got this gig. You wouldn’t have if I had interviewed you. I don’t have time to deal with rookies. This is a big tour, the biggest of the year with the biggest band of the decade. I need experts, not hands to hold.”

Morgan ground his teeth, then forced cordiality into his voice. “I might not have roadie experience, but I have plenty of experience with music and instruments. My father owned a music store, and—”

“This is what I get for not doing the interviews myself.” Kurt

shook his head. "Lesson learned. You better learn quick, because I don't need getting my ass chewed out by Mr. Alexander, or worse, Mr. Arden, for bad setups. You know, I was the staff manager for Conquest on their last tour before they joined up with Mr. Arden's tour. He already had a staff manager in place, otherwise I would've had that job, too."

"Yeah, I bet," Morgan mumbled, his soft tone hiding his sarcasm.

"Now, I don't know how you feel about the whole gay thing, but unless you've lived under a rock for the past three months, you know Mr. Alexander and Mr. Arden are in a relationship."

"Actually, I'm—"

"If you're for it, great. If you're not, keep your mouth shut." Kurt's voice dipped low. "To be honest, I always knew about those two, but that's beside the point. What I'm saying is if you want to live to old age, you better not look at Mr. Alexander in any way other than friendly professionalism, because Mr. Arden won't just throw you off the tour. He'll throw you in front of a semi-truck if you look at Mr. Alexander as anything less or more."

Morgan glanced at him. "Isn't it kind of formal to constantly be calling them mister? I mean, they're rock stars, not the President."

Kurt stopped and jabbed his index finger in the air toward Morgan's face. "These men are our bread and butter, and I won't have them treated with anything but top respect. Got it?"

Morgan clenched and unclenched one hand, wanting to grab Kurt's finger and shove it into the man's own face. "Yeah, I got it."

Kurt continued his march toward the arena interior, mumbling to himself, though his voice was loud enough for Morgan to hear, "I knew I should've handled all the interviews."

Morgan glared at the back of Kurt's buzz-cut blond head and filled his lungs with a long, deep breath as he followed after him. He still wondered how his life had taken this turn. He knew the

realities of it well enough. He looked at them constantly in the stack of bills from the music store. If only he'd known when his father was alive the financial trouble he was in. Maybe he could've helped him before things reached such a desperate point.

Not that he could've lent much aid. His job for the past eight years teaching music at a local Chicago high school didn't exactly pay a prince's salary, but what it lacked in monetary compensation it made up for in emotional satisfaction. Nothing compared to seeing a young person's face glow as the music clicked with them for the first time.

He loved his job. He'd always thought if he could do it every day for the rest of his life, he'd be content. If only the school system felt the same way. Budget cuts made them slash a number of the arts programs from many schools, and his job was completely eliminated. He was allowed to finish out the school year, and all summer he searched for another school, but the ones with the funds to support a music program already had instructors. Now it was September and classes were in session. At best he could do substituting.

Between his shrinking savings and the debts of his father's music store becoming his own, he was forced to work full-time waiting tables at a small café, along with part-time at a boarding kennel. Really, cleaning the kennels didn't bother him. He enjoyed being around the dogs, and he found it less disgusting than the messes people would leave in the café. But when he saw the band Conquest was looking for tour staff, he jumped on it. Even though they weren't his type of music, as far as rock bands went they were certainly the best around. And there was one other reason he wanted the job, one that was the real motivator.

Kurt's voice broke his thoughts.

"Keep up! You want to keep this job, you need to move faster! It's all about time here!"

Morgan quickened his pace, though more because annoyance spurred him rather than having a desire to obey Kurt. "I was taking things in."

“Like I told you, don’t worry about the arena.” Kurt held open a large door.

Morgan stepped inside the inner arena. A sea of empty seats stretched before him. Down at the end of the open floor was the stage.

Kurt’s voice pitched higher with excitement. “There he is!”

Morgan followed his gaze to the stage holding the members of Conquest along with a few other people. Recorded music blasted through the arena and at the sight of the lead singer, Jesse, dancing, Morgan realized they were working out choreography. He gave Kurt a quick look, taking in the man’s rapt expression. For someone who warned him not to drool over Jesse, the guy was certainly doing a good job of forming a puddle at their feet.

Morgan looked back to the stage. Undoubtedly, Jesse was a beautiful man with his delicate features, black hair, and dark blue eyes. He wouldn’t, and couldn’t, deny Jesse was also an amazingly gifted musician. But his type? Not at all. He saw enough of him in interviews to know Jesse was too hyper for him. Plus, Jesse had Evan Arden, who he saw standing off to the side of the stage. With Evan’s dark chestnut hair streaked in highlights of gold and copper, his brilliant blue eyes, it was hard to tell which of them was more attractive, but they certainly made for a good looking couple.

No, it was fine by him if the whole world lusted after Jesse. It left the one he found most attractive more available, not that the beautiful pianist would want him.

Morgan focused his eyes on Julian Forrester, seated at the black grand. A sudden weakness struck his legs. He felt warm, like he couldn’t get enough air to steady his pounding heart. He knew when he got this job he would see Julian in person, even meet him since it would be his duty to tend to Julian’s instruments, but it didn’t seem real until that moment.

How long had he admired him? Years. Going back to when Julian still played classical piano. It was on an album of the New York Philharmonic Morgan had heard him for the first time on

the very first song, *Fur Elise*. Just the memory of Julian playing those notes, the sheer loveliness, the emotion he lifted from the keys, stirred his heart. He hadn't known what Julian looked like, but he swooned over his talent. Then he searched for him online and saw his picture, Julian with his pale blond hair bound in a sleek ponytail, his light blue eyes holding a smile. Never before had Morgan's heart surged in such a way at the mere sight of someone, and furthermore, someone he couldn't hope to know.

He followed Julian's classical career, wishing for the day when Julian would tour as a solo artist, or at the very least, hoping he would be invited to play with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Before that day could happen, Julian walked away from classical music to become a rock star. When Morgan learned of the news, his heart sank. He wondered why a man with such talent would lower himself to playing rock and pop. He decided Julian must have done it for money, which disappointed him in ways he couldn't explain.

When Julian appeared in the public eye again, it was with Conquest as their keyboardist and pianist. Morgan heard Julian's artful playing melding with the driving drums and wailing guitar, led by Jesse's powerful tenor, and he realized Julian was more diverse in his talent than he'd ever thought. Though, he still missed hearing Julian master Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Bach, and all the greats.

Not long after Conquest's first tour started, he saw Julian on TV at the Grammy Awards and he looked like a different man. He'd cut his sleek ponytail and sported the style he wore now, layered with sharp angles, often having a tousled look. At the awards, Julian was wearing black leather pants and a black V-neck sweater. He looked like...well, like a rock star. But those light blue eyes were still the same, as was his smile, and when he spoke, not all the rock star attire in the world could mask Julian's sophistication.

There was an even better part of seeing a new side to Julian. A few months ago when Jesse openly proclaimed his relationship with Evan, Julian also admitted he was gay. The confession didn't

change the fact that he believed they'd never meet, just added more reality to his fantasies. But now, he could meet him.

Movement out the corner of his eye caught Morgan's attention. He looked at a young man hastening toward them.

"Kurt!" the young man called. "Dude, we got a problem. Some of the guys were hooking up the amps, and sparks and shit started flying everywhere. Now five of them won't come on. I think they fried 'em."

Kurt blinked rapidly as if coming out of a trance. "Goddamn it! Can't I leave anyone alone in this place for more than five minutes?" He turned to Morgan. "Take a seat and wait for me while I go see what's been screwed up now."

Morgan didn't bother acknowledging Kurt, his gaze already back on the stage. He saw many had left, and Conquest's guitarist and drummer were approaching Julian. He could hear their voices, but couldn't make out their words, though the sound of Julian's light tenor voice sent warmth through him. The guitarist and drummer walked offstage. Morgan stayed in place. For so long he had wanted to see Julian in concert. Now an entire arena was theirs. All he needed to do was walk down to the stage, say hi, introduce himself. It didn't really matter if Julian wasn't interested in him. To just speak to him and be close to the talent he'd admired for so long would be enough.

Morgan took a step forward, then froze. Gentle notes sounded from the piano, notes he knew so well. A soft gasp escaped him as the arena filled with Julian playing *Fur Elise*. The beauty of the music stole the last of his strength. Morgan staggered to the side and dropped down on a chair, his gaze fixed on Julian.

Julian played with his eyes closed, his hands floating over the keys in fluid, graceful movements. His body rocked slightly as the music claimed him. His soft facial features were filled with serenity. A cluster of his long bangs fell over one of his eyes.

In his mind, Morgan envisioned brushing the soft tendril of hair away, letting his fingertips caress Julian's cheek. If only such a thing could happen. Despite how he admired Julian, despite

how attracted he was to him, he knew Julian would hardly spare him a glance. It wasn't that he was unattractive, but he was about as opposite from the sophisticated pianist as could be. He felt certain Julian would pick a man who could equal him in class and talent, if such another man existed. Or maybe, Julian already had a man. Morgan had never heard he was seeing anyone, but that didn't mean Julian wasn't. Julian could be the type of celebrity who didn't broadcast such things and preferred maintaining as quiet a life as possible.

It was a sad irony that he would be a total mismatch for a man who seemed so perfect for him. Even if he never got beyond two words with Julian, at least he'd always have his music, and this moment. Listening to Julian play as if for him alone brought Morgan more joy than anything heaven could offer.

A loud snap next to his ear startled Morgan. He whipped his head to the side to find Kurt glaring at him.

"Earth to Morgan! You really aren't going to last being that much of a space cadet."

Morgan glared at Kurt. "I was listening to Julian play."

Kurt's face flushed as rage claimed his visage, yet his voice came out oddly even. "Did you miss the whole conversation we had about not calling the band members by their first names? I was talking to you, wasn't I? Not a wall?"

Morgan stood up, straightening his posture to his full height, which put him half a head taller than Kurt. "No, I got it. But now let me ask you for something. You think you can give me just a little respect? Not much. Just talk to me like I'm a human being."

"You'll get respect when you earn it. I could go out on the street and find twenty people in less than two minutes who would take your job. So deal with it or walk. Which is it going to be?"

Morgan balled both hands into white-knuckled fists. Would it be that bad if he decked him? Sure he needed the money, but waiting tables and cleaning up dog shit wasn't that awful. It'd be worth it just to leave the guy sprawled on the floor with a broken nose.

Julian's gentle playing penetrated his thoughts. No, he couldn't punch Kurt. Worse than losing his job, it'd ruin his chance at meeting Julian. If down the road the opportunity came to punch Kurt after he'd at least said hi to Julian, then he'd take it.

Morgan forced a smile. "You were going to show me the stage setup, weren't you?"

Kurt let out a snort. "Yeah, that's the decision I thought you'd make. Come on."

Morgan took another deep breath and followed him toward the stage, each step he took bringing him closer to Julian.

CHAPTER THREE

Julian brought Fur Elise to a soft conclusion. He exhaled a sigh, his mind, his body, more at peace. The song always did that for him, and for all the pieces he played, it was still one of his favorites. At least now he could stand up from the piano and not unintentionally point at everyone.

He moved to close the fallboard over the keys and halted his movements at the sight of two men approaching him. He recognized the stockier built of the two as Kurt, one of the tour managers, with his shortly cropped blond hair and slightly darker goatee. They had a few managers to handle different aspects of the massive tour, but Kurt was in charge of the staff. It was true the man was excellent at his job—the staff was always in place, setups were quick and efficient—but the man grated on his nerves. He knew it wasn't intentional on Kurt's part. If Kurt had any flaw it was he obsessed about doing an exceptional job for the band. The man beside Kurt, though, nearly made his jaw drop.

Dressed in dark khakis and a forest green button down shirt, the other man stood taller than Kurt by several inches, putting him well over six feet. The man's height was complimented by a powerful build. Julian could make out hints of thick musculature beneath his shirt. His dark brown hair was brushed back in medium-length waves, a few strands falling to the sides of his face, and shone with deep auburn highlights.

Julian moved his gaze over the other's face, his features masculine and painfully attractive in how his jaw was dusted with trimmed stubble. He couldn't help but admire the man's beautifully formed cheekbones, the fullness and perfect shape of his lips, his skin of a lightly bronzed hue that looked a natural shade rather than tanned. As Julian met his gaze, he tightened his jaw to make certain it wouldn't drop at seeing the loveliest shade of earthy brown in the man's eyes.

"Beautifully played, Mr. Forrester, beautifully played!" Kurt said. "But what else is to be expected from you?"

Julian summoned a smile. "You're too kind, Kurt. I was simply dabbling."

Kurt stopped beside the piano. "Well dabbling for you is what other people wish they could sound like."

Julian strained to keep his smile. "Yes, well..." he left the sentence hanging, deciding not to accept the compliment because if he did, others were certain to follow and he'd already had enough of them. He turned his gaze to the other man and found it far easier to hold his smile. "And who is your friend?"

Morgan took a step closer and offered his hand to him. "Mor—"

"Morgan," Kurt intervened. "His name is Morgan."

Julian glanced at Kurt, then back to Morgan, noticing the barely concealed annoyance on his face. He suppressed a chuckle. It seemed he wasn't the only one forced to practice patience with Kurt. He placed his hand in Morgan's larger one, the roughness of his skin and calluses on his palm telling him Morgan must work with his hands a lot. Morgan's grip was strong, but not crushing, and just the touch was enough to make heat roll through his groin.

"It's such a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Forrester," Morgan said.

"Please call me Julian, most people do." Julian's gaze flicked to Kurt. When it returned to Morgan, he saw the slight curve of a smirk and he knew Morgan caught how it annoyed him the way Kurt always referred to him as mister. "And the pleasure is mine, Morgan..."

"Chandler," Morgan quickly filled in.

Julian nodded once. "Morgan is such a lovely name. Classic and sophisticated, strong, yet soft."

A bright smile shone over Morgan's countenance. "Thank you. I've always liked the name Julian, too. It has such a fluid, musical sound."

"Ah, well, I'll admit I used to get teased quite a bit with it when I was young. Other boys would call me Julie Ann."

Morgan's expression turned sympathetic. "I can relate. The other kids used to tell me I had a girl's name."

Before Julian could reply, Kurt broke in. "Yeah, I never had any problems like that. So Mr. Forrester, Morgan is going to be in charge of your instruments."

Julian looked to Morgan. "Great!"

"Yeah, I'm—"

"That's right," Kurt said. "So if anything is ever wrong with them, you know who to blame. And if anything like that does happen, you come to me and I'll put him in line for you."

Julian's smile faded. He saw the flush on Morgan's cheeks, showing he was both angered and embarrassed. Julian turned to Kurt. "Somehow I doubt that will happen." He focused on Morgan, presenting another smile to him. "So I take it you have experience handling pianos and keyboards?"

Morgan nodded. "Yeah, my father—"

"His dad owns a music shop, or something, so he knows what he's doing," Kurt said.

Julian brought his gaze to Kurt. All semblance of patience vanished from him and his voice left him with a sharp edge. "Kurt, as much as I appreciate you having knowledge about our staff, at this moment, I would prefer to hear Morgan answer for himself."

"Of course, of course," Kurt said hastily. "You want to make sure he's not all talk. I get it. You'd be able to see someone talking a big game about music better than anyone, Mr. Forrester."

"That's not my intent at all. I'm sure Morgan can back up any game he talks if you would give him a moment to speak at all. And with that said, I would appreciate no further interruptions." Julian returned his attention to Morgan. "So your father owns a music store?"

"He did, but it's mine now. He passed away last year."

Julian's expression filled with sympathy. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

Morgan shook his head. "It's alright. He passed away in the shop he loved, surrounded by instruments. It's how he would've wanted to go, and it's how I grew up. I was tuning pianos when I was still too small to even lift the lid on a grand."

"That's sweet. Then you play?"

"I pretend to." Morgan held up his hands. "I took lessons for years, but these clunky fingers of mine just don't have the agility. There's no instrument I love more, though."

Kurt interceded again. "Which is why he'll be perfect for handling your instruments, Mr. Forrester. That's what I was thinking the whole time I've talked with him."

Julian slowly brought his gaze to Kurt in a glare.

Kurt lifted both hands high as if Julian had a gun pointed at him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, and I hate to break this up, but I really do need to finish showing Morgan around and introduce him to a few more people."

"Fine." Julian aimed a kinder gaze at Morgan. "I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities to chat later. We'll only be traveling to the same places and working together day after day for the next several months, after all."

Morgan extended his hand to him again. "Absolutely. I look forward to it."

As Julian took Morgan's hand, he noticed his grip was gentler than before. His heart pounded a little quicker, his cock stirred. Morgan released his hand and turned to leave. Julian watched him depart, his gaze on Morgan's ass. He closed the fallboard over the keys and rested his elbows on it while rubbing his eyes.

He couldn't craft a man to fit his type any more perfectly than Morgan was naturally; tall, rugged, athletic. Sadly, he hadn't picked up the slightest bit of flirtatiousness from him. Kindness, yes. Professionalism, certainly. Julian sighed. Now how was he going to be able to focus on music when day in and day out he would have to look at that godlike ass? There was only one

answer. Sex. Lots of it. With any hot boy groupie who verified he was at least eighteen.

Julian pushed away from the piano and stood, no longer caring if anyone noticed his hard-on. He was more than ready to head home and share his evening with a few glasses of wine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Julian dragged through arena's backstage. He hadn't seen anyone on stage and assumed they must be in one of the dressing rooms. He felt utterly exhausted. After making himself a spaghetti dinner the evening before, he retired to bed early, but not to sleep. With a bear and a twink going at it on the TV hanging across from his bed, he had given himself a thorough work over using his hand and favorite dildo.

Yet even with the lovelies playing on the screen, one man occupied his mind. He didn't know why. Well actually, he did. Morgan was gorgeous. Even though he'd only spoken with him for barely ten minutes, throughout his self pleasuring session it was Morgan he envisioned. He thought of him last before he fell asleep and first when waking. It all brought him to the conclusion he'd reached a whole new level of pathetic in obsessing about a man he didn't know, and though he told himself he wouldn't have any more one-night-stands until they hit the road again, maybe he needed to pop into a club and grab some company for an evening.

Julian swung into the dressing room to the sight of Jesse, Evan, Kenny, and Brad sitting around talking. He hardly stepped through the doorway when Jesse and Evan's dogs charged him, both bouncing and spinning in happy greeting. Achilles, a Collie/German Shepherd mix Jesse found as a stray two years before, was the larger of the two with a long coat colored white, tan, and black. The four-month old black and tan German Shepherd, Iris, still had a great deal of growing to fill out her large paws. Julian bent down, smiling and roughing up the thick fur of both dogs.

Jesse glanced at him. "Damn, Jules, you look like hell." A smirk lifted his lips. "I hope he was worth it."

"I'm afraid there was no *he*," Julian made his way to the couch and sat heavily beside Brad.

"Now that's just sad," Jesse said. "If a man looks as exhausted

as you do, there should at least be a he involved. I really think you need a he, Jules.”

“As you’ve told me before.” Julian opted for a subject change as the current one brought Morgan to his mind again. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“We’re going to do more jamming than we did yesterday,” Jesse said. “I’ve already got the moves down that I’ll need for the dance routines, so I don’t want to spend a lot of time on those. But before we get started, Ev’s got something he wants to talk to everyone about.”

Evan gave Jesse a warm smile, then looked to the others. “You guys know I’m getting ready to retire from recording and performing, and I’ve given a lot of thought to what I’d like to do besides managing you guys. One thing kept coming into my head. I want to do something good for the world. I know my music has done a lot, but I want to do something more solid, something that will really affect people, so I’m going to get involved with some charities.”

“That’s wonderful, Evan,” Julian said. “What better thing than to become a philanthropist.”

Evan nodded. “Yeah, I think so. But for the first thing I want to do, I need help from you guys. I want to hold an auction where all the proceeds go to a cancer research foundation.”

Julian saw Jesse take Evan’s hand. Since joining Conquest, he’d gotten to know Evan very well, and during that time he learned when Evan was eighteen years old, his father passed away from cancer. It made perfect sense the first cause Evan would seek to throw his support behind would be to aid in treating the disease.

His voice soft, Julian said, “Whatever help you need, you have my full support.”

Evan smiled at him. “Thank you. I was hoping I could get everyone to donate something, a personal item of high value, to be auctioned off. I’m going to put up my grand piano that I’ve written most of my music on and autograph it, then Jess and I are going to auction off a private dinner with the both of us.”

"And I'm putting up my original sheet music from *Conquest* and *No Fear*," Jesse added.

Kenny gasped. "You can't auction your music for the albums!"

Jesse looked at him. "Why not?"

"They have all your original handwritten notes, your adjustments, everything!"

"Exactly. You can't get more personal than that, and people will go nuts over them."

Evan cleared his throat to call attention to himself. "I said the same thing, Kenny, which is why I made copies of the originals so he would always have his notes."

"Still," Kenny said, "to lose the originals—"

"Won't matter if they go to something more important," Jesse interrupted.

Julian gazed at Jesse, how dedicated he was in supporting Evan. He felt the familiar ache in his heart to have someone feel the same toward him. He took a breath, attempting to shake the feeling away. "It'll be hard to find something I own of equal value to what you're both laying out. It's strange, for all the possessions I have, they all seem rather trivial compared to this cause."

"I'll be grateful for anything you offer," Evan said.

Julian sat quiet, pondering on what he could donate. The room filled with silence as Kenny and Brad did the same. After a few long moments, the silence broke with Kenny snapping his fingers.

"I know what I can give! I'll donate my lucky guitar pick!"

Jesse gave him an unenthused expression and spoke in a monotone voice. "Your guitar pick?"

Kenny nodded excitedly. "Not just any guitar pick. My *lucky* one!"

"And what luck has this all magical pick brought you?" Jesse asked.

"Hello, I'm lead guitar of the hottest band in the world."

Jesse sat silent for a moment, blinking at Kenny. "Okay, later I'll explain to you exactly why our success has nothing to do with a guitar pick that can be bought in a pack of three for five bucks. In the mean time, think of something else."

Kenny frowned at him. "It's a custom Fender pick and it cost me a lot more than that."

"I don't care if it's made from diamonds. Find something better."

Trying to speak through his laughter, Brad said, "Dude, Jess's right. A guitar pick is so lame."

Kenny turned on Brad. "So what are you going to donate?"

"I was thinking maybe I could offer private drum lessons. Not like a year's worth, but maybe once a week for a month or so. The only problem is, we'll be on the road."

"No, I think that's a great idea," Evan said. "We could have it as a stipulation to the auction that the buyer wouldn't be able to collect until the tour is over. I don't think that'd deter anyone."

Jesse gave Brad a slap on the arm. "Good thinking! Completely selfless." His gaze went to Kenny in a pointed look.

Kenny aimed his index finger at Jesse, his face holding a smug expression. "Yeah? Well how's this for selfless? How about I offer *myself* up? Completely! The winner gets to go on a date with me!"

Jesse smirked at him. "Sounds like a great idea. I'm sure there are a lot of rich old men who would jump at the chance to buy you and have you all to themselves."

All smugness vanished from Kenny. He looked to Evan for help. "We could have a stipulation that only chicks can bid on me, couldn't we?"

Evan took a deep breath. "I don't know, Kenny. That really wouldn't be fair and could limit the amount we might get for you." He turned to Jesse. "What do you think?"

Julian looked back and forth between them, easily able to tell they were now teasing Kenny. He glanced at Kenny and almost burst out laughing at how he looked at Jesse as if his life

depended on Jesse's decision.

Jesse nodded thoughtfully. "It certainly could limit the clientele. And we want to raise every penny we can."

"Jess," Kenny pleaded.

"I agree," Evan said. "Of course, it wouldn't do us any good if we get some guy storming back after a date with him demanding a refund."

"Which could happen if there's an unsatisfactory performance." Jesse grinned at Kenny. "Okay, I guess we can put you up as a woman-only item."

Kenny let out his held breath. "Awesome!"

Jesse lifted up an index finger. "But, if you're not bringing in a high dollar, I *will* change it on the fly and open the floor to male bidders."

Kenny stared at Jesse. "What do you mean, *you'll open the floor?*?"

Jesse's grin shifted to a wicked smirk. "I'm emceeing the auction."

"No." Kenny took a step back, shaking his head. "No, I've changed my mind."

"Sorry, you can't. You've offered your item and we've accepted. But don't worry. I'll take good care of you."

Julian laughed along with Evan and Brad. He couldn't help it at Kenny's horrified expression over his fate now being in Jesse's hands. He slowed his laugh and looked at Jesse and Evan. "Well, I'm not sure I can compete with Kenny prostituting himself, but I have an idea of what I can offer. What about a private piano concert?"

"I love it," Evan said. "People will get into a bidding war over having you play a private concert for them."

Julian nodded. "We can hope."

Evan's gaze moved over everyone. "Thank you, guys, for doing this. It means a lot to me to have your support."

Julian stretched across the distance between them to lay his

hand on Evan's knee. "Of course you'd have our support. We're a family."

Evan lowered his gaze. His voice left him in a hushed whisper as he muttered another, "thank you." For how expressive he was with his music and on stage, Julian knew Evan always became uncomfortable when his true emotions began to show in front of anyone other than Jesse, though he had steadily adapted to it around them.

Jesse wrapped his arms around Evan and laid his head on Evan's shoulder. "Thanks, guys. It means a lot to me, too."

Julian brought his gaze to Jesse. "When's it going to be?"

"Not this Wednesday, but the following one."

Kenny's eyes widened. "So soon?"

Jesse turned to him. "Yeah. Isn't that awesome? Less time for you to wait."

Kenny clamped his lips shut as if not sure how to reply.

Jesse stood and turned for the door. "Really, we just want to do it before we hit the road. Ev's already got the advertising lined up and after he makes the call, it'll be all over the place."

Julian looked at Evan. "Then you've worked on this for a while?"

Evan shook his head. "Not really. I talked to the foundation a couple weeks ago and when I brought up the idea, they jumped on it, especially with the connections and promoting power I have. And with holding it here in Conquest's hometown, that'll bring in a lot of local money."

Jesse took Evan's hand as they walked toward the stage. "Yeah, and Brandon's going to hit up the theatre community. He's going to offer something and get some of the other big actors in town to join in."

"What's Brandon offering?" Julian asked.

"I don't know yet. We're going to talk about it when he gets here later."

“He’s stopping by?”

“Yeah, we’re getting together for lunch.”

An internal sigh passed through Julian. Just what he needed to top the parade of beautiful men who didn’t want him. Of course, he didn’t know for certain that Morgan didn’t want him. He also didn’t know for certain Morgan was gay. When they met, he had been so busy trying to keep his cool, he hadn’t scrutinized him. But with an ass like what Morgan had, it’d be one of the greatest injustices of the world if he wasn’t. Julian gave the thought a frustrated shove to the back of his mind. He needed to stop thinking about him. In less than twenty-four hours, it’d hit the point of obsessive.

Julian climbed the stairs to the stage, and as he rounded a stack of amps, stopped in mid-stride. Morgan stood at the keyboards with senior tech, Remmy Laurent, who had worked their last tour. Morgan had his back to him, but he still knew it was him. A muffled groan sounded in Julian’s throat. How bad was it that after one day, he could already recognize the man by his ass?

Julian looked at Remmy, a cutie in his own right, with shaggy dark blond hair and youthful features that made him look as if he’d run away from home to follow a rock band. Remmy had a sweet personality, often quiet and a little shy, but Julian couldn’t think of anyone who knew the ins and outs of a high profile tour better.

Julian saw Jesse stop at the keyboards and hastened forward. It was never good to leave Jesse’s mouth unattended.

“Is everything alright with the keyboards, Remmy?” Jesse asked.

The senior tech nodded. “Yeah, everything’s perfect. I was just showing Morgan how to set them up, do the programming, all that good stuff. He just joined us yesterday.”

Morgan offered his hand to Jesse. “It’s great to meet you, Mr. Alexander.”

“You too, but don’t call me mister. You’ll have me feeling like there’s a second Kurt running around here and none of us want

that.”

Julian walked up as Morgan laughed at Jesse’s comment. He gazed at Morgan, his ears drinking in the husky timbre of his laugh, and felt entranced by his smile. He didn’t know how it was physically possible for his whole body to suddenly feel like mush while his cock hardened. Morgan was dressed more casually than the day before, in a plain gray, long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans. He’d never seen such simple clothing look so sexy on anyone. The jeans alone were a vision in how they formed to Morgan’s narrow hips, and he couldn’t help but notice how filled out the crotch looked.

Evan speaking pulled Julian back to the moment.

“I don’t know why Greg brought him back on.”

“I think because he headed up our staff on the last tour,” Jesse answered. “But he does seem more...*intense* than last time.” He faced Julian. “But look, Jules. This is who’s going to be taking care of your babies.”

Julian thought he caught a hint of innuendo in Jesse’s tone, but couldn’t be certain if it was real, or if his own paranoia placed it there. He willed a cool, relaxed smile to his lips and looked at Morgan, giving him a nod. “Yes, Morgan and I met yesterday.”

Morgan smiled in return.

“Already?” Jesse said. “Damn, you work fast.”

Julian’s smile tightened as he turned to Jesse. “I just happened to be here when Kurt was showing him around. Shouldn’t we start rehearsing? You said Brandon will be here soon for lunch, right? You won’t want to keep him waiting.”

“Yeah, you know how he gets cranky when he’s hungry.”

Julian put both hands on Jesse’s shoulders and pushed him toward the center of the stage. “And so do you, so let’s get on with it.”

Jesse waved to Morgan and Remmy. “Later, guys.”

Julian threw a hasty wave at them, seeing they were departing the stage.

Jesse laughed softly. "Are you feeling lucky right now?"

"Why would I?"

"That roadie is so your type. You'll get to look at him every day."

Julian dropped his hands from Jesse as he headed for the piano. "Yeah, I suppose."

Jesse worked on adjusting a mic stand. "It's just too bad he's a staff member."

Julian paused and turned toward him. "Why's that?"

"Remember that fiasco on the last tour?"

Julian stared at Jesse, who was occupied with getting the mic stand to the height he wanted and grumbling about who the hell had adjusted it the day before. The fiasco Jesse mentioned happened when two roadies started seeing each other. It seemed the gossiping, backbiting, and vindictiveness that occurred because the man was a lead tech and the woman was just a bottom rung roadie had been awful, since many believed she was getting special treatment.

In truth, not he or any of the other band members paid attention to the personal lives of the crew, and between the four of them and Evan, he doubted they could rattle off twenty names of the staff. The only way they found out about the situation was when right before a show, they walked out of Jesse's dressing room to an all out fist fight in the hall between the female roadie and another woman. Julian still didn't know what had sparked the fight other than hearing the other woman had apparently taunted the female roadie. Either way, Jesse was in a fury over it, and even though he didn't order the woman in the relationship to leave the tour, embarrassment forced her to. Would such a thing happen if he entered a relationship with Morgan? If it did, he'd never forgive himself.

Through his thoughts, Julian heard Jesse's voice.

"I don't ever want something like that to happen again. Whoever heard of a band being late taking the stage because of

a roadie brawl? At least there weren't any fans backstage to see it. It would've been all over the Internet. Talk about embarrassing."

Julian nodded slowly and continued toward the piano. "Yeah, not at all professional."

CHAPTER FIVE

Julian stood up from the piano and stretched his arms above his head, letting out a groan as he did. He still felt exhausted. He'd managed well enough during the morning rehearsal, or had once Morgan's distracting beauty left the stage, but in just the brief break from Kenny excusing himself to use the restroom, fatigue settled in again. At least Jesse was good enough to decide they could all break early for lunch.

Julian's vision blackened as a pair of warm hands covered his eyes from behind. A deep baritone whispered in his ear, "Guess who?"

"Not quite the man of my dreams, but close enough."

Brandon laughed and dropped his hands from Julian's eyes. "Strange, I've heard that before. But it's usually more like, not the man of my dreams, and not even close."

Julian turned around and met the blue eyes of Jesse's older brother, the shade lighter than Jesse's indigo. With his ebony hair, his elegant features, and medium build lined in muscle, the famed stage actor never ceased to make Julian's heart flutter. Except today. Oddly, his body wasn't reacting to Brandon's presence like it usually did. There wasn't even a stir of emotion. He chocked it up to being tired. "Now we both know that's not true. There's one man who you fulfill every one of his wildest dreams and fantasies."

Brandon sighed, a dreamy expression on his face as he sat on the piano bench. "That's true."

Julian took a seat beside him. "And where is the karate master today?"

"Parking the car. It's pouring outside and he didn't want me to get wet, so he dropped me off at the doors. Have you ever known a man so sweet?"

"Yes, quite the prince," Julian grumbled.

Brandon rocked against him. "Now, there's no need for that. I know you like Shun."

"I do like Shunichi, very much." Julian exhaled a sigh. "I'm just jealous."

Brandon gazed at him, a soft smile on his lips. "It never would've worked out between us, Jules. We both know that."

"Of course I do. I didn't mean I was jealous because he has you. I'm jealous of the action I know he's getting. I mean, my God, Brandon, you're phenomenal."

Brandon's smiled brightened. "Why, thank you. I think I'm quite good myself, and Shun doesn't seem to think I'm half bad either."

Julian chuckled. "Yeah, I'm sure he doesn't."

He glanced at Brandon, the memories of their nights of intimacy filling his mind. The first time happened over Christmas while Conquest was on their first tour. Whether it had been not wanting to sleep alone over the holiday, or their attraction for each had built to a breaking point, he and Brandon couldn't resist falling into bed together. He had suspected Brandon would be good, but how good still stunned him.

After the New Year, when Brandon was forced to return to Chicago to continue playing the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*, and he had to move on with the band, they parted under the belief that while they both enjoyed what happened between them, it wouldn't happen again, and neither wanted a commitment from the other. So when Brandon caught up with them on the road in Japan while they were touring with Evan, going to bed with him again was the last thing on Julian's mind, until they all went out. He, Evan, and Brandon sat in a bar drinking *sake* and trading sex stories while Jesse and Kenny played video games in an arcade across the street. The stories left all of them hot, but Evan had an outlet and took Jesse straight to their hotel.

At that time, neither he nor Brandon were seeing anyone. When they returned to the hotel, Brandon followed him to his room, accepting the unspoken invitation. But once again when

they parted ways, both knew their experience was nothing more than a good time.

The truth of it was, even though the sex between them was amazing, it was more of a comfort thing for him. Brandon was a friend, and at the time, it was nice to be with someone he'd known longer than having just met backstage. But for all Brandon's attractiveness, kindness, and bright personality, he simply didn't fulfill what Julian wanted in a permanent partner. Brandon was just a bit too refined. With regards to Brandon's type, Julian knew it was even more true concerning himself. Brandon's type was, well, Brandon had already found his perfect match.

Julian grinned at him. "There was also the Jesse factor. He would've killed us if he had found out about our adventures."

"Actually, he knows."

Julian's grin withered. "What? How?"

Brandon gave him a light push on the shoulder. "Don't look so horrified. He didn't care."

Disbelief claimed Julian's countenance. "Really?"

"Really. When we hooked up over Christmas, I was coming out of your room and he was walking down the hall to take Achilles out. At first he stopped and just stared at me. Then he got that little smirk of his and as he walked by, asked, 'Did you boys enjoy yourselves?' I said, 'Immensely.' He chuckled, said 'good,' and went on his way. Then I told him about our time in Japan, and he found it pretty hilarious since he knew damn well how horny Evan had gotten from our chat in the bar."

"But he always reproached us for flirting."

"Yeah, but that was because he knew it wouldn't work out between us in the long run, and he didn't want to see either of us get hurt."

"I wonder why he never said anything to me."

"Well, even though he's a nosey thing, he's also capable of being discreet. He probably figured he wouldn't bring it up unless you did." Brandon gave him a nudge with his elbow and a wink.

“Besides, I already told him all the dirty details.”

“Oh, wonderful. And here I thought *you* were capable of being more discreet.”

“Not with Jesse. You know he and I tell each other everything.”

“And you see? That’s another reason why we never would’ve worked out. That’s all I’d need is Jesse snickering at me every day over my naughty bedroom habits.”

Julian glanced to the side and saw Brandon’s partner, Shunichi Miyamoto, walking toward them. Shunichi’s refined features, dark eyes, black hair, and slender body of solid muscle made him absolutely stunning, topped with a gentle and playful disposition.

“And what are you two giggling about?” Shunichi asked.

Brandon stood up to greet him. “I just told him that Jesse knows about the flings he and I had.”

Julian gasped. “Brandon!”

Shunichi laughed and wrapped Brandon in an embrace, his gaze settling on Julian. “It’s okay. I already know about them. Brandon and I don’t have any secrets between us.”

“Yeah, but still, no one wants to hear about their partner’s past...*experiences*.”

Shunichi shrugged. “The past is nothing more than the road traveled to the present. What matters are the steps we take today.”

Brandon placed a tender kiss on Shunichi’s lips. “Says the holder of the Philosophy degree.”

Shunichi chuckled. “Okay, then I’ll just say it doesn’t matter to me because you’re mine now and I know you will be forever.” He delivered another kiss to Brandon, this one deeper than their first.

Julian looked away. As wonderful as it was to see them happy, just how many couples glowing in monogamous bliss were going to be paraded before him? He knew flaunting their perfect relationships wasn’t any of their intentions, but it didn’t ease his loneliness.

Brandon and Shunichi slowly pulled apart. Brandon looked to Julian. "Are you joining us for lunch?"

Julian shook his head. "No, I have other plans."

Brandon took Shunichi's hand and turned to leave. "Then let's make sure we all get together before you guys hit the road."

"We will."

As they walked away, he saw Shunichi pull his hand from Brandon's to slide it into the back pocket of Brandon's jeans, Brandon gave Shunichi's ass a rub before copying the movement, putting his hand in Shunichi's pocket. With a sigh, Julian shoved away from the piano and headed for the back exit. He felt guilty for lying; he didn't have plans, but he really didn't feel like watching Jesse and Evan, Brandon and Shunichi, loving on each other while he was trying to eat.

A single, humorless chuckle escaped him. It seemed he should add bitterness to all the other quirks he had going on lately.

Julian hastened through the backstage, hoping with each step he wouldn't bump into any of them. He reached a back door, flung it open, and paused. Rain poured so hard he could barely make out his car in the distance. For mid-September, the weather already held a chill, and a blast of wind sent a shiver through him. He realized in his haste, he'd forgotten to grab his coat, but if he went back now, he was certain to run into everyone. He decided it'd be better to just brave the weather.

Julian sprinted forward. He reached his silver Audi Q7 and grabbed the door handle. It stayed locked. Cold rain soaked his hair and shirt. He cursed under his breath. This wasn't the first time his keyless entry hadn't worked recently. Julian dug in his pocket for his keys, unlocked the door, and dove inside, slamming it closed. He let out an annoyed breath as he shook his fingers through his hair and gave the car's start button a hard push. Nothing happened. Just as the keyless entry refused to work, it seemed the keyless start was following the same pattern. He shoved the key into the ignition and cranked it. The SUV remained lifeless.

Julian collapsed back in the seat. He glanced at the switch for the headlights and saw he'd turned them off before going inside. That pretty much tapped out his knowledge of what could be wrong with it. From minor annoyances to major, it seemed nothing was going right for him lately.

Despite knowing he wouldn't be able to decipher the problem, Julian popped the hood and grudgingly climbed out. He stomped around to the front, well aware of each icy raindrop pelting him. He raised the hood and peered inside. Just as he suspected. It looked like a car. No little red flags or flashing lights signaled what was wrong.

The rumble of an engine made him glance over his shoulder. An older model black Jeep Wrangler pulled up next to him and the window rolled down. As he looked inside, he no longer felt the cold.

"Is everything okay?" Morgan asked. "I saw your hood up."

Julian blinked through the rain at him. "It's completely dead and it's not the battery. At least, I don't think it is. I didn't leave my lights on."

"Well jump in before you freeze to death. You're already soaked."

Julian paused for a brief instant, then grabbed the Jeep's door handle and climbed in. "Thanks." He glanced around the Jeep's interior, worn, but clean and well cared for.

Morgan saw him looking things over and smiled. "Yeah, not exactly an Audi, is it?"

Julian let out a snort. "No, it runs."

Morgan laughed, and Julian felt the last bit of chill melt from his body. He faced forward, needing to give himself, and his cock, a respite from Morgan's attractiveness.

Morgan slowly moved his gaze over him. Julian's pale blond hair looked slightly darker with moisture. His light blue shirt clung to him, his perked nipples visible through the thin material.

A soft scent touched Morgan's nose, one he had smelled the

first time he met Julian. He savored it then, wondering if it was a cologne Julian wore often, and now realizing it must be. The fragrance was light, subtle, fresh. It gently took over his sense of smell, then moved on to arouse the rest of his body. To his mind came a vision of sliding an arm around Julian's lower back, pulling him close and burying his nose in Julian's neck, licking his scented skin.

Morgan quickly turned his eyes away. He reached to turn up the heat and adjusted the vents toward Julian so all the warm air blasted on him. "Were you going anywhere I can give you a lift?"

Julian held his hands toward a vent. "Just out to lunch."

Morgan gazed at Julian's hands, his fingers long and graceful. "I can take you wherever you want to go. If you don't mind hanging out with a lowly roadie, of course."

Julian looked at him, a smile came to his lips as he met Morgan's eyes. "I'd like that very much."

Morgan threw the Jeep in gear and pulled away. "Where would you like to go? You look like you could do with something warm."

"Anywhere is fine."

"I'm surprised you didn't go out with the rest of the band."

"Well, sometimes it's good to get a break from each other."

"I thought maybe it was because of that guy you were talking to earlier."

Julian slowly turned his gaze on him. "What guy?"

Morgan shifted in the seat, his eyes focused ahead. "The guy who came up on stage. He had black hair. It just seemed like you guys were, uh...enjoying each other's company."

"You were watching us?"

"Not intentionally. I was about to change a chord with the keyboards, and..." he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in an anxious beat, then gave Julian a quick smile. "And it's none of my business. Forget I brought it up."

Julian took in Morgan's discomfiture. Was Morgan put on edge because he wasn't comfortable with the idea of two men together, or was it something more? He wanted to believe it was something more, perhaps a touch of jealousy, but so far, he didn't have any reasons to even believe Morgan was gay. He got a slight vibe from him, but he also got that feeling from Brad, who insisted he was straight.

The whole thing was starting to give him a headache. He was half tempted to plainly ask Morgan if he'd be interested in sucking him off. Though, if the answer didn't come out the way he wanted, it could leave for a little bit of awkwardness.

"Brandon is Jesse's older brother, and a dear friend," Julian said.

"That's fine. It's not like it'd matter, anyway."

Julian winced internally, and nearly externally, at Morgan's words. That pretty much summed things up. If Morgan was straight, he didn't care if he was gay. If Morgan was gay, it wouldn't matter to Morgan if he was seeing someone, which equated into, he had no interest in him. Hurt and frustration at Morgan's blunt words filled Julian with each second of uncomfortable silence that ticked by, until he couldn't contain it.

"I'm glad it doesn't matter, and since you've already assumed I was trying to flirt Brandon's pants off, I'll just admit I've already had them off, but he and I ended up going separate ways. He has a partner who he's very devoted to. Does that satisfy your curiosity or would you like more details?"

Morgan snapped his head toward him, his mouth dropped open. Only a stutter came out before he found his voice. "I...I wasn't implying anything like that."

Julian huffed and turned his gaze out the passenger window.

Morgan looked back to the road. He mentally chastised himself for his big mouth. He couldn't believe he'd mentioned Brandon. It just slipped out, pushed from his mouth by jealousy. When Remmy was going over the keyboard setup with him, they noticed the coating on one of the wires was cracked. Remmy got

called off to take care of another issue, so he returned on his own to replace the wire, and when he walked on stage, all he saw was another man standing behind Julian, his hands over Julian's eyes as he whispered to him.

Instant jealousy had filled him, but even more, inexplicable hurt. Seeing the other guy, Brandon, made it sink in even harder that he wasn't the type of man Julian was interested in, especially learning they had been lovers in the past. Brandon had pretty boy good looks, his hair was perfectly styled, his clothes classy and immaculate. And now knowing Brandon was Jesse's brother, he vaguely recalled hearing about him being an actor. How could a schoolteacher, and an unemployed one, compete with that?

Then to say it didn't matter? He'd wanted to say something nonchalant, cool, laidback, and that's what came out. Morgan gave himself a mental kick. He didn't understand why when he finally had Julian alone, he turned into a shy schoolboy trying to tell his first crush how he felt. He was normally a lot smoother than this.

Morgan wondered if keeping his job was really a good idea between his jackass boss and now this. He originally thought it'd be enough to just meet Julian. Now he confessed to himself he wanted so much more from him. Not that he'd be able to get it with this blunder.

The tense silence continued to drag out as Morgan sought to find words, a neutral topic they could talk about. He cleared his throat. "So, has your truck been acting up lately?"

"The navigation screen's acted glitchy for the past week, but I didn't think much of it."

Morgan nodded. "Sounds like one of the computer modules could be fried."

Julian let out a noncommittal, "Ah."

To Morgan's relief, he saw an open parking spot by the small diner that was his destination. He parked and smiled at Julian. "Here we are. I hope you like it. The food's nothing fancy, but damn good. The place is owned by an older couple and they

make everything fresh themselves.”

Julian looked at him. He could tell Morgan was trying to ease the tension between them, and really, there was no need for such tension. Morgan hadn't intended to hurt his feelings. It was his own oversensitivity making him feel rejected, which was ridiculous in of itself. He shouldn't feel rejected when he hadn't even hit on Morgan.

Julian allowed his lips to lift in a smile. “It sounds lovely.”

He reached to open the door, halting as he felt Morgan's hand on his forearm. He glanced at him, but Morgan was stretched between the front seats reaching in the back.

“Here, before you step out,” Morgan said, and sat back in his seat, extending a small umbrella toward him.

Julian slowly took it, touched by the kind gesture despite his snappishness. He nodded his thanks and climbed out of the Jeep. Morgan came around to walk at his side, and Julian tipped the umbrella to cover him also. Morgan moved under it with him, walking so close their arms touched.

Julian tried to will his racing heart to slow. Why was it, even with knowing how Morgan felt, he still couldn't let his attraction toward him go? He assumed he was expecting too much. Even though he got an instant crush on him, that didn't mean it'd go away easily. If anything, it would probably take longer. Julian sighed. He really didn't need a case of infatuation right now.

Morgan stopped outside the restaurant and held the door open for him. Julian walked into the single dining room. Only a handful of people occupied the place, giving them uninterested glances. The smell of freshly baked bread and pot roast wafted through the air.

Morgan pointed to a booth by a window. “Is that one alright?”

“It's perfect.”

Julian had no sooner slid in, than a woman, her hair mostly gray with a few brown streaks running through, approached their table with a wide smile directed at Morgan.

“Well look who’s here. It’s been a long time since you’ve stopped in, hon. I was starting to wonder about you.”

Morgan grinned up at her. “Sorry, Anna, I’ve had to cut back on eating out. And I’m going to be leaving for a few months for work, so don’t worry if you don’t see me until next year.”

“I’ll still worry about you. Now what do you boys want? The pot roast is the special. Perfect for a day like today.”

“I’ll take it.” Morgan looked to Julian. “Do you want to see a menu?”

Julian shook his head. “No, I’ll have the same.”

The hint of a smile touched Anna’s lips as her gaze moved over Julian. She nodded. “Alright, two pot roasts it is.” She took their drink orders then disappeared to the back.

Julian brought his gaze to Morgan. “Why was she smiling at me like that?”

Morgan shrugged, wearing a grin of his own. “Maybe she thinks you’re cute.”

“Well of course she does. Who wouldn’t?” Julian joked.

“No one.”

Julian paused at the seriousness in Morgan’s voice. He glanced down at the table, then out the window. He absolutely would *not* allow his mind to take that comment where it wanted to.

“Are you excited to go on tour?” Morgan asked softly.

“Not really. I’ve done it so many times. Not to the level of what Evan’s tour was, and certainly not to the level that this one’s going to be, but I’ve traveled with my music for a very long time.”

“I know.”

Julian brought his gaze to him. “You do?”

Morgan took a breath to answer, but before he could, Anna stepped up to their table with their food. She placed a plate laden with pot roast, potatoes, and carrots in front of each of them, along with their iced tea and a basket of warm bread. As she left, Morgan cleared his throat. “So you probably have a lot to get

settled before you leave. I know I do, but I can imagine it's worse for you."

Julian caught the subject change, and though he wanted to know what Morgan meant by his earlier statement, decided to go with the new topic until he could bring the old one back around. "I don't have all that much to do. I've settled most things already. The biggest part will be how hectic next week's shaping up. Evan's hosting an auction on Wednesday where all of us are putting up items with the proceeds going toward a cancer research foundation.

"For my item, I'm offering a private piano concert, and I decided rather than make the winner wait until we come off the road, I'd do the concert Friday night, if they're local and available. Then our kick-off concert is Saturday, so even before going on the road, I'm going to be playing like crazy, but it's more than worth it for the cause."

Morgan stared at him. "A private piano concert?"

Julian nodded, his gaze on his food as he cut it.

"How private is it going to be?"

"Just me, the winner, and whoever they'd like to bring. And some security, of course. Evan's not willing to take the chance that whoever wins won't be psychotic, so he'll have guards with me. Just because a person has money doesn't mean they're sane." He laughed lightly. "It's usually quite the opposite."

Morgan didn't acknowledge the joke. "How high do you think the bidding will go?"

"It's hard to say. A private concert is difficult to put a price on. I imagine it'll depend on the bidders and how many are fans of me personally. Lucky for me, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is going to let me use a hall in the Symphony Center. I have friends there, but again, it was Evan who pulled that string for me." Julian took a bite of the pot roast and froze with the fork in his mouth. He slowly drew it out. "This is fantastic."

As he set to devouring his food, Morgan slowly picked at his own.

"Tell me more about your music store," Julian said between bites. "Is it primarily pianos?"

Morgan looked at him as if coming out of deep thought. "Yeah, mainly pianos, but other traditional instruments too, strings, woodwinds, a small selection of brass and percussion, and all the accessories for instruments."

"What about guitars and such?"

Morgan shook his head. "My father wasn't a big fan of rock and pop music. He wanted to keep the shop focused on the needs of classical musicians or things like what a kid needs to be in a school band. He was really big into supporting school music programs, would even donate instruments to kids who couldn't afford them. I know it's from him that I got my love of music and teaching." He chuckled. "Too bad neither one worked out."

Julian looked at him, confused. "What do you mean about teaching?"

"I was a high school music teacher for eight years. I might not have the talent to play as a professional musician, but I can play well enough to instruct, and also teach the history and mechanics of music. But that was before the funding fell out. I lost my job this past spring and I spent the summer trying to find another one, but no luck. I've been waiting tables and working at a kennel until something better came along." A soft smile graced Morgan's lips. "And now it has. I'll get to be a roadie for you. Sure, it pales next to teaching, but it's better than wiping up half chewed food from people."

Julian could easily tell that unlike so many roadies who lived and died by the bands they followed, Morgan held no such passion toward Conquest. "You taught for eight years. Then you're around thirty years old?"

"I just turned thirty-one earlier this month. You?"

"Twenty-six. I'll be twenty-seven in November. But I'm confused about why you're going to be a roadie with us. What about your music store? Doesn't it bring in money?"

"It probably would if I could afford to have it open, but my

father racked up some hefty debts and I can't pay for staff right now, so the only time it's open is when I have the time to be there, which is pretty much never. I just have a sign posted on the door that it's open by appointment only. I'm hoping with being on the road with you guys, I'll be able to save up some money to get it operating again.

"I'll admit, though, I'm torn between keeping it or just liquidating everything and letting it go. It was my father's pride and passion, but it's hard walking into it." Morgan's voice quieted. "I was the one who found him, after he passed away. Even though I know if he could've picked a place to go it would've been where he did, it bothers me that he died alone."

Julian slid his hand across the table toward Morgan's. "I'm sorry."

Morgan cleared his throat a couple times. He glanced up at Julian with a strained smile. "That's just how it is sometimes, right?" He gave Julian's hand a few quick pats. "Now what about you? I've got a feeling you came from affluence."

Julian slowly drew his hand back, feeling a twinge of hurt that Morgan hadn't taken it, or opened up more to him. "I suppose you could say my parents are well off. They still reside in Connecticut. I attended private schools, and had personal instructors for piano, tennis, and swimming."

A smirk quirked one corner of Morgan's lips. "No offense, but you don't really come across as the athletic type."

"No offense taken, because I'm not. That's why I needed personal instructors. One year of failing physical fitness was one too many for my parents."

Morgan laughed. "How does anyone fail gym class?"

"From telling my teacher I didn't see the point in running unless I was doing so for my life and informing him I flat out refused to put my wrists in danger by hitting a volleyball, as I was already playing piano. But for the record, I did turn out to be a fair tennis player and I'm an excellent swimmer. I even competed at swimming. Of course, that was mostly for the added benefit

of it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I can guess what it was. Probably the same one that keeps me glued to the swimming and diving events during the Summer Olympics.”

Julian stared at him, silent.

Morgan tipped his head. “So you didn’t know, or you weren’t sure?”

“About what?”

“You tell me.”

Julian shook his head. “No. *You* tell me.”

Morgan leaned over the table toward him, looking as though he was about to tell him a secret, though he didn’t bother to hush his voice against those who could overhear. “I’m gay, Julian.”

Julian continued to stare at him.

Morgan suppressed a chuckle at Julian’s doubtful expression. “So, do you want dessert? All the pies here are homemade.”

Julian finally blinked at being asked the odd question. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and sighed on seeing Jesse’s name and number on the screen. He looked at Morgan. “Sorry, I have to grab this.” He answered his phone. “Hello, Jesse.”

Jesse’s voice sounded through the phone. “Jules! I have a huge problem and only you can help me.”

“What is it?”

“I’m in dire need of an extremely talented keyboardist and pianist to play in my band. Our old one took off for lunch and hasn’t come back.”

“You really are a master of exaggeration. It’s only...” Julian shook back his shirt sleeve and glanced at his watch. “Oh, I didn’t realize that was the time. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s just not like you to be late, so I was starting to worry. Is everything okay?”

"Yeah, everything's fine. I lost track of time, is all. I'll be right there."

"Alright. Later."

"Bye." Julian ended the call. "It seems time got away from me. I'm twenty minutes late getting back for rehearsal."

Morgan slid toward the end of the booth. "I'll take full blame for that."

"You will not! My damn car will."

"Okay, I'll go with that." Morgan stepped up to the cash register where Anna stood waiting. He reached in his back pocket for his wallet, only to feel Julian's hand on his elbow.

"I have it," Julian said, retrieving his money clip.

Morgan shook his head. "No, I'm the one who invited you. I'll pay."

Julian faced him, one hand on his hip, one finger doing an annoyed tap. "You saved me from the rain, you brought me to get food, the least I can do is pay. Just swallow your pride and take it."

Morgan only barely managed from bursting out in laughter, but couldn't hold back his grin. With the stance Julian had, the tone in his voice, he looked too damn sexy to argue with. Though, if this was how Julian looked when he did argue, it would be worth instigating a few spats with him on occasion. His impression of Julian from seeing him during interviews and publicity was that he must be a man of mild manners and supreme politeness. But Julian had showed him his fiery side when he reprimanded Kurt the day they met. He couldn't deny, he liked seeing this different side of him.

Despite wanting to say how much he'd rather swallow something other than pride, Morgan inclined his head and stepped back from the register. He saw Anna smirking, and said a silent thank you that she opted to not embarrass him.

With the bill taken care of, Julian headed out, holding the umbrella aloft to once again cover Morgan as well. They rode

back to the arena with Julian mostly making small talk about the food.

Morgan drove through the parking lot and up to one of the back entrances. "I'll drop you off here so you don't get soaked again."

Julian smiled at him. "Thank you. And thank you for lunch, also."

"I have to thank you for that. You're the one who paid."

"But you're the one who provided the good company." Julian hopped out of the Jeep, waving over his shoulder as he disappeared inside.

Morgan gazed at the door even after it closed, breathing in Julian's gentle scent still lingering in the car, his mind spinning with plans.

CHAPTER SIX

After not rehearsing the previous Friday because of his interview and photo shoot for *Keyboard Magazine*, then the whole band taking the weekend off, Julian walked quickly down the hall toward the dressing rooms. His eyes hadn't stopped scanning for Morgan since he arrived. That weekend, rather than go out and find some intimate company, he was content to remain home and feed his fantasies about Morgan. He didn't understand how his infatuation was growing, not lessening, but determined it must be Morgan's fault. After all, Morgan was the one so damn attractive and personable.

Julian sighed, deciding it wasn't his good fortune to see Morgan before rehearsing, and stepped into the dressing room. Jesse stood in the center, stretching in preparation for dancing. Brad lounged on the couch, flipping through a motorcycle magazine. Julian headed toward the refrigerator, glancing back at Brad. "Please don't tell me you're thinking of getting one of those things."

Brad chuckled. "Okay, I won't."

Jesse shook his head and looked at Julian. "I told him if he crashes like he did before, I was going to pull an Ev on him and ditch him for a new drummer."

Brad turned another page of the magazine. "Yeah, yeah, I hear your threat and I've already forgotten it."

Julian smiled at the banter while raising a bottle of water to his lips. He paused, thinking he heard what sounded like running footsteps.

Kenny slid by the door, grabbing the doorframe to catch himself, and burst into the room, trying to speak and catch his breath at once. "Krista...Krista Hansen's here!"

Jesse smirked at Kenny. "Oh, is she?"

Julian snickered under his breath. Everyone knew Kenny had

a huge crush on their producer Greg's daughter ever since they met two Christmases ago. At that time, between Krista still being in college and her flirting with Jesse, Kenny kept quiet, albeit bitterly. It irked him to no end that she held more interest in Jesse, but her attraction toward Jesse also vanished once it was revealed who *Jesse* was interested in. At Jesse and Evan's wedding, Kenny managed to collect enough courage to ask Krista to dance, which only fueled his crush further, even if he hadn't told her.

"Dude, settle down," Brad said. "She's only a girl."

"She's only the hottest girl ever!" Kenny retorted.

"She's twenty-two," Jesse said. "I think that makes her a woman, not a girl."

"Either way!" Kenny rushed toward Jesse, holding out his hand. "Give me a breath mint! Hurry! I had an onion bagel for breakfast on my way here."

Jesse turned his face away, making a disgusted expression. "Yeah, I can tell."

"This isn't the time for jokes! Just give me a damn mint!"

Jesse held up both hands in a helpless gesture. "Sorry. Don't have any."

Kenny reached for Jesse's right front pocket, shoving his hand half inside. "Don't lie to me! You always have Altoids on you!"

Jesse flinched away, laughing. "Whoa! Easy boy, that's not a Tic Tac you're grabbing."

Kenny jumped back, holding his hand to his chest as if it'd gotten burned.

Julian lost all control and broke into hysterics, along with Brad.

Jesse winked at Kenny. "Just kidding. I hang to the left. And my Altoids are in my car."

Kenny grabbed him by the upper arms. "Then let's go so you can give me one!"

"Kenny, I know how irresistible he is, but could you please

refrain from propositioning my husband for a blowjob?"

Julian looked toward Evan's voice, finding him standing in the doorway, smirking. Greg Hansen was next to Evan, wearing an unenthused expression, his giggling daughter, Krista, at his side. It wasn't surprising Kenny was so enamored with her. Her lush brunette hair cascaded past her shoulders in thick waves, her eyes were a lovely crystal blue, her features model perfect.

Kenny quickly shook his head. "That's not what I was saying! Even if I did want a guy to blow me, it sure as hell wouldn't be him!"

Jesse's laughter forced him to stumble to the couch and sit down. Julian saw Krista also laughing harder.

"That came out wrong!" Kenny said. "I only do that with girls! Women, I mean! But I do it with that many! I don't with any! Hardly."

Julian laid his hand on Kenny's shoulder and whispered. "I think you'd do well to be quiet now."

Kenny glanced at him.

Despite how funny he found the situation, Julian also felt a touch of pity for him. Kenny looked ready to faint from embarrassment. Julian slipped a hand into his own pocket and slid out a stick of gum. He subtly pressed it into Kenny's palm and smiled as Kenny's eyes widened in surprise and gratitude.

Greg sighed and looked at Krista. "I knew it was a bad idea to bring you here."

Krista rolled her eyes. "Like I didn't hear worse in school, Dad."

"And probably did worse, too," Evan said.

"Evan!" Greg bellowed.

Evan moved across the room toward Jesse. "I hate to break it to you, Greg, but she's a grown woman. Not that it doesn't hurt me also." He sat next to Jesse, looking at Krista. "I still remember that young girl following me around backstage at my shows."

Krista smiled warmly at him. "And I still remember you putting more security around me than you did yourself."

"Well, lots of not very nice people go to rock concerts."

Greg took a seat in one of the chairs. "Keep saying things like that and I'll be changing my mind on having her work for Phoenix."

Julian looked to Krista. "You're going to work for Phoenix? That's wonderful!" He gave Kenny a nudge with his elbow. "Isn't that wonderful, Kenny?"

Kenny slapped one hand to his mouth in what Julian assumed was supposed to be surprise, but he really was popping the gum in. The poor boy, he was so not slick.

"That's great, Krista!" Kenny said. "Congratulations!"

Krista stepped closer to him. "Thanks, Kenny. I'm really excited about it. My dad even said I might get to work with Black Heart Down, and I'm really excited about that. I've loved their music forever."

"No!" Kenny blurted out, making her jump. He quieted his voice. "I mean, they wouldn't be any fun to work. Their lead singer, Kyler Christenson, is a total jerk."

"I thought you liked Kyler," Jesse chimed in. "You've hung out with him before."

Kenny shot Jesse a sharp glance. "I've hung out with Robbie. Kyler just happened to show up." He looked back to Krista, smiling. "Their guitar player, Robbie Russo, is a good friend of mine. He'd be okay to work for, but definitely not Kyler. You should work with us."

Krista's gaze went to Jesse, a playful smirk on her lips. "Well, from what I've heard, your lead singer can be a total jerk, too."

Jesse let out an exaggerated sigh. "That's what happens when you're as famous as me. Tons of nasty rumors circulate around you."

Julian chuckled. "And occasionally they're correct."

Jesse pointed at him. "I've never been a jerk to you."

"No, but I've felt the pain of others."

"Like I was saying," Kenny broke in. "You should work with us, Krista. I won't let Jesse be a jerk to you. I promise."

Krista laid her hand on Kenny's forearm. "You're so sweet, Kenny. Thank you."

Julian glanced at Kenny. He'd never seen him glow in such a way.

Greg loudly cleared his throat. "The truth of it is, she'll be working with you guys, along with BHD, and many other bands. She's my new assistant and over the next couple years, I'm going to work on getting her prepared to take over my job as I settle more into the VP position."

Kenny snapped his head toward Krista. "How cool!"

"Yeah, but don't think I'll go easy on you just because I'm a girl, I mean, woman." She winked at Kenny.

Kenny laughed, though his face colored again. "I won't."

"Congratulations, Krista," Julian said, making his way toward the couch.

Krista nodded at him. "Thanks, Jules."

Kenny sat in a plush chair near the couch; Krista took a seat on the arm. Kenny hopped up. "Here, you take the chair."

She gave him another smile. "I'm fine, but thank you."

"No really, you should take it."

Krista nodded in acceptance and took a seat in the chair. "Since you're insisting so nicely. Thank you."

Greg slowly turned his less-than-pleased expression from Kenny and Krista to Evan. "So how're things going with the auction? I've heard a lot of advertising for it."

"It's going great. Interest in it is off the charts. I think it's going to bring in a lot of money for the foundation."

"What auction?" Krista asked.

Evan filled her in on the details.

She turned to Kenny. "What are you putting up?"

Jesse spoke before Kenny could answer. "He's whoring himself out."

"I am not!" Kenny softened his voice as he spoke to Krista. "I didn't know what to put up, Jesse shot down my idea for my lucky pick, so I thought I'd offer a date with me. Just an innocent, good fun date, you know."

Julian glanced to the side to hide his smirk, especially since Brad and Jesse were all but trembling to not burst out laughing. He looked at Krista and saw though she wore a polite smile, she wasn't buying Kenny's claim to innocence either and from Kenny's tentative grin, he seemed to realize it.

Deciding it'd be best to distract everyone, and it would also get them out where his chances increased of seeing Morgan, Julian stood and stretched. "Well, boys, we should probably get rehearsing, don't you think?"

Jesse rose also. "Yeah, we should, considering today and tomorrow are going to be our last days."

"Don't we have the rest of the week?" Julian asked.

"We could, but I don't really feel like it. We've got everything down, it's the dancers and the rest of the staff who need this time, not us. I'm not going to bother with it the day of the auction, and I'd like to relax for the rest of the week before we head out."

Julian nodded slowly. He had hoped he'd have the entire week to admire Morgan. He chuckled inside. It really was getting bad. He would get to see the man every day for months, yet he felt sad at missing a few days.

As they stepped out to the hall, he saw Krista slip her arm through Jesse's and whisper in his ear.

Jesse stopped and faced the others. "You guys go on ahead. I'll be right there."

Kenny looked between him and Krista. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Just go on without me."

Evan flicked his hand at Greg. "You too."

Greg gave them a suspicious look, but turned to walk with the others.

Seeing Kenny's crestfallen face, Julian moved to his side. "You know you don't have anything to be concerned about when she's with him."

Kenny gave him a disheartened smile. "I know. It just sucks she likes talking to him more than me. Not that I don't know why. I fall apart and make an ass of myself whenever she's around."

"It happens to the best of us. All it means is your feelings for her are genuine."

"Yeah," Kenny said softly.

Before reaching the stage, the sound of a male voice pitched high with shouting carried to them. Julian couldn't discern the words at first, but as they neared, he recognized the voice as Kurt's.

"Does that look like where the piano goes? Well does it?"

Julian quickened his pace and bounded up the stairs to the stage. Kurt stood in front of Remmy, a couple other roadies, and Morgan. All stared down at the stage floor, hiding their eyes from Kurt, except Morgan who glared directly at him.

"I asked a question!" Kurt said.

"No," Remmy mumbled.

Kurt cocked his head. "What was that? I didn't quite catch it."

Remmy glanced up at him. "I said no. But—"

"Well hallelujah, there is a brain between all of you."

Morgan took a step toward Kurt. "The piano is sitting there for a reason, if you'd give anyone a chance to tell you."

Kurt shoved his index finger toward Morgan. "Keep up with the attitude. I've about had it with you."

Julian stormed across the stage. "Is there a problem?"

Kurt spun around, flashing a smile at Julian. "There's no problem at all, Mr. Forrester. Nothing I can't handle, anyhow."

Julian folded his arms across his chest. "Well it certainly sounds like there's a problem, and I want to know what it is."

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself with. If I can ask for a just an extra moment, we'll have the stage all set and ready for you guys."

Morgan looked at Julian. "The problem is, Julian, that we—"

Kurt whirled toward Morgan. "What do I need to do to get you to listen to a damn thing I tell you?"

Julian's rage hit its breaking point. "Who the hell do you think you are talking to him like that?"

Jesse's booming voice followed, filling the arena. "Kurt! What the hell is going on?"

Everyone looked toward Jesse marching across the stage. He stopped inches from Kurt. "I don't ever want to hear you talking to one of my staff like that! Yeah, I said *my* staff! They work for me, not you!" He snapped his hand out, pointing to the piano. "You want to know why the piano is there? Because that's where I told them to put it!"

"I...I'm sorry, Mr. Alexander," Kurt stammered. "I didn't know."

"And now you do." Jesse's voice calmed. "Kurt, you did a good job for us the last time, and I know this tour is going to be the largest you've ever worked, but you have to keep your cool. I won't tolerate people being degraded. Understand?"

Kurt nodded quickly.

"Good. Then why don't you check to make sure things are set with the speaker system so we can put the music through for the dancers."

"Right away," Kurt said, hastening from Jesse as he spoke the last word.

Julian spun toward Jesse. "I do love your prima donna

moments when they're so well timed."

"Yeah well, it seemed like a good moment to pull out my inner diva, especially since it looked like you were having trouble."

Julian gave him a shove. "I was not."

Jesse snorted. "Jules, you're so not intimidating."

Morgan looked at Julian. "Sorry, he's right. But thanks for coming to our rescue."

Julian gasped. "I can't believe you're siding with him!"

Morgan smiled at him, then looked to Jesse. "Thank you, too. You didn't have to cover for us."

Jesse shrugged, his gaze going to Remmy. "Why *is* the piano there?"

"Darius asked us to move it because he was marking off the stage so the dancers would know their positions. He thinks the problem with one of the routines is there's not enough space, so he was going to talk to you about having the piano sit somewhere else on stage, for the problem routine, at least."

Julian and Jesse glanced at the stage floor and the new Xs marked in yellow tape.

Julian snapped his head toward Jesse. "You didn't ask them to move it?"

"No, I lied. It came out convincing, didn't it?" Jesse looked back at Evan, who had lingered close to the scene, but allowed Jesse to handle things. "Ev! Did you see me? I told a convincing lie!"

Evan chuckled. "Convincing to anyone who doesn't know you. But the shouting did help hide the fact you're an awful liar."

Jesse spun toward the mic. "Fine, take away my victory."

Seeing Morgan looked confused, Julian said, "Jesse couldn't tell a convincing lie if his life depended on it, so whenever he makes an attempt and thinks it sounds believable, he's very proud of himself."

Morgan grinned. "How honorable."

“Isn’t it, though?” Julian glanced at the other roadies, wishing they would excuse themselves, but they didn’t seem to pick up his vibe of wanting time alone with Morgan. “Well, I suppose I should get working.”

Morgan nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

Julian lingered in place for another moment. That’s it? Didn’t Morgan have anything else to say to him? But what did he expect him to say? Admittedly, he was hoping he’d ask him to lunch again, but just as he didn’t want to ask Morgan in front of the other roadies, Morgan probably felt the same way. Or maybe Morgan didn’t want to have lunch with him again. Maybe one time was more than enough.

Julian attempted to slow his racing thoughts. Yeah, he truly had turned the corner onto Mental Street. He aimed for the piano. “Alright, then.”

“Okay. Have a good rehearsal.”

Julian nodded. And he had thought Kenny wasn’t smooth. That display was beyond pathetic. He sat at the piano and sighed as he watched Morgan walk away. To continue this charade was nothing but detrimental to his emotions. It was time for it to stop. He looked down at the keys and flew his fingers over them in a flurry of notes. Opening night of the tour, the first man who flirted with him would be in his bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Julian stood off stage, watching Jesse entertain the auction crowd as he got them to bid higher on private drum lessons with Brad. Somehow, he couldn't get into the spirit of the moment. He knew after Kenny went up, it'd be his turn to step out on stage, presenting a façade of smiles and good humor, when really, he felt utterly depressed.

Pathetic. How many times had he called himself that since Monday? He mourned not talking to Morgan all week as if they'd broken up from a long term relationship. Julian mulled it over in his mind again and again, trying to figure out why he felt so drawn to him. No answers came. He didn't know Morgan very well, they'd already had tense moments between them, but all he wanted was to know him better. He wanted to ease any tension with a touch, a caress, a kiss. He envisioned Morgan's lips on his, Morgan's strong hands exploring his body. He imagined what Morgan would feel like beneath his touch, all hard muscle and smooth skin.

Julian jumped as Jesse slammed the gavel down on the podium and yelled, "Sold! For twenty-five thousand dollars!"

Julian let out a soft whistle. That was about ten thousand more than they were expecting. Not bad for the opening item. It set a good precedent that perhaps they'd make even more than they anticipated. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Brandon and Shunichi talking with Evan, all three dressed in Versace tuxes similar to his own and looking amazing.

Jesse had insisted everyone wear tuxes, saying it would create a nice, high class look, not to mention he loved how Evan looked in a tux. And yet, Jesse was out on stage in black leather pants and a midnight blue cashmere sweater. Kenny had been ready to choke Jesse when he saw how he was dressed. Jesse simply said as the emcee, he needed to stand out, then added as a final thought how he hated wearing a tuxedo.

Julian glanced to his other side at Kenny chatting with Robbie Russo. He was surprised to see the guitar master from Black Heart Down had shown up for the auction, but then Robbie and Kenny were good friends. What really surprised him was that Robbie came without Kyler, whose presence he was never far from.

The fact Robbie came alone silently spoke that he and Kyler must be at odds...again. It was a common occurrence when they were all recording to see Robbie stomping out of Black Heart's studio with Kyler rushing after him. As Julian gazed at Robbie he couldn't help but feel sympathy for him. At least Robbie looked like he was having fun now, and he was dashing in his black tux with the short spikes of his ebony hair styled perfectly, his blue eyes holding a smile.

Julian glanced at Kenny. He noticed him fidgeting with his bowtie and faced him. "Here." He placed his hands on the black silk tie and straightened it. "Don't be so nervous, Kenny. It's no different than going out on stage for any concert."

"It's a lot different. What if no one bids on me? What if *he* embarrasses the hell out of me?"

Robbie clapped Kenny on the back. "I think that's a given, man. He did with Brad. You'll just have to roll with it."

Julian nodded. "It's why the crowd is in such a good mood, and people in a good mood spend money more freely. And I wouldn't worry about no one bidding on you. That's the least likely thing to happen."

Brad walked toward them, laughing softly. He slapped a hand down on Kenny's shoulder. "Good luck, man. He's really on tonight."

Kenny groaned.

Julian smirked at Brad. "And lucky you. I saw that blond beauty who won those drumming lessons."

"Yeah, there're just three problems." Brad patted his own crotch. "He's got one of these." He cupped his hands to his chest as if holding large breasts. "And is missing two of these."

"A little experimentation never hurt anyone," Julian said.

Brad winked at him. "Only if you're volunteering to be the lab rat."

"Well, if I had known that's all it took to turn you from your heathen het ways, I would've started squeaking ages ago."

Jesse's tenor called them all back to the moment. "And now our next item is for the ladies only." He held up his hand at a couple discontented groans. "I know, gentlemen, I know. I tried to convince him to be an equal opportunity dater, but he can't keep from walking that straight road."

Kenny covered his face with both hands. "I can't do this."

Julian patted him on the back. "It's going to be fine. He already said you're a ladies only item."

"Of course," Jesse continued, "that's not to say I couldn't be persuaded to sell him to a man. Everything has its price, after all."

Another pitiful groan escaped Kenny's throat.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our second item, Kenny Cooper!"

Brad shoved Kenny toward the stage. "Better get out there, man."

Kenny trudged a step forward.

"And don't forget to smile," Julian called.

Kenny paused just before getting within sight of the audience. He sucked in a deep breath, lifted his head, set his shoulders back, and strutted out wearing a broad smile. He stepped on stage to loud clapping and hooting.

Julian saw Jesse turn toward Kenny and noted his mischievous smirk. Poor Kenny. He really may not survive.

Jesse flung his right arm toward Kenny. "And here he is! Isn't he handsome, ladies? And the winner will get him all to herself for an entire night, to do with as she pleases."

Kenny attempted a lighthearted laugh, but it came out with a nervous edge. "Jesse, you make it sound like I'm prostituting

myself.”

Jesse waved his words away. “That’s ridiculous. You’re not prostituting yourself. I’m pimping you out.”

The crowd laughed. Kenny chuckled with them, though it held no humor.

Jesse tapped his gavel on the podium. “Alright, let’s open the bidding at five thousand.”

Julian watched several numbered cards shoot up and a bidding war began. Within minutes, Kenny was at fifteen thousand, but as Jesse called for sixteen, hesitation lingered over the audience.

Jesse pulled the mic from the podium and walked across the stage. “Looks like everyone’s not sure about going higher, and I can understand that. I mean, you don’t know much about him, so let me see if I can entice you with some information. Born on August twelfth, Mr. Cooper just turned twenty-three last month. Sure, he might be on the downward side of his sexual peak, but really, it balances out since even being a rock star doesn’t get him laid much.”

“Jesse!” Kenny snapped.

Julian burst out laughing with the rest of the audience.

Jesse continued over the laughter. “And as you can see, he can be somewhat foul-tempered. But that’s nothing a good woman couldn’t whip out of him. In fact...” he held his hand out to the side. Evan walked on stage carrying a small riding crop with a leather popper on the end. He handed it to Jesse and turned to leave. Jesse sliced the air with the whip. “As an added bonus, we’re throwing in this fine tool to help the winner keep Mr. Cooper in line.”

Julian could hardly breathe through his laughter. Kenny played right into Jesse’s hands, proof of how well Jesse knew him to be able to anticipate his reaction. With the crowd roaring, a woman’s voice shouted, “sixteen,” and the bidding started again.

As it lagged around twenty-six thousand, Jesse faced Kenny, talking to him as well as the crowd. “Alright, Kenny, you’ve beat

Brad by a thousand bucks, which is pretty lame for a lead guitar. Sorry, but I either got to open the floor to the men, or you need to drop your drawers and show the ladies what they're really bidding for."

Kenny's jaw dropped rather than his pants.

As the raucous crowd settled, a female voice called out, "Twenty-seven thousand."

Julian looked to the crowd and let out a surprised cough. Sitting toward the back of the hall, Krista Hansen held up her numbered paddle.

"Awesome!" Jesse said. "We have twenty-seven. How about twenty-eight?"

The blonde who Krista outbid snapped her paddle up. "Twenty-eight!"

Just as she finished her last word, Krista shoved her paddle high. "Twenty-nine!"

Julian watched as Kenny staggered back a step, and for an instant, he thought Kenny might faint. But Kenny kept himself standing, if not a little wobbly.

Jesse looked to the blonde. "Your bid. She jumped it to twenty-nine. How about thirty?"

With a discontented look, the blonde shook her head.

Jesse raised his gavel above the podium, called out for other bids, and when none came, he slammed it down, declaring Kenny sold.

Julian saw Krista glowing in her victory, but he couldn't help but wonder where she'd get the money. He doubted Greg would fund her going on a date with Kenny, not even for such a good cause. He glanced to his side as Evan walked up. "Well that was unexpected."

"For everyone except me, Jess, and Krista."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when Krista pulled me and Jess aside last week?

She asked if we could help her get him. Of course we said yes. We looked at it that we'll just be donating a little extra to the foundation and told her to go as high as she needed. Plus, you know Jess was bouncing off the walls at getting to play matchmaker. His saying he was going to open the floor to men was her cue to jump into the bidding. We wanted it to go as high as it could on it's own, then see if her coming in at the last second could up it some more."

Julian grinned. "You guys are horribly wicked."

Evan laughed. "Yeah, but it feels so good."

Kenny walked off stage, his eyes and expression glazed. "Krista...Krista bought me."

"That's awesome, man!" Robbie said. "You got your girl!"

Kenny whipped his head toward him, his dazed look replaced by panic. "No I don't! Now I have to go out on a date with her! Like, just the two of us!"

Brad snorted. "Uh, yeah, that's how most dates work."

"But then I'll really make an ass of myself!"

Julian gave him a shove. "Like you said last week, making an ass of yourself in front of her is a habit. But since she still showed up to bid on you, obviously it doesn't bother her."

Kenny's panicked expression dropped as a non-amused one took over. "That doesn't really help."

"And as I'm sure Jesse would put it," Evan added, "she probably thinks your dork ass is sexy."

Kenny looked at him. "Yeah, that's exactly what he'd say and it doesn't help either. What do you say?"

Evan smiled. "I say she must feel the same way about you, if she's willing to pay just for some time alone with you."

Kenny nodded thoughtfully. "I like that better."

Having announced the line-up for the next items, Jesse walked off stage while a crew brought out a white grand piano, and to give the audience a moment to catch their breath and gather their

wallets. Evan handed him a bottle of water and Jesse took it while smirking at Kenny. "So, what do you think of your winner?"

Kenny stared at him. "You were behind this, weren't you?"

"Well, I didn't work alone."

Kenny shook his head slightly, as if still in disbelief. "I don't even know what to say, how to thank you—"

Jesse held up a hand, stopping Kenny's words. "You don't have to say anything, and you sure as hell don't need to thank me. You'd weird me out of you did."

Julian couldn't help but smile at seeing Kenny's grateful one.

The moment broke as Robbie muttered, "Shit," the stress in his voice clear even with its muted tone. Robbie's gaze was beyond everyone, and Julian turned to see what had his attention. His own breath caught at the sight of Kyler Christenson storming toward them. Normally Kyler's sharp features were beautiful to behold. Now Julian saw a mix of determination and anger in the singer's expression.

"I can't believe you were serious about doing this!" Kyler said.

Though Kyler's gaze was focused on Robbie, it was Evan who marched forward to meet him.

Julian held his breath. It was a gross understatement to say Evan's and Kyler's personalities clashed. They were capable of being civil to each other. They even banded together to take down the Swiller boys after Evan found out they were behind the attack on Jesse, but all it took was one wrong word, one misplaced look, and they were at each other's throats.

Evan's voice dipped to a threatening growl. "I don't know what bullshit is going on between you two now, but there's no way I'm going to let you fuck up this auction. You need to cool your ass."

Kyler took a half step toward Evan, leaving only inches between them. "And what you need to do is get out of my face."

His hands moving in a flash, Evan slammed Kyler on the chest, sending him flying backward several steps before Kyler

caught his balance.

Evan advanced a step and pointed at him. "Now I'm not in your face. And I'm not going to tell you again, cool it."

Jesse leaped in front of Evan, shielding him to stop Kyler from coming at Evan, though it wasn't needed. Robbie rushed forward to stand in front of both Jesse and Evan, facing Kyler.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Robbie snapped.

"What's wrong with me?" Kyler said in disbelief. "What's wrong with you? You're the one selling himself to the highest bidder!"

Robbie rapidly shook his head. "What are you talking about? I'm not selling myself to anyone!"

"You said that was the whole point of this thing! Everybody's hooking themselves except those two!" Kyler jabbed his finger toward Jesse and Evan.

A cough came from Robbie's throat as if he was trying to find his voice, but from how he held his hands up in utter frustration, he seemed unable to speak for several seconds. He took a breath and tried again. "I can't believe it. I don't know why I can't believe it because it's completely typical of you, but this one really takes it."

Confusion dimmed the anger on Kyler's face. "What are you talking about?"

"You never listen to me! I'm not hooking myself out! I told you, everyone is offering up different things! The only one whoring himself out is Kenny!"

Kenny choked out a gasp. "Hey, I didn't—"

"But I thought..." Kyler started, "then you're not selling a date with you?"

"No! I've autographed one of my custom guitars and that's what I'm donating." Robbie gestured to Julian. "He's giving away a private piano concert." He pointed next to Brad. "He donated drum lessons."

Julian watched as one by one, Robbie named what all of them had put up in the auction and how Kyler's posture relaxed, despite looking flushed and embarrassed.

Robbie let out a fatigued sigh as he finished. "You really screwed this one up, Ky. I think you owe everyone an apology."

Kyler lowered his head. He gave a few small nods. "I'm... sorry, guys."

Evan made an attempt to step around Jesse. "You need to pull your head out of your ass and get your act together, Kyler. But if you really want to make it up to everyone, then figure out what you want to donate because you're going up on the block."

Kyler jerked his head up. "Are you serious?"

"Would I have said it if I wasn't?" Evan said.

A smirk spread over Robbie's lips. "What about your Lamborghini Gallardo? That'd be perfect."

Kyler waved his hands in the air. "Whoa! I've got a lot of other things. I'll come up with something else."

Robbie rolled his eyes. "It's not like you can't buy another one. And it needs to be something personal. Everyone knows you and that car."

Kyler gazed at him for a long moment, then bowed his head. His voice was barely audible as he mumbled, "Fine."

Evan turned to Jesse. "You better get back out there before people get antsy. You can apologize for the delay and say as a special treat to help make up for it, a new item has been added by a guest celebrity, and announce Kyler and his car."

Jesse started walking for the stage. "Got it. But be a good boy and no fighting without me having your back."

Evan winked at him. "I'll do my best, gorgeous."

Julian let out a relieved sigh now that it appeared the situation was defused. Jesse's cheery voice rang out from the stage talking about Kyler and his Lamborghini, followed by wild shouts and excited applause. He watched Kyler follow Robbie away, the two

clearly needing a moment of privacy. He heard Brandon laugh softly and looked at him standing with his arm around Shunichi.

“Well, at least no one can say Kyler doesn’t care,” Brandon said. “However twisted it is.”

As everyone chuckled, Jesse’s voice called Julian back.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have something very special for you to bid on. I don’t suppose there’s anyone here who would like a private piano concert performed by the once famed classical pianist and now famed rock star, Julian Forrester, is there?”

The crowd erupted in applause.

Julian snapped his tux jacket down and nodded to the others. “Looks like it’s my turn.”

“Good luck!” Brad said.

Julian took the stage, waving to the audience as he walked toward the white grand. He took a seat at it, stretched out his fingers, then settled them on the keys. The crowd quieted in anticipation. He struck the first soft notes of Conquest’s famed and much loved ballad, “Shattered.” The people cheered, then hushed once again as they listened to the instrumental version.

Jesse turned to the audience. “And now with Julian offering this teaser and me wanting to sing really badly, we’ll open the bidding at five thousand.”

Julian saw a flash of white paddles raise. The bidding went quickly, soaring to ten thousand, fifteen thousand, and continued to climb. With how the piano was positioned, he couldn’t get a good look at the audience. He did face the phones, and one in particular had the holder constantly waving a number.

As the bidding hit twenty-three thousand, many dropped out. When it reached twenty-five, all but the person on the phone and one in the crowd remained. Julian tried to see the bidder in the audience, but the person was seated in the last row, a sea of heads blocked them, and all he could make out was the paddle numbered thirty-three popping up to counter each bid from the

phone caller. The bidder didn't speak, only snapped up their paddle, so he couldn't even tell if they were male or female.

"Twenty-seven. Can I get twenty-eight?" Jesse said.

The phone holder waved his number.

"Twenty-nine?"

The in-house bidder held up their paddle.

"C'mon, give me thirty!"

Again, the phone holder retaliated.

As "Shattered" drew to a close, Julian shifted into a rendition of Conquest's most recent single, "Twisted Destiny," and started rocking out the piano, though his mind spun at how high the bidding was climbing. Jesse called out thirty-one thousand. The in-house bidder responded. With the next bid at thirty-two, Julian gazed anxiously at the phone holder, who was speaking animatedly to the mystery person on the line. After a moment's pause, the phone holder looked up and shook his head.

Jesse raised his gavel high. "Thirty-one thousand going once!" He paused. "Thirty-one going twice!" He waited. "Sold!" He slammed the gavel down.

As Jesse announced a brief intermission, Julian rose from the piano to applause. He bowed and waved, his eyes scanning the back of the crowd for the winner. Without them holding up their number, he couldn't pinpoint where they were sitting. He sighed and turned to walk off stage with Jesse at his side.

"You didn't by chance get a look at the winning bidder, did you?"

Twirling the riding crop between his fingers, Jesse shook his head. "They were seated too far back. But you should have their name by the end of the night. They'll have to file it when they pay. Ev and I weren't about to have any deadbeats bidding, so all payments have to be done before they can collect their prize." He paused, looking from side to side. "You don't see a trash can around here, do you? I wanted to throw this thing out."

Julian looked at the crop. "I thought you said it'd be going to

the winner.”

“I already told Krista what we had planned for embarrassing Kenny and asked her if she wanted it to keep teasing him, or to actually use on him, but she said she wouldn’t need it to keep him in line. And she was certain I would do a good enough job of embarrassing him that she wouldn’t have to continue it.”

Julian pulled the crop out from Jesse’s fingers, feeling its pliability, but was also amazed at how supple the leather was on the handle and popper. “You don’t want it?”

“Ev and I might like to get kinky, but we’re not into that kind of play.” Jesse smirked at him. “You want it, don’t you?”

Julian attempted a nonchalant shrug. “Well, it’s too nice to just throw away.”

Jesse snickered. “People would be so surprised if they knew what a dirty boy you are underneath that façade of propriety. You can keep it, but you better know you’re going to pay for it with me teasing you mercilessly.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Julian gave Jesse a tap on the shoulder with the crop. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Julian glanced forward to see Evan with people from the cancer research foundation, a woman holding one of his hands in both of hers, her gratitude clear as Evan humbly accepted her thanks.

Jesse stopped, a soft smile on his lips as he watched. “He’s really found what he was meant for now.”

Julian halted also. “Charity work?”

“Yeah. Look at how happy he is. You should’ve seen him this past week. He was so excited about this auction and what it was going to do. So many people would think his calling was music, even I would’ve thought that before I met him. Now I understand the true reason he was gifted with such musical talent. It wasn’t so he could dazzle the world with catchy rock songs and wild concerts. His music was just a stepping stone to this. I think he’s

realized that also.”

“I think you’re right.” Julian laid his hand on Jesse’s back. “And you better go share in his happiness before you have to go back out there.”

Jesse looked at him. “Thanks for helping with this.”

“Like I told Evan, thanks aren’t necessary.”

Jesse nodded and moved to join his husband.

Julian walked away to find the others, hoping they’d offer distraction until he could find out who he’d be performing for.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From the wooden stage, Julian gazed over the empty hall in the Symphony Center. The hall was grander than what he needed, able to seat around a hundred and fifty, but the winner had paid a large amount of money for this, so he didn't see the harm in being a bit extravagant. The lights over the front seats were dim, the ones toward the back completely black. The stage was well lit, a black grand piano sitting in the center. Two security guards sat in the first row.

Julian took a seat at the piano, thinking of how well the auction had wrapped up. Jesse's original handwritten sheet music sold for fifty thousand dollars, Evan's piano one hundred and twenty thousand, dinner with both of them for fifty-five thousand. He couldn't believe the success of it, or the prices people were willing to pay for such things. Probably for many, it was about the prestige of getting to personally interact with them, and he knew why Kenny's bidder had bought him. What the bidders thought really didn't matter, though. All that did was the money raised for the foundation. As for himself, he discovered the person who won the private concert was a man named Martin Spencer.

Julian glanced at his watch. His winner should be arriving at any moment. He felt anxious, not for meeting this person or for performing, but for wanting to get it over with. It wasn't that he didn't want to do it, but it seemed anything he did that distracted his thoughts from Morgan frustrated him. He was starting to get as bad as Kenny with his hopeless crushing. Though, Kenny's wasn't so hopeless any longer.

He flicked a piece of lint from his shirt. He hoped the winner wasn't expecting him to be dressed up. Well, he sort of was, but not in the typical way. He opted to go rock star tonight, wearing a tight, violet long-sleeved shirt and black leather pants. If someone had told him two years ago he'd wear leather pants frequently, he would've laughed at them. But he'd picked up the

habit on the last tour after seeing Jesse and Evan in them all the time, and looking damn good. At the risk of feeding his ego, he had to admit, they didn't look bad on him, either.

Julian saw a male figure moving down the shadowed aisle. He stood and walked toward the front of the stage, smiling brightly.

The shadows slipped away from the man.

Julian froze. Shock stole his voice. When he found it again, he could only get it to come out in a whisper. "Morgan."

Morgan smiled up at him. "Hey, Julian."

Julian opened his mouth to speak, his voice completely lost to him this time. Morgan looked unbelievable, like a vision from a dream. He wore a black tux, the jacket open, the top two buttons of the white dress shirt undone, as he had foregone a tie. He chose a vest rather than a cummerbund and it accentuated his fit torso. His auburn-highlighted, dark brown hair shone with the golden lights from the stage. His usual stubble covered his chiseled jaw and lined his full lips.

Morgan chuckled softly. "You look surprised. Well, I guess you should be, since that was my intention."

Julian cleared his throat to summon his voice. "Why are you here?"

"I won the auction."

Julian gave a confused shake of his head. "You couldn't have. I was told the winner's name was Martin Spencer."

"A friend of mine. I had him do the bidding and payment so I could surprise you. It worked, huh?"

"But why? And *how* did you do it?"

Morgan cast a quick glance at the security guards, who eyed him with suspicion, then brought his gaze back to Julian. "I'd rather talk about those things alone, if that's okay."

Julian looked at the guards, having completely forgotten about their presence once he was graced with Morgan's. "Gentlemen, if you'd be so kind, I don't think your services will be required

tonight.”

One of the guards stood up. “I’m sorry, Mr. Forrester, but Mr. Arden wouldn’t like it if we were to leave you alone.” He glanced at Morgan. “Even if he does seem to be someone you know.”

“He is someone I know and a friend. As for Mr. Arden, if Evan has a problem with you leaving me, I’ll take full responsibility. Now please, go and enjoy your evening, with pay.”

The two guards shared a look, then with a shrug, relented and left.

Morgan stepped up to the front of the stage. He placed both hands on it, and with a hop, pulled himself up. He stood and stepped closer to Julian. “It seems like you have a lot of questions.”

Julian gazed up at him. Morgan was so tall, so built, so beautiful. And Morgan was looking at him like he never had before. There was always kindness in his eyes, but there was something more now, open attraction. How was he supposed to keep a coherent thought when Morgan was looking at him in such a way?

“You wanted to know how I won the auction and why I bid for you?” Morgan prompted.

Julian pulled in a quick breath. “I’m only asking because, please don’t take this the wrong way, but when we went to lunch, I thought it sounded like you were in dire straits.”

“I am.” Morgan walked across the stage toward the piano. “Everything I have and more is wrapped up in the music store. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t have a way to get the money. I liquidated some of the inventory.” He chuckled softly. “Lucky for me the bidding didn’t go much higher. I was going to be done at thirty-five thou.”

“But what will you do for merchandise? If you were going to do such a thing, you should’ve used the money to pay the debts you told me about.”

Morgan stood with his back to him. He ran his fingers over

the smooth wood of the piano. "Then you're not happy I'm the winner?"

Julian took a couple quick steps toward him. "No, that's not what I meant. I was just trying to say you shouldn't have wasted your money. One evening with me isn't worth you risking so much."

Morgan glanced back at him. "It is to me."

Julian lost his voice as his breath fled him.

Morgan faced him. "There're so many things I want to say to you, that I've wanted to say since we met. I've admired you for so long, even before you joined Conquest. In fact, when you did, I was disappointed because I wouldn't get to hear you play classical anymore, and that's how long I've followed you. I guess it's been about five years, and in that time, I never thought I'd get the chance to meet you. I dreamed it, certainly, but to actually stand here with you, to spend time with you, to know the man behind the music, it's made what I've dreamed pale because you're so much more than what I imagined."

"I..." Julian started, then realized he had no words to follow such a confession. No one had ever said anything like that to him.

Morgan glanced away. "Of course, I understand if I've completely freaked you out by doing this, then saying everything I just did. It is pretty eccentric."

"No," Julian said softly. "I'm not freaked out. Speechless, yes. Stunned, yes. But not freaked out."

Morgan brought his gaze back to him. "Will you still play for me?"

Julian stared at him for a long moment. He nodded and moved toward the bench.

Morgan sat beside him. He felt Julian tense, and wondered if this really had been the right thing to do. In his thoughts it seemed like a great idea, but he couldn't predict Julian's reaction. Even now in the midst of things, he wasn't certain what Julian was feeling. One thing he'd learned about him already, Julian was

a man of utmost control. With people he didn't know well, Julian presented the image of propriety, and it hurt to see Julian having those moments with him, like now. He realized he'd made him uncomfortable. But was Julian uncomfortable because he didn't want him there, or was it because he *did* want him there?

Ever since their lunch together, he thought he picked up a glimmer of attraction from Julian. They didn't have much time to talk in the past week, but he did notice Julian stealing glances at him, always ready to give him a smile, and come to his defense. The memory of Julian yelling at Kurt still made him grin, and with all those things combined, the feeble hope he had that Julian could feel something toward him grew stronger. Now, if only he knew for sure.

Julian set his fingers to the keys. He sounded the first notes of Conquest's new ballad, "No Fear," the title track of their album. As he played, his arm brushed against Morgan's each time he reached for the higher keys. Only a few notes in, he said, "I'm sorry, I should've asked what you wanted me to play."

"Anything you play is perfect."

Morgan watched Julian's fingers float over the keys. Each flick, each movement fluid and flawless. His hands were delicately put together, the skin smooth and fair, his nails perfectly manicured. So opposite from himself, as Julian was in so many ways. Perhaps it was because of that, along with Julian's beautiful musical gift, that he was so drawn to him.

Julian spoke softly over his playing. "I wasn't even sure you liked me."

"But you are now, right?"

Julian chuckled. "Now, I'm positive."

Morgan lightly rocked against him. "That's too bad. I was hoping you would say no, so I could prove it to you."

Julian grinned at him. "Well, I could still use some convincing." He looked back to the keys. He didn't need to see them to play, but he found the gentle brown of Morgan's eyes incredibly distracting. With each second, his shock gave way to giddiness.

He'd flirted with Morgan and it was reciprocated. Just that alone was enough to make his mind and body swim in delight, but knowing the lengths Morgan had gone to just for this night with him, sent him soaring.

He brought "No Fear" to its conclusion and stilled his fingers on the keys. He turned to Morgan. "What would you like me to play now?"

Morgan met his gaze. "How about Fur Elise?"

Julian nodded and sounded the first soft notes.

Morgan closed his eyes in a long blink. Sitting so close to Julian, hearing each note resonate in his ears with every keystroke, the song sounded more beautiful than ever. Added to it, he could feel the warmth from Julian's body, each breath he took in pulled the soft fragrance of Julian's cologne to him.

Morgan slowly opened his eyes. Just like the day Julian played it in the arena, with his head bowed toward the piano, a cluster of his bangs had fallen near one eye. Morgan couldn't resist. He reached to Julian and brushed his bangs aside. Julian's hair felt soft, like fine silk, against his rough fingertips.

Julian's fingers slowed on the keys, though his heart raced. Morgan caressed his cheek and under his chin, gently turning his head toward him.

Morgan's gaze moved over Julian's face, settling on his lips. He leaned toward him. As Morgan's lips brushed lightly over his, Julian parted them to allow a breath to escape, and Morgan's lips opened against them. A hushed groan purred in Julian's throat as Morgan eased his tongue into his mouth. Each slow thrust of Morgan's tongue over his own raised Julian's desire. He turned fully toward him and wrapped his arms around him, sinking his fingers into Morgan's thick hair.

Morgan shifted on the bench so he straddled it, his lips never leaving Julian's. He embraced Julian around the waist, then brought his touch lower. He cupped Julian's ass in both hands and heaved him up, placing Julian on his thighs.

Julian felt dizzy. All thought evaded him, only sensation

existed. Morgan's body, large, powerful, firm. Morgan's tongue, soft, wet, warm. Everything about Morgan felt so good, so right. His hand tightened in a fist in Morgan's hair as he deepened the kiss. He reached back and grabbed one of Morgan's hands on his ass and pulled it forward, shoving it between their bodies to his cock. At feeling the heat of Morgan's touch seeping through his pants, Julian broke the kiss with a moan.

Morgan took the moment to catch his breath. He met Julian's eyes, his light blue gaze filled with passion. "We should leave, go somewhere more private."

Julian nodded. "My place?"

"Sounds great."

Rather than move from Morgan, Julian covered his mouth in another deep kiss. As Morgan returned it, he noticed it was more forceful, hungrier than before. Julian rocked down on him. Morgan thrust up to meet him. Each ground against the other, their movements growing more urgent.

Morgan pulled his lips away. "We have to go. If we don't, you're going to make me drop you to the stage floor."

Julian kissed Morgan's neck. "Go ahead."

Morgan closed his eyes and tipped his head away from Julian to give him more of his neck. "You're naughtier than I thought."

"And we haven't even begun." Julian gently nipped him.

Morgan exhaled a trembling breath. "You don't know how much you're tempting me to do that, but for this first time, I want you in a bed."

"An old fashioned gentleman, are you?"

Morgan chuckled. "I'm not sure you'll be calling me a gentleman when this night is over."

Julian slowly slid off him and stood, extending his hand down to him. "I don't think there's anything you could do to change my opinion of that."

Morgan lifted Julian's hand to his lips as he stood. "Shall we?"

Julian nodded and turned with Morgan's hand in his, leading him from the stage.

CHAPTER NINE

After informing his building's parking garage guard that the black Jeep behind him was a friend, Julian parked his dark metallic blue Mercedes-Benz CL600 close to the elevators.

Morgan parked next to him and hopped out of his Jeep. He looked past Julian's Mercedes to the black Porsche 911 Turbo beside it. "That's not yours, is it?"

"Yes, it is."

Morgan's mouth dropped open slightly. "You're kidding me."

"Why do you look so surprised? Isn't every boy entitled to a few toys?"

"Yeah, I just never pictured you in a car like that, with how sophisticated you are."

"I'm a rock star. Hot cars come with the territory. And I'll have you know that's a very sophisticated machine. But if you don't like it, I guess I won't bother offering to take you for a ride—"

"Hey now! I wasn't saying I didn't like it. I was just surprised by it. As it is, I'm trying to decide what I want more, going for a ride in it right now or having sex with you."

Julian stepped close to him, placing his hands on Morgan's hips as he pressed his own to him. "We could have sex in the car."

Morgan smiled and brushed his lips across Julian's. "I'm starting to get the feeling there's a kinky side to you."

Julian grinned in answer and flicked his tongue over Morgan's lips, then took his hand and led him toward the elevator. "It's actually your good luck that you've gotten to see my Porsche. Normally I have it in storage, but since the Audi's still in the shop, I thought I'd bring it out to play before leaving. But tomorrow I'm going to have to put it back in storage, along with the Mercedes. I don't trust leaving them parked in a garage like

this for months on end.”

“What about your Audi?”

“When it’s finally fixed, Brandon’s going to pick it up and put it in storage for me.”

A rush of jealousy dampened Morgan’s desire. “Well, isn’t that sweet of him?”

Julian stopped at the elevator and turned to him, a teasing smirk on his lips. “Already getting possessive?”

Morgan stared at him with an expression revealing his lack of amusement.

Julian laughed under his breath and placed both hands on the sides of Morgan’s face, gently guiding him down. He whispered against Morgan’s lips, “You’ve nothing to be jealous about.”

Julian gave him a soft kiss. Morgan closed his eyes, keeping them shut even after Julian drew back. He felt amazed at how all it took was one small tender touch from Julian to shift his mood.

“I’ve driven past this building a hundred times when I’ve gone to Millennium Park,” Morgan said. “It’s funny how you’ve been so close all this time.”

“I know. I go down to Millennium Park often for walks. I wonder how many times we almost ran into each other.”

“I don’t want to think about it. It’s too frustrating.”

Julian faced him as they stepped into the elevator. “But we’re together now.”

Morgan cupped Julian’s cheek. “And that’s the only thing that matters.”

Julian hit the button for the twenty-fifth floor as he met Morgan’s lips. Morgan pushed him back, pinning him against the elevator wall. A soft groan purred in Julian’s throat at the feeling of Morgan’s large, hard body pressing on him. He slid his hands around Morgan’s hips to his ass and smiled through the kiss as he squeezed the muscled mounds.

Morgan dipped his head, pressing his nose to Julian’s neck,

breathing deeply Julian's cologne as he kissed him. "What *is* this cologne you wear?"

"Versace's Eau Fraiche. It's my favorite. I'm guessing from your tone, you like it, too."

"I love it. I can't get enough of it."

"That's a good thing."

Julian claimed Morgan's lips once again. The elevator chimed they'd reached their destination. Morgan started to pull away. Julian caught him by the back of the neck with one hand, forcing him to continue the kiss, and refused to loosen his hold on Morgan's ass.

As the door closed, Morgan broke the kiss with laughter. "Are we just going to do it in here?"

Julian kissed him with smiling lips. "Maybe, since you rejected me at the hall and doing it in my car."

"I would never reject you."

Morgan delivered another deep kiss, then drew back so they could leave. Julian tapped the button to open the doors. They stepped out to a small sitting area and only one white wooden door.

"Don't tell me the whole floor is yours," Morgan said.

Julian unlocked the door. "Everything from the twentieth floor up is penthouses. But it's really not that big."

Morgan followed him inside. He stepped onto the tan marble foyer, then followed Julian down a short hallway. The hall opened into an expansive living room with mocha colored carpet. Beige leather furniture dotted the space. An electric fireplace made of red brick was on one wall, and atop the mantel sat Julian's Julliard diploma in a silver frame.

The living room continued on to the left until it met with three stairs leading up to a raised section, where a grand piano sat before floor to ceiling windows. Morgan's mouth dropped open more over it than the Porsche. It was undoubtedly the most beautiful piano he'd ever seen. Finished to keep its natural, deep

mahogany color, the legs were intricately carved with leaves and flowers. Though it was immaculate, there was a sense of age to it. He wanted to hear its voice, even just a single note.

Morgan glanced to the right and saw the spacious kitchen behind Julian. "Not that big, huh?"

"Well, it's not exactly shabby, but I'm considering buying a house. I'd like to walk into a home without having to ride in an elevator with my neighbors, to park in my own garage and have all my cars there. After this tour, I might look for some place in the Evanston area, near Jesse and Evan." Julian pointed toward the kitchen. "A dining room is connected there, which is also connected to a den." He took Morgan's hand, smiling as he walked backward toward the piano. "But this is the way to the best section, the bedrooms."

"How many bedrooms do you have?"

"Four, but only one of them is important." Julian stopped. "But I'm being rude, aren't I? I haven't even asked if you'd like something to drink."

Morgan jerked Julian to him. He lifted Julian's chin to meet his gaze. "You can drop the proper boy routine."

Julian grinned. "But I am a proper boy."

"Then I'll have to see what I can do to change that."

Morgan pressed their lips together, driving his tongue deep into Julian's mouth. Julian wrapped his arms around him. He stepped back, leading Morgan down the hall with their lips together. He opened his eyes to see where they were and was forced to pull his lips away as he turned Morgan into his bedroom.

Morgan took in the space that looked to be twice the size of his own bedroom. A dark cherry, king-sized sleigh bed covered in a burgundy comforter was centered against a wall. Windows running from floor to ceiling revealed a view overlooking Lake Michigan.

Julian placed his hand on Morgan's cheek, guiding his gaze back to him. "I want you to know, this isn't something I do

regularly. I don't bring men home because I never know who I can trust. The last thing I need is to end up with a stalker who knows exactly where I live."

Morgan laid his hand over Julian's. "Then I'm glad you trust me." A wry smile quirked his lips. "Especially since even though I've admired your music for a long time, and I'm a roadie on your tour, and I spent over thirty thousand dollars to be with you, I'm not at all mental or a stalker."

Julian chuckled. "Well, when you put it like that..."

Morgan laughed with him.

Julian looked into his eyes, shining with affection and humor, and knew he could trust Morgan implicitly.

Morgan brushed Julian's hair to the side of his forehead, his gaze following the movement. "I will say, though, I've wanted a moment like this with you for a very long time."

Julian placed his other hand on Morgan's chest. "And I've wanted it since I first saw you."

Morgan bowed his head to him. As their lips met, Julian felt the difference in Morgan's kiss. Where earlier it was filled with starved passion, now it was tender. With every glide of Morgan's tongue over his, Julian melted. All the men he'd kissed, none had ever done it with such warmth.

Julian slid his hands under Morgan's tux jacket and over his broad shoulders as he guided it off. One by one, he opened the buttons on the vest, and when the last was freed, Morgan shook out of it. Julian unfastened Morgan's pants, then gripped the white dress shirt and pulled it loose. He huffed as he unbuttoned it to find the undershirt beneath. "You have too many clothes on."

"Lucky for me you don't."

Morgan drifted his hands under Julian's shirt. His fingers explored the feel of Julian's body as he lifted it over his head. He dropped it and looked at him, Julian's lean frame lightly muscled, his fair skin catching the moonlight streaming through

the windows. He touched his fingertips to the center of Julian's collarbone and brought his touch slowly down Julian's smooth chest, traveling lower to his firm abdomen. As he reached the top of Julian's leather pants, he lifted his other hand to open them.

Julian pushed Morgan's dress shirt off, then raised the undershirt. He stood back, staring at the beautiful body before him. Morgan's medium build was covered in thick musculature. Hair dusted his chest; his abdomen was cut in deep grooves. His biceps looked powerful even at rest, cords of sinew shifted in his forearms with each movement. If Julian were to design the body of a man he wanted, he couldn't have come as close to Morgan's perfection.

Julian grabbed Morgan's pants and shoved them down. He glanced at Morgan's defined quads and calves, but what captured his attention was the large bulge pushing against the black boxer-briefs. He touched the tip of his index finger to the top of the hard line and followed it lower.

Morgan closed his eyes; his hips swayed forward to Julian's touch. Julian hooked his fingers over the boxer-briefs and slowly edged them down. The broad head was revealed, the slit wet. The veined and thick shaft followed. Julian nearly swooned as he imagined what it'd feel like to have every inch of its length buried inside him. As he brought the boxer-briefs to Morgan's thighs, he gazed at his sac, large, full, shaven, hanging in waiting for him to suck and lick at it.

Julian went to his knees. He couldn't resist leaning in, pressing his nose to Morgan's skin, inhaling his masculine musk while he finished pulling off Morgan's clothes. His tongue darted out to lick the sac. He kissed up the shaft from base to tip and stood up.

Morgan pulled him close, claiming Julian's lips again. Julian moved toward the bed, then forced himself to break the kiss to turn and throw the comforter back. Morgan pressed against him from behind. As he felt Morgan's hard cock push against his ass, Julian paused with the top sheet in hand. Morgan's fingers moved around his waist to the button on his pants. As Morgan brought them down, they barely made it over Julian's ass before he bent

over the bed.

Morgan settled his cock between Julian's ass cheeks. Julian exhaled a sigh of pleasure as the silken shaft rubbed his hole. He rocked back to the hard rod, desperately wanting it inside him.

Morgan quickly turned away from him.

Julian looked to see he'd picked up his pants and was digging in the front pocket. When he saw him come out with a strip of condoms, he reached for the nightstand at his bedside and opened a drawer for the lube. He tossed it to the bed and hastily finished removing his own clothes.

Morgan's gaze traveled down Julian's body to his cock. He saw Julian shaved his pubic hair save for a small patch, the color, blond, just a shade darker than Julian's hair. He looked up and smiled. "That's a first."

"It does give me some uniqueness, doesn't it? One of the benefits of being so fair haired and skinned." He took Morgan's hand. "And feel. It's very fine."

Morgan gently brushed his fingertips over the soft curls, then brought them to Julian's smooth shaft.

Julian moaned softly. His eyes closed for a moment, then he met Morgan's gaze. "I want us to still use protection, but I also want you to know I'm clean. I thought you might like to know, with what I do for a career and the reputation that goes with it. But I'm always careful and get tested regularly."

Morgan frowned slightly. "Is that your way of saying you've slept around a lot?"

"I'm not sure what you'd define as a lot, so I'll say I'm far from virginal, but I'm not a man-whore, either."

Morgan brushed Julian's cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Then we're the same, and you don't have to worry about anything on my end."

Julian smirked as he closed the distance between them. "Which end? This one?" He touched the tip of Morgan's cock. "Or this one?" He moved his hand behind Morgan to grip his

ass.

“Both,” Morgan said as he kissed him.

Morgan wrapped his hand around Julian’s cock and brought his grip down in a firm stroke. He took his own cock in the same hand and squeezed their organs together.

Julian laid one hand on Morgan’s shoulder. He tipped his head down, looking at their hard flesh clamped together in Morgan’s strong hand. Morgan gave them a pump. Julian rocked his hips toward him, then gasped in protest when Morgan suddenly released him. A heartbeat later, he found himself being pressed down to the bed.

He dropped to the mattress and slid back, Morgan crawling with him. Before reaching the center, Morgan stopped him by bringing their lips together. As Morgan eased his weight down on him, Julian kissed him harder, sucking Morgan’s tongue into his mouth. He rubbed his legs over Morgan’s, his hands down Morgan’s back.

Morgan slowly lifted up and snatched the lube. He coated his fingers, and as he lowered himself down again, Julian parted his thighs wide. He covered Julian’s mouth with his as he pushed one finger into him. Julian groaned and arched up to his hand. After a few thrusts, Morgan added a second.

Julian halted the kiss. He dug his fingers into Morgan’s back and raised his hips. The thickness of Morgan’s fingers stretching and filling him felt too incredible for him to not want more. A needy moan left him; he shifted his hips in askance. Morgan curled his fingers upward to his gland. Julian jerked with pleasure, sighing, “God, yes,” as he clung to him. The tender massage pushed him closer to the edge. Fluid dripped onto his stomach from his leaking cock; tingling heat circulated through his groin. He couldn’t take it. A few more moments and he’d lose it.

“Morgan, I’m right there. But I want it when you’re in me.”

Morgan moaned against Julian’s lips. He pulled his fingers from him and reached for a condom.

Julian watched him roll the condom on, his body pulsing in

anticipation. Looking at the profile of Morgan kneeling on the bed, his body hard with muscle, his ass so finely rounded, his handsome features, he felt nothing less than he was about to have sex with the man of his dreams.

Morgan turned back to him.

Julian met his gaze as he brought his body over him once again. He rested his hand on Morgan's cheek. "It's been a little while, but you don't have to go easy on me."

Morgan brushed his fingertips across Julian's forehead and down his cheek. "Maybe I want to."

His words caused a burst of emotion in Julian's chest, disbelief that he'd found someone so kind; hope that it was genuine and would last. He felt the wrapped and slicked tip of Morgan's cock press against his hole. He willed his body to be still, despite wanting to shove it in. The wide head pushed inside him. A moan escaped him as he felt it rubbing his sensitive inner walls, opening him with each inch Morgan eased in.

Once Morgan's cock was fully inside him, Julian embraced him around the neck and raised his head to meet Morgan's lips. The length of him, the girth of him, it all felt so amazing. As Morgan pulled back and went forward again in his first thrust, Julian tightened his arms around him, his pleasure intensifying still more.

Morgan slid one arm under Julian's shoulders, holding him tight as he set a slow pace. He kissed every part of Julian he could reach with his lips and nuzzled into Julian's hair near his temple as he whispered his name.

Julian softly said Morgan's name in return. Every thrust built pleasure on top of pleasure. Each movement caused his cock to rub against Morgan's stomach, the skin of which had turned slick with pre-cum. His mind, his body, swam in ecstasy, and it continued to grow. It hit a point where it could go no higher. He let out a stuttering shout, heaving up against Morgan, his hips working as his cock emptied cum between them. He heard Morgan groan low in his ear and felt Morgan's hold on

him tighten. Even through the condom he felt Morgan's cock throbbing as he came.

Morgan stilled. He continued to hold him for a long moment, then lifted his head.

Julian looked into his eyes before Morgan kissed him and hoped what he saw in them was true. If it was, then he knew there would be many more nights like this.

CHAPTER TEN

Lying on his side, Julian woke to gentle kisses on his shoulder and a stubbly chin brushing against his skin. His eyes remained closed, but a smile rose to his lips. Morgan had stayed. He didn't think Morgan was the type to dress and dash, but he'd thought that about others only to wake up alone. He shifted slightly, finding his body pleasantly fatigued. Soreness around his rim reminded him of their night together, not because Morgan had been rough with him, but because after the first time, they'd started again. He'd never experienced anything like it, the intensity, the passion. They'd held onto each other so tightly throughout it all, as if they couldn't get their bodies close enough.

Julian reached back and sank his fingers into Morgan's hair. "Good morning."

Morgan wrapped one arm around him and pulled him back against his chest. "Good morning."

Morgan's fingers lightly stroked up and down Julian's chest, lulling him into total relaxation. "What time is it?"

Morgan kissed his neck. "Almost seven."

Julian groaned. "Why are you awake at such an ungodly hour?"

"This is sleeping in to me. I hate to break it to you, but most people who aren't lazy rock stars get up at seven or earlier to get to work."

"Ah, is that what the common populace does," Julian teased.

Morgan lightly nipped Julian's shoulder.

Julian laughed and rocked against him. Morgan's hard cock pressed on his ass, and he pushed back toward it. A husky groan from Morgan rumbled in his ear.

"Plus," Morgan said, "I have to get home."

Julian's good humor dissipated. "I see." He sat up, forcing

Morgan to release him. “Well, at least you stayed to say good morning.”

Morgan caught the shift in Julian’s mood and gently gripped his wrist. “Hey, the only reason I have to go is I need to take care of my dog. You can come with me if you want to.”

Julian glanced back at him. “Your dog?”

Morgan gave him a warm smile. “Yeah. I also have an appointment later this morning with some guy whose picking up one of the pianos from the store, but that won’t take long and you can come with me for that. And if you want, I’ll help you move your cars into storage today. So...” he snatched Julian around the waist and tackled him back to the bed. Julian fell to his side, laughing. “Don’t think I’m done with you yet.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Julian flipped onto his other side so he faced him. He cleared his throat, his voice followed hesitantly. “Then, we’ll do things like this often?”

Morgan’s eyes narrowed playfully. “Are you asking me for a relationship?”

The slight smirk on Morgan’s lips told Julian he already knew what he was trying to ask. “You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?”

“Actually I’ll make it very easy on you once we stop answering each other with questions.”

“Are you sure you didn’t teach grammar, not music?”

Morgan’s smirk broadened. “Another question, and one of avoidance.”

Julian huffed. “Fine. Yes, I’m asking you for a relationship, and to define what kind of relationship I’m asking for, it’s a committed one. Sorry, I’m not a middle of the road type of boy. It’s either one night or all of them. Fuck and buddy are two words that don’t go together in my vocabulary. How’s that for specific?”

Morgan nodded slowly. “Much better. The use of fuck was a nice touch to show how serious you are. But, you still ended with a question.”

Julian shoved him on the shoulder. "Which requires an answer! Did I pass or fail my speech, Mr. Chandler?"

Morgan smiled and cupped Julian's cheek. "You passed with flying colors. Nothing would make me happier. I'm past the point in my life of getting kicks from flings and one-night stands. I want a commitment. I want monogamy. I want *you*." He slid his head across the pillows to rest his forehead against Julian's, his voice hushed. "How's that for an answer?"

"Breathtaking," Julian whispered, touching his lips up to Morgan's.

Morgan grinned through the kiss. "Besides, you are my boss. It'd probably be bad for my employment status to pull a hit and run."

Julian gave him a light slap on the hip. "I'd never hold anything like that over you."

"That's good, but just so you know, I'm going to hold it over you that you still owe me a private concert. I blew thirty thousand bucks and all I got were two measly songs."

Julian's fingertips floated down Morgan's abdomen to lightly caress his cock. "Only because you interrupted me."

Morgan closed his eyes as a sigh of pleasure left him. "I guess that evens it out. I still want my concert, though."

"And you'll get it. I'll play for you whenever you want."

Morgan brought their lips together, a groan passing from his mouth to Julian's. He pushed against him, rolling Julian onto his back. Julian wrapped his arms around him as Morgan eased on top of him. Morgan's cock slid along his, and he rocked his hips in small thrusts, softly rubbing their hard flesh together.

Morgan pulled his lips from Julian's to kiss down his throat. He moved to Julian's chest, licking and sucking at one nipple, tickling the other with his fingertips. A hushed moan left Julian. He weaved his fingers in Morgan's hair, relishing how soft it was, yet also savoring the scratchiness of Morgan's stubble as he drifted lower. Julian's heartbeat raced as he felt Morgan's warm

breath on his cock.

Morgan flicked his tongue over the tip, then sat up and slid up the bed to grab a condom from the pile on the nightstand. He returned to his original spot and tore open the package. As Morgan brought the condom to Julian's cock, Julian closed his eyes, feeling him slide the cool latex into place. He hardly took another breath before the heat of Morgan's mouth seeped through the condom. Strong suction pulled at his cock.

Julian gripped Morgan's hair in two fistfuls. Morgan moved from base to tip over and over again; each time he reached the head he'd suck hard before descending back down the shaft. Julian's breath quickened. He writhed and thrust up to meet Morgan on each downward return.

Julian gasped. "I'm right there, I'm so close."

He felt Morgan's fingers clench into his hip as Morgan moved faster and sucked harder. The extra speed and force finished him. He let out a choked cry, everything around him fading as pleasure consumed him. Morgan continued to suck, then released him to carefully pull the condom off. He climbed off the bed, disappearing into the bathroom to throw it away. When Morgan got into bed again, as soon as his lips were in reach, Julian claimed them.

Morgan brought the kiss to a slow end, but kept his lips on Julian's. "Do you feel up to doing more?"

"Absolutely."

"You're not sore from last night?"

"I am a little, but nowhere near enough to make me not want to be with you."

Morgan's breath left him in a husky groan. He kissed him once again, then rolled off him to grab the lube and another condom. Julian turned onto his side, putting his back to him. Morgan tucked in behind him, laying kisses on Julian's neck and shoulder as he brought his slicked fingers to his hole. Julian pulled in a sharp breath as Morgan's finger entered him, then exhaled slowly. It amazed him how even though they were together the

night before and he'd just climaxed, Morgan could make him instantly yearn for more.

After only a few strokes of one finger, Morgan added a second. He didn't want to rush, but he was desperate to be inside him again. But then, even when he was inside him, Julian's sensual movements made him desperate to come. The feelings Julian sparked in him were unlike anything he'd felt before. He'd had a few fairly long-term relationships, but even after being with someone for several months, his emotions weren't as powerful as they were for Julian, after only a night.

He wondered if it was because he'd appreciated Julian's talent for so long, but if it did play a part, he knew it was a small one. He wanted to be close to him, but in more than just a sexual way. That was so simple to do. He wanted the complicated things, knowing Julian's likes and dislikes, learning his flaws and quirks, being able to read his thoughts from the look in his eyes. He smiled as he kissed the back of Julian's neck. He would get the chance to learn those things now that Julian had confessed what he wanted. His mind still spun at the idea; Julian was his.

He heard Julian groan his name. He withdrew his fingers. He quickly swiped lube over his wrapped cock and slid up behind him. Julian stretched his top leg forward and pushed his ass back to him. Morgan pressed and thrust into him. He paused, his breathing already heavy. He started to sink into him again and moved deeper until all space between their bodies vanished. He held Julian to his chest, their legs tangled together.

Julian rocked with each slow thrust from Morgan. He rubbed a hand over Morgan's arm embracing him. He turned his head, and Morgan leaned over his shoulder to kiss him. As Morgan's hand drifted down his torso to stroke his cock, Julian brought the kiss to an end with a soft moan. He stretched back and took hold of Morgan's ass cheek, gripping onto the solidness of it.

Morgan squeezed him. Julian felt Morgan's body tense, telling him he was close. He pushed back to meet each of Morgan's thrusts. Morgan's pace quickened slightly, then his hips snapped forward as he came. Julian's own orgasm raced to the surface. He

laid his hand over Morgan's as it hit, his fluid wetting both their hands.

Julian kept his hand on Morgan's while they rested. Morgan's firm body behind him, his arm embracing him, his cock still inside him, it all felt so right. Where the night before things between them had been all passion and intensity, now it was emotion and affection. A smile spread over his lips; a soft chuckle escaped him.

Morgan nuzzled into Julian's neck. "I'm not sure how I feel about you laughing after we've finished having sex."

"I'm just feeling very happy right now because it's settling in that I have a boyfriend."

Morgan rose up on one elbow and smiled down at him. "I was thinking the same thing."

Morgan lowered his head to kiss him, neither losing their smiles as their lips touched.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Julian steered the Porsche with his left hand. His right rested on the shifter with Morgan's lying on top, their fingers entwined. The simple act was enough to make him giddy. How many times had he ridden with Jesse and Evan, gazing at their locked hands from the backseat? He always wished someday he'd have a man who would do the same for him, holding his hand without him having to ask. Now, it seemed he did.

He coasted through a neighborhood of well-maintained brick townhouses until Morgan pointed ahead to one on the right side.

"That's my place. Looks like all the other ones on the street."

Julian swung next to the curb and parked. "Now, that's not true. You have a chair on your porch."

Morgan laughed and hopped out.

Julian followed him up the walk to the red front door, and even as Morgan worked to unlock it, he heard scraping and whining from the other side.

Morgan pushed open the door, smiling down. "Hey, buddy—"

A Golden Retriever shot past him, going directly to a bush outside the door and lifting his leg.

Morgan placed his hands on his hips. "Well, now you see how much my dog loves me."

"I'd do the same thing if I was cooped up for hours, dependent on someone else to let me use the bathroom."

"Oh thanks. Now I feel guilty for pushing him. I took him for a long walk before coming to see you last night, and it ended at his usual last time out for the night, but this is about an hour later than he's used to going out in the morning."

With his business finished, the dog bounded back to Morgan, hopping and circling around him. Morgan went to one knee, roughing up his fur and talking to him.

Julian smiled as he watched. Even though the dog was hyper at the moment, there was gentleness to him. The dog's light gold coat held a healthy, clean shine. "I forgot to ask earlier, what's his name?"

Morgan grinned up at him. "Chopin."

Chopin spun toward Julian, sniffing at him while his tail rapidly wagged.

Julian petted the dog's head and rubbed behind one fuzzy ear. "I could get attached to a dog named for one of my favorite composers."

"Mine too, that's how he got the name. When he was a puppy, the first night I had him, he was crying and whining. I couldn't get him to settle, so I popped in a CD of Chopin sonatas and put him in bed with me. He fell asleep instantly."

"That's adorable."

Chopin sat in front of Julian, leaning against his legs while he petted him.

Morgan stood up and reached inside the door, grabbing a brown leather leash. At the sight of the leash, Chopin bounced and barked at him. "Yeah, except it set a trend. Now he sleeps on the bed every night."

As Julian fell in at Morgan's side, Morgan took his hand once again. He realized it was the first time in his life he'd openly held hands with anyone. He held hands in private, but walking down a sidewalk, out for anyone to see, never. If holding Morgan's hand in the car made him feeling giddy, to hold it in public made him feel absolutely euphoric.

Julian looked at Chopin walking ahead of them with the leash pulled taut. The dog's tail hadn't stopped wagging the entire time. There was something about the moment that touched deep inside him. He gave Morgan's hand a squeeze. "What will you do with Chopin when you leave?"

Morgan took a deep breath. It left him in a sigh. "My mom's going to take care of him. I didn't want to saddle her with him,

her health isn't all that great, but I couldn't leave him in a kennel for months on end. Even if my mom isn't strong enough to walk him, she's got a small fenced backyard, and he'll have food, shelter, and good care. Can't ask for anything more than that."

Julian nodded slowly.

"But I'll admit, I almost didn't bother applying for the roadie job because of him." Morgan let out a humorless chuckle. "That's bad, isn't it? Being ready to pass on a job for a dog?"

"No, not at all." They walked in silence for several strides, Julian pondering on an idea, wondering if he should present it to Morgan, then decided it couldn't do any harm. "What if you could take him with you, for a few months of the tour, at least?"

Morgan glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"For our last tour, Jesse had his dog with him. The only time Achilles wasn't with us was when we went overseas on Evan's tour. Brandon watched him then since the long flights, vet requirements and quarantine issues were just too much for Jesse to put the dog through. But he's bringing him and his other dog again for the North American leg of this one."

"I doubt he'd be open to the idea of a roadie bringing their dog. If he let me, then everyone would want to have their dogs and kids and cats and everything else. It'd be chaos."

"True, but he may be open to the idea if one of his band members was bringing a dog."

Morgan stopped, putting his full attention on him. "You would do that?"

"Would it make you happy?"

"I can't tell you how much."

"Then I'll do my best to convince him. I may have to bend the truth a little, but I'm almost certain he'll agree." Julian pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket. "With the concert tonight, we're running short on time, so I better call him now."

Morgan gazed at him, visibly showing his surprise.

Julian speed dialed Jesse's cell number. On the third ring, Jesse picked up with a "Hey, Jules," that was mostly crunching and hardly discernable since his mouth was full.

"Jesse, are you ever not eating?"

"Well yeah. Sometimes I'm having sex. And every once in a while I take a little time to sleep and write songs."

Julian laughed. "I should've expected an answer like that from you."

"Yeah, so what's up? Are you already looking so forward to almost living with me for months on end that you wanted to call and say how excited you are?" Jesse joked.

"Not quite. Actually I was calling to ask a favor."

"*You* need a favor? But you're always so self-sufficient. This must big. What is it?"

"A friend of mine is leaving to go out of town on work at the same time we are. He'll be gone for several months and was going to have his mother take care of his dog, but her health is poor, so I volunteered that if you're alright with it, I'd bring the dog on the road with me."

Julian listened to the silence on the other end of the phone. A touch of trepidation went through him when Jesse didn't answer right away.

"That's it?" Jesse asked, his voice flat.

"Yeah."

"You called to ask if you could bring a dog on the road with us? That's the big favor?"

"Well, yes."

Jesse sighed. "What a let down. I thought you were going to ask for something big."

"This is big."

"Like I care if you bring a dog. What kind of dog is it?"

"A Golden Retriever."

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Boy."

"How old?"

"How old?" Julian repeated for Morgan to hear and looked to him for help. Morgan held up two fingers. "Two-years."

"Around the same age as 'Chilles. Maybe they'll be friends."

"Then you're alright with it?"

"So long as 'Chilles and Iris get along with him. Bring him to the arena with you tonight and we'll see how things go."

"You're wonderful, do you know that?"

"Of course I do! Now, I'm going to finish eating so I can do the second thing I'm usually doing."

"Have fun, but don't wear yourself out for the show."

"Can't promise anything. Later."

"Bye." Julian hung up and held his arms open to the sides. "Done! So long as Chopin gets along with Jesse and Evan's dogs, he'll be going on tour, and I dare say traveling in more comfort than you'll be since he'll get to ride on our bus."

Morgan flung his arms around him. "I know you called Jesse wonderful, but you're the one who really is."

"I wouldn't go that far until we see how it goes tonight."

"Chopin loves to play with other dogs." Morgan laid his hand on Julian's cheek. "But you don't have to do this for me."

"And that's why I want to." Julian caught Morgan's hand in his. "I want to do something to make you happy."

"You've already done that." Morgan put his lips to Julian's in a slow, sensual kiss.

Through the kiss, anxiety coursed through Julian. Anyone could see them, people looking out their windows, driving by in their cars, walking down the sidewalk. To openly hold hands was one thing. To show this level of affection was another. He knew too well what could happen if the wrong kind of person saw

them. Only a few months ago Jesse had been jumped. And when Julian was younger, he had a friend who'd been hospitalized with grave injuries after being attacked leaving a gay bar.

Yet at the same time, he wanted to show the world who he was with. Shouldn't he have that right? He knew the answer was yes, yet so many people who had no right to determine what was right and wrong for others, didn't agree. But then there was Jesse and Evan, who decide to throw the opinions of the world to the wind and show their love with no shame, no fear. That's how he wanted to live, especially if Morgan wanted the same thing.

Morgan slowly drew back. "You're not used to public displays, are you?"

A confused smile rose to Julian's lips. "How could you tell?"

"You tensed up, and you were holding back in returning the kiss. Usually you push your tongue down my throat, but not this time."

Julian slowly lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry."

Morgan shook his head. "It's not anything you need to apologize for. Not everyone is comfortable with it." He started walking again.

Julian felt a touch of relief when Morgan took his hand. "I would like to, though. Get more comfortable with it."

Morgan pulled his hand from Julian's to wrap his arm around his shoulders. "Then I'll take it upon myself to become your teacher."

Julian laughed. "How good of you. But if I'm not learning as quickly as I should be, you may have to pull out the paddle."

"I never was a believer in corporal punishment, but I think I can make an exception in your case."

Julian affectionately bumped against him and slipped his arm around Morgan's waist.

Morgan offered him the leash. "Do you want to walk him? It'd be good for him to start getting used to my new boyfriend."

Julian took the leash, glowing at Morgan's words. "That's right, he should."

Chopin looked back as the leash was exchanged, then trotted forward, not seeming to mind someone else holding him.

They walked in comfortable silence before Morgan spoke, his voice hesitant. "There's something that's been on and off my mind all morning. How are we going to work things out on the tour?"

Reality dampened Julian's good mood. "I don't know. I'm not sure how Jesse and the guys will react. On our last tour, there was an incident with a couple who were seeing each other. We were minutes from hitting the stage and we stepped out of Jesse's dressing room to a cat fight outside the door."

"I heard about that. One thing I've learned in my short time as a roadie is gossiping is like religion to everyone, even beating old news like that to death. It was damn shitty of Kurt to fire that woman, even if it doesn't surprise me."

Julian glanced at him. "I thought she left the tour on her own."

"Not according to the story I heard."

"If that's true, then we could have problems. Kurt wouldn't dare fire you knowing it's me you're seeing, but Jesse already mentioned how it could build resentment among the staff, especially if they believe you received favored treatment. If it started to affect the tour, I don't know what he'd do. Even if Jesse doesn't care about our relationship, if Brad or Kenny thought it was creating tension between the band and staff, it would put everyone in a difficult spot, but you especially. I don't want you losing your job because of me."

"So what are our options?" Morgan asked softly.

"I learned quite a few things from watching Jesse and Evan when they were still keeping their relationship hush-hush, and I did a fair job myself in not letting my sexuality be known. We could just keep things quiet until the tour is over."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"If you feel like me, you don't like it. I don't want to be deceitful to the people I don't just call my friends, but my family. But it just might be the safest way to go for you to keep your job and keep the peace between everyone."

Morgan walked in silence. Julian could tell from his concentrated mien he was contemplating the situation. After several moments, Morgan exhaled a heavy sigh.

"If it's the only way we can be together, then that's the road we'll take. As far as losing my job goes, I'm more worried about losing it because if I do, we won't be able to see each other. I'd have to come back here and start working wherever I can while you stay on the road. Being with you is more important than anything else."

Julian tightened his hold around Morgan's waist.

They continued their walk, making a circuit around the block and ending at Morgan's home. Julian followed him in with Chopin. There were three places to go. To the left was a flight of stairs, a family room to the right, and directly in front of him, a hall led to the kitchen. Morgan veered toward the family room. Julian took Chopin off his leash and trailed after him.

Morgan hustled around the room, picking up dog toys from the floor and tossing them into a basket near a wall, straightening magazines on the coffee table, grabbing an empty but used glass from the end table near the couch. "Sorry about the mess. My plan was to spend the morning cleaning before I left."

"It's hardly messy."

Julian gazed around the room, decorated with prints of mountains, forests, deer, and other wildlife. He saw a set of shelves against one wall holding pictures and went to it. One photo showed a little boy, who he recognized as Morgan, sitting at a piano smiling up at an older man leaning against it. He saw Morgan in the handsome features of the other man and knew he must be his father. Another photo showed an early teen Morgan standing at a look-out point with forested mountains in the background, one arm around his father, the other around a lovely

dark blonde woman who Julian guessed was Morgan's mother.

Julian's gaze moved next to photos of Morgan in football uniforms, one from high school, another from college. He glanced back at him. "You played football."

Morgan moved to Julian's side. "Yeah, I played quarterback in high school, then in college, I was the backup quarterback and the starting tight-end."

Julian looked at another photo of a college baseball team, Morgan in the center. "You played baseball, also."

"And basketball, only in high school, though. Something had to give once I started college."

Julian faced him. "I knew you were athletic, just look at your gorgeous body, but I didn't realize how much so."

"Well, I don't play any sports now. No time for it. I do make a point to go to the gym a lot." Morgan turned to walk out of the room. "I'd offer you something to drink, but all I have is tap water since I gutted everything for leaving."

"I'm fine." Julian followed him down the hall to the kitchen. He paused just inside, looking at the dirty dishes stacked in the sink. "Okay, this is a bit messy."

"I warned you. I'll admit I'm not the best housekeeper. I usually pull clean dishes from the dishwasher as I need them, then once it's empty, I load it up. I guess we're opposites like that. I didn't even see a speck of dust in your place."

"I'm obsessively organized, but I also have a housekeeper who comes Mondays and Thursdays to keep things nice for me."

Morgan leaned back on the kitchen counter. "Are you totally turned off that I'm messy?"

Julian walked to him and slid his arms around Morgan's waist. "It'd take a lot more than a few dirty dishes to turn me off."

Morgan slid one hand around the back of Julian's neck as he bent to kiss him. Julian instantly deepened the kiss. He reached behind Morgan to grip each ass cheek and squeezed them.

Morgan broke the kiss with a chuckle. "You really like groping my ass, don't you?"

"I can't help it. It's so damn firm and fine."

Morgan took Julian's ass in both his hands. "I'm the same way about yours. It's so small and tight."

"One more reason we're meant for each other. We're both ass addicts."

"One of many reasons." Morgan delivered another kiss, then took Julian's hand to lead him from the kitchen. "Should I give you a tour?"

"I'd love one."

They walked back down the hall to the stairs and up to the second floor. There were three doors beyond the small landing. Morgan pointed to each. "Master bedroom, spare bedroom, bathroom." He turned to Julian and held his arms open to the sides. "And that completes the tour. Extravagant, isn't it?"

"Now, you can at least show me your bedroom."

Morgan walked toward it. "But if we go in here, we might not come out."

"Which is my plan."

Julian stepped into Morgan's bedroom. Clothes lay scattered across the floor. The queen-sized bed still had disheveled sheets and a faded blue comforter. A large print of a moose standing in a stream hung on one wall. The single window was dressed in white mini-blinds, no curtains.

Morgan rushed around the room, snatching shirts, jeans, and underwear off the floor. He gave Julian an embarrassed grin. "Turned off yet?"

"Hardly." Julian sat on the bed, looking at the moose print. "You're a nature fan, aren't you?"

Morgan glanced to where Julian was looking. "Yeah, I love the outdoors. Hiking, camping, exploring the wilds. I used to camp a lot in the summer. A good weekend for me was heading out to

the woods and not seeing another person until I started driving back on a Sunday night. We should go camping someday. We'd have a blast."

Julian managed a slight grin, then opted for a distraction from the idea. He beckoned Morgan with his index finger. Morgan walked to him. Julian took hold of his hips, directing Morgan to stand in front of him and between his legs. He rubbed one hand up Morgan's thigh. "So, now that you have me in your bedroom, what are you going to do with me?"

Morgan slid his hand under Julian's chin. "I have a few things in mind." He glanced at the alarm clock. "But we've got to head down to the store so I can meet that guy for the piano."

Julian sighed. "Fine, reject me again."

Morgan took both of Julian's hands and hauled him to his feet. He yanked him against his chest, smirking down at him. "Why am I getting the impression you don't like being told no?"

"Because I don't. Especially when it comes to sex." Julian kissed him under the jaw. "And I plan to teach *you* to never say it to me."

Morgan let out a husky chuckle. "So the student wants to become the teacher. I like that idea."

Julian took Morgan's hand as he turned for the bedroom door. "There's no *become* about it. I wouldn't underestimate what I can teach you, if I were you."

Morgan lifted Julian's hand to place a kiss on it. "I'm more than ready for those lessons."

They returned to the first floor, Morgan grabbing Chopin's leash as they headed out the door. He glanced at Julian as they neared the Porsche. "Maybe I should leave him home."

Julian looked down at Chopin, then back to his car. "But he's been cooped up for so long." He paused for a moment, then shrugged. "A little dog hair and drool isn't anything a good detailer can't clean."

"You're serious?"

“Of course.” Julian extended the car keys to him. “And before you lose that shocked expression, would you like to drive?”

“Hell yes!” Morgan took the keys, then reached to open the passenger side door to load Chopin in the back, who promptly sat in the middle with his head between the front seats. Julian petted him as Morgan got in.

Morgan adjusted the seat and mirrors, then took a breath as he fired up the car. When it roared to life, he turned to Julian with a grin. “Thank you so much.”

Julian laughed. “You haven’t even started driving it yet.”

“But just starting it was so good.”

Morgan veered away from his home. It took him a couple blocks to get used to the car’s power, but after soon he felt comfortable enough to switch on the radio and take Julian’s hand as he held the shifter. Jesse’s tenor voice blasted through the speakers, singing Conquest’s rock song, “Twisted Destiny.”

Morgan looked at Julian and rolled his eyes. “I can’t get away from this band. Every time I turn on the radio, there they are.”

“Yes, they’re quite annoying, aren’t they?”

“It’s just a good thing their keyboardist is hot. Otherwise, I wouldn’t listen to them at all.”

“It’s funny you say that because most people find the singer to be the hottie in the group.”

Morgan let out a snort. “He’s got looks, I’ll give him that, but nowhere near the keyboardist.”

“If you truly believe that, then we really are made for each other.”

Morgan’s joking demeanor faded. “You shouldn’t say it like that. It agitates me you’re always stuck in his shadow. You deserve better.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m in his shadow, but even if I am, I’m more recognized than I ever was as a classical pianist.”

Morgan sat quiet, mulling over Julian’s words. He swung into

an open spot on the street near his music store. "Here we are."

Julian got out and took Chopin's leash as Morgan handed it to him. They neared the brick storefront, and he saw a wooden sign hanging outside with a piano and *Chandler's* written in cursive. As Morgan unlocked the door, Julian peered in through the bay window, making out the shadows of instruments inside. Morgan held the door open for him, and he stepped in with Chopin.

Morgan closed the door behind them. "You can let him off his leash. He's good in here."

Julian unclipped Chopin from his leash, all the while his gaze strayed around the shop. The space was larger than it appeared outside, the walls and floor done in warm, natural wood. Five pianos dominated the floor, three uprights, two baby grands. Along one wall hung a few violins and violas, cellos in open cases in front of them. The back wall was occupied with a handful of woodwinds and brass instruments, in one corner sat a set of timpani drums. On the remaining wall were accessories; strings, mouthpieces, polishes, all that one would need to play and tend the fine instruments. He noticed the many vacant spaces, as if instruments had gotten sold, but no new inventory replaced them.

Julian felt at ease in the shop, as if he'd visited many times before. Maybe it was the smell of the instruments, their wood and polish, their familiarity, or the quietness surrounding them as they lay at rest. He started to regret the money Morgan had used to win the auction and felt a twinge of guilt at his doing so. If he'd only been more open with Morgan about his attraction, maybe Morgan wouldn't have felt the need to do such a thing. Then if he still decided to liquidate any of the instruments, the money could've gone toward the store's debts.

Morgan walked past the cash counter. "The office is back here. I just need to grab the paper work on the piano."

Julian came out of his thoughts to follow him into the small office cluttered with filing cabinets, a desk and chair, a few more instruments that looked to need repair. He took a seat behind the desk, gazing around the room.

Morgan stood at a filing cabinet, flipping through files with his back to him. "Can I ask you something?"

Julian brought his attention to him. "You can ask me anything."

"What you said in the car, about getting more attention playing for Conquest than as a classical pianist, is that why you decided to make the change to rock? To get more fame and money?"

Julian shook his head. "No, not at all."

Morgan walked toward him and sat on a corner of the desk. "Then why did you do it?"

"Because I needed to. All my life, for as long as I can remember, I was placed at a piano with classical scores in front of me. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Vivaldi, Brahms, the list goes on and on. It's all I knew, it's all I played, and for a long time, it's all I loved. I enjoyed rock and other forms of music, but I'll admit, I used to look down at them, believing none had the class or sophistication of classical. Then something happened to change my opinion, a musician who made me see that different genres of music can be blended into one harmony."

"Who was it?"

Julian smiled. "Evan Arden. I've never told Evan how he influenced me, he'd just smile and say thank you, anyway. And certainly there are other bands who had melded classical instruments with popular before. But something in Evan's music touched me, and I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to do something like that?"

"Now, part of these thoughts also happened at a time when I was starting to get bored with playing classical. Always the same pieces over and over again, living under the reigning fists of conductors. I wanted freedom. I wanted challenge. I wanted to break free of the strict scores and do things on my own."

"But isn't it still the same thing playing for Jesse?" Morgan asked. "I've heard he's a tyrant."

"He's not half as bad as people think. A lot of people only see what he shows on his surface, his arrogance. But once you get

to know him, you realize most of that is just his wall. Whenever you work in the arts, you have to build defenses or else you'll very quickly *not* be working in the arts any longer. Whether it's being a musician, a painter, an actor, a writer, there are few other careers where you throw your work at the mercy of the public. So to survive, Jesse has a wall of arrogance. Evan is cold and distant to those he doesn't know."

Morgan spoke up before Julian could continue. "And you present a façade of propriety and sophistication that makes you seem untouchable until you get to know someone better."

Julian grinned. "Exactly. But that's not to say any of our facades are completely fake. Jesse can be cocky, Evan can be icy, and I like to think I have a little sophistication in me, but none of it is as dramatic as it first appears. Take Jesse. He likes things done his way, but he's also open to opinions. His bottom line is what's best for the music. And you know, there's one song on *No Fear* that I wrote the entire piano score for."

"Which one?"

"*"Tomorrow."*

"I love that song!" Morgan cleared his throat to recite the chorus,

*"I'll be in your arms...tomorrow,
When the first light shines.
I'll be in your arms...tomorrow,
When the daylight dies.
I give you all my tomorrows,
From now to eternity.
Without you at my side.
None would exist for me..."*

Julian clapped softly. "Well done! But you should've sung it."

Morgan held up both hands. "No, really, I shouldn't have. There would be no tomorrows for us if you heard me sing. But the piano in that song is amazing."

"I've had the melody in my head for ages, but didn't know

what to do with it. I played it for Jesse one day and halfway through, he snapped his fingers, pointed at me, and said, 'I'm going to write lyrics for this.' And so, he put lyrics to it, wrote the parts for guitar and drums, and now it's on the album. If it wasn't for him, it never would've gotten heard at all."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully. "So you left classical music to expand as a musician. I'm glad and relieved to hear that. I hated to think you were a sell-out."

"Sell-out! That's harsh in any regard. You just proved the point of those walls I spoke about not even thirty seconds ago."

A chastised expression crossed Morgan's face. "Sorry. I guess it's going to take some adjusting to look at things from the inside rather than out."

Julian laid his hand on Morgan's thigh. "It's alright. It does take time to adjust to this lifestyle. But yes, I made the change to grow into the musician I wanted to be. That's not to say I wouldn't go back to playing classical professionally, but only if I could balance it with being in Conquest. And you know, I've found the keyboards to be a lot of fun. They're so similar to a piano, but at the same time, so different. I like the challenge of them and the challenges of playing for Jesse, because he *does* push me.

"Where before people would do nothing but nod and smile in approval at whatever I played, he'll shake his head and say, 'You can do better.' I can't tell you how much I needed that. I was *starved* for it. To have someone tell me not everything I do is perfect, but who also works with me to grow closer to that. When I made the decision to try and break into rock, I never in a million years thought I'd end up with a front-man who is also a classicist at heart. I consider it a heavy dose of good fortune."

"Well," Morgan said, "I guess I'll admit that if the classical world had to lose you, it's good it was to a band like Conquest. That doesn't mean I'm not going to hold out on hoping someday I'll get to see you surrounded by a symphony playing some of those same old scores, though."

"I already owe you a concert. I could call in a favor and make it a grand one."

Morgan smirked at him. "Or you could play two for me and open the second one up to the public."

Julian shook his head at him with a playful grin. "Greedy boy. But it's not beyond the realm of possibilities. Maybe a charity concert. Of course, you do know you'd have to be seated next to my mother if I were to do such a thing. She mourns my entering into popular music."

"What about your father?"

"He nods sympathetically to my mother when she goes on one of her woe-is-me tangents, but when I first made the announcement, he pulled me aside and gave me a hard pat on the back saying he was happy for me. When we're all together, while he's doing his sympathetic nods to my mother, he's always throwing me covert winks of approval."

"That's good he's supportive."

A buzzer sounding through the shop interrupted them.

Morgan glanced out the office door. "Damn. They're here already." He looked back to Julian. "This shouldn't take long. It's just one of the uprights going, a lot easier to move than one of the baby grands. I'll get this wrapped up, then we can go get an early lunch."

Julian drifted his hand up Morgan's thigh. "Or we could grab takeout and go back to my place."

Morgan leaned down to him, his lips nearly touching Julian's. "You're insatiable."

"And I'm thinking you like it."

"I love it." Morgan brought their lips together, pausing in the kiss as the buzzer screeched again. He sighed and stood up. "Isn't it enough they're already getting this piano at a third of its value? Do they have to be so damn rude, too?"

Julian watched him stomp toward the front door, unlock it, and talk to the people outside, pointing to direct them around

back. As Morgan turned from the door to head to toward the back from the inside, he met Julian's gaze and rolled his eyes in a look that said how he felt about the people. Julian smiled at him, more in sympathy than finding any humor in the situation. He looked around the office once again, his gaze skimming the stacks of papers on the desk.

A glimpse of red ink on one sheet caught his eye. He lifted a leather ledger and saw "Past Due" stamped on a bill. He picked it up to find another underneath. He saw the one in his hand was for the mortgage on the store, the other an electric bill. The interest on the loan was outrageous, the payment ridiculously high and even what was paid barely covered the interest. Hardly any went into the shop's equity. And yet, if Morgan had used the money for the auction, it could've chewed a decent sum of it down.

Julian stared at the figures. Morgan had sacrificed the shop for him. Even without knowing what the outcome would be, Morgan had put everything on the line for one special night with him. Julian felt his throat tightening with emotion. He grabbed a pen and a Post-it note. He glanced at Chopin as he jotted down the bank's name and information.

"This is our secret, for now."

The dog's tail thumped the floor in a few wags.

Julian heard Morgan's voice, along with another man's. He quickly folded the paper and shoved it in the back pocket of his jeans. He looked out the office door to see Morgan leading two men who appeared to be in their late-thirties, and an older teen boy, toward one of the uprights. He didn't care for their slovenly dress, but then again, they were buying a piano, so they wouldn't be wearing their finest to move it.

One of the men paced around the piano. "This is it?"

Morgan nodded. "Yeah, this is the one."

The man stood at the piano, rubbing his chin in a distasteful expression. "It looked lighter in the picture. This has a reddish tint."

"Like I said when I talked to you on the phone, the flash made it look a little lighter. Its cherry wood, so red tint is natural to it."

"I'm not sure how I feel about it." The man looked to the other. "What do you think?"

"Well, it does have a reddish tint," the other said.

Julian could feel annoyance slowly spreading through him and couldn't imagine what Morgan felt. From the look on Morgan's face, he gathered the same thing.

The man shook his head. "I don't know. Now that I see it in person, it's not what I thought it'd be." He pointed to another upright with a light, natural wood finish. "I like that one instead."

Morgan shook his head. "I can sell it to you, but I can't give it to you for the same price as this one. That's a Baldwin."

The man snorted. "So you're saying the one I'm buying is junk compared to that one?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm only saying it's a different brand. If you're interested in it, I can knock a little off, but it still won't be close to the deal you're getting on this one." Morgan laid his hand on the cherry upright.

"Well, since the stain isn't what I want on this one, I think it'd be fair if you took at least another ten percent off."

"You're already getting it at a third of its value. I can't go any lower."

Fed up with the man's haggling, Julian marched toward the showroom. As he did, he saw the man give the side of the piano a kick, making an echo resound in the chamber, and say, "Does it at least have a good sound?"

Julian stepped through the door. "Whether it does or doesn't is no reason for you to disrespect it. You haven't even paid for it, yet you kick it like its trash."

Morgan gasped. "Julian..."

The man scowled at Julian. "And who are you?"

As soon as his final words left the man, the teen boy snatched

his arm. "Dad, that's...it can't be." The boy's head snapped to Morgan. "But you called him Julian, so he has to be." He looked to Julian. "You're Julian Forrester from Conquest!"

"Yes, I am." Julian walked the rest of way into the showroom.

"Dude, you rock! What are you doing here?"

Julian stood at Morgan's side. "This is my favorite music store. I'm getting ready to leave on tour with the guys tomorrow and wanted to pick up some last minute supplies."

The teen looked to his father. "It's his favorite store! You know that band you're always telling me to turn down? He's the keyboardist!"

"And pianist," Julian added. "And from what I see, you're on the borderline of stealing this piano."

The teen pulled his father's arm. "We have to get it! We have to!"

"I'm not getting this thing just because he says it's good." The man turned to Morgan. "I want to hear it played."

Morgan gestured toward the keys. "Then have at it."

"This thing is for my wife. She's the one who knows how to play."

Julian grinned at Morgan. "So then, you play."

Morgan frowned at him. "Why don't you?"

Julian's grin turned into a wicked smirk. "Well, if you want me to play it, then I'll have to give you my manager's phone number, and you can try to reach him, but if you can't you'll have to leave a message, and he might not call you back, but if he does, then he'll work on setting up a rate and day—"

"I get it, I get it. You don't want to." Morgan huffed and sat on the bench. "Just everyone know that if it sounds off, it's my playing not the piano."

Morgan stared at the keys for a moment. He took a deep breath, exhaled a defeated sigh, and lifted his hands to the keys. From low notes to high, he ran through a scale demonstrating

the piano's range and sound.

Julian watched Morgan's fingers. His movements were specific, perhaps a little heavy, but not without grace. He looked at Morgan's face, and from his concentrated visage, he could tell Morgan was focused more on hitting the right keys than the sound they produced. Still, he warmed at the sight of seeing him play, and couldn't help but think of what it would be like to sit at a piano with him to help him polish his craft.

Morgan finished and looked up at the man. "Good enough?"

The man shrugged. "Gave me an idea of how it sounds. Not sure if I like it, though. Sounds a little out of tune."

"Are you kidding me?" Julian said. "The instrument's in perfect tune!" He patted Morgan on the shoulder. "Here, it seems I have no choice."

A large smile on his face, Morgan hopped up.

Julian sat at the bench, cracked his knuckles, and snapped out his hands. He dropped them to the keyboard. The first notes of Beethoven's 5th Symphony burst from the piano. Julian let his frustration explode out the song, the powerful chords booming through the shop. He brought the first movement to an end and moved his hands to his hips as he glared at the man. "Good enough?"

The man quickly nodded. "Yeah, yeah. It's good."

Julian stood and walked toward the office. "Then pay what's owed to him and wrap this up."

He heard Morgan chuckle and say, "Sorry. Temperamental rock star, you know."

Julian caught himself before he laughed out loud. He took a seat behind the desk again as Morgan and the men finalized the agreement on the piano. Chopin trotted to him. Julian patted his lap and the dog jumped his front half up. He glanced up at movement near the door.

The teen stood barely peeking in. Meeting Julian's gaze, he stepped further into the doorway. "Mr. Forrester, I was wondering

if I could please have your autograph.”

Julian smiled and waved him in. “Of course, and you don’t have to be hesitant. I’m not nearly as temperamental as I appear.”

The teen walked into the office. “I didn’t think so. Out of everyone in Conquest, you seem the most laidback.”

Julian pulled a blank piece of paper toward him. “The others are pretty laidback also. What’s your name?”

“David. But I have to tell you, Conquest is my favorite band. You guys rock hardcore and Jesse is awesome! It’s because of him that I’ve started my own band.”

“Do you play piano?”

David looked at him, confused. “No.”

Julian held the autographed paper toward him, signed with, *It was a pleasure to meet you, David. Thank you for your support of Conquest. Much love, Julian Forrester.* “You should consider learning. It’s Jesse’s favorite instrument and you’re getting a very fine one today. Be sure to take good care of it.”

“I will! Thanks for this!”

Morgan appeared in the doorway, along with David’s father and the other man.

David’s father flicked his head toward the exit. “It’s time to go.”

His eyes on Julian, David held up his cell phone. “Would it be okay if I got a picture with you, too? Otherwise my friends won’t believe I really met you.”

“Sure.” Julian stood and moved to David’s side.

David handed his phone to his father, who grumbled under his breath, but held up the phone to snap a picture nonetheless. Julian rested his arm over David’s shoulders and called upon his best public smile. With the picture taken, David thanked him again and turned to leave, Morgan showing them the way out.

Morgan returned, smiling as he walked toward him. “That was one of the more interesting sales I’ve done.”

Julian let out a snort and turned his gaze back to Chopin as he petted him. "He was an ass. I feel bad that piano is going to him."

"His money is as good as anyone else's. I'm sure his wife will take good care of it." Morgan gently touched Julian under the jaw and brought his gaze to him. "And it was nice of you to chat with the kid." He leaned down to him. "And to help me out, too. Seems like you've come to my defense a lot since we've met."

"What can I say? You've sparked the protective side of me."

Morgan brushed his lips across Julian's. "Just like you have in me."

Julian brought their lips together. As the kiss came to an end, he spoke with his lips still on Morgan's, his voice hushed and breathless, "I want you again."

Morgan tried to slow his quick breaths. "What about getting something to eat? You're hungry, aren't you?"

Julian stood, pressing their bodies together. "Let's go back to my place. We can order something up from the restaurant in the building."

"Perfect." Morgan gave him another deep kiss, then took his hand.

Julian clipped Chopin's leash on and walked toward the door, giving the shop a final look before stepping out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julian strolled toward the dressing rooms with Chopin, noticing how many of the roadies stopped what they were doing to grin at the dog. He saw Morgan up the hall standing next to an extra set of keyboards with Remmy. He looked nervous. Julian gave him a soft smile, then saw Jesse step out of his dressing room with Achilles on a leash, Evan following with Iris.

“Hey, there you are!” Jesse called. “I was starting to wonder about you. You’re late again.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Julian said.

Jesse waved his words away, his gaze on the Golden Retriever. “So this is him. He’s cute. What’s his name?”

“Chopin.”

Jesse laughed. “Yeah, it’d figure you’d have a friend who’d name their dog Chopin.” He handed Achilles’ leash to Evan and walked toward Julian and Chopin. “Are you a good boy, Chopin? Do you want to go on tour and be a rock star?”

Chopin’s tail hit an all new rate of speed as Jesse approached. Jesse extended his fist down to him. Chopin gave it a quick sniff and stretched toward him. Jesse went to one knee, and the dog instantly tried to lick him. Jesse petted him as he looked up to Julian. “Well, he’s cool so far.” He glanced back at Evan. “Let’s see what happens when you bring them up.”

Evan walked forward with both dogs trying to drag him. Jesse took Achilles’ leash and allowed him to get near Chopin. While the two dogs sniffed at each other, Evan edged Iris closer, her tail whipping back and forth. After they greeted each other, Chopin suddenly dropped his front end down in a play stance and let out a bark. Achilles hopped back, then sprang forward. Chopin jumped up, and all three dogs started bouncing and trying to play despite the hands holding their leashes.

Evan chuckled. “I think it’ll be fine to take him with us.”

Jesse nodded. "Yeah, they're friends already." He patted Achilles and shifted his voice to baby talk. "Do you have a new friend? He's cool, isn't he?"

Kenny peeked out of the dressing room, then stepped further into the hall. "What's all this?"

Jesse glanced back at him. "This is Chopin. He's coming on tour with us."

Kenny stared at him for a moment. "What? Why?"

"I'm doing a favor for a friend," Julian said. "He's going out of town also and only had his mother to care for him, whose health is poor."

"Hasn't your friend ever heard of a kennel?" Kenny asked.

"He'll be gone for several months. I didn't think it'd be a problem."

"And it's not." Jesse petted Chopin again. "He's more than welcome to come with us."

Kenny marched toward them. "Listen, it's not that I don't want him with us, but it's going to be packed enough on the bus with those two." He pointed at Achilles and Iris. "Now we're going to have another big dog? And what about all the hair? On the last tour, I was constantly picking dog hair off my clothes. It'd even get into a locked suitcase."

Jesse pointed at him. "I don't know what's got your panties in a bunch, but I would've thought you'd be in a better mood since you're banging your dream girl, thanks to me. So do you still want to say Chopin can't join us?"

Kenny face flushed bright red. He spun away. "No, it's fine."

Speaking through soft laughter, Julian called, "Are you sure?"

Kenny flicked his hand in the air. "It's fine!"

Julian turned to Jesse, and had to drop his gaze since Jesse was kneeling on the floor playfully batting at the dogs, which got them riled up.

Evan laid a hand on Julian's shoulder. "Thanks for bringing

something along to help entertain him.”

Julian smirked at him. “But I thought that was your job.”

“Well, even I need a break once in a while.”

“Geezer,” Jesse snickered.

Evan looked down at him. “I’m sorry, who was saying I needed to take it easy on him this afternoon because he was going to be too worn out to perform tonight?”

Jesse stood and slid his arms around Evan’s waist. “That was the wicked hot guy who had his legs around your neck.”

Evan leaned close to kiss him. “That’s right. He’s a lot nicer than the brat in front of me now.”

Jesse gave him a light shove on the shoulder, followed by a kiss on the lips.

Julian smiled watching them. For the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel the ache in his heart that usually came with seeing them share affection. It was soothed by the thought of Morgan. He looked up the hall and saw Morgan was still at the keyboards, but noticed he wore a somber expression.

Jesse and Evan moved to go back into the dressing room. He followed them, and as they neared, Chopin snapped his head in Morgan’s direction, his tail wagging harder. The dog resisted a little as Julian guided him into the room, but obeyed with only a couple of tugs on the leash.

Julian looked to Jesse. “Can you watch him for a moment? I want to check on my boards.”

“Sure.” Jesse bent forward and clapped his hands. “Here, Chopin.”

Julian released the leash and Chopin bounded to Jesse. He left the room, closing the door behind him, and went over to Morgan.

A weak smile curved Morgan’s lips. “Hey.”

“Hi. Are you alright?”

Morgan nodded as he wrapped extra cords around his arm.

“Yeah, it was just hard watching Jesse play with him and having to pretend he’s not my dog.”

Julian hushed his voice against listening ears. “I know, but at least you’ll still get to see him every day.” He stepped a fraction closer. “And be with him at night in my hotel rooms.”

Morgan slid his hand across a keyboard toward him. “This might not be as easy as I thought. I’m dying to kiss you right now.”

Julian laid his hand on the keyboard, his fingertips touching Morgan’s hand. “I know, but we can’t take the chance that our relationship could make your life hell.”

“I’m thinking it’s going to be more hell with the way we’re doing this.”

“I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“Hey, Morgan!” Remmy rounded a corner, then paused at the sight of Julian. “Hey, Julian, how’s it going? You ready to launch this tour?”

Julian slowly drew his hand away from Morgan’s. “Absolutely.” He glanced at Morgan. “I should let you get back to work.”

“Yeah,” Morgan mumbled.

Julian nodded at Remmy, then headed toward the dressing room.

Morgan watched him walk away, wondering how much secrecy their relationship could take before it suffocated. He tried to push his heavy heart aside as he turned to Remmy, but it remained leaden in his chest. He forced a smile regardless. “What’s up?”

Remmy flicked his head for Morgan to follow him. “If you’re wrapped up here, I was hoping you could help us double check the setup on stage.”

“Yeah, sure.” Morgan walked beside him, though his thoughts stayed with Julian. How they were going about things didn’t feel right. He understood it was important to run a smooth tour. He also knew more than a couple of the roadies were banging each

other. True they were on an equal level, but would people really be jealous and treat him differently if it was known he and Julian were a couple?

Another thought struck him, and with enough force it made his heart ache. What if Julian didn't want everyone to know they were a couple because he wanted to keep his options open? Morgan shook the thought away. That went against everything Julian said to him. But it wouldn't be the first time a man lied to him to get what he wanted. Julian didn't act that devious, though. But wasn't part of being devious, not letting it be known? What if Julian just wanted him available on those nights when he couldn't find a hot enough groupie?

Morgan physically shook his head. Julian wouldn't do that to him. But there again, how well did he really know him? They'd only spent one night together.

"Morgan?"

Morgan lifted his head and looked at Remmy. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay? I don't think you've heard anything I've said."

"I'm sorry. I was wrapped up in my thoughts." Morgan let out a couple ragged chuckles. "I think it's nerves with tonight being my first concert."

Remmy smiled and patted him on the back. "You'll do fine. The most important thing is the instruments are ready and sounding good. Oh, and the stage doesn't collapse."

"Yeah, that'd be bad."

"It's happened before. Not to Conquest, but to other artists. That's why I have everyone double-check everything."

Morgan turned a curious look on him. "I don't understand why you're not the staff manager and Kurt is. You do five times the work he does. Actually, I can't even figure out what the hell he does other than yell at people."

Remmy gave him a wry grin. "Guess my talent hasn't been discovered yet."

They reached the stage. Work and the other roadies helped to

distract Morgan's thoughts, though he knew his laugh was slower to come out than the others, his smile not as strong. Almost before he knew it, people entered the arena. The opening act, a local band, wouldn't be taking the stage for another hour yet, but he knew Conquest was doing a meet-and-greet for a few fans backstage.

Morgan wanted so badly to peek in on them, to see Julian interacting with fans. It wasn't that he didn't trust him...or maybe it was. He couldn't help it that his mind filled his heart with doubts. He turned to look for Remmy and saw him talking with another tech. He walked up to them as their conversation finished. "Hey, Remmy, do you care if I take fifteen? I just want to get a drink and take a minute to calm before the storm."

"Yeah, man, that's cool. Things are looking good for now."

"Thanks."

Morgan left the stage and walked toward the dressing rooms, finding each one empty. He maneuvered around other roadies, past crates of equipment, to the meet-and-greet in the green room. The door was open, but two security guards stood outside. As Morgan approached, he saw their eyes moving over him as if to verify he was staff. That should be clear in what he was wearing, the standard attire all the workers wore of a black T-shirt with *Conquest No Fear World Tour* written in white letters on the left breast and *Staff* in large white letters across the back. He also glanced down to make sure the lanyard with his employee badge showed.

One of the guards nodded to him.

Morgan nodded in return. "How's it goin'?"

"Good," the guard said. "How's the setup?"

Morgan stepped close to the doorway. He casually glanced into the room, instantly spotting Julian smiling and posing for a picture with a tall, lean, and very attractive young guy who looked like he couldn't be much more than twenty. "Pretty much done. I'm taking a few before things get crazy. First concert jitters, you know?"

“Yeah, I hear that.”

Morgan watched the guy take his camera back from a young woman, but instead of simply thanking Julian and walking away, the guy started a conversation with him. “So you guys are old hands at this, huh?”

“We worked Evan Arden’s last tour,” said the first guard, pointing at the other with his thumb. “But we’ve both been around the block with different bands, even a few actors.”

The second guard knocked the first on the arm with the back of his hand, mentioning a young starlet they worked for the previous year. As they started going into stories about her wild partying and the number of men she’d entertain in any given night, Morgan continued to gaze into the room. He laughed at the guards’ stories at what he hoped was the right points, and occasionally met their gazes to not make it appear he was spying on the band.

Even when other fans came up to Julian for autographs and pictures, the young man lingered close, and as soon as Julian had a free moment, the guy would start talking to him. From the way the guy looked at Julian, how he angled his body toward him, it was obvious he was flirting with him. Morgan saw Julian laugh with the guy, smile at him, but it seemed more politeness than anything else. Hope started to fill his heart against doubt.

Morgan looked at the other band members. Jesse talked to a group of fans with Evan at his side, Evan’s arm around Jesse’s waist. He knew Evan held Jesse because he loved him, but it was also a silent reminder to all that Jesse was taken. If anyone knew how the rock world worked, it was Evan Arden, and seeing his protectiveness with Jesse made Morgan dislike even more how he and Julian were going about things. So what if Julian wasn’t flirting with the young guy now. How many other men would flaunt themselves at him on this tour? Without being a strong presence in Julian’s life, how soon would Julian forget he was part of it at all?

Morgan glanced at the guitar player, Kenny, chatting with fans and standing with his arm around a young brunette woman;

Krista, he assumed, from Julian telling him about her. His gaze moved next to the drummer, Brad, and he could barely see him since he was surrounded by a harem of women. Everyone who had a significant other was sharing this moment with them. He looked at Julian and caught the young guy laugh as he laid a hand on Julian's arm.

Jealousy erupted inside him. His body did an involuntary forward twitch, wanting to burst into the room. He flicked a glance at each guard, still wrapped up in their stories, and decided he needed to leave before he did something he'd regret. He summoned his willpower to turn his back on the scene, excusing himself to the guards.

Morgan walked down the hall, laughter from the room chasing him. He felt like he'd just looked in on a life he wasn't a part of, and maybe never would be.

He returned to the other techs in charge of the instruments, unable to match their excitement. Before he knew it the opening band took the stage, hyping up the crowd with their driving rock beats. He barely heard them, or the roaring audience. It wasn't until the openers rushed past him in a flurry of excited voices and high fives that he came out of his daze. He and the other techs hastened on stage to set it for Conquest, finishing just before the band needed to go on.

Morgan peered down the hall toward Jesse's dressing room, where he knew from Julian telling him the band always met right before taking the stage. Kenny walked out with Brad and Julian following. His heart clenched at the sight of Julian prepared for the stage, his pale blond hair styled so the jagged angles looked tousled. He wore a pair of dark brown leather pants with a fire red shirt that clung to his slender body. For the first time since he'd met him, he saw Julian as a rock star. A grin pulled at Morgan's lips. And a hot one.

His moment of pleasure dissipated as the image of the young guy touching Julian invaded his mind. Instead of it rousing jealousy in him, sorrow came. He didn't want to lose him. They'd only had a day together, but he wanted so many more. He sighed

aloud. Things were so simple, so easy, when it was just the two of them. The challenges of Julian's public life never entered his mind, and now he realized how naïve it was to not consider it.

Morgan watched Julian and the others lay their hands over one of Jesse's. With Jesse shouting, "Let's do it!" they snapped their hands down and broke. Jesse spun for the stage with the others following. Morgan stood where he'd be within touch range of Julian as he passed, needing even a fleeting moment of closeness with him.

Julian slowed his strides, falling further back from the others. His eyes met Morgan's, a soft smile on his lips. As he walked by, he pressed something into Morgan's hand and spoke in a barely audible voice, "For after the show."

Morgan glanced down. In his hand was a card to access the parking garage in Julian's building and a key. He stared at them for a brief moment until joy burst through him. He looked at Julian. Each band member stood on a platform that would spring them through trap doors in the floor. Julian winked at him. Morgan smiled, then saw Evan step in front of Jesse, giving him a kiss before handing him a mic.

Jesse took a few deep breaths. He closed his eyes and bounced in place a couple times, then raised the mic. He let his honeyed tenor flow out in a smooth breath, going from mid-range to high. The crowd exploded at the sound of his voice, blasts erupted as pyrotechnics shot flames into the air, all timed to the lifts launching the band members up to the stage.

Morgan moved around the side of the stage to see them. The crowd roared so loudly the first notes of Conquest's number one single, "Twisted Destiny," were lost, but only for a moment until the band took over the arena with the rock song, and Jesse's voice dominated all. Morgan saw Julian at the keyboards, amazed at how huge a smile he wore. Julian looked like he was having an absolute blast. His gaze was toward the crowd and on Jesse standing at the front of the stage, not needing to see the keys to hit the correct ones.

Morgan realized all his times of mourning Julian's change

from classical to rock were wrong. Being a rock star suited Julian. It's who he was. Morgan tightened his hand around the card and key and laughed to himself. He never would've thought he'd have a rock star for a boyfriend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Julian glanced at the clock in the living room. Almost two in the morning. The show had ended at around eleven-thirty, then he went out to a club with the guys to celebrate their kickoff concert, but by one o'clock, Jesse was ready to call it an early night. He claimed he wanted to sleep a full night in his and Evan's own bed one more time before they hit the road. Though, from the way Jesse and Evan had been bumping and grinding against each other on the dance floor, he really doubted sleep was all they intended.

Julian picked up the phone from the end table beside him. He wanted to call Morgan again, but he'd already tried him twice, once after the concert to let him know where they were going, then again on his way home. Both times Morgan's voicemail answered. He felt so anxious to see him, touch him, be held by him. While the evening had been a great time, Morgan never strayed far from his thoughts.

One of the hardest moments of the night came at the meet-and-greet where he was forced to watch the loving team of Jesse and Evan, added with Kenny and Krista, while he stood alone knowing the man he wanted was in the same building. Not to mention the pushy young man who came right out and told him he wanted to have sex with him. While he might have considered it before, it simply annoyed him now. He let the boy down gently, though it took a couple times of saying no to convince him.

Lying on the couch beside him, Chopin's head snapped up and toward the hall, his ears and body alert. Julian heard the door opening. Chopin leaped off the couch, racing toward it. Julian hopped up and restrained himself from sprinting toward the door with equal enthusiasm despite feeling it inside. He turned into the hall to Morgan softly laughing and petting the excited dog.

"He missed you," Julian said.

Morgan looked up at him. Julian felt his entire body respond at the sight of his soft brown eyes.

Morgan moved toward him. "Was he the only one?"

Julian stepped forward to meet him. "Far from it."

Julian pressed his body to him. His arms went around Morgan's neck as their lips met. The passion of Morgan's kiss evoked a moan from Julian. He sank his fingers into Morgan's hair. He slowly drew back from the kiss, but kept a tight hold on him. "I was beginning to worry about you."

Morgan rested his forehead on Julian's. "I'm sorry. Kurt kept us to get everything broken down and packed for the trucks. And lucky me, I get to be back down there at seven in the morning to help load everything."

Julian drew back slightly to meet his eyes. "That's not fair."

"That's the life of a roadie." Morgan smiled as he rubbed their noses together. "You didn't think the stage and all your equipment just magically appeared at every arena you went to, did you?"

"Well, sort of."

Morgan smiled as he closed their mouths together again. After several long moments into the kiss, he brought it to a gradual end. "You were amazing tonight. Watching you made me fully realize just how good of a rocker you are."

"I'm glad I impressed you." Julian took his hand and led him toward the living room.

"I wanted to be close to you so many times tonight."

Julian pulled him in the direction of the bedroom. "I wanted the same thing."

"Then I have a confession to make."

Julian stopped and turned to him, surprised by the serious tone of Morgan's voice. "What is it?"

Morgan exhaled a heavy sigh and released Julian's hand. He paced away from him. He stopped by the steps to the piano and

faced him. "I had a lot of doubts tonight."

Julian froze, mentally and bodily. Only his heart continued to move, and it leaped into a rapid pace of anxiety. He struggled to find his voice and managed to choke out, "Doubts? About us?"

"Yeah," Morgan said softly. He climbed the steps and sat on the piano bench, his shoulders hunched forward. "You know I don't like how we're going about things, all this secrecy. It started to weigh on me, and got me wondering if the reason you didn't want to be open about our relationship was because you didn't want anyone to know, so you could see other people."

Julian walked quickly toward him. "That's not true."

"I know. At least, I do now. I knew it before too, but then..." Morgan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, "then I started feeling insecure."

Julian went to him. He bent down, cupping Morgan's face in both hands. "There's no reason for you to feel that way."

Morgan looked into his eyes. "There isn't? I saw you tonight at the meet-and-greet. I wasn't spying on you, or maybe I was. Hell, I don't know. All I wanted was to see you. I wanted to put my fears to rest. Instead, I saw some guy doing everything short of shoving his face in your crotch to let you know he wanted you."

"But I wasn't flirting back. You have to know that."

"I do. At least, I think I do."

Julian's expression turned pained. His hands fell from Morgan's face.

Morgan grabbed both Julian's hands. "I said that wrong. Sit by me, please, so we can try to figure this out."

Julian dropped down to the bench.

Morgan turned toward him, keeping Julian's hands in his. "I think what I'm trying to say is, I never considered how your lifestyle could affect us. When I saw you tonight, I felt like an outsider looking in. It was like I didn't belong, and you were somebody else other than the man I spent the night with."

"I'm the same person regardless of whether I'm on stage or off it."

Morgan cocked his head in a thoughtful look. "Is that really true?"

Julian gazed at him, then shook his head. "Maybe not entirely. I *am* different when I'm on stage. I'm more outgoing, wilder, looser with my behavior. And I have a public persona when I'm at events, like the meet-and-greet. Not necessarily wild and loose, but certainly more outgoing.

"But don't you see that's not how I really am? I have to force myself to act in those ways, to live up to what's expected of me as a performer, and what's always been expected of me as a professional musician in general. How I am when the lights and cameras are off," Julian's voice softened, "how I am with you, is who I really am. I don't show this side to just anyone." His voice rose back to his normal pitch with determination behind it. "And I certainly don't show it to any random groupie."

Morgan squeezed Julian's hands. "I know."

"Do you?" Julian pulled his hands from Morgan's and stood up. "My life puts me in the public eye. When I'm on tour, I have to interact with more people in a week than many interact with in a year. I can't control the behavior of others. I can't stop men from flirting with me. The only thing I can control is my own behavior. The question is, can you believe that and know I'll be faithful to you?"

Morgan gripped Julian's hips and pulled him to stand between his legs. "I *can* believe that. But what you have to understand is I'm going to have these moments of jealousy. It doesn't mean I don't trust you. It just means I want to be with you."

Julian rested a gentle hand on Morgan's head and stroked his hair. "I can handle your moments of jealousy, so long as deep down you know you have nothing to be jealous about."

Morgan nodded once.

Julian bent to bring their lips together. Before kissing him, he said, "You're the only one I want, Morgan. And I promise you,

as much as you were thinking of me tonight, I was thinking of you.”

Morgan whispered Julian’s name as their lips met. He stood, pulling Julian against him. Julian slid his hands down Morgan’s arms, off them to touch his waist, and forward so he could open his jeans. With the button and zipper loosened, he rubbed across Morgan’s hips and slipped his fingertips into the back of his jeans and boxer-briefs. He pulled his lips from Morgan’s and kissed his neck. Morgan’s head fell back, and Julian lightly nipped under his jaw.

Morgan groaned softly. He lowered his head to put his lips near Julian’s ear. “How would you feel about changing things up tonight?”

Julian caressed Morgan’s chest. “I would say, stay where you are and I’ll be right back.”

A husky chuckle left Morgan’s throat. “I don’t even get the bed?”

Julian walked down the steps. “I want you bent over the bench.”

“You’re naughtier than I thought.”

Julian threw him a smirk over his shoulder before disappearing down the hall to his bedroom. He snatched the lube and a condom off the nightstand and returned to Morgan. The sight of Morgan standing by the piano, lifting his shirt over his head, the wall of windows filled with night behind him, stopped Julian in mid-stride. The muscles in Morgan’s powerfully built torso flexed with the movement. Morgan’s hands went to his hips as he pushed his jeans down with his boxer-briefs. Julian’s gaze fixed on the long, thick rod rearing up toward Morgan’s navel.

Bared of his clothing, Morgan looked toward Julian. He lifted one hand to him, a sensual smile on his lips. “You’re not going to be able to fuck me standing all the way over there.”

Julian snapped out of his daze. “I think you have a naughty side, too.”

Morgan moved to the end of the piano bench and turned his back to him. Julian gazed at the perfect V of Morgan's muscular back, from his wide shoulders down to his narrow hips.

Morgan bent forward, his hands gripping the sides of the padded leather seat, his arms locked. He kept his legs straight and spread wide apart. He glanced back at Julian. "Does this convince you further?"

Julian walked up the steps, staring at the chiseled ass cheeks before him, the taut hamstrings in Morgan's legs. He moved close behind him and rubbed his palms over Morgan's ass. "You truly have the most beautiful ass I've ever seen." He gave one cheek a slap.

Morgan let out a hard groan between clenched teeth.

Julian smirked down at him. "And you like a little rough treatment. That's a surprise considering how gentle you are with me."

A couple of ragged chuckles escaped Morgan's throat. "Well, it depends on my mood, but doesn't everybody like it a little rough once in a while?"

"Very true. Then you might like a little toy I have in the bedroom. Remember at the auction that riding crop Jesse said he was throwing in with Kenny?"

Morgan wet his lips and nodded.

Julian leaned over Morgan's back to put his lips closer to his ear. "I have it."

Morgan glanced at him. "How'd you get it?"

"Krista said she wouldn't need it to keep Kenny in line, and Jesse, even though he makes no secret that he and Evan get kinky, said using a whip isn't their type of thing. He was going to throw it away, so I asked to have it. I've more than paid for it in the jokes, but it's worth it. The leather is so fine, I'd swear it was made by Versace."

Morgan grinned. "Somehow I don't think Versace is in the sex toy line."

“Which is their loss. I’d certainly buy their products.” Julian straightened. He touched his middle fingertip to the top of Morgan’s spine and ran it down to his tailbone. “Maybe for round two, if we make it into the bedroom, we can play with it a little since you seemed to enjoy the slap I laid on you.”

“I’m game for anything you want.”

Julian let out a pleased groan at Morgan’s words as he opened the lube and slicked his fingers. He set the lube on the floor, then drew two fingers slowly along Morgan’s crack to his hole. He massaged the outside of it before slipping one inside him. Morgan’s muscles clenched around it. Julian opened his pants with his free hand and pulled his own cock out, pumping it while thrusting his finger into him.

Morgan cranked his head around. “That’s not fair. I can’t see you stroking yourself.”

“One more thing I’ll give you a private performance of someday.” Julian added a second finger.

Morgan’s breath fled. He dropped his head down and rocked back toward Julian in small movements. Julian curled his fingers downward to Morgan’s gland. Morgan snapped his head up, a loud gasp left him as his channel constricted around Julian’s fingers. Those beautiful, long, graceful fingers Morgan had seen play the piano with such nimble skill, now did the same thing to his body. It seemed like a fantasy come true, and yet at the same time, the emotion he felt for Julian made this moment of reality so much better than any dream.

Julian stopped pumping himself to reach under Morgan and grip his cock. He ran his thumb over the wet slit. Morgan thrust hard and quick into Julian’s hand. Julian felt it in Morgan’s tight body, how he was nearing the point of desperation, and withdrew his touch.

Morgan folded his arms on the bench and lowered his forehead to them. “Hurry, Jules.”

Julian grinned at the back of Morgan’s head as he rolled a condom onto his cock. “That’s the first time you’ve called me

that. I like how it sounds in your voice, especially with the needy quality added to it.”

“I’ll call you evil in a moment if you don’t get your dick in me.”

Julian brushed his cock back and forth over Morgan’s hole. “I do like a man who’s not afraid to beg or talk dirty.”

“Then please, put it in and fuck me.”

“Now that’s better.”

Morgan hushed his voice, speaking with a teasing tone. “Pushy rock star.”

Julian chuckled and gave one ass cheek another slap. “You’re supposed to be begging.”

Morgan snickered. “Sorry. Should I try again?”

“Too late for that.”

Julian thrust forward, his cock forcing past Morgan’s tight rim and sinking into him. Both exhaled loud moans as their bodies joined.

Julian held Morgan’s hips. Morgan felt better than Julian had dreamed, so tight and warm. He started to thrust slow, but each one followed a little quicker. He felt his control melting. After missing him all night, then the tension between them, and hearing of Morgan’s jealousy, that to him only reinforced how much Morgan wanted him, he found he couldn’t keep a slow pace. His emotions spurred his movements, and almost without realizing it, he found himself pounding hard and fast into him.

Morgan humped back, meeting every thrust with equal force. Julian heard him moaning his name and “yes” every time their bodies slammed together. He felt Morgan tremble and gripped his cock again. It only took a few strokes. Morgan let out a deep shout. His white cum splattered down on the black seat. Julian pushed deep, rolling and grinding his hips on Morgan’s ass as pleasure overcame him with his own release.

Morgan bowed his head, trying to catch his breath. Julian ran one hand up Morgan’s back, then leaned over him. He kissed

Morgan's shoulder. "Now you can have the bed."

Morgan let out a few winded chuckles. He stretched one hand back, sinking his fingers into Julian's hair as he turned his head and met him in a kiss.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Julian yawned as he climbed out of the black limo, holding Chopin's leash. Rather than have the tour bus drive all over the city picking them up, they each took limos to the studio, where the bus idled outside the doors. Julian stared at it. The thing looked larger than the last beast they'd had. In an attempt to be inconspicuous, it didn't have decals announcing the band it carried, rather it was black, with dark tinted windows, and silver lines racing down the sides. Still, it was pretty obvious it wasn't just any bus going down the road, but it might limit groupies from tailing them if they weren't certain who was inside.

Julian saw Kenny standing outside the door, holding both of Krista's hands. He sighed, already missing Morgan. It was bad enough poor Morgan had to leave for the arena early to get the trucks loaded, but they wouldn't see each other until it was show time, and by then, they'd both be too busy to hardly say hello. At least since the staff usually stayed at the same hotels, it should be fairly easy for Morgan to sneak up to him. It was better than nothing.

Krista glanced at him as he neared. "Hey, Julian." Her gaze dropped to Chopin. "Oh, what a cute baby! I didn't know you had a dog?"

"He's a friend's, actually. I'm just taking care of him." He grinned at her. "You look well. Very happy, in fact."

She wrapped her arms around Kenny's waist and laid her head on his shoulder. "Couldn't be happier. I'll be catching up with you guys from time to time on the road to make sure everything's going alright."

Julian chuckled. "Nice job of using work as an excuse."

She giggled. "I thought so."

Julian patted Kenny's shoulder as he walked by. "Don't be too long."

"I won't," Kenny said.

Julian let Chopin climb the stairs ahead of him. As he stepped onto the bus, he saw the interior was basically a small house on wheels. Plush, brown suede seats were in the first half. The middle had a long, tan leather couch to the right side. On the left was a table with booth seats. Behind that a kitchen, and on the opposite side, more seats with a TV, DVD player, and the latest gaming consoles. After the kitchen was a small bathroom with a shower, and the back of the bus held the bunks, including another couch across the tail-end.

Julian saw Brad in one of the seats, his head tipped back, his mouth open as he snored softly. He smiled at him, despite feeling sadness as he looked at him. It didn't seem right to keep his relationship with Morgan quiet from Brad. Part of him wanted to drop down beside him, nudge him awake, and whisper the whole story to him. He couldn't deny he desperately wanted to tell someone about Morgan, just to share his happiness.

But what if Brad wasn't supportive with Morgan being a staff member? Actually, now that he thought about it, whenever he talked to Brad about any of the guys he saw, Brad would criticize each of them. Brad had never met any of them, Julian hadn't been with someone long enough for him to, but in just the things Brad picked up from general conversation, he would point out flaws. It was one of the reasons he liked talking to him. Brad would see and catch things he often didn't.

With Morgan, he didn't feel the need to have his flaws pointed out. Strange as it was, he was eager to learn those on his own. Still, if there was something with Morgan Brad didn't agree with, Morgan being a roadie could be an easy scapegoat.

Julian felt his stomach churn thinking of Brad, and all his friends, in such a way. None had ever given him a reason to. All were always supportive of him in all things. Even when Brad would pick at the men he'd been with, in the end, he'd always say, "But if he can make you happy, that's all that matters." Yet even for all the support they gave him, his top priority was protecting Morgan and his job. He refused to cause more difficulty in

Morgan's life than what he was already facing.

Julian looked away from Brad as he walked down the aisle. Jesse was slouched on the couch wrapped in his thick black leather coat, leaning against Evan with his eyes closed, his head on Evan's shoulder. Evan had his head tipped to the side, resting on Jesse's, his eyes also closed. Achilles and Iris sprang up, tails wagging at the sight of Chopin. Their pulling on the leashes caused Evan to open his eyes, as he held them both since the door was open.

"Good morning, Jules," Evan said.

"Same to you." Julian took a seat on the edge of a booth across from them, allowing Chopin to sniff noses with the other dogs. "You're both looking a bit tired. I thought you were going to get a final good night of sleep in your own bed."

Evan smirked as his eyes shut. "We had a good night of something else instead."

Julian laughed, and though Jesse's eyes didn't open, he chuckled.

"Evan," Julian said, "you should know better than to wear him out like that."

Jesse opened his eyes to look at Julian with a grin. "You're looking tired too, but there's also a chipper little glow around you. Was he good?"

A smile curved Julian's lips. "Amazingly so."

"Are you going to stay in touch with him?"

"I plan to."

"Awesome." Jesse glanced toward the bus driver seated behind the wheel. "Henry, go ahead and close the door. If he's dumb enough to stand outside in the cold, I'm not freezing my ass off with him."

The grey-haired Henry laughed and closed the door. "You want me to turn the heat up, Jesse?"

"Yes, please."

"You really should get him to come in," Evan said. "We need to get going in case we run into traffic on the way to Indy."

Julian watched as Jesse sighed and pushed off the couch. Henry once again opened the door for him to stand in the opening.

"Hey," Jesse said. "It's time to stop playing suck face. We need to get this show on the road."

Julian leaned back and peered out the window to see Kenny's retaliation.

Kenny whirled around and pointed at Jesse. "I've had to watch you playing suck face with Evan for two years! Deal with it!"

Jesse folded his arms across his chest. "For your information, I also enjoy sucking on something else of his and you've never seen me do that. But if you'd like to, I'd be happy to play the exhibitionist for you. And we've been together for almost two and a *half* years, thank you."

Kenny rubbed his face with one hand and turned to Krista. "Do you see what I'm going to have to put up with *every single day*?"

Krista smirked at Jesse as she spoke to Kenny. "He's all bark, you know that."

"It's true," Jesse said. "Ev's the biter."

Julian grinned and glanced at Evan when he heard him snickering. He turned back to the scene, listening to Kenny and Krista's voices floating through the door.

"You better go," Krista said. "But remember your promise. You're going to be a good boy who thinks only of me and doesn't even dream of touching another woman."

Kenny leaned forward to kiss her. "I could never forget."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I have someone who's going to help remind you, just in case." She looked past him to Jesse.

Kenny slowly turned his head to follow her gaze.

Jesse flashed a bright smile and waved.

Kenny looked back to Krista. "That's just cold. Don't you trust me?"

Krista laid her hand on his cheek. "Of course I do, baby. Ninety-nine point nine percent. Jesse's only going to help make sure that point one percent isn't an issue."

"I'm here to help!" Jesse chimed in.

Krista patted Kenny's cheek. "Now you better go. I'll see you in a couple weeks."

"Yeah," Kenny mumbled. He leaned to kiss her, then froze, his gaze fixed to the side.

Julian heard Jesse say, "Uh oh," and looked to him. "What is it, Jess?"

"Greg just pulled up."

Evan hopped up and hastened down the aisle to stand by Jesse.

Julian watched as Greg marched toward Kenny and Krista, his gaze locked on Kenny.

Krista smiled at him. "Hey, Dad. I'm surprised you came down."

"I wanted to talk to someone." Greg slapped his hand on Kenny's shoulder.

Even from where he sat, Julian saw Greg had a firm grip on the sensitive spot where the neck and shoulder met. Greg steered Kenny away from everyone toward the studio doors. Though Julian saw Greg was smiling, he thought it was more of him baring his teeth rather than a friendly gesture. Greg's head was bent toward Kenny's, his eyes focused on him in an intense look. His voice was too soft to be overheard, but Kenny nodded often and enthusiastically. As Greg finished talking to Kenny, he gave him a pat on the back so hard, Kenny stumbled.

Kenny went up to Krista, gave her a quick kiss, and dashed for the bus. He nearly bowled over Jesse and Evan as he sprang up the stairs.

Julian took in his rattled expression and offered a sympathetic smile. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Everything's fine." Kenny dropped down on the couch. "I just pretty much got told if I break his little girl's heart, he'd break my neck, and I'd need surgery to pull my favorite guitar from my ass. But yeah, all's good."

Julian burst out laughing, catching Brad's laughter mixed with his. He glanced at Brad. "I thought you were sleeping."

Brad looked over his seat at him. "Who can sleep with this soap opera going on?"

Jesse and Evan backed up to make room for Greg climbing onto the bus.

"You two," Greg growled.

Jesse adopted a look of innocence. "What did we do?"

"You know damn well what you did. I can't believe you two funded that little stunt of hers."

Jesse raised his voice to carry out the door. "Yeah, and she should've repaid us by waiting until we were miles away to tell you."

Krista's voice followed. "My excitement got the better of me."

Greg's gaze went to Evan. "You of all people know how I feel about her dating rock stars."

Evan moved around Jesse to be in front. "And you should know if it was anybody else, I would've tried to turn her away. But it's Kenny, and as far as rock stars go, you have to admit he's pretty mild."

Greg turned a withering look on Kenny.

"And rock stars are people too, Greg," Jesse said. "You shouldn't discriminate."

Greg aimed his look at Jesse. "You're not funny."

Evan flicked his hand in a shooing motion toward Greg. "But in all seriousness, we need to roll and I think you need to talk to

your daughter since *she* was the one who actively pursued him. So, bye.”

Greg stared at him for a moment, then sighed and shook his head. “Fine. Travel safe. Break a few legs.” His gaze went to Kenny as he said the last part.

As Greg left the bus, Jesse and Evan turned back inside. Jesse wrapped his arms around Evan’s waist from behind, laying his chin on Evan’s shoulder. “I’m cold and tired. Let’s go take a nap.”

Kenny glowered up at him. “You’re not going to start with that shit already. We haven’t even pulled away from the curb yet.”

Julian chuckled, knowing usually when Jesse said he wanted to take a nap with Evan, he meant something else entirely.

Jesse looked at Kenny. “If you must know, I really am intending to sleep.”

Evan pulled out his cell phone. “Alright, I can lie down with you, but I need to look at your calendar to see where I can squeeze in a meeting with the Dolce & Gabbana people. They want you to be the model for their new spring line.”

Jesse paused. “D&G?” A slow grin spread over his lips. “Why am I not surprised you’d be all for me modeling for them?”

“Well, when they contacted me, you know I couldn’t say no. They’ll have you dressed so hot, I can’t wait to see what they put you in. And, I really want to get a look at their new line. It’s all around good.”

Jesse gave Evan’s neck a kiss. “So this is a publicity gig with some extra benefits for you, too.”

Evan laughed softly. “You got it.”

“Will I have to do fashion shows?”

“No, we don’t have time for that. Just a photo shoot so they can put you on their website, on banners, in ads, things like that.”

“Awesome, but,” Jesse stepped in front of him and took the phone from Evan’s hand, “you getting rest is more important. You’ve been working too hard lately as it is. This can wait a

couple hours.”

Evan smiled as he brought their lips closer together. “You’re such a good boss to me.”

“Well, since you’re so devoted in your work, it’s the least I can do,” Jesse said, placing a tender kiss on Evan’s lips. He took Evan’s hand to lead him to the bunks.

“Jess,” Kenny called. “Would you really tell on me if I made a slip up? I mean, I don’t intend to and I don’t want to, but sometimes temptation and alcohol makes accidents happen.”

Jesse stopped and turned to him. “Kenny, you know I’d always protect you, but I’d also slap the shit out of you.”

“I’d be second,” Evan said.

“And I’ll follow third,” Julian added. “Sorry, Kenny, but in my experience, one’s dick never accidentally slips into another person, no matter how much alcohol they have.”

“Exactly,” Jesse agreed. “And as far as temptation goes, I think you’d do better transferring that into anticipation of seeing her. You’ve never dated anyone as good for you as her.”

“Yeah, dude,” Brad said. “If you’re stupid enough to screw things up, just give me her number now. She’s freakin’ hot.”

Kenny scowled at him.

“And with that, see you guys in a couple hours.” Jesse closed the curtain to shut out the front of the bus.

Kenny reclined on the couch. “Man, isn’t it funny how something like meeting somebody can make you want to throw everything out the window just to spend time with them? I’ve never felt like this before.”

Julian grinned at him as he unclipped Chopin from his leash. “Why, Kenny, I do think you’re in love.”

Kenny swished a hand through the air in a disregarding motion. “Nah, it’s too soon for that.”

“Love doesn’t follow a schedule. It hits when it’s inclined to.”

“Well, I’m not ready to admit it yet.” Kenny lightly kicked

Brad's foot. "You want to play a game?"

"Yeah, that'd be cool."

Kenny looked at Julian. "You want to?"

Julian sighed. "You only want me to play because I'm guaranteed to lose."

"Yeah, pretty much," Kenny teased.

"At least you're honest."

As Julian went to stand, Brad caught his wrist and gave it a gentle tug for him to stay sitting and took a seat across from him. Brad leaned over the table, hushing his voice. "Hey, I overheard what you were saying to Jesse. You met someone last night? Was it that young guy?"

"No, it was someone else."

"I didn't think that kid was your type." Brad grinned and gave Julian's forearm a light slap. "But I also know it's been a while for you, so I thought you might of reached the point where you didn't care what he looked like so long as he was warm and breathing."

Julian laughed. "It was getting close to that."

"So who's the guy? I heard you tell Jesse you were thinking of staying in touch with him, so he must've struck a chord."

Julian tensed inside. What was he supposed to say? The truth? He met Brad's gaze. It was one thing to believe he could keep things secret from his friend in his thoughts, but to sit here now, looking Brad in the eyes, was entirely different. He could almost feel the truth wanting to push its way out. But Morgan stood stronger in his mind, and the desire to keep Morgan's job safe.

Julian cleared his throat. Maybe telling partial truth would make it easier. "Actually, I met him a couple of weeks ago, but it wasn't until the other day things got more serious between us."

Brad sat back slightly. "A couple of weeks ago? Why haven't you said anything about him?"

"Well, I wasn't even sure at first if he was interested, or if

anything would come of it. And we've all been so busy with getting ready for the road, we just haven't had time to talk."

"We do now. And we'll have a hell of a lot of time on this bus."

Julian's heart started to beat faster. He was lying himself into a corner. Or maybe it was the opposite with telling a little truth, now he didn't now how to get away from telling all of it.

Kenny voice sounded from the back by the entertainment area. "What game do you guys want to play?"

"You pick," Brad called, then looked back to Julian. "So what's this guy's name?"

Julian cleared his throat. "His name?"

"You *did* catch his name before you slept with him, didn't you? Since you said you've been talking for a couple weeks, I figure you're calling him something other than 'hey you.'"

"Yeah, well, it's just..." Julian's mind worked frantically. He could just tell him Morgan's name. It's not like he was the only person in the world with that name, though he was probably the only one working the tour. There had to be a way around it. An idea struck him and he spoke before it finished playing through his mind. "It's just he'd rather wait until he can meet everyone in person."

Brad gave him a curious look. "That's a little odd, don't you think?"

"No, he just likes to make a full first impression himself." Julian clenched his teeth together. It all sounded terrible to his ears, he knew to Brad's it sounded even worse.

"I still think it sounds weird, like he could be hiding something," Brad said. "And I really don't like the way he's ordering you around saying you can't tell anyone his name."

"He didn't say that specifically." Julian glanced out the window. The conversation was getting worse by the second. Now he was putting words into Morgan's mouth and it could effect how the others would look at him later. Guilt stabbed through him, for

both Morgan and Brad.

Brad slid his hand across the table and touched Julian's arm, his voice soft. "Is everything okay, Jules? I've never seen you like this."

Julian put on a bright smile and forced lightness into his voice. "I'm fantastic! I'm just a little distracted. You know how it is when you first start seeing someone, they're all you think about."

"I guess. It just seems like it's more than that."

Kenny's voice called out again, "Are you guys coming, or what?"

Brad glanced back on him. "Man, give us a minute!" He faced around to Julian. "I just hope you know if ever you have something going on, even if it's something you feel embarrassed or weird about, that you can come to me."

Julian laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood. "You don't have to tell me that. Of course I know!"

"I kinda felt like I had to say it."

Julian laid his hand over Brad's, giving it as squeeze as he smiled warmly at him. "You don't have anything to worry about."

The grumble Brad gave in answer expressed he wasn't as certain.

Julian patted his hand and stood up. "Now let's go before Kenny has a fit. But you better have my back, and not let Kenny kick my ass all over the virtual place."

As Brad turned to walk up the aisle, he whispered, "I always have your back, Jules."

Julian gazed at Brad's back, a sting of pain added to the guilt at the hurt he heard in Brad's hushed voice. He was starting to think he'd put himself into a worse situation than even Jesse and Evan had faced. At least the people closest to them were privy to their relationship, but he couldn't even let the people he cared the most about in on him and Morgan. And what was worse, deep down, his instincts rebelled against what he was doing. It wasn't who he was to lie like this.

He started to wonder if it was worth it. So what if Morgan lost his job because of their relationship. It didn't mean him and Morgan would have to stop seeing each other. Except, Morgan would have to go back home to try and find work. Julian shook his head as he followed after Brad. He couldn't let that happen. He knew it was selfish, but he wanted Morgan with him.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and pulled it out to see he had a text message from Morgan. He opened it to two simple words, *Missing you*. As Kenny and *Brad* debated on video games, he slowly sat down, unable to dim the smile on his lips.

Julian hit reply and typed, *Missing you, too*, and sent it. Kenny's words couldn't be more true. He'd also reached the point of being ready to disregard everything to be with Morgan. Save for those things that were important to Morgan himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julian let out a discontented groan as the alarm clock repeatedly beeped. Morgan rolled away from him to slap it into silence. As he returned to snuggle, Julian released a pleased groan and shifted back into him.

A drowsy chuckle rumbled in Morgan's throat. "Don't you start with that ass wiggling. I need to get back to my room. I've got an early day again with the trip to Detroit ahead of us."

Julian reached back to touch Morgan's hair. "I can't help it if I'm greedy."

Morgan kissed Julian's shoulder. "I like you greedy."

Julian turned his head toward him. Morgan greeted Julian's lips in a sensual kiss. As the kiss grew more heated, he slowly drew away.

"I really have to go," he whispered against Julian's lips.

"I know." Julian gave him another kiss.

They eased apart a second time, and Morgan climbed out of bed. Julian moved to get up, but he stopped him with a hand on Julian's hip. "No, you stay in bed and get some more rest. There's no reason for you to get up, too."

"These late nights and early mornings are going to burn you out."

Morgan pulled on his boxer-briefs and picked up his jeans from the floor. "Such is the life of a roadie, from what I've been told. But I was looking at the concert schedule yesterday, and it looked like there are quite a few breaks."

"Evan arranged it that way. He wanted us to have more and longer times off to keep us rested."

Morgan finished zipping up his jeans and grabbed his shirt. "I saw in a couple weeks, there's going to be a week long break before the show in Charlotte. Did you have any plans for it?"

“Not really. I was thinking of going back home. Evan has the Phoenix private jet booked and they’re going home for that week to celebrate Jesse’s birthday. I know Kenny’s going back, too. Don’t know what Brad’s doing.”

Fully dressed, Morgan sat on the edge of the bed beside Julian. “I was thinking we could go camping. The mountains in North Carolina are beautiful, and the leaves are probably starting to turn.”

Julian sat up and took Morgan’s hand. “That’s a wonderful idea. We could stay at the Biltmore. When I was young, we took a few family vacations there as a change since we were always going to Martha’s Vineyard.”

Morgan chuckled softly. “That’s not exactly the type of camping I was talking about. I’m talking hike out to the middle of the woods, pitch a tent, no people around for miles, camping.”

Julian’s expression turned tentative. “What about a bathroom?”

“You’ll have your pick of thousands. Oaks, maples, maybe a pine tree here and there.”

Julian held up one hand, waving it back and forth as he shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve never, in my entire life, peed outside, and I don’t intend to start now.”

“What do you mean you’ve never peed outside? Every man has peed outside!”

“Not this one. I won’t even use one of those disgusting portable things.”

“Going outside is a lot cleaner than those.” Morgan took Julian’s hand, grinning as he kissed his knuckles. “You’re so sheltered. I’m seeing now I need to get you out in the world.”

Julian rolled his eyes. “I’ve seen the world several times.”

“No, you haven’t. You may have traveled it, but you haven’t *seen* it, and I’m going to show it to you.”

Julian leaned toward him. “I’d love to see the world if it was shown to me by you. Except for the whole peeing outside part.”

Morgan brought their smiling lips together, then stood, his hand on Julian's cheek. "See you in Detroit?"

Julian laid his hand over Morgan's. "You know you will."

Morgan turned to leave, his hand lingering on Julian's cheek until he was forced to pull it away. He petted and talked to Chopin, then headed for the door. He cracked it open, peered up and down the hall, and seeing no one, stepped out.

Morgan sighed as he walked to the elevators. One night of sneaking around and he was already sick of it. He took the elevator down a couple floors to his room, swiped the card through the lock, and entered to the sound of the shower running. He was lucky that he got paired with Remmy to bunk with, or would've considered himself lucky if he was actually going to be spending any time in his rooms. He got along really well with him, and had learned more from him than anyone else.

He went to his suitcase and dug out fresh clothes as he heard the shower turned off. He waited for Remmy to finish, then grabbed the TV remote and reclined on the unused bed.

Remmy walked out, a white towel around his waist, another on his head as he dried his hair. "Hey, I'm glad you're back. I was starting to wonder about you."

Morgan glanced at him. With hair wet, Remmy looked even younger than his twenty-four years. His wiry body and soft features made Remmy appear like he could've blended in with Morgan's former students at the high school.

Morgan looked back to the TV. "Yeah, sorry. I guess I should've told you I wouldn't be crashing here last night."

Remmy sat on the opposite bed. "It's okay, but I should warn you, if you're banging someone on the tour, you need to play it cool. If Kurt finds out, he'll have your ass. He's real anti-intermingling, you know?"

"He really needs to get over that incident from the last tour."

"He's always been that way, which is why everyone just sleeps around behind his back. I think it's because he never gets any and

wants everyone else to feel as miserable as him.”

“Yeah, that could be it.”

Remmy stood and returned to the bathroom, leaving the door open as he continued to speak. “So, are you going to be not crashing in our rooms a lot?”

“It’s looking that way so far.”

“Are you going to tell me who she is?”

“Didn’t you just tell me to play things cool?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean with me.”

“So that’s how it works. Sorry, either way, I think it’s better if I stay discreet for a little while longer, even with you, so I’m not going to tell you who *he* is.”

Silence answered him from the bathroom.

After a long moment, Morgan slid off the bed with his fresh clothes in hand. He stepped into the bathroom doorway to find Remmy staring down at the sink. Remmy slowly looked up at him. Morgan slapped his hand down on Remmy’s bare shoulder. “Come on, I don’t hide it that well. I don’t even try to hide it at all. Now, are you done in here?”

Remmy blinked rapidly a couple times and snapped his gaze away to grab his clothes folded on the toilet lid. “Yeah, yeah I’m done.”

As Remmy exited, Morgan walked into the bathroom and prepared to close the door. “I guess judging by your reaction, it’ll be a good thing I won’t be here much.”

Remmy quickly shook his head. “No, man, it’s cool! I was just surprised, that’s all. I’m down with you being gay.”

Morgan laughed. “Alright, good.”

As he shut the door, his laughter stopped and his smile dropped from his lips. He lowered his head and put his fingertips to his forehead in an attempt to massage away a growing headache caused by Remmy’s warning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julian walked through the backstage of yet another stadium. Only a little over a week on the road and they all already looked the same. He scanned for Morgan, having checked on stage and not finding him there. He rounded some large equipment crates and saw him leaning back on one, laughing with three other roadies and Remmy. For an instant, he felt a touch of discomfort, as if despite all their moments of intimacy, he didn't know how to approach him.

In this atmosphere, surrounded by his co-workers, none of them knowing their relationship, he got a glimpse of how Morgan must have felt the night he saw him at the meet-and-greet. This was a part of Morgan's life he didn't share in, one he didn't fully know. Irony touched him in two ways; at now being subjected to what Morgan had experienced and how for all his time working as a musician, so much of the behind the scenes aspects were just that to him. Hundreds of tasks performed by just as many hands went into these concerts, yet he realized how blind he'd always been to it all, just expecting things would be done for him.

A grin pulled at his lips. It seemed Morgan was already showing him the world.

Morgan looked toward him. Remmy and the other roadies stopped talking to smile politely at him.

"Hey, Julian," Remmy said. "How's it going?"

Julian stepped toward the group. "It'd be going better if you all didn't stop having fun just because I showed up. I'm not Kurt, you know."

"Yeah, you're a lot cuter," Remmy said.

The others laughed, except Morgan who only managed a tight smile.

"Why thank you, Remmy, that's sweet of you." Julian looked

at Morgan. "But I guess I *am* going to spoil your fun, because I need to borrow you. I was doing a sound check, and noticed when I try to play an A sharp I'm having to hit the sharp harder than usual to get it to sound. I think something might be wrong with the hammer."

"Really?" Morgan said. "I'll double check it."

"Thank you." Julian nodded to Remmy and the others as he turned to leave.

Morgan fell into stride beside him. He hushed his voice. "I could kiss you for rescuing me."

Julian glanced at him. "It looked like you were having fun to me."

"I'm a good faker." Morgan exhaled a heavy sigh. "Working this concert isn't that much different than when I was a teacher; angst and gossip abounds. I understood it from my students, they were teenagers trying to figure the whole life thing out, but these people are adults and still acting like they're in high school. Of course, most of the other teachers acted like they had never left high school at all, so maybe's it's just the way people are."

"A lot of people never fully grow up. You're just a diamond in the rough."

Julian glanced at Morgan with a grin, then noticed how tired he looked. The night before when Morgan made it up to his room, he fell asleep the instant he got in bed. When Morgan woke in the morning, he apologized over and over for crashing on him. He'd told Morgan not to worry about it, that they didn't need to have sex every night. Truthfully, he got just as much pleasure out of simply sleeping beside him, and was just glad to have him close. Julian knew firsthand, just how draining the constant travel was, and in addition to all the physical labor Morgan did, it was amazing he had any energy left for sex at all.

Julian lightly touched Morgan's hand. "You need more rest."

Morgan brushed his fingers over Julian's. "Easier said than done."

"I don't understand why Kurt has you doing so many other duties. You're in charge of my instruments, you're to be a part of sound checks. All this extra work, helping to build the stage, loading trucks, aren't part of your responsibilities."

"They are according to Kurt. He doesn't like me. Hasn't since I started."

"Maybe I should start letting him know how little I care for him."

"I think you're better than to lower yourself to his level."

"I don't know about that."

They walked onto the stage where a handful of techs were working on finishing the setup. Julian took a seat at the black grand. Morgan moved to the right side of the keyboard and tapped every sharp and flat. All sounded clear and perfectly. He grinned at Julian. "Just as I thought."

"Well of course. It's tended to by the best."

Morgan threw a quick glance from side to side, and seeing the others had left the stage, he placed a chaste, but sensual kiss on Julian's lips.

Julian's eyes remained closed for a moment even after Morgan pulled back. He opened his eyes to Morgan's gaze and laid his hand over his. "You shouldn't have risked that."

"Some things are worth taking a risk for. Besides, you worry too much."

"Maybe. And just so you know, I'm looking forward to our time alone together. Even if it does mean I have to pee outside."

Morgan winked at him. "Keep making sacrifices like that and I'll know just how much you really care about me."

Julian laughed. "Some boys want their partners to express their feelings with gifts, some like quality time, some want it through sex, but not you."

"What can I say? I march to my own drummer. But hey, I meant to tell you, I've got it all planned out, where we'll hike, and

renting some gear.”

Julian’s bright expression faded. “Renting? You don’t mean to rent a tent, do you?”

“Don’t have another choice. Mine’s at home.”

“Can I say I’m opposed to the idea of sleeping where who knows how many other people have?”

Morgan leaned down toward him again as if preparing to tell him a secret. “Jules, sweetheart, I hate to break it to you, but you do that every night in your hotel rooms.”

Julian blinked at him in silence for a moment. “I never thought of it like that. But it’s still not the same. The linens are cleaned daily on the beds.”

“We’ll be in a sleeping bag, not on the tent floor.”

Julian pulled in a deep breath. “I’ve never slept in a sleeping bag before.”

Morgan stared at him, then smiled and shook his head. “I don’t know why that surprises me.”

“Those won’t be rented too, will they?”

“No, I’ll buy us a new one.”

Confusion crossed Julian’s face. “Won’t we need two?”

Morgan moistened his smirking lips with a slip of his tongue. “I thought we’d share.”

Julian’s face brightened once again. “Well then, this could be more fun than I was anticipating.”

“*And* since it’s your first time and I want it to be good for you, we’re only going to do it one night, then I’m taking you to the Biltmore for the rest of the week. I’ve already got the room booked.”

Julian exhaled a shocked breath. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Morgan rubbed the knuckles of Julian’s hand with his thumb. “But it’ll make you happy, right?”

“Yes...well actually, no. Not if you’re going to pay. Let me

cover the Biltmore.”

“Jules—”

“Either let me pay or I won’t go at all.”

Morgan sighed. “You really have a stubborn streak, you know that?”

Julian continued to stare at him with a hard expression.

Morgan held up his hands to signal defeat. “Alright, you pick up the Biltmore.”

A smile sprang to Julian’s lips. “Thank you!”

“Like I had a choice! Where’s Chopin, by the way?”

“With Jesse. He and Evan were going to take their dogs for a walk and asked if I’d like for them to take him. Do you mind?”

“No, it’s fine. From what I’ve seen, he seems to really like Jesse and—”

“Morgan! Just the man I was looking for.”

Julian looked over the top of the piano at Kurt walking briskly toward them. He glanced at Morgan, and thought Morgan looked as baffled as he felt by the odd cheeriness in Kurt’s voice.

Kurt slapped Morgan on the back. “You getting this thing ready to rock tonight?”

“Yeah,” Morgan said, his tone not matching Kurt’s jollity. “We thought there was a problem with the A sharp, but it’s all set now.”

“Perfect! Then if you have a moment and if Mr. Forrester doesn’t need you anymore,” Kurt smiled at Julian before bringing his attention back to Morgan, “I need to borrow these muscles of yours to help move a couple crates.”

“That’s fine.” Morgan looked at Julian. “I’m glad it’s all worked out now.”

Julian nodded, catching he was meaning more than fixing an unbroken piano. “So am I.”

“Have a good show tonight, Mr. Forrester,” Kurt called over

his shoulder as he escorted Morgan away.

Morgan glanced back and did a subtle shrug to show his further confusion.

Julian glowered at Kurt's back. Just a few more days, then he'd have Morgan to himself with no interruptions.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the stadium lights dimmed, Julian rushed across the stage from the keyboards to the piano to play the opening notes for the ballad, “Shattered.” They always rocked the crowds for the first few songs, then brought things to a slower pace with a couple ballads, only to lift them up again. For him, he wouldn’t be able to match the slower pace, on the inside at least. He was just four days away from his week with Morgan.

Julian slid onto the bench and turned his gaze to Jesse standing at the front of the stage. He waited for Jesse’s signal. His right hand at his hip, Jesse gave a subtle flick in Julian’s direction. Julian touched his fingers to the keys. He froze at the sound. It was completely flat. He snapped his gaze to Jesse. Jesse peered back at him out the corner of his eye. Julian’s gaze darted to the piano again and once more tried to sound the notes he needed. Again, the middle C was silent.

Soft guitar started to play the notes he should be playing, and he realized Jesse had signaled Kenny in an attempt to cover the error. Jesse’s voice lifted to an angelic pitch as he sang a scale, the crowd clapping, oblivious to the disaster happening on stage. Julian’s chest tightened with panic. Not for himself or the concert, but for Morgan. How could the note be dead? Morgan checked the instrument. He knew he did. Didn’t he?

Julian gave a quick shake of his head. Jesse couldn’t stall forever and he needed to think of something. He’d have to improvise. He was certain he could cover the loss of the middle C so long as all the other keys worked. He closed his eyes as Jesse’s voice hushed and Kenny’s guitar quieted. Julian lifted his hands, and the notes he wanted rang clear and pure.

As he worked his way through the song, all he could think of was Morgan, and Jesse’s wrath when he learned of the problem. “Shattered” came to a soft conclusion and the stage lights blackened. Normally after the ballad, he’d remain on stage for

his solo portion while the others took a quick break, but with the piano broken, he didn't know what to do. He saw Jesse at Kenny's side, then turn to hasten off stage. He realized Jesse was changing the set list on the fly and bumping Kenny's solo up to buy some time. As Jesse moved to descend the stairs, he met Julian's eyes and waved for him to follow.

Julian rushed down the stairs to chaos below the stage. Jesse stood drinking from a bottle of water while Evan laid a white towel around his shoulders. Julian stepped quickly toward him. "Jesse—"

Jesse laid his hand on Julian's arm. "Are you okay?"

Julian startled inside at the concern in Jesse's face and voice. "Yeah, I'm fine. There was a slight malfunction with the piano..." His words trailed off, not knowing what else to say. He wanted to cover for Morgan, but it was so obvious something had gone wrong with the instrument.

Jesse marched in the direction of his dressing room. "Well that's a relief. You scared me. You never screw up, so I was afraid something was wrong with you."

Julian trotted to keep up with him. "You're not mad?"

Jesse swung into his dressing room and tore his sweat soaked shirt over his head. "At you? Of course not. However," he raised his voice to carry out the door, "I want the tech who's in charge of the piano brought to me!"

"No!"

Jesse looked at Julian. Evan paused in wiping Jesse down to stare at him.

"There's no time right now," Julian added hastily. "We need to get back out there."

Evan moved behind Jesse and held up a white, button down silk shirt for him. "He's right, gorgeous. We'll worry about it after the show. Right now, we need to get the piano changed out with the backup, and hope it's ready to go."

Jesse slid into the shirt with Evan adjusting it on his shoulders.

“Alright, but I’m still going to talk to him later.”

Jesse and Evan moved toward the door. As they passed him, Julian made eye contact with Evan, and the way Evan looked at him made him feel as though he was made of crystal clear glass. He flicked his gaze away from Evan’s piercing blue one and followed after them.

Jesse’s shirt billowed behind him with his quick strides, having not bothered to button it. He called out orders as he walked. “We need the backup grand on the stage now! Black the lights and put a single spotlight on me. I’m going to do my solo portion so I can keep an eye on things up top. The set list is changed. After my part, we’re going to launch straight into ‘Euphoria,’ then Brad will do his solo to take us into ‘Vanish.’ From there we’ll do ‘Tomorrow’ and after it Jules will take the stage, followed by ‘No Fear.’ Let’s move, people! Go, go, go!”

Julian jogged up to Jesse’s side. “I was thinking about the piano, and I bet the wire snapped after sound check. It was probably already weak.”

Jesse glanced at him as he put in his earpiece that allowed him to hear himself and the music un-amplified without the crowd noise. He took an earplug for his other ear. “We’ll check it over after the show. Which reminds me,” he spun toward a cluster of roadies, “no one goes near that piano once it’s off stage.”

Evan clipped the receiver to the in-ear monitor on the back of Jesse’s black leather pants. “I’ll check it as soon as it comes off and put guards on it. You focus on what you need to do.”

Jesse nodded and gave him a light kiss, then bounded up the stairs to the stage, blasting out a greeting to the crowd timed with Kenny’s guitar solo ending.

Julian stared up at the opening Jesse disappeared through. When he turned, he saw Morgan walking toward him. Julian gave a quick shake of his head. Morgan looked at him in confusion, but turned and went back the way he’d come. Julian put a hand over his heart. It raced so fast, yet felt so tense at the same moment. Somehow, he needed to find a way to appease Jesse

before Morgan was brought to him.



Julian descended the stairs behind a laughing Jesse, hoping his bright spirits meant Morgan's job could be salvaged. All things considered, the remainder of the concert went off flawlessly. The pianos were swapped without incident, there wasn't a single misstep in changing the order of the songs, and three encores later they finally said goodnight to a sold-out stadium still screaming for more.

Jesse jumped down the last two steps and into Evan's arms. "Was it awesome or what?"

"It was incredible." Evan handed him a damp towel.

Jesse wiped his face and the back of his neck as he walked toward the dressing rooms. "Considering the earlier fiasco, hell yeah it was! Did you get a chance to look at the piano?"

"Yeah. Let's go look at it before you get changed."

Julian felt his heart clench to the point where it didn't seem possible it could beat. "Can't it wait? I'd really like to get out of these sweaty clothes."

Evan glanced at him. "It won't take long."

Julian's mind raced for ways to help Morgan as he trailed after them. Despite his desperation, no explanations or ideas came to his mind. They rounded a corner to two guards standing by the black grand. He couldn't believe Evan really had put guards on the thing. It spoke to how serious a situation Evan must think it was. But even if Morgan had messed up, it still seemed blown out of proportion.

With the piano's lid up, Evan leaned over the side. He reached into the chamber and held up a loose string. "Look at this."

Jesse stood at his side. "I guess it did break. But the question is, when did it happen? I want to know who sound checked it before the show, if it was checked at all."

Evan shook his head. "No, look more closely." He rubbed his thumb over the string's end. "It's smooth, not jagged like it

would be if it snapped. And when I first looked in at it, it was lying perfectly flat inside. If it snapped, it would've recoiled from the tension."

Jesse's countenance sobered. "It was cut."

"That's what I'm thinking."

Julian moved closer to them. "But who would do that?"

Evan folded his arms on the edge of the chamber. "I was hoping you might have an idea. Have you had any disagreements with the tech in charge of your instruments?"

"No. He's an absolute professional and exceptional at caring for my instruments."

Brad jumped into the conversation. "Then why didn't he notice it was busted?"

"Maybe it was cut after the sound check," Jesse said.

Julian nodded quickly. "That must be it."

Jesse let out a snort. "Well then, that narrows it down to countless other people. Have you pissed off anyone lately, Jules?"

"Who says it has to be someone Julian's pissed off?" Kenny broke in. "You play the piano during shows, too. Maybe it's someone you got on the bad side of."

Jesse gave him a doubtful look. "First off, how is it possible for me to be on anyone's bad side?" At Kenny's flat expression, he added. "Don't answer that. But second, I've been a very good boy and haven't yelled at anyone all tour. Okay, I've given orders, but that's not the same as yelling."

"Man, there's no way we're going to find out who did this," Brad said.

Evan looked at him. "I don't know about that. It might be tough this time, but if someone's holding bad feelings against Julian, Jesse, or any of you for that matter since it could be someone who wanted to see the whole band embarrassed, then they'll try something like this again. What we need to do is be vigilant. As part of that, I don't want any of you going anywhere

without at least one guard on your ass.”

Jesse rolled his eyes. “Ev—”

Evan poked Jesse’s shoulder with his index finger. “You especially won’t argue with me about this.”

Jesse sighed. “Fine.”

Evan threw a glance at all of them. “I mean it, guys. If someone was malicious enough to do this,” he held up the piano string, “who knows what their behavior could escalate to.”

Julian started to nod in agreement, then froze at the sight of Morgan striding toward them. He caught Morgan’s gaze and once again tried to warn him back, but Morgan looked away from him, setting his gaze on Jesse and Evan. Julian watched, helpless, as he stopped in front of them, looking directly into Jesse’s eyes.

“Jesse, I’m not entirely certain what happened tonight, but from the gossip going around and the quick change of the pianos, I’ve figured out something was wrong with this one.” Morgan laid his hand on the grand. “It’s my job to make sure it plays perfectly and I take full responsibility for any malfunction with it. I did thoroughly sound check it, and it was fine right before the show, but clearly I must’ve missed something.”

Jesse nodded thoughtfully. “I appreciate that...what was your name again?”

“Morgan.”

“Right, Morgan. I remember we met before the tour started. Accountability and responsibility are two things I’ve discovered people rarely own up to. It takes a lot of character and strength, and I’m glad to have someone who possesses both on my staff, even if he isn’t accountable or responsible for what happened tonight.”

Morgan shook his head in confusion. “What?”

“The wire was cut,” Evan said, and filled him in on what he’d discovered.

As Evan finished, Morgan aimed a concerned glance at Julian. “I don’t understand why someone would do something like that.”

"That's what we're trying to figure out, too," Julian said. "Evan believes one of us may have gotten on the bad side of a staff member."

Morgan snapped his gaze toward Evan. "Something has to be done. If there's a lunatic running around here who'll damage the instruments, possessions that are intimate and important to the people who play them, and in this case Julian, something has to be done to protect him. Why aren't the cops here? This needs to be reported!"

Evan held up a hand as if to slow Morgan's growing panic. "I agree, something needs to be done, but calling the cops isn't it. We'll be gone tomorrow, and the person who did this most likely will be with us. So what good could local cops do? We're better off with our own security and running a private investigation. These guys won't even be walking into a restroom without a guard waiting outside."

"That's a little extreme, don't you think?" Jesse said.

Evan turned to him. "No, I don't, and you already agreed to not argue with me."

Jesse grumbled in consent.

Evan brought his attention back to Morgan. "So I'll amend what I said and have it everyone will be as well protected as they'll allow themselves to be. But also, no one knows what we've uncovered except for the people here, so keep it on the down low. If the jackass who did this thinks they got away with it, they might feel safe enough to let their guard down."

Morgan nodded slowly, throwing another glance at Julian.

Jesse smiled at Evan. "And on that note, Inspector Ev, let's get ready to head back to the hotel."

Evan laid a light slap on Jesse's leather clad ass. "Inspector Ev, I like the sound of that. Maybe we can bust out the handcuffs tonight, and I'll give you a thorough interrogation."

Jesse laughed and slid his arm around Evan's waist. "I'm all for it."

Julian took a seat at the piano. "I'll follow you guys in a moment."

Jesse glanced back at him. "Don't worry, we'll have it fixed and sounding perfect before the next show."

"I know," Julian said softly. When everyone had left except the two guards, he looked up at Morgan. "I don't even know what to make of any of this."

"I don't either, but you need to listen to Evan and do what he says with security."

"That could be problematic."

"It would be more problematic if something happened to you."

Julian lowered his gaze.

Morgan bent over the piano as if looking into the chamber and whispered, "We'll talk tonight."

Julian mustered a weak smile and nodded once. He stood, his shoulders sagging. "Until later, then."

He walked away, his entire body feeling weighted with worry as he wondered how he and Morgan were going to manage with even more of their few moments together taken away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Julian slid out of the limo. Just a couple of hours before, the arena he stood outside was bursting with life and noise. Now with the fans gone, it was hard to tell a concert had been performed at all. As he walked toward a back entrance, he glanced down to make certain his leather duster was buttoned completely shut. A smirk touched his lips. With how the coat covered him down to his ankles, no one would be the wiser, least of all Morgan.

He saw a handful of roadies wheeling crates onto a truck. They glanced up at him and gave confused greetings. Julian could understand why. Once a show was done, he and the guys never returned to an arena unless they were playing back-to-back at the same venue the next day. Either way, they certainly didn't return at one o'clock in the morning. But he had a purpose for being there, a mission.

Julian nodded to the roadies and headed inside. As he walked down the halls, he saw most of the staff was gone other than the few he saw, making him all the more irritated the Morgan was forced to work. He decided after they returned from the week off, he'd talk to Kurt about it. This couldn't go on. And yes, part of it was his own selfishness.

Two nights ago when Morgan crashed on him, he had been understanding about it. When Morgan came to him late again the night before and the same thing happened, he couldn't deny being a little irritated. Especially after what happened with the piano, he wanted to be with him. Morgan held him close and snuggled him as they fell asleep, which was great, but things were shaping up for it to happen the same way tonight, and there was no way he wasn't going to get laid three nights in a row when he had a boyfriend.

Julian rounded a corner and saw Morgan locking a crate.

Morgan glanced up, his eyes widened in surprise. "Jules, what are—"

Julian continued past him, beckoning to follow as he walked away.

Morgan checked for other workers, then hastened after Julian, trailing behind him down the dimly lit hall. Julian swung into a dressing room. Morgan went in after him, turning to him. "What are you doing here? And why are you here alone? Why don't you have guards—"

Having closed the door, Julian faced him and shoved him hard on the chest.

Morgan flew back a couple steps before catching himself. "Jules!"

Julian walked forward and pushed him again, sending him back another step toward the couch. "Morgan, darling, you know I love to talk to you, but right now I'm in the mood to do one thing, and answering your questions isn't it. So sit your ass down and take off whatever clothes you want. I really don't care what you have on so long as your cock is out and hard."

Morgan's mouth dropped open with a shocked cough. He remained standing in front of the couch.

Julian placed one hand on his hip, tapping an impatient beat with his index finger as he waited for Morgan to recover from his shock. Five seconds ticked by, far too long in his opinion, so he decided he'd just have to take what he wanted.

He gave Morgan another shove. The backs of Morgan's knees hit the couch's edge and buckled. He fell into a sitting position. Julian stepped forward, straddling Morgan's legs as he stood over him, shaking his head as he started to unbutton his coat. "I see now that my student hasn't been learning his lessons properly. You're supposed to react much faster to what I want."

"It's just you've caught your student by surprise..." Morgan's voice trailed off as Julian's coat opened down to mid-chest, revealing bare skin beneath. He stared, captivated as each button revealed more of Julian's fair skin. As the coat fell open to show Julian nude beneath, Morgan's breath left him.

Julian smirked at him. "You're being a bad student again.

Aren't you forgetting something I asked you to do?"

Morgan stared at him, continuing to drink in Julian's nakedness barely concealed by the coat, his brown snakeskin boots still on. His hands went to his jeans, his fingers working quickly to get them open. Morgan turned on the couch, lying on his back as he edged his jeans and his underwear down. They barely reached the middle of his thighs when Julian climbed onto the couch with him, flicking the bottom of the coat behind him.

Julian went to his hands and knees over him. He lowered his head to put his lips close to Morgan's. "I think you're learning now."

Morgan lifted his head, pressing his lips to Julian's in a rough kiss, his tongue thrusting deep into Julian's mouth with starved passion. Julian returned the kiss with equal hunger, gripping a fistful of Morgan's hair at the same moment. Morgan slipped one hand under the coat and caressed down Julian's back to his ass. His fingers traced along Julian's crack, and as they reached his hole, he paused at feeling something hard and plastic.

Morgan broke the kiss, licking his lips before he spoke. "You've got in a plug?"

"I didn't want to waste time on preparation. This way, I'm already stretched and ready for you." He lightly nipped Morgan's bottom lip. "Do you want to take it out for me?"

"As if you have to ask."

Morgan gripped the plug's base and gently pulled back, keeping his gaze on Julian's face. Julian's eyes closed, his lips parted as a soft groan left him. When the plug was halfway out, Morgan eased it almost all the way in again, then drew it back once more.

Julian moaned louder. He dropped down to his elbows, keeping his ass raised high. "Keep fucking me with that and I won't need your cock tonight after all."

"I have a feeling you'd still be good for more, but I'm hitting the point of being ready to be greedy." Morgan slowly pulled the plug fully out.

Julian pushed himself up, kneeling tall over him as he retrieved lube and a condom from his coat pocket. He ripped open a condom, covered Morgan's cock, then fisted a palmful of lube over it. Keeping it in his hand, he positioned his body over it and lowered down onto the hard rod. Placing his other hand on Morgan's chest, he felt the broad cock head stretch his rim, inching deeper. Julian moaned deep and low, his fingers digging into Morgan's peck.

Morgan gripped Julian's hips. Only half in, Morgan couldn't stop his own hips from jerking up, pushing deeper. Julian held still for a moment, savoring Morgan's quick thrusts in and out, but needed more than Morgan was giving him. He pushed off Morgan's chest as he sank down on his cock, taking all of him hard and fast. His body slammed down on Morgan's, evoking a rough groan from him.

Julian rolled his hips, grinding Morgan's cock inside him, then lifted up and leaned back, bracing one hand behind him as he pumped up and down on Morgan's cock. He took his own cock, stroking it as he rode him. His head fell back; pleasure consumed his expression.

Morgan gazed at him, Julian's lean body stretched out, his hips working to bring them both to pleasure. Since the start of their relationship, he couldn't count all the times he looked at Julian, thinking how breathtaking he was. This was another of those moments. No inhibitions, fully bared before him, his aggression, his passion, in full control of him, Morgan knew there would never be anyone who could equal Julian in his life.

Morgan's thoughts broke as Julian pushed off the hand he braced himself with to sit forward. Both his hands slapped down on Morgan's chest. Julian rocked hard and fast. Morgan found himself unable to move, his entire body under Julian's control. The most he could manage was sliding a hand from Julian's hip to his cock enclosing it in a tight fist. He could hear himself moaning on each of Julian's thrusts, felt his muscles tightening in preparation for letting everything go in just a few short seconds.

A loud moan left Morgan. Julian opened his eyes to see

Morgan's face lost in pleasure, his muscles constricted as his body heaved beneath him. His own orgasm hit the surface. Julian gasped and lowered his head, watching his cum leave him to splatter across Morgan's abdomen.

Julian slowly lowered himself to lie on Morgan's chest, their skin slick and wet with cum and sweat. "Well, you caught on to this lesson exceptionally well."

Morgan chuckled softly. He placed one hand on Julian's head, his fingers wrapping around a few silky strands. "That's good, but also bad since if I've mastered it, I won't get to try again."

"Oh, I think you'll get plenty of other chances."

Morgan kissed the top of Julian's head. "But I think I see now why Kurt doesn't like people hooking up. He's probably hunting all over the arena looking for me."

Julian lifted his head. "Okay, we really need to get away if after I finish ravishing you, your first thought is Kurt."

"He wasn't my first thought, but yeah, I agree we need to get away." Morgan caressed Julian's cheek. "Just two more days."

Julian touched his smiling lips to Morgan's. "I can't wait."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

With Julian sleeping soundly, Morgan eased out of bed. A faint strip of sunlight glowed through the closed curtains. He picked up his jeans from the floor and pulled out his cell phone. He was a couple days late on payment for the lien to the store; he had to wait until his most recent paycheck hit his account, but luckily the bank had a grace period. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door, then scrolled through the address book until he found the bank's number.

Normally making a payment on the store put him in a bad mood, but nothing could touch his good mood today. The first contributor to his good mood, Kurt had told him he wasn't needed this morning to help load the trucks. Whether it was because Kurt had been so pissed at him for disappearing last night, or Kurt was actually being considerate, he couldn't say. Kurt had odd moods, sometimes manic, sometimes filled with an odd calm, though maybe it seemed odd because it was so opposite from his frequent yelling fits.

Either way, it didn't matter. The only thing that did was he got to sleep in with Julian since the trip today would be short, just from Philadelphia to Baltimore, so they'd all be heading down the road in a convoy with the band. But the biggest contributor to his good mood, after tonight, he and Julian would have an entire week alone together. Since the band's next concert after the break would be in Charlotte, he decided the best place for them to camp would be in the North Carolina mountains to make it easy to meet up with everyone after.

Morgan snapped to attention as a female voice said hello for what he assumed was at least the second time from her annoyed tone. "Hi, sorry about that. I'm calling to make a payment."

"Your name and account number?" she asked, her voice still holding irritation.

Morgan gave the information and waited, deciding she

probably wasn't up to friendly chitchat.

"And what exactly are you making a payment on, Mr. Chandler?"

"It's for my business, a music store. I have the mortgage for the building through you, and also a lien on the business itself."

"According to the system, everything was paid in full last week. Haven't you received the deed for the building?"

"I've been out of town. What do you mean it's paid off? Even the lien?"

"Our system shows you owe no debt to us, Mr. Chandler. All outstanding loans have been paid in full."

Morgan slowly sank down on the closed toilet lid. "I don't understand how that's possible. Who paid the loans?"

"It looks like the money was transferred from the account of a Mr. Julian Forrester, but everything was kept in your name."

Morgan sat in stunned silence. Julian? Julian paid his bills? He couldn't have. The debts he had weren't small. But then, debts that weren't small to him were probably nothing for Julian.

Anger and hurt rose in him. He'd never felt so humiliated. It wasn't Julian's responsibility to take on his debts. The woman's voice sounded through his thoughts, though he barely comprehended her words.

"Congratulations on now owning your business and building, Mr. Chandler."

"Yeah. Thanks. Bye."

Morgan hung up. He sat in the bathroom for another moment before willing himself to stand and open the door. He walked into the bedroom and collected his scattered clothes. Once dressed, he stood a few feet from the bed, staring down at Julian.

Julian yawned and stretched. His arm slid across the bed, and at not finding Morgan, he opened his eyes. He turned his head and saw Morgan. He lifted one hand to him, smiling. "You finally get the chance to sleep in and look at you. Come back to bed."

Morgan remained in place. "Why did you do it?"

Julian's smile faded. He slowly lowered his hand back to the bed. "Why did I do what?"

"You paid off my debts. Why?"

Julian sat up and tugged the pillows behind him to prop himself against the headboard. "Isn't the answer obvious?"

Morgan's final bit of patience drowned under anger. "How about you just answer the goddamn question instead of talking down to me?"

Julian's mouth dropped slightly open. "I'm not talking down to you."

"The hell you're not! Why did you sneak around behind my back? And how the hell did you even find out what bank my loans were under?"

Anger filled Julian's face. "I saw the bills in your office at the shop. And I wasn't sneaking around. It was supposed to be a surprise. So, surprise!"

"I don't need your goddamn surprises and I don't need your goddamn help!"

Julian flung off the blankets and sprang out of bed. He snatched his robe off the foot and yanked it on. He advanced on Morgan to stand hardly a foot away. "You need to settle down and drop the egotistical pride!"

"Egotistical pride?" Morgan yelled in disbelief.

"Exactly! You look at me helping you out as a wound to your foolish pride! When what you need to do is get over it and realize all I was doing was trying to help you!"

"Bullshit! It was one more way for you to flaunt your money in my face! Just like wanting to pay for the Biltmore!"

"Are you serious? Is that what you really think?" Julian spun from him in frustration, stomped a few paces away, then whirled back around, pointing at Morgan. "Maybe I wouldn't have to flaunt my money if you weren't so damn frivolous with your

own! And maybe it's time you accepted that yes, I have more money than you and there's nothing wrong with letting me pay for things!"

Morgan turned his back on him, storming toward the door. "Now I'm frivolous with my money? Just because I wanted to do something nice for us?" He ripped open the door. "You know what? You want to pay for the Biltmore so damn bad? Go ahead because you'll be staying there by yourself!"

Morgan slammed the door behind him and stomped down the hall toward the elevators. He was frivolous? He couldn't believe Julian had said that. What he did with his money was his own damn business. Julian had no right to snoop around in his finances.

His pace slowed. But still, what Julian did for him was incredible. Without being asked, without question, he paid thousands of dollars. Morgan's anger returned. It didn't matter. Julian shouldn't have done it without talking to him. And if Julian knew him at all, he'd have realized he wouldn't want his help.

Because of his egotistical pride.

Morgan shook his head against Julian's words. That wasn't why. He didn't want Julian's help because...his mind went blank. Why didn't he want Julian's help? There really weren't any good reasons to not accept it. Other than accepting it made him feel dependent, like less of a man to not be able to handle his bills...a wound to his egotistical pride. Maybe Julian knew him better than he thought.

He took a deep breath to sigh, and as he did, the gentle scent of Julian's cologne came to him. It still lingered on his shirt from the night before when Julian's body had been pressed so tightly against his own. He always loved how in the mornings when he was forced to leave Julian for the day, his scent would go with him. Now, it caused his throat to tighten with emotion in wondering if he'd ever get to smell it directly on Julian's skin again.

Morgan rounded the corner to the elevators and nearly stumbled to a halt. A low glass wall ran between two sets of

elevators on either side and overlooked the lobby. Evan Arden leaned on the wall's railing, one arm folded on top, the other propped up with his chin in hand. It struck Morgan how Julian mentioned the night before that Jesse and Evan's room was next to his own, but he felt relief at seeing Evan since it meant he probably hadn't heard their fight. He took a breath and walked to one elevator and hit the down button.

"Good morning," Evan said.

Morgan nodded at him. "Morning."

"I'm watching for Jesse. He took the dogs for a run this morning."

Morgan glanced at him, confused by the odd statement. "That's nice of you."

"Well, it's what you do when you love someone, just like so many other things."

Morgan's heartbeat started to pick up. The elevator door opened. He ignored it and faced Evan.

Evan kept his gaze focused down on the lobby. "Sometimes you do things for the person you love that may not always be what they want, but you do it because you think it's what's best for them, because you want to take care of them. I did something like that a few months ago when I wanted to protect Jess, and I fought with some people who had hurt him. He was furious with me about it, but in the end, he forgave me because he knew my intentions had been good, even if my methods weren't. That's also what you do when you love someone, you forgive them."

Morgan lowered his gaze.

"Jesse and I have been together for two and a half years, and let me tell you, we've had some good fights in that time." Evan looked at Morgan for the first time, a grin on his lips. "Ninety-nine percent of them being my fault. Fortunately, I've learned to say I'm sorry."

Morgan met Evan's gaze. Evan knew. The look in his eyes, the words he spoke, Evan knew about him and Julian.

Evan looked away. His features shone with a smile as he waved below.

Morgan followed Evan's gaze and saw Jesse walking through the lobby holding the leashes of their dogs, flanked on both sides by two bodyguards. Jesse's gaze was focused upward, smiling as he waved back at Evan.

Evan pushed off the rail and stepped up to Morgan's side. He hit the down button and the elevator Morgan hadn't taken instantly opened for him. He walked inside and turned around. "Talk to you later, Morgan."

Morgan nodded as the door closed. He stood in place for several moments, Evan's words replaying in his head. Exhaling a heavy sigh, he hit the down button for the second time and stepped into the elevator.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Julian lay in his bunk, where he'd stayed all morning since getting on the bus. He felt like everything he ever wanted had gotten swept away from him. Morgan was right. He shouldn't have acted without asking him. But he wanted to surprise him, the same way Morgan had surprised him by winning the auction. He didn't see at it as flaunting his money at him, or looking down on him, though in hindsight he could understand how Morgan viewed his actions as an invasion of privacy. Somehow, that hurt even more. He didn't want there to be "privacy" between them. He wanted everything in their lives to be open and shared with each other.

Julian felt the bus slow, make a couple turns, and stop. The engine switched off, and he heard the curtain to the bunks sliding open.

"Jules, are you awake?"

Julian sighed at Jesse's voice. He rolled over and pulled back the curtain closing off his little cubby from the rest of the world. "Yeah."

Jesse squatted down, peering into the darkness at him. "We're stopping to get some lunch. Come with us."

Julian shook his head. "I'm not really feeling up to it."

"Are you sick? You've been lying in here all morning." Jesse laid his hand on Julian's forehead. "You don't feel warm."

"I'm not feeling well, but I don't have a fever. I really think it'd be better if I just stayed here and rested."

"But you have to eat. I'll bring you back something. What do you want? We're stopping at a steakhouse, so I'm sure they have a little bit of everything."

"You know what I like. Anything is fine."

Jesse patted Julian's hand. "Then get some rest. At least if

you're coming down with something, you've only got to get through tonight's show, then you can have a whole week to get better."

"Yeah," Julian said softly.

"I'll run Sho Sho out before going in to eat."

Julian gave a confused shake of his head. "Sho Sho?"

Chopin's nose appeared from the edge of the curtain as he licked Jesse's cheek.

Jesse put his arm around the dog. "It's Chopin's nickname. We've become good friends."

"I can tell."

Jesse stood up. "I'll lock the door after I bring the dogs back so you don't have to worry about anyone sneaking on."

"Thanks, Jess."

Julian listened to Jesse walk away. He heard Brad asking about him, then Jesse relaying what he'd told him. A moment later, Jesse called to all the dogs. The empty bus was silent for several minutes until Jesse brought the dogs back, then left again.

Julian listened to the quiet, then with a sigh rolled out of the bunk. He shuffled to the main portion and was greeted by three wagging tails. He made rounds petting each dog, then sat heavily in one of the seats, staring blankly out the window. His eyes caught movement between the bus and one of the equipment trucks. A shocked cough left him as he saw it was Morgan heading for the bus's door.

Julian sprang up and reached the door at the same moment Morgan did. He quickly opened it for him. Morgan jogged up the steps as Julian closed the door again.

"What are you doing here?" Julian said.

Morgan stopped in front of him, standing close enough he wouldn't have to extend his hand to touch him, but simply raise it. "I saw Jesse walking Chopin, then I didn't see you with the guys when they went into the restaurant, and I got worried about you."

Julian gazed at him. He was so close, all of Morgan's masculine beauty before him, and yet after their harsh words that morning, he'd never seemed so far away. He turned from all the temptation that Morgan's was. "I wanted some time alone."

Morgan caught Julian's arm. He gently pulled him closer. Julian considered resisting, but just the simple warmth of Morgan's hand felt so good and he found himself wanting to fall against him.

Morgan placed his other hand on Julian's cheek. "I'm so sorry, Jules. Everything from this morning was my fault. You were right about my stupid egotistical pride. If I would've thought for half a second before flying off the handle, I would've realized all you wanted to do was help me. I'm so, so sorry."

Julian lifted his hands to lay them on Morgan's waist. "No, it wasn't all your fault. I should've talked to you before doing what I did. It wasn't my place to get involved in your finances."

"But that's just it." Morgan cupped Julian's face in both hands. "I *want* it to be your place. It took me the whole morning thinking on it, but I realized I want to share everything I have with you." He smiled and laid his forehead on Julian's. "Even my debts."

Julian chuckled softly. "I want to share everything I have with you, too."

Julian tipped his head further back, and Morgan's lips pressed against his own. Their mouths opened at the same moment, their tongues glided over each other. Julian savored Morgan after the fear he'd never share such intimacy with him again.

As the kiss slowly ended, Morgan wrapped Julian in a tight embrace, Julian's arms going around him in return. He rested his head on Julian's, closing his eyes as he breathed in Julian's cologne. Simply inhaling the fragrance washed the remaining anxiety from his heart.

Morgan held Julian for a long moment, then eased back. He took Julian's hand and led him to the couch. Morgan sat, drawing Julian down next to him. "I do appreciate what you did, but it's not an easy thing for me to accept that much help from you. It's

not easy for me to even accept marginal help from anybody. I tend to be a bit on the independent side.”

“A bit? That’s part of the reason I went about things the way I did. I knew you’d never accept my help if I stepped forward and offered it.” Julian bumped his shoulder against Morgan’s. “Plus, this was also payback for you blowing thirty thousand dollars to get a date with me when all you had to do was ask.”

Morgan laughed. “It was for a private concert, which you still owe me, by the way.” His laughter ended as another sigh left him. “I guess I *am* frivolous with my money, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re not. I’m grateful you bid for me, and I understand you booked a room at the Biltmore trying to make me happy, but there’s no shame in letting me pay for the more expensive things.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Morgan grumbled.

“And it should be easy for you to accept, because it doesn’t matter where the funds come from. All that matters is we’re together.” Julian brought Morgan’s hand to his lips. He spoke in a hushed voice, his lips on Morgan’s fingers. “Maybe because I came from it, maybe because I have so much of it now, but money holds so little value to me. But you, and what we’ve had these past couple weeks, that’s something I’ve never known and it’s something I cherish so much more. I don’t want to lose you because of something as cold as money.”

“Jules,” Morgan whispered, and pulled him into his arms. “You won’t lose me over something like that.”

Julian lay against Morgan’s warmth. “Then we’re still on for our trip tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Julian sat up. “Good. I really want this time with you. It seems like it’s getting harder and harder staying quiet about us.”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. I think Evan—”

“Jesse!” Julian blurted out, jumping off the couch. “Why is he coming back already?”

Morgan looked out the window to the sight of Jesse walking toward the bus carrying a white bag and followed by a bodyguard.

Julian grabbed Morgan's hand and pulled him up. "Get in the bathroom. Quick!"

Morgan allowed Julian to push him down to the bathroom, laughing softly as he went. Julian ripped open the door and gave him a shove. Morgan stumbled inside, gazing around the small space. "Man, this is tiny enough, but it's still twice the size of the bathroom on the roadie bus. Do you have any idea what it's like to share a bathroom with twenty other men?"

"Shhh!" Julian shut the door and spun around just as Jesse unlocked the bus's door.

Jesse climbed the steps, smiling as he saw Julian. "Hey, you're up. Feeling better?"

Julian shook his head. "No, not really."

Jesse held up the white bag. "I thought I'd bring your food out so you wouldn't have to wait on us. I ended up ordering you some chicken soup, a salad, and a grilled chicken sandwich with fries. I thought you could pick whatever you felt up to eating. And there're three steaks in there for the dogs."

"You're so thoughtful."

Jesse stepped forward. "You didn't expect me to let you lay in here sick and hungry, did you?"

Julian hastened forward and placed his hands on the bag. "I'll take it. You better get back to your food before it gets cold."

Jesse gave him a suspicious look. "Is there a reason why I shouldn't go to the back?"

"What? No, not at all..." Julian's mind worked to come up with an excuse. "Well, it's just, I'm having some issues." He laid his hand on his lower abdomen, then waved it under his nose. "It's not pleasant by the bathroom."

Jesse pushed the bag of food toward him. "And on that note, I'm out of here. Just do us all a favor and crack a window, okay?"

Julian took the food. "I will. Thank you for the food."

Jesse lifted his hand in a wave without turning around as he walked away.

Julian watched Jesse lock the door behind him, then head for the restaurant. He spun toward the bathroom and opened the door to find a red-faced Morgan with tears in his eyes from restraining his laughter. What hold he had over it vanished and Morgan burst out laughing.

"That was the best excuse you could think of?" Morgan choked out.

Julian grabbed Morgan's wrist and tugged him forward. "Just get out of there and have lunch with me."

Morgan sat at the table across from him, still snickering as he watched Julian pull container after container from the bag. "He doesn't do anything halfway, does he?"

"Jesse?" Julian shook his head. "No, it's all or nothing."

Morgan opened one container to three New York strip steaks inside. He glanced at Chopin standing beside Achilles and Iris, all three staring at him with expectant looks. "And you're getting more and more spoiled. I don't even get to eat New York strip."

"I'm sure the dogs wouldn't mind if you took one for yourself and split two between them."

"I think I will." Morgan looked at Chopin again. "You don't need a whole one, anyway. You're going to get chunky."

"Jesse's offered to take him out on his morning runs, but I always said no because I didn't want him interrupting us. I could tell him I've changed my mind."

"I think it'd be good for him. Besides, I'm not so sure we have to keep playing the sneaking around game."

Julian paused in dishing out salad to Morgan's plate. "What do you mean?"

"This morning after I left your room, I ran into Evan." Morgan relayed Evan's words to him.

Julian slowly sat down. "The night the piano string was cut, Evan looked at me as if he knew something. He's incredibly astute, sometimes unnervingly so."

"But if he knows, then Jesse probably knows, right?"

"Well, we don't even know if he knows. It could be more a suspicion on his part. But yeah, even if it's just a suspicion, it's guaranteed Jesse knows." Julian drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Still, neither have mentioned anything to me, so maybe we're just being paranoid."

"Maybe, but I think they'd be okay with it."

Julian sat quiet for a moment, then met Morgan's gaze and nodded. "Then we'll tell everyone after the break. All the guys should be in a good mood when we all join up again, so even if someone's not thrilled at the idea, it may go smoother."

A bright smile shone across Morgan's face. "Really?"

Julian leaned over the table to him. "Yes, but only on one condition."

Morgan rose up to bring their lips closer. "What?"

"That if things turn sour and Jesse wants you to leave the tour, you let me take care of you until you find another job."

Morgan shook his head. "You're really going to work on squashing my egotistical pride, aren't you?"

"No, I just want you to feel comfortable accepting help from me."

"In that case, I agree."

Morgan closed their mouths together, sealing their agreement with a passion-filled kiss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Julian gripped onto the rented Ford Explorer's interior handle with a white knuckled fist. His other hand lashed out to brace against the center console as the SUV hit another crater on the dirt road. He glanced at Morgan, who didn't look in the least perturbed that they hadn't even seen another car in half an hour, and that was before they reached this track of dirt doing a poor imitation of a road. Trees lined both sides, so thick he could only see a few yards into the forest. Julian risked moving his hand from the console to pull out his cell phone. No signal. He looked at Morgan.

"I'm starting to have second thoughts about this."

"Only second thoughts? Honey, you're on like your twentieth thought by now."

"Yes, well, I didn't realize I wouldn't have a phone signal. What if someone needs to get a hold of me? Or worse, what if something happens and we need help?"

Morgan laid his hand on Julian's thigh. "The world isn't going to come to an end if you miss a couple phone calls for one night. And nothing's going to happen."

"But I haven't seen a hint of civilization in over an hour."

"You're exaggerating. We just passed houses half an hour ago."

"I wouldn't call those civilized," Julian mumbled.

Morgan rubbed Julian's thigh. "You don't think I'd ever put you in danger, do you?"

"Not intentionally."

Morgan laughed and gave Julian's leg a shove. "That's not very reassuring!"

"Neither is this road."

Julian saw the road ended ahead in a large dirt patch with

nothing but forest all around. "How did you know about this place, anyway?"

"My father and I would come down to camp the Appalachians every spring. In the fall, we'd go camping again, not always in the mountains, sometimes we'd stay closer to home, but we'd do it in the more civilized way, having a spot at a campground so my mother could enjoy it." Morgan smirked at him. "She wasn't much of one for peeing outside."

"A woman of class. I can already tell I'll like her when I meet her."

Morgan threw the Explorer in park. "I've already told her about you and now every time I talk to her, she asks about you. I think I get being a sucker for a musician from her."

Julian hopped out of the SUV. "It's wonderful she's supportive."

Morgan opened one of the back doors, allowing Chopin to bound out. "She and my father both were. I was lucky that they were easy to come out to, no hysterics, no crying, no chastising. They simply said I was their child and nothing could ever change their love for me. It makes me so sad when I hear how other people's parents can't be as accepting of their children."

"I've known several people rejected by their parents, including Jesse. I'm fortunate with mine too." Julian paused as he watched Morgan toss a hiking pack on the ground, then pull a second from the back of the SUV and add it with the first. "That's all we're taking?"

"Yeah, and it's probably overkill." Morgan lifted up the smaller pack and held it toward him. "Time for you to meet the world."

Julian turned around and let Morgan help him put on the pack. When Morgan released it, he let out a small grunt at the weight. "You know, I don't even carry my own suitcases."

Morgan wrestled on his own pack. "Which is exactly why getting out and doing things like this is good for you. It'll keep you in shape."

"You don't know what a workout it is being on stage every night. *And* I do go to the hotel gyms three times week."

Morgan gave him a doubtful look.

Julian held up one hand as he relented. "Okay, I used to go three times a week and swim every morning until a certain someone started giving me workouts of a different and more enjoyable kind."

Morgan laughed and held his hand out to him. "Let's go."

Julian took it and walked with him toward the trailhead, Chopin trotting in front of them without a leash, as Morgan told him the dog never strayed. They entered the woods, the air cool and moist, smelling of fallen autumn leaves and wet earth. Julian breathed deep the refreshing scent. It invigorated him, as if touching a part of himself he'd never known he had.

They walked slowly up the ragged little trail that wove in a gentle incline, then dipped again. Julian gazed into the forest, drinking in the leaves colored with fiery reds, burning oranges, brilliant yellows, and some still vibrant green. He had admired the forested mountains when they were driving toward them. From a distance they were stunning, a collage of color all blended into smooth slopes, but now he saw the individual pieces, the oaks, the maples, the birches, and so many others that made the mountains what they were.

Morgan squeezed Julian's hand. "You're so quiet."

"I'm just taking it all in. I've never really paid much attention to natural things. I've flown over or driven through mountains and forests hundreds of times and always thought, how pretty, but it seems different now."

"Because now you're really looking at it. You're seeing how each small thing is intricate to making the greater thing beautiful."

Julian turned a smile on him. "And I have you to thank for it."

Morgan stopped. He lowered his head and laid a tender kiss on Julian's lips.

As they drew apart, Chopin let out a bark. Both turned in his

direction a few feet up the trail. He rapidly sniffed at something on the ground, his tail wagging at a furious pace.

"Did you find something, Sho Sho?" Julian called as they approached.

Morgan shot him a confused look. "Sho Sho?"

Julian sighed. "It's what Jesse calls him. I didn't even realize I said it."

"You know, I'm starting to get jealous of all the time he's spending with him."

"What? Like Jesse's the other man in his life?"

"Exactly!" Morgan squatted next to Chopin and laid an arm over the Golden Retriever. "So you found a turtle."

Julian stared down at the small creature hiding in its black shell accented with yellowish lines. "What's it doing out here?"

Morgan grinned at him. "It lives here."

Julian rolled his eyes. "I figured. But I thought turtles lived in water."

"He's a box turtle, so he's happy living in the woods." Morgan carefully slid his fingers under the turtle's shell and slowly lifted it from the ground. He stood and held it up to Julian's eye level. "But we're not far from the stream we're going to camp by either."

Julian peeked into the turtle's shell at its leathery face, its tiny hooked beak.

Morgan smiled at Julian's fascinated expression. "Another part of the world you've never seen before."

Julian looked at him. "Another of the smaller beauties."

"That's right." Morgan placed the turtle on the ground in the same way he'd found it, then took Julian's hand again. "Not too much further now."

They walked for another half mile, Morgan pointing out things to Julian; gouges on a tree where a buck had rubbed the velvet from its antlers, tiny wildflowers blooming in the shadows of the trees, the songs of various birds. It felt almost surreal to

him, as if he'd stepped into another world, and for him, he had.

The trees thinned, and Julian heard rushing water. They walked from the forest to a stream rolling over boulders and the silt bank dotted with large rocks. The area where they came out was fairly clear, though further along the bank and on the other side, trees kissed the water's edge.

Morgan shrugged out of his pack near a couple downed logs. "We'll set up the tent first, then dig the fire pit, gather some wood, and we'll be set."

Julian set his pack next to Morgan's, then sat on one of the logs, watching Morgan untie the tent in a long, blue nylon sack from the top. "That's all of it in there?"

"Yep." Morgan pulled several steel poles from the sack and handed them to Julian. "You can be in charge of the poles."

Julian gave Morgan a smirk. "I am rather handy when it comes to poles."

Morgan leaned toward him. "Especially when you're using your *hands* to make them *come*."

Julian touched their lips together in a light kiss. "Already getting naughty, are we?"

"I've been trying to restrain myself all day." Morgan delivered a deeper kiss.

Julian wrapped his arms around him. His lips still on Morgan's, he whispered, "I knew I wanted this, to have you completely to myself, but I didn't realize how much. Why have we tortured ourselves like this?"

"It's hard to remember, isn't it? Things like people being difficult about our relationship and my job seem pretty meaningless right now."

Julian placed his hand on Morgan's jaw, caressing the stubble with his thumb. "I know we agreed to talk to everyone, and you said you'd accept my help if the worst happened and things didn't work out with you continuing to work on the tour, but I also want you to stay on the road with me. The thought of sending

you back to Chicago while I continue on, I don't even want to think about it."

Morgan laid his hand over Julian's. "I'll stay with you on the road."

"Then after we return home, I want to continue helping you until you find another teaching job and get the store running well again."

Morgan chuckled under his breath. "You want an awful lot of things."

Julian's expression remained resolute. "I'm serious."

Morgan gazed at him for a moment. He lowered his head and shook it. "It could take a very long time for me to find another teaching job. I've actually been playing with the idea of going back to school myself. Maybe if I got my Master's, it'd make me more marketable, or even let me look at colleges for a professorship."

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Yeah," Morgan said softly. "But it'd take a long time and a lot of money."

"I don't care how long it takes. If you'd like to go back to school, I'll help you and cover your tuition."

Morgan snapped his head up in a look of shock. "Jules..."

Julian held up one hand. "There's just one thing I'd want from you in return."

"What?"

Julian cupped Morgan's face in both hands and met his gaze. "For you to move in with me."

Morgan's breath fled from him. "You're serious?"

"I already said I was. You don't have to answer now. Take some time to think about it." Julian smiled. "I know you'll need a few minutes to talk it over with that pride of yours."

Morgan laughed softly. "Yeah, maybe just a few." He slid one hand to the back of Julian's head as he brought their lips together in a passionate kiss. He slowly drew back, his voice a breathless

whisper. "We better get things set up before it gets dark."

Julian nodded.

Morgan stood and held both hands down to him. Julian took them and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet by Morgan's strength. He helped Morgan set up the tent, which to his surprise was much larger than he thought and couldn't quite understand how it managed to come out of the small bag. They laughed and joked through the process, but he couldn't deny part of him felt hurt that Morgan hadn't jumped at his offer to live with him.

He shouldn't have expected him to, not with how independent Morgan was, but he started to fear his feelings had deepened quicker for Morgan than Morgan's had for him. Julian felt like kicking himself. Twenty-six years old and he still didn't know how to do things right in a relationship. He realized some time ago he was falling in love with him. Being without Morgan after their fight made him fully acknowledge it. Before asking Morgan to move in with him, he should've told him he loved him. He had moved a step too quickly. What if Morgan wasn't in love with him yet? What if he never would be?

Julian tried to stop the doubts and anxiety before they took control of his mood. He saw Morgan putting the finishing touches to the tent and forced a smile, raising his hands in a light applause. "Well done!"

"Yeah, not too bad considering I haven't done it in years, and this is a new tent." Morgan turned to him and paused. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course. What could be wrong?"

"You look a little upset."

Julian let out a doubtful snort and walked past him. "If I do, it's because I've realized I can't hold off on going to the bathroom any longer."

Morgan gestured out to the woods. "Pick any tree or bush, but don't go too far. There are bears in these mountains."

"Oh, lovely."

Morgan watched him disappear into the woods, then turned to retrieve a small shovel from his pack. He worked on clearing a spot for the fire pit, and though his hands moved automatically, his mind lingered on Julian's early words. He hadn't expected Julian to ask him to move in with him. What he expected even less was how badly he wanted to say yes. After the fight they'd had, when he'd faced those handful of hours filled with uncertainty as to whether they'd be together again or if he'd ruined things between them, he'd realized he didn't ever want to be without Julian.

So why hadn't he accepted immediately? Because it didn't feel right to say yes to such a thing without first telling Julian he loved him. He had to tell him. He couldn't let Julian think he was accepting his offer for no reason other than the benefits to himself. Yes, he wanted to teach again, and of course he wanted the store to return to success and profit, but what he wanted more was a life with Julian.

Morgan glanced back in the direction Julian disappeared. "Jules, you doing okay?"

"I'm fine." Julian stepped around a tree and some brush. "That was an...*experience*."

"Nothing like feeling the cool breeze where it doesn't often touch, huh? I was starting to worry about you, it was taking so long."

"Well, I sort of had to convince it that it was alright to come out." Julian held up his hands. "And now where am I supposed to wash?"

Morgan pointed to the stream with the shovel.

Julian's hands fell to his sides. "Of course."

Snickering, Morgan watched him walk up to the stream bank. "But be sure to wash them downstream so all the nasty gets washed away."

"As if there's not already nasty in this water."

"I'll bet it's cleaner than the bottled stuff you're always drinking, with its refreshing pictures on the label of crisp

mountains, when it's really coming out of any Joe's garden hose."

When Julian didn't answer, Morgan stretched his neck to see what he was doing. Julian knelt on the bank, letting the water rush and swirl around his fingers while he gazed at it like a fascinated child. Morgan smiled and turned back to finishing up the fire pit.

Julian rose from playing in the water, grinning to himself. He turned to Morgan, wiping his hands dry on his jeans.

"Now that's something I never thought I'd see," Morgan said.

"What?"

"You just wiped your hands on your pants. I do believe you left some of your sophistication back with civilization."

Julian waved him off. "Now what?"

Morgan stood and held his hand out to him. "Now we gather some wood."

Julian pulled Morgan to him, pressing their hips together as he slid one hand around to stroke Morgan's ass. "That sounds like fun."

Morgan grazed his lips across Julian's. "That wasn't the type of wood I was talking about, but it *is* part of the later plan."

Julian kissed him, then with Chopin leading the way, they traveled along the forest's edge gathering their wood supply. As they brought the last load back, dusk threw a purple haze over the trees, yet lighted the stream with a fiery glow. Julian sat on the ground, leaning back on one of the logs. He gazed at the water, then looked at the opposite bank. He saw movement. He sat up straighter, his heart started to pound faster. The sound of soft rustling and cracking twigs carried over the gurgling stream. Dark shapes moved among the trees like living shadows.

"Morgan," he called in a loud whisper.

Morgan glanced back at him. Julian's gaze remained fixed across the stream. Morgan moved to his side. "What it is?"

"Something's over there. You said there are bears in these

mountains, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but they're usually very shy." Morgan let out a low whistle. Chopin was instantly at his side. He put one arm around the dog.

The rustling grew louder, then stopped.

Julian glanced at him. "What's our defense against a bear?"

"Praying it doesn't eat us. Well actually, it wouldn't eat both of us, anyway. Just whoever is slowest."

Julian shoved him hard and spoke in a loud whisper, "You're not funny."

Chuckling, Morgan put his index finger to his lips. "Shhh, I know what it is. Or what they are. Sit very still and watch."

Julian shot him a doubtful look, but did as Morgan said. After a few minutes of silence, the rustling sounded again. A stag with a massive set of antlers stepped from the shadows.

Julian let out a soft gasp and laid one hand on Morgan's arm. Morgan grinned at him and rested his hand over Julian's. The stag took a cautious step closer to the stream, then another. More rustling came from behind him and a doe emerged, followed by three more. The stag's head moved back and forth as he eyed the blue tent. He snorted and stomped one front hoof.

"Is he angry we're here?" Julian whispered.

"He's being cautious. He knows something's different and he's warning the others to be on guard." Morgan shook his head slightly. "He's one of the biggest deer I've ever seen. Good thing he's living in a protected area."

Julian looked at him, horrified. "Someone would kill him?"

"With that rack, he'd be hunted ruthlessly." Morgan took Julian's hand. "Don't worry. He's safe living here."

Julian slowly turned back to the deer. After several minutes, they settled enough to drink. The sunlight burnished their coats in a golden glow. Julian felt captivated by them. Unable to look away, he studied each of their movements and interactions. Then

as quietly as they'd entered, the deer turned back and vanished into the woods.

Morgan patted Chopin's side. "Good boy. You didn't even bark."

"What kind of deer were they?" Julian asked.

"Whitetail. They run all over these mountains." Morgan stood and went back to the fire pit. "Now I'm going to get us a fire going and start our dinner."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Morgan smiled at him. "Relax and enjoy the sunset."

Julian reclined against the log, petting Chopin as he watched the shadows shift from grays and purples to dark blues and black. As night blanketed the woods, the fire burned strong and Morgan unpacked their and Chopin's food. With Chopin fed, he stuck a couple hot dogs on a fork and held them over the fire. Julian moved to sit at Morgan's side. Morgan wrapped his arm around him, and Julian leaned against him.

Julian nodded toward the hot dogs. "You know, I haven't eaten hot dogs since I was young, and then it was only because I was fed them at a friend's house. My mother wouldn't even allow them in her kitchen."

"What about when you guys had cook-outs, or went to a baseball game or something like that?"

"We always had steak or fish or chicken when we had our cook grill out. And we never went to baseball games or such things."

Morgan studied him as Julian gazed into the fire. "Did you have any life away from a piano?"

"Not much of one."

"It's amazing you didn't get completely burned out and turn away from it completely."

"Well, I do love the music, and I did one worse by my mother." Julian smirked at him. "I started playing rock."

Morgan laughed and hugged him along with placing a kiss on his cheek. When the hot dogs were finished, he handed Julian the fork while he got the plates and buns. He couldn't help but chuckle as Julian downed two, then stuck a third on the fork and roasted it himself. "Don't stuff yourself too much. We still have marshmallows."

Julian's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

Morgan pulled a bag of them from his pack. "Don't tell me you never roasted marshmallows either."

"I haven't."

Morgan sighed and tossed the bag beside Julian. "I'm starting to think even though you grew up with enough money you could use it as toilet paper, you really had a deprived childhood."

Julian ripped open the bag of marshmallows. "In many ways I did."

With some help from Morgan, Julian learned about toasting marshmallows and discovered he liked them best when they caught fire. Their laughter echoing through the woods, he knew he was having one of the most fun moments of his life, and it was all because of the company he shared. As they finished, he shifted closed to the fire and held his hands toward the flames.

"Getting chilly?" Morgan asked.

"A little."

Morgan went to his pack and pulled out two blankets. One he laid over the ground close enough to the fire to still feel the heat, but folded so no embers would land on it. He sat on it, leaning back on one of the logs, and patted between his legs. Julian settled between them, his back to Morgan's chest. Morgan wrestled the other blanket over them both with some assistance from Julian, then wrapped him in his arms.

"Warmer?"

"Much." Julian lifted his gaze to the sky. The longer he looked into the blackness, the more stars seemed to come out and the brighter they shined. "They're so much clearer here than in the

city.”

Morgan rubbed Julian’s thigh with one hand. “Yeah.”

Morgan’s voice, deep and gravely with desire, roused Julian’s cock. Almost without thinking he parted his thighs wider. Morgan slid his hand between Julian’s legs to gently massage Julian’s sac through his jeans. He brought his other hand up to open the button and zipper. Julian’s breathing quickened as he felt Morgan’s warm hand dip inside his briefs to grip his solid shaft. He moaned softly and let his head fall back on Morgan’s shoulder.

Morgan stroked him slowly, bringing every sensitive nerve of his cock to life. He pressed his ass back more firmly between Morgan’s legs. A deep groan left Morgan. Julian felt Morgan’s one arm wrap tightly around his waist as Morgan ground his cock against his ass. Just the feel of the hard rod pressing against him sent heat rushing through his body. Morgan’s thumb rubbed over his slit, slicking the head with pre-cum, then moved down to press against his sweet spot on the underside below the head.

Julian sucked in a sharp breath. He arched against Morgan, feeling the warm wave building with every pump. He rocked his hips in harmony with Morgan’s movements, and rested one hand over Morgan’s. He stretched his other arm back to sink his fingers into Morgan’s hair, and as he did, Morgan’s hold around his waist loosened, his touch floating up to pinch and tease one of his nipples.

Julian’s fingers tightened in a fist around Morgan’s hair. He thrust up to Morgan’s hand with more force, then moaned loud as the pleasure hit its breaking point. His warm fluid pulsed out. He collapsed on Morgan, savoring the lingering sensation.

Morgan nuzzled into Julian’s hair near his ear. He kissed him softly and closed his eyes, holding him for a few moments. When he spoke, his voice came out in a hushed whisper. “Julian, I love you. You’re the most amazing man I’ve ever met. Everything about you, your kindness, your intelligence,” he chuckled softly and lifted his head, “your feistiness, I love it all.”

Julian's heart raced. He'd finally heard the words he desired so badly, spoken from the first man he could honestly say he loved. He shifted around until he faced him. As he met Morgan's gaze, holding uncertainty, he lifted one hand to Morgan's cheek. He saw in Morgan's expression the touch alone reassured him, but he still allowed the smile inside him to glow outwardly. "I love you too, Morgan. When I first saw you, I thought the man of my dreams had been delivered to me. Then as I got to know you, I realized how right that first thought was."

Julian saw Morgan's bright smile, but only for an instant before Morgan claimed his lips in a passionate kiss. He felt Morgan's hands sliding up his sides and raising his sweater and undershirt beneath it. Julian broke the kiss, lifting his arms over his head as Morgan pulled both away. He took hold of Morgan's sweatshirt and tugged it off him.

Morgan wrapped one arm around Julian's lower back and turned him on the blanket. He brought their lips together again as he guided Julian to his back. Between tender kisses and soft licks over each other's skin, they worked out of their remaining clothes. Morgan left him briefly to get lube and condoms from his pack. He placed the lube near the fire to warm as he covered Julian with his body again.

Morgan moved to kiss him, but Julian stopped him with a soft touch on his cheek. He flicked his gaze toward the condoms. "I wanted to talk to you about using those. How would you feel about going without from now on?"

"Ecstatic." Morgan smiled against Julian's lips, and they continued their gentle devotions on each other.

Julian drifted his hands over every part of Morgan's body he could reach, his broad shoulders, his muscled back, his firm ass, and rubbed his own legs across Morgan's. He kissed and sucked at Morgan's neck, Morgan doing the same to his in turn. He felt Morgan's hands traveling along his body, as if exploring him for the first time, and everywhere Morgan touched, his skin tingled with pleasure and excitement.

Julian lost track of how long their ritual lasted, minutes, an

hour or more. When Morgan lifted up to get the lube, his body felt flushed and anxious to join with him. The chill night air kissed Julian's heated skin. He looked up at the stars, heard the stream rushing beyond, smelled the forest and earth. Something about it all felt so right for them to make love here. Perhaps because it was his first time with someone he truly loved, and who had shown him things he never would have thought to see before.

Morgan settled over him again. He dipped his head down to lay a kiss on his neck, moving his slicked fingers to Julian's hole. Julian bent his legs back. His eyes closed; a soft sigh left him as Morgan's fingers eased into him and tenderly worked him open. Only a few minutes passed before he felt Morgan's fingers leave to be replaced by his broad cock-head. Julian raised his hips, wanting all of Morgan's bare flesh pressed deep inside him. Morgan sank into him. As their bodies fully connected, Morgan slid his arms under him, and Julian wrapped his around him, clinging to each other as their lips met once more.

Morgan thrust slowly. Their lips never parted from each other for long as they shared every breath. Julian could feel his orgasm beginning to build, but Morgan stopped and rested inside him, kissing and touching him, allowing both their bodies to calm. Over and over again, he did the same thing, drawing out their union for as long as possible.

Julian didn't want it to end. He wanted to stay joined with him until dawn came and beyond, but his body was reaching a point where it wouldn't be denied, and he knew Morgan was feeling the same. He felt Morgan's body tense. His own muscles constricted in response. Pleasure hummed through him with every one of Morgan's thrusts. But unlike before where Morgan stopped, he kept going. Each thrust grew in force and urgency, and drove Julian to his peak. He gripped Morgan's back. It was seconds away. Just as it erupted, Morgan let out a deep shout of pleasure. Julian pushed up against him, feeling Morgan's warm cum emptying inside him.

Julian continued to hold on to him. He turned his head toward Morgan, kissing his neck, his cheek, his temple. "I truly do love

you, more than I ever imagined it was possible to love a person.”

Morgan raised his head and gazed down at him. He softly stroked Julian’s hair. “I love you, too. The first time we met, I knew I could spend the rest of my life with you.”

Julian smiled and placed his hand on Morgan’s head, gently bringing him down to his lips again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Julian leaned his cheek on his fist as he gazed out the tour bus window. He and Morgan had returned from the Biltmore to Charlotte the day before, but they hadn't even entered the city limits when Morgan's cell phone rang. Kurt was on the other end demanding to know where he was, which didn't make sense since Morgan wasn't late. It didn't matter, though, because Morgan was still swept from him before he was ready, just as their hope to talk to everyone about their relationship was crushed.

The Phoenix private jet got stuck in Chicago with delays, so as show time approached, he was the only member of Conquest around. Luckily the others made it on time, but only barely, with none left to spare for anything more than a quick greeting. After the concert, he thought he'd find Morgan and they'd try again, but Jesse looked exhausted, and all but ran from the arena with Evan to the hotel.

That morning, Morgan once again left early to join the other roadies in going ahead of the band as they headed to Atlanta, Georgia. Not a terribly long drive, so that was another thing he didn't understand—why Kurt was pushing the staff, or more to say, Moran. The man was really agitating him, even though he rarely interacted with him these days. When he did see him, the sweetness Kurt showed sickened him, since he knew it was fake.

But all that was secondary to telling the guys about him and Morgan. He considered doing it now. They had several hours of uninterrupted time on the bus, and judging from the laughter as Jesse, Kenny, and Brad played video games, they were all in good moods, which was especially important with Jesse. Even though it was important for everyone to support him and Morgan, Jesse's support was most important in Morgan keeping his job.

Julian glanced back at the guys. Now would be a good time, but Morgan insisted on being present for the discussion. Still, maybe he should just go ahead.

Julian felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and dug it out. He smiled at seeing Morgan's name and a new text. He opened the message, reading, *Have you told them?* Julian nearly chuckled aloud. Perhaps it was his years of teaching, but Morgan always typed full words and used proper punctuation when he texted. He discovered it was a major pet peeve of Morgan's to use the abbreviations, so he followed his example, though occasionally he'd use abbreviations just to pick on him.

He put his fingers to the phone keys and replied back, *No. You told me to wait, so I have. Barely.*

A moment later, Morgan's answer came through. *I had a feeling you were getting antsy. That's why I'm texting you to say be patient.*

I'm tired with being patient.

Keeping things hush-hush was your idea from the start, you know.

I'm so not going to bicker about this through texts.

Okay, what would you rather do? Sexting? Oh baby, you're so hot. I want to suck you right now. Better?

Julian snorted in trying not to laugh. *No! It's not sexy at all.*

No? Do you want me to go in the restroom and send you a picture of my cock?

I don't think my screen is big enough to show it all.

Julian felt something bump against the back of his seat. He whipped his head to the side, looking eye to eye with Jesse, who stood behind the empty seat next to him, leaning over the back.

Jesse smirked at him. "What are you up to? Something's got you all smiles."

Julian turned over his phone and poked Jesse on the arm. "Nothing. I thought you were playing a game."

"It got boring." Jesse raised his voice. "Since I had no competition."

Kenny and Brad answered with a round of, "yeah, yeah" and "whatever."

Jesse turned back to Julian. "So now I'm bored and thought I'd see what you're doing." His smirk returned with a mischievous edge. "You were texting someone, weren't you? Who was it? Tell me."

Julian opted to ignore Jesse's questions. "If you're bored, why don't you read a book?"

"I'm not in a reading mood. It was a guy, wasn't it? Is he the same one you were seeing before we hit the road?"

Julian gave him an exasperated look. "Must you be so nosey? Why don't you go write a new song?"

"Maybe I will later." Jesse leaned toward him. "A *love* song."

Chuckles at Jesse's playful teasing escaped Julian despite his attempt to remain serious. "Well if you're so bored, then go have sex with Evan. I know you're always in the mood for that."

Jesse glanced across the aisle at Evan sprawled out on the couch, a car magazine lying over his face as he napped. "Now that's a possibility." He snapped his gaze back to Julian. "But first I want to know about this mystery man of yours. Why won't you tell me his name?"

"Because he wants to wait until we can all be together."

"So it's really serious?"

Julian met his gaze. "It's extremely serious."

"Then I need to meet him! If I guess his name, will you tell me?"

"You're not going to guess his name."

"But if I do, will you tell me?"

Julian chuckled. "Yeah, I will."

Jesse brought his hands together in a loud clap. "Alright! This'll be fun. I'm going to start by trying to guess the first letter of his name."

"Go for it."

Jesse looked up in a thoughtful expression. "Does it begin

with a..." he held the "a" in a single pure note until he blurted out, "B?"

Julian shook his head. "No."

Jesse tapped a finger on the back of the seat. "Okay. Does it begin with a...Q?"

Laughing softly, Julian said, "Sorry."

Jesse leaned over the seat, putting his lips near Julian's ear, though he didn't hush his voice and it came out with a more serious tone. "Does it begin with an M?"

Julian tensed. He slowly turned his head to look at him.

Jesse's smirk returned full force. "So it begins with an M. Now, what male names start with M?"

Evan's voice sounded from under the magazine. "Michael. As in Jesse Michael Alexander, get your cute ass over here and quit teasing him."

Jesse looked toward Evan. "I thought you were sleeping."

"And I thought you were supposed to be killing your boredom by seducing me."

"Well, if you insist." Jesse moved to walk toward him, but paused to glance back at Julian. "We'll finish this game later."

Julian managed a tense smile. "I'll look forward to it."

He watched as Jesse crawled onto the couch to straddle Evan's legs on his hands and knees. Jesse lowered to his elbows as he caught the bottom of Evan's shirt in his teeth. He slowly raised himself and crept up Evan's body, drawing the shirt with him. Evan arched his back to let it slide up. Jesse released it from his teeth as it reached Evan's chest, revealing his taut stomach. He lifted the magazine, flinging it to the floor. As Jesse bowed his head to meet Evan's smiling lips, Evan opened his mouth, their tongues gliding over each other before their mouths closed together.

Julian shook his head at them. He held up his phone and snapped a picture of them right as Jesse licked up Evan's throat.

Jesse looked at him. "Did you just take our picture?"

"Yes. To show you how you both look more like porn stars than rock stars right now."

"Send it to my phone." Jesse smiled down at Evan. "I'll make it my wallpaper."

Julian sent the picture to Jesse's phone, then in a separate message to Morgan, he added the words, *Do you see what I deal with? It's like watching live porn everyday.*

He glanced at Jesse as he hopped up, holding both hands down to Evan and bringing him to his feet. He extended his hands back and Evan took them as they walked back to the bunks, closing the curtain behind them.

Julian exhaled a sigh, both of relief at Jesse being occupied and of remorse for missing Morgan. He looked at his phone and a new message from Morgan. *Yeah, I see. You poor thing, having to look at one hot guy licking another.*

I thought you said Jesse wasn't your type!

He's not. But just like with watching any porn, does type matter?

Perverved boy. Just as Julian hit send, Brad dropped into the seat beside him.

"Hey," Brad said.

"Hey. Did you get bored with the game, too?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you."

Anxiety swelled in Julian's chest, a feeling he was getting far too familiar with lately, and worse, it was always caused when talking with Brad or Jesse since no matter what the conversation would start as, he'd worry they'd start questioning him about Morgan at any moment.

Julian took a deep breath and looked at Brad with a smile. "What'd you want to talk about?"

Brad flicked his hand toward Julian's phone. "Why won't you tell anyone his name?"

"Because like I told you and just told Jesse, he wants to wait until he can meet you guys in person."

"Is he famous or something?"

Julian felt his phone vibrate with another message. He saw Brad's gaze go to it, but with it turned over, knew Brad couldn't see who it was. "No, it's just the way he likes to do things."

Brad's voice sharpened. "Well it's pretty shitty of him to be like that. If he wants to meet us, then tell him to get off his ass and say hi."

Julian startled back at the anger in Brad's voice. "There's no reason to get so upset about it."

"The hell there isn't. He's pushing you around."

"No he isn't."

"Whether you see it or not, he is. And when I do finally meet him, he'll be damn lucky if I don't pun—"

"Brad!"

Julian jumped at Evan's powerful baritone filling the bus with the one word. He glanced back to see a shirtless Evan holding the curtain halfway open.

"You need to cool it," Evan said. "When Jules wants to talk about his relationship, he will. It's not any of our business until he's ready for it to be."

"I'm just trying to make sure he's okay," Brad said.

"Look at him. He's fine. And he was happy until you started attacking him."

Jesse's voice rang out, "You guys better play nice because if he has to come out again wearing any less clothes than he is now, he's going to be really pissed."

Evan laughed. "That's right." He let the curtain drop shut.

Brad stared forward, his jaw visibly tight.

Julian laid his hand on Brad's arm. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more about him yet. But I promise very, very soon, you're going

to learn why. I'm not doing this to hurt anyone or because he's asking me to. Really, he's wanted to be more open about our relationship since the start, but I have some concerns on how it could affect him, so he's the one who's bent to doing what I want, not the other way around. I can't ask you to understand, but just to be patient with me for a little while longer."

Brad's head barely moved in a nod. "Fine." As he said the word, he stood up and went back to sit by Kenny.

Julian sighed. His phone vibrated again, and he flipped it over to two messages. The first in reply to the last one he sent, *I can't argue with being a perverted boy since I do like the way you handle a crop.* And the most recent and second, *Where'd you go?* Julian typed in his reply. *I'm still here. Jesse and Brad were just asking about who I'm seeing. This is getting more difficult by the minute.*

Then the sooner we talk to everyone the better.

Couldn't agree more. Julian hit send and reclined in the seat. Tonight. They had to confess their relationship tonight. He wasn't going to live another day hiding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Julian tipped the young man who carried his bags into his room, then sighed as he looked around the empty space with only Chopin for company. He dropped onto the bed. Once they arrived at the stadium, he'd find Morgan and they'd go to the guys before the concert.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, surprised to see Morgan was calling rather than texting, and answered. "And now who's the antsy one?"

Morgan's tense voice sounded. "Me, since there's been an accident."

Julian bolted upright. "Are you okay?"

Morgan exhaled a deep breath into the phone. "Yeah, I'm fine. It wasn't an accident with me. It's your primary piano."

Julian remained silent.

"It wasn't secured in the truck, neither were some of the crates. It's...it's broken."

Julian cleared his throat to help in finding his voice. "What do you mean, *it's broken*? How broken is it?"

"It's ruined, Jules. The back leg and left front leg are completely broken. The side panel on the left side of the case is smashed. The strings, the soundboard, it's all ruined. All of it."

Through his shock, Julian heard the pain in Morgan's voice.

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault. I was the one who secured it." A burst of anger entered his tone. "I told Kurt before the first show, it and the backup needed to be put in crates. He said it was extra work and would add too much time to the loading and unloading." Sorrow softened his voice again. "But it doesn't matter. It's still my fault for not locking it down properly. The thing is, I thought it was. I triple checked the straps. I don't understand how it came loose."

Julian worked to comprehend all Morgan was saying, but a single thought blocked his mind, his piano was ruined.

"Jules? Are you still there?"

Julian blinked and took a breath. "Yeah, I'm just...I'm just trying to understand everything."

"I don't even know how to tell you how sorry I am. Simply saying it isn't anywhere near enough. I'll do whatever I can to replace it. I don't care what the cost is."

Julian's mind started functioning again. He caught up to all Morgan had said and put some humor into his own tone. "There you go being frivolous again."

Morgan's voice took on shock. "What?"

"It's just a piano. Not even my favorite, that one's at home. Yes, I loved my concert piano, but it can be replaced. The backup is undamaged, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts about it. Everything will be fine and the show will go on."

Morgan took his turn to be silent for a moment. "I'm glad you're taking this so well. I thought you'd want to kill me."

"I love you, Morgan. A piano is nothing compared to that."

Morgan's voice trembled as he spoke. "I love you too, Jules."

"So you see, everything is fine."

"The most important thing is, at least. But it looks like I'm going to lose my job. Kurt was so pissed, he couldn't even talk, except to tell me to get away from him until he decided he wanted to see me again. He's going to fire me."

"The hell he is!" Julian paused. "Wait, you said you secured it, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Just like you had sound checked it the night the wire was cut."

Julian could tell as Morgan spoke again, it was through clenched teeth.

“Fuck! I was so upset over the piano, I wasn’t thinking. We need to talk to Jesse and Evan.”

Julian sprang off the bed and grabbed Chopin’s leash. “We will, but first I’m coming to the stadium. I’m sure Kurt’s already tried to get a hold of Evan. But since I don’t have either of them pounding on my door, I’m assuming he hasn’t reached him yet.”

“Be careful. We don’t know who this psycho is or what he’s after.”

“I’ll be careful, but not waiting on guards. I’ll be there in a few.”

“Alright. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Julian hung up and left with Chopin. He had the concierge call around a limo. The ride to the stadium felt like it took longer than the entire trip that morning. He marched inside through one of the back exits, expecting he’d have to hunt for Morgan, but saw him walking toward him. Stress darkened Morgan’s features.

Julian gave him a reassuring smile. “Are you doing better?”

Morgan walked beside him. “Now that I have you with me.”

“We need to find a place to talk. Where the hell are the dressing rooms in this place?”

“We’re coming up on them. Do you want to see your piano?”

Julian took a deep breath. “I think it’d be best if I waited a little longer. I’m not sure I’m ready to see it yet from how you described it.”

Morgan lightly touched Julian’s hand. He guided him into one of the dressing rooms and closed the door behind them. “So what are we going to do? We have to find out who’s doing this.”

Julian let Chopin off his leash and started pacing. “I don’t know. I was thinking on the ride over here, and what if it isn’t me or the band someone is trying to sabotage? What if it’s you?”

Morgan shook his head slightly. "Why would someone want to sabotage me?"

Julian shrugged. "Why would someone want to sabotage the band?"

"But that's the thing. I don't think it's targeted toward all of you guys. I really believe it's just toward you. Why haven't any of the other instruments been damaged? Kenny's guitars, Brad's drums, Jesse's guitars and basses. Even though Jesse plays your piano during the shows, he's not the one who everyone first connects with it. You are."

"I haven't done anything to make myself a target."

Morgan moved close to him and took his hand. "If this person is as much of a psycho as I think, they're the type where you don't even have to have said hi to them. Look at how things progressed from cutting the piano string, then damaging the body of it. Your piano is something close to you, something personal. By hurting it, they're hurting you."

Julian closed his eyes. He rubbed his forehead with one hand. "I don't understand why this is happening."

Morgan wrapped him in a tight embrace. "We'll find out when we catch them. Until then, I'm not leaving your side."

Julian nodded. He managed a weak smile and looked up at him. "My hero."

Morgan chuckled and bowed his head to meet Julian's lips.

Julian felt Morgan was intending to keep the kiss chaste. He took Morgan's head in both hands and pushed his tongue into Morgan's mouth before he had a chance to fully part his lips. A groan from Morgan reverberated in his mouth as Morgan quickly matched his own passion. Julian felt desperate to be close to him. He needed it like never before with the threat lingering over them.

Too late he caught the sound of voices on the other side of the door. The door flung open. His lips still on Morgan's, Julian's gaze met Jesse's.

Jesse froze in place, even his smile didn't move. He held up one index finger as if about to say something, then dropped it and backed out of the doorway, forcing Evan back as well, and closed the door.

Morgan slowly glanced over his shoulder. "Was that who I think it was?"

"If you think it was Jesse, then yes. Yes it was."

Morgan took a step back. "I guess he knows for sure now."

Julian slapped a hand to his forehead. "This wasn't exactly how I wanted everyone to find out."

Morgan placed his hands on Julian's shoulders. "Just settle down and be calm."

A knock came from the other side of the door, followed by Jesse's voice. "Since it sounds like you both have your tongues back in your own mouths, is it safe to come in now?"

Julian took a deep breath and a couple steps toward the door, putting himself in front of Morgan. "Yes, come in."

Jesse opened the door enough to peek his head through, then looked back at the others. "Okay, you're safe, Kenny. There's no man-loving going on in here to burn your sensitive eyes."

Julian huffed. "Will you just get in here?"

Jesse stepped in, followed by Evan, Brad, and Kenny. Evan locked the door and moved to Jesse's side. Jesse stood with his hands on his hips, his gaze moving from Julian to Morgan and back to Julian. "Well, it's not every day I get to walk into my dressing room and find two boys making out."

Julian moved toward Jesse, his voice leaving him in a rush of words. "I know what it must look like and I'm not even going to deny what it looks like because it's exactly what it is, but it's also more than what you're probably thinking. You're probably thinking you caught me in a fling, but that's not true. I love him. I've loved him for a long time. Not that we've been together all that long, but certainly long enough.

"He's shown me things I never saw before. We went camping

and I peed outside! And we had sex outside, too! Have you ever had sex outside? Of course you have. Look who I'm talking to. But I never had and it was amazing! But all that aside, I know it's not his fault about my piano. He secured it. He told me. So it's someone else and we need to find out who!"

As Julian ended his rant, Jesse silently stared at him. Julian heard Morgan chuckling behind him. He glanced at him, only to have Jesse's voice bring his attention back to him.

"There's just one thing I want to know."

Julian nodded. "Anything."

"When you peed and had sex outside, it wasn't at the same time, was it? Because that'd be really nasty."

Evan snickered. Morgan laughed harder.

Julian took in Jesse's smirk. "You're not angry," he said more than asked.

"No." Jesse's smirk dropped away. "I'm hurt, just like I think all of us are." He gestured toward Kenny and Brad.

"Jess..."

Jesse held up his hand, stopping Julian's words. "You've had your say, or whatever that speech was, now it's my turn. First off, let me admit I've known about you and Morgan for a while, because I knew he won the auction for you."

Morgan stepped forward. "How? I gave the money to a friend. I didn't even go to the auction because I wanted it all to be a surprise."

Evan looked at Morgan. "But you *did* show up to collect your prize and I had security to make sure it wasn't a nutcase who won. They informed the head of security that Julian sent them away and gave your description as a precautionary measure, including your first name because they overheard Julian say it. The security head wasn't comfortable with what happened, so he contacted me that night asking if I wanted his guys to tail Julian, just to be on the safe side. When I learned who you were, I told him there was nothing to worry about since I remembered meeting you at

the arena and Julian's obvious crush on you."

"It wasn't that obvious," Julian grumbled.

Jesse continued for Evan, his gaze on Julian. "So of course Ev told me. He also told me he heard you guys fighting one morning in your hotel room."

Julian and Morgan glanced at each other, then down at the floor.

"And I knew fully when you didn't come back to Chicago with us and missed my birthday," Jesse said.

"I didn't want to miss your birthday," Julian said softly. "It was the only time I could get alone with him."

"I'm not upset about that. I understand why you weren't there. What I don't understand is why didn't you tell all of us from the start you guys were seeing each other?"

Julian slowly looked up at him. "I was afraid of someone not approving because Morgan works for us. The first day you met him, you said, 'it's too bad he's a roadie,' and brought up the incident between those women. I couldn't stand the thought you might not want Morgan to work for us because of the tensions it could cause among the staff."

"And it's caused tensions regardless judging by your shattered piano."

Julian dropped his gaze.

Jesse sighed and shook his head. "And this is where the part of me being hurt comes in. You put way too much meaning into my words. I was just talking that day. It's not like I knew how you felt about him. And I can't believe you'd think I wouldn't want you to see the man you're so clearly attracted to, just because he's staff. It was the same thing with my brother."

Julian snapped his head up. "You made it very clear to me and Brandon you didn't want us seeing each other."

"I joked around with you guys about it. Yeah, given the choice, I didn't want you in a relationship together because I knew it wouldn't last and I didn't want to see either of you hurt. But if

you guys really wanted to be together, I wouldn't have stood in your way. Not that it mattered. You both figured out on your own you guys weren't a perfect match. Granted, it took you screwing each other a few times—ow!" Jesse flinched and whipped his head toward Evan. "Why'd you pinch my ass? Other than it being so cute and irresistible."

"That was the biggest part of it, but I also don't think we should go into details about Julian's past right now." Evan's gaze flicked to Morgan.

Jesse nodded in understanding, then looked back to Julian. "Sorry, but I was just trying to say, you should've just come to me. To all of us for that matter."

Julian took a tentative step toward Jesse. "But if you knew about me and Morgan, why didn't you say anything? You acted like you didn't know him when the string was cut."

"I pretended I didn't know him because you were still acting like he wasn't important to you. How was it my place to act any different? And why would I come to you about a relationship you hadn't talked to me about? Just like I minded my business and waited for you to come to me about Brandon, I did the same thing now. And just like back then, you didn't confide in me, and now we have a major problem."

Jesse's expression turned wounded. "What have I done to make you feel like you can't come to me, Jules? I know I'm not the most silent when it comes to my opinion, but after all our time together, I thought you'd know you can always talk to me about anything. If you want to be with Morgan, do you really think I'd let some pissy attitudes from other people keep you guys apart? I love you like a brother." He glanced away. "I didn't realize until all this happened my feelings were so one-sided."

"They're not!" Julian moved to stand in front of Jesse. "I do look at you as a brother and love you like family." He glanced at the others. "All of you. You're better to me than my own family is. I was wrong to hide my relationship with Morgan from you. And I realize I underestimated and misjudged all of you, but I was so blinded by wanting to keep Morgan safe." His voice

hushed. "I've made a few other poor decisions since Morgan and I have been together. I'm just fortunate he's very patient as I try to figure out the whole complicated dealings of a long-term relationship."

Jesse met Julian's gaze directly. "I can understand that. Wanting to protect the person you love most makes everything and everyone, even family, seem secondary."

Julian's relief, and also sadness for having not spoken to anyone sooner, took control of him. He wrapped his arms around Jesse. "I truly am sorry, Jess. I should've known you more than anyone else would understand."

Jesse hugged Julian in return. "It's alright. Since your intentions were good and it was all for love, I can easily forgive you. In fact, I already did a long time ago. I just needed to talk to you about it. Everything you said is what I already thought. Or actually, it's what Ev thought. He and I have talked about you both a lot, we all have." He looked at Kenny and Brad. "You might not have been ready to confide in us about you guys, but since we all care about you, we've talked amongst ourselves about what was going on with you. But really, you need to thank Ev, because he's the one who said you guys would talk when you were ready. Even if I was trying to trick it out of you on the bus earlier, and he stopped me."

Julian chuckled and drew back to wipe grateful tears from his eyes. He looked to Evan. "Thanks, Evan. I owe you an apology, too."

Evan waved his words away. "There's no need for thanks or apologies." He put his arm around Jesse's waist. "It was my pleasure to distract him."

Jesse laughed. "And it was *my* pleasure to be distracted by him." He focused his gaze on Morgan. "And then there's you."

Morgan laid his arm over Julian's shoulders. "Hey, I told him I wanted to be honest with all of you from the start."

Julian nodded. "He did."

Jesse extended his hand to Morgan. "Yeah well, here's a

belated welcome to the family.”

Morgan clasped Jesse’s hand. “Thanks.”

As Morgan attempted to pull his hand back, Jesse held on. “I just want to inform you of one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve gotten really attached to your dog.”

“I know! I told Julian this past week I was jealous of your relationship with him.”

Jesse laughed. “And one other good thing came out of this, Jules.”

“What’s that?” Julian asked.

“I told a convincing lie! You had no clue I knew about you and Morgan, and really believed I didn’t remember him the night the string was cut.”

Evan grinned as he kissed Jesse’s cheek. “I’m sorry, gorgeous. It was still pretty obvious you knew. Jules just didn’t see it because he’s couldn’t see three feet beyond Morgan.”

Kenny nodded. “He’s right, man.”

“You know,” Morgan said, smiling at Jesse, “not being able to lie isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

“True, but I have ambitions of perfection in all things I do,” Jesse said.

Brad broke the moment by stepping forward, waving one hand to get everyone’s attention. “Whoa, hey! Listen, it’s great Jesse and Evan are cool, but on my end, I’m more than a little hurt. How many times did I try to get you to open up to me, Jules? Even today! It’s just like I said to the guys, I thought you and me were tighter than that. But you have something big like this going on in your life and you don’t even come to me?” He laid his hand over his heart. “That really hurts. I mean, if nothing else, even if you didn’t want to tell everyone else, I thought you would’ve told me. But you get him,” he flicked his hand at Morgan, “and suddenly you don’t need anybody else.”

Julian shook his head. "It wasn't like that. I didn't come to you because I wasn't sure how you'd react. In the past, you'd always criticize every man I saw. And even without knowing Morgan, you were criticizing him."

"What else was I supposed to do when you wouldn't talk about him and you weren't acting like yourself? I was worried about you! And through everything, you kept saying, you knew you could come to me, when obviously you didn't! You misjudged me more than anyone else!"

Evan laid his hand on Brad's arm. "Cool it, Brad."

Brad turned on him. "No! It's not right how he hid this from us!"

Evan glared at him. "Don't make me tell you a second time."

Brad huffed and stomped away to flop down on the couch.

Evan's gaze remained on him. "Julian hiding his relationship from us isn't much different from when Jesse and I hid ours from the world. I understand why he did it, Jesse understands why he did it, and you should too after having known me for years and watched all that Jesse and I went through before we came out."

"I get why he did it, wanting to protect Morgan. I just think it's pretty shitty everyone else was put in second place because he's got a new man."

"That's what happens when you fall in love with someone," Kenny said. "Everyone else gets knocked down a notch. And that's the way it should be, especially if you see yourself spending the rest of your life with that person."

Jesse turned shocked eyes on Kenny. "You just totally freaked me out. I can't believe you'd say something like that. Krista is really rubbing off on you."

A dreamy little grin graced Kenny's lips. "I know."

Julian turned to Kenny. "How do you feel about Morgan and me?"

Kenny shrugged. "I really don't care so long as you're not pulling the crap he does." He pointed to Jesse with his thumb,

then looked at Morgan. "And you seem pretty cool. You like sports, man?"

Morgan nodded. "You name it, I watch it."

"Awesome!" Kenny said, holding up his hand for a high five.

Morgan slapped their hands together.

Julian glanced at Brad. He left Morgan's side and sat on the couch beside him. He laid his hand on Brad's knee. "I'm so sorry, Brad. You're right. I should've told you, if no one else. You're one of my best friends and I know I haven't shown it with how I've acted the past few weeks."

Brad kept his eyes turned away. "I just kept waiting for you to come to me about it, not understanding why you weren't, then Jesse and Evan pulled me and Kenny together to tell us what they were thinking about you guys. I was surprised, but I guess I don't really know what I was expecting." He slowly turned his head and looked at him. "Maybe part of it's my fault for not pushing you harder to talk."

"No, you have no blame in this. I just hope we can put it behind us. I don't want our friendship to be damaged."

Brad laid his hand over Julian's. "It's not. I just need a little time to let the hurt heal." His gaze turned to Morgan, his voice dipped to a gruffer tone. "And to get to know him and make sure he's good enough for you."

"He's too good for me." Julian leaned forward and hugged him.

Brad squeezed him and gave him a couple pats on the back.

Morgan moved over to them and looked at Brad. "I know you and Jules are good friends and I don't want to come between you guys. I really hope we can become friends, too." He held his hand down to Brad.

Brad gazed at it for a moment before he took it. "Yeah."

Jesse took a seat in a chair near the couch. "Now that we've got everything cleared up, we have to tackle the bigger problem. I'm assuming you already know about your piano."

"Morgan and I were discussing it just before you came in."

Jesse smirked at him. "You must've been talking really closely then."

Julian gave him an exasperated look. "Don't even start with the jokes."

Jesse snickered. "Sorry, but you're going to have to deal with it. I've got weeks of jokes to catch up on."

Julian laughed. "Yeah, I'm getting a clear vision of my punishment."

Evan sat on the arm of Jesse's chair. "Before we came in, what were you guys saying about everything?"

"Julian was thinking it might not be him or the band someone's trying to get at, but me," Morgan said.

"I was thinking the same thing," Evan said. "Have you fought with any of the other staff? Done or said something to offend someone?"

Morgan shook his head. "I've gotten along with everyone. Well, except Kurt, but he doesn't get along with anybody."

"Does anyone know about you and Julian?" Evan asked.

"Not from my mouth, they don't."

"You're spending your nights together, right?"

Both Morgan and Julian nodded.

"Then who are you rooming with, and what have you told them about why you're not in your room at night?"

Morgan tensed. "My roommate's Remmy." He told them of his conversation with Remmy after he had returned to his hotel room from his and Julian's first night on the road together.

Evan shared a look with Jesse, then brought his gaze to Morgan. "So he seemed uncomfortable when you said you were gay?"

"Well, I don't know if it was uncomfortable or shocked."

Jesse fell back against the chair. "That's going to really suck if

it's Remmy. I thought he was pretty cool."

"I'm not ready to put full blame on him yet," Evan said. "Whether it's Remmy or someone else, they've already struck twice, they'll do it again, so we need to be ready for them."

Kenny cut in. "I think it's weird they're always going after the piano. Why aren't they going after Jules's keyboards if they're targeting him? He's the only one who plays them during shows, but he shares the piano with Jesse."

"Yeah, but the piano is his," Jesse said. "This was his personal concert piano he used on the last tour, and he's owned for years. I'm just borrowing it during shows."

Julian sighed. "I haven't even seen it yet. Have you?"

Jesse's expression filled with sympathy. "Yeah. I think it's better if you don't see it."

"It's that bad?"

"Ev thinks someone took a sledgehammer to it."

Julian choked out a shocked cough. Morgan wrapped an arm around him and pulled him closer.

"But...but how could you tell?" Julian stammered.

Evan's gaze went to Julian. "First off, even if it and none of the other equipment was secured in the truck, the ride here wasn't rough enough for everything to get thrown around with such force to do the damage done to it. Second, when I was looking at the wood, I saw a couple half circle indents, like the wood broke lower or higher where the hammer impacted."

Jesse winked up at him. "That's my Inspector Ev."

Morgan spoke softly. "To smash something like that takes a lot of strength and a lot of violence."

"And a lot of anger," Evan added. "Which is why I need a favor from you."

"Anything," Julian said.

"I need you to have your mahogany grand shipped to you."

Julian shook his head. "I love that piano! It took me forever to find one like it. It's an antique! I'd never find another with its sound."

Evan locked his gaze with Julian's. "And it's dear to you."

Julian stared back at him. He looked to Morgan for help.

Morgan gave him a squeeze. "I'm sorry, but if it'll bring out this psycho, we need to do it. His plan makes perfect sense to me."

Julian let out a whimper and hung his head. "Fine. But I'll have to go back to Chicago. The only person with a key to my place is Brandon." He felt Morgan's arm around his shoulders twitch and looked at him, seeing his tense jaw muscles. "It's only so he can check on things while I'm gone. He does the same for Jesse and Evan."

"He's Jesse's brother, so it's expected," Morgan said between clenched teeth.

Jesse chuckled. "Looks like you got a jealous one there, Jules."

Morgan shot him an unappreciative look.

Evan brought the conversation back. "If you're comfortable with Brandon and Shunichi going into your place, there's no need for you to go back home. They can handle meeting the haulers, and they might even be able to come down with it."

"I'm fine with them going in and getting it moved, but I don't think it's necessary for them to come down."

"Then it's settled," Evan said. "Let's hope this works."

Jesse stood up. "And now, we need to start thinking about getting ready to rock this joint."

Julian slowly rose to his feet. "I'd like to take a moment to see my piano first, just to help convince me the risk I'm taking with my grand at home is worth it."

Jesse headed toward the door. "If you really think you have to, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Julian and Morgan followed with Brad and Kenny behind.

Evan stopped Jesse before he opened the door and turned to them. "There's just one more thing. You guys came out to us, so I take it that means you're ready to be open with everyone."

Julian nodded. "We are."

"Good. Then I want you guys hanging all over each other every chance you get around the staff."

"I'm fine with that, but why?"

"He's adding fuel to the fire," Morgan answered for Evan.

Evan nodded. "I have another thought this whole thing could be based in jealousy, and whether that's it or it's something else, like someone not comfortable with Morgan being gay, then you two openly flaunting it will agitate both factors."

"There's one other problem, though," Morgan said.

"What's that?" Evan asked.

"Kurt. He can't stand me. He's been one step from firing me since I started, and he would've today, if he wasn't so pissed he couldn't get the words out."

"I'll handle Kurt."

Morgan looked at Julian and held out his hand. "Then shall we?"

Julian smiled and placed his hand in Morgan's. "Yes, we shall."

They followed Jesse and Evan to the back of the arena. They walked outside, since the broken piano never got as far as being unloaded.

The back of the semi was open. Julian gasped as he saw the black grand lying inside, half of it held up by only one leg, like a wounded animal still struggling to rise. He stopped and stared, then took a few hesitant steps closer. He climbed into the trailer and stood over his broken instrument. Morgan and the others watched him from the outside.

Julian shook his head slightly. "How could someone do this much damage without anyone hearing?"

"Depends on what time they did it," Evan said. "If it was in

the middle of the night, after everything was loaded, there would only be a handful of guards watching the trucks. If they're not watching closely, or a few take a break together, someone could sneak in and do it. They could've hid in the truck behind the crates while it was being loaded and waited for their chance. They might've even stayed inside during transport, then when it was time for it to be unloaded, ducked out. Since there's no damage on the doors, I'm leaning that way."

Jesse turned to Evan. "I know it'll take forever, but we should have someone interview the staff to see where everyone was last night."

Evan put his arm around Jesse's shoulders. "Good idea, gorgeous. I'll talk to Sam about it."

"Who's Sam?" Morgan asked.

"The head of our security," Evan answered.

"Kurt could probably help out with what staff was on that night, too," Kenny said.

Evan let out a humorless snort. "Kurt's going to be getting questioned with everyone else, if not harder. I have zero trust in him."

Julian knelt and picked up a shattered piece of wood from the panel. He gently ran his fingers over the slick black surface. He looked at them, his voice trembling with anger. "I want the person found who did this."

"We'll find them," Morgan said.

Julian placed the piece of wood down and moved to leave the trailer. He glanced back at it a final time, then jumped out. He took Morgan's hand and marched toward the stadium without looking back again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Morgan sat beside Evan in the empty stadium, watching Julian and the others on stage doing a sound check. In the week since they stopped hiding their relationship, not a great deal changed except their lives were easier and so much better. He even started taking Chopin jogging in the morning with Jesse and his dogs. Since Jesse ran almost everyday, his endurance was unbelievable and he couldn't believe how fast Jesse was. Lucky for him, Jesse was nice enough to slow his running to a jog so he could keep up and to shorten the distance for him, then would hit a treadmill afterward to do his full routine.

He'd gotten to know all the band members fairly well. He learned that Jesse, while arrogant, had a kind and caring heart, which he guessed anyway from how good he treated Chopin. Kenny was laidback and easy to get along with, always ready to talk about sports or his girlfriend. He noticed one of Jesse's favorite pastimes was teasing Kenny, who would often ignore him, which only spurred Jesse to keep going until he got a rise out of Kenny, but Kenny always ended up in laughter, and it was clear he enjoyed the attention. As an outsider looking in, he thought they acted as much like siblings as they did friends.

Brad had a sweet natured personality, but there was still some tension between them. Things seemed fine with Brad and Julian, but he knew Brad blamed him for Julian's distance over the past few weeks. He tried his best to stay cool and nice with him, hoping to gain his friendship for Julian's sake, and also because if Brad decided to start badmouthing him like he knew Brad had with other guys, he'd have to confront him, which would probably turn ugly real fast.

Evan kept the guys focused and organized, but also happy. Out of everyone, Morgan felt the strongest connection with him, maybe because he knew Evan was working on keeping Julian safe, but also he felt comfortable around him. In his time watching

everyone, he caught that Evan was aloof with most people, but not with him. Maybe since he was Julian's partner, Evan already considered him part of the inner circle.

Morgan did notice many of the other roadies didn't rejoice for him and his relationship with Julian, the news of which he was certain had spread to every staff member in less than five minutes. He still continued to do his job; he traveled with the staff rather than the band, even though he was growing weary of it and wanted to be with Julian instead.

He didn't let it show outwardly, though, and thought he hid his emotions better than others. He saw open resentment in some. With others, he saw more smiles and friendliness, but they were a façade, people sucking up to him because of his connection to Julian. It gave him an idea of what life must be like for Julian and the guys on a daily basis, never knowing who they could trust, who genuinely liked them or who was showing kindness because of their status. He never thought about the challenges of being famous until now, when he was thrown in the middle of it.

Remmy didn't seem changed by the news, but then, he'd grown distant ever since Morgan had told him he was gay. Kurt, however, was one of the people wearing a false smile. Kurt no longer pushed him to do tasks beyond his job, he didn't yell or degrade him; he didn't force him to work endless hours. All of it pissed him off. Not necessarily the better treatment, but that it should've been given to him from the start, and he wondered who had taken his place on Kurt's shit-list.

One thing he could say, he was getting used to Julian spoiling him. Part of him rebelled against it, on the inside. But more of him had fun with it because he saw how happy it made Julian. When they reached Miami a couple days ago, the band had two days off. On the first, he went with everyone to look at concert grounds and while Julian didn't find one he liked as well as his old one, he found one with a sound he and Jesse both agreed on.

On the second day, he and Julian spent the morning in bed, the afternoon shopping, the evening at a beautiful dinner, the night wrapped around each other once again. With the shopping,

Julian insisted on getting him a new wardrobe. The first few stores Julian took him to surpassed his comfort level with their swank, but he adjusted quickly with Julian guiding him through the couture.

What amazed him further was that day, Julian told him he would be dropping his name as his partner in his next interview, that he wanted him to attend award shows with him, to be a part of meet-and-greets, and other events. Julian was opening his life to him, completely and fully. With such a profound thing, how could he not allow Julian to spoil him? Every day, their lives were becoming more intertwined.

Laughter from the stage pulled his attention back to Julian and the guys. Jesse was pushing Brad away from the drums and taking over. He snatched Brad's drumsticks, twirled one in his right fingers, then started pounding the skins, not playing a Conquest song, or any song Morgan knew of, just laying a kicking beat. He realized Jesse was just playing around, but the rhythms he laid down instantly caught his attention, making him want to move to them.

Morgan glanced at Evan. "It looks like your husband has lost his focus."

Evan looked up from a contract he was reading. "Yeah. That happens a lot."

"Is this a new song he's working on?"

"If it is, he hasn't shared it with me yet. He likes taking over instruments and playing whatever his fingers and ears tell him. You haven't seen him and Julian have one of their classical showdowns yet, have you?"

Morgan shook his head. "No. What's that?"

"When they get bored, they challenge each other with classical pieces trying to outplay each other. It's fun and amazing to watch."

"Jesse can keep up with him?"

"He played classical piano for years." Evan smiled at him.

“He’s not your average rocker boy.”

Jesse’s voice interrupted with shouting, “Brandon!”

Morgan snapped his head around to where Jesse was looking. Brandon walked between seats toward the stage, waving to Jesse with one hand, holding the hand of his partner, Shunichi, in his other. Morgan couldn’t control the tension creeping over him, the annoyance at Brandon’s glowing, actor-perfect smile. He felt a hand rest on his shoulder. He turned to see Evan had stood up and was also looking at Brandon.

“You don’t have anything to worry about from him,” Evan said.

“That still doesn’t make me any more thrilled to see someone Julian’s been naked with.”

“I understand completely, but I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to it. Brandon couldn’t be more a part of Conquest than if he was in the band.” Evan glanced at the stage. He sucked in a sharp breath. “Please don’t fall.”

Morgan looked to the stage and saw Jesse sprinting for the edge. At how fast he moved, even he held his breath, but Jesse gracefully slid off it to land on his feet and jogged to meet his brother, nearly knocking him over as he embraced him. Morgan sighed and stood. “I should probably introduce myself.”

“It’d be the nice thing to do so he can put a face to your name.”

Morgan gave him a curious look.

Evan laughed. “You didn’t really expect Jess to hold out on to so juicy a tidbit as Jules having a man, did you?”

Morgan grinned. “I guess not.”

Evan hushed his voice. “Besides, the more eyes watching everyone’s back, the better.”

“I’ll agree with that.”

Morgan saw the other band members working their way toward Jesse, Brandon, and Shunichi, except Julian was lingering

at the end of the row he and Evan would come out from. He felt a burst of reassurance at Julian waiting for him. As they reached the end of the row, Julian smiled at Morgan and held out his hand. Morgan took it, and side by side they moved to join the others.

Brandon and Shunichi took turns greeting Evan with hugs. After Brandon released Evan, he held his arms open for Julian. Morgan fought his jealousy down as he watched Brandon laugh and jostle Julian in an embrace.

As Brandon released him, Julian went next into Shunichi's arms. "I'm surprised you're both here. I didn't really expect you to come down with my piano."

"We wanted to make sure it was treated well," Shunichi said. "But even more, Jesse told us about what's going on. We wanted to see you in person to make sure you're handling things alright, and try to help out if we can, even if it's only for a couple days."

"Thank you," Julian said. "I appreciate it since I know you're both so busy. Then it's here?"

Shunichi shook his head. "Not yet. We were a little ahead of the truck."

As Morgan watched them, he saw there wasn't any tension between Julian and Brandon's partner, only warmth and friendship. He felt surprised by it, but also more secure.

"I'll be so relieved when it gets here in one, undamaged piece." Julian faced around and gestured to Morgan. "And now for the man I've been dying to introduce you both to. Brandon, Shun, this is Morgan Chandler."

Brandon offered Morgan his hand and a smile. "I'm glad to finally meet you. Jesse's talked about you so much, I was starting to get worried you were more his boyfriend than Julian's."

Morgan couldn't help but chuckle as he took Brandon's hand. "No worries on that." He slid his arm around Julian's waist. "I've got my perfect man here."

Brandon laid his arm over Shunichi's shoulders. "So I see and

have heard.” He looked at Julian. “But what’s this whole thing about you peeing outside?”

Julian shot Jesse a glare. “Did you really have to?”

Jesse snickered and spun around. “Come on, guys. Let’s get some lunch.”

Julian turned to Morgan. “You can join us, can’t you?”

Morgan shook his head. “I was only on a short break as it is. Now that you guys are done playing, I need to help get the stage ready or Kurt will have a fit.”

“Screw Kurt,” Jesse said. “What’s he going to do if you hang out with us?”

“True, but I have my own sense of responsibility, too.”

“You might want to think about ditching that if you’re going to hang out with rock stars, man,” Brad said.

Julian clasped Morgan’s hand. “If you’re not coming, then I’ll stick around, too.”

Evan looked back at him. “Just so long as you don’t go running off anywhere by yourself.”

“I won’t.”

Julian and Morgan walked with them to a back exit, then turned and traveled the way they’d come after they all left.

“You don’t have to stay,” Morgan said. “I’m going to be working, anyway.”

“So you think.”

Morgan glanced at him.

As they came upon the dressing rooms, Julian veered into one, dragging Morgan in. He locked the door, then leaned back on it, grinning at Morgan. “And now, I finally have you all to myself.”

Morgan smiled and shook his head at him. “Don’t you get enough of that already?”

“Not even close.” Julian pushed off the door and placed his

hands on Morgan's shoulders.

Morgan walked backward until he bumped into a chair and sat down, reaching to pull Julian onto his lap. Instead, Julian dropped to his knees in front of him.

Julian rubbed Morgan's thighs, his playful demeanor replaced by concern. "You seemed tense when talking to Brandon. Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Morgan said, hearing the tightness in his tone. "It's just, it's not easy, looking at him and knowing about you guys. It's probably stupid of me to be jealous, but it's hard not to be." His voice dipped to a grumble. "And he doesn't make it any easier, looking as hot as he does."

Julian laughed softly. "That's not really something he can help." He leaned over Morgan's lap. "But I happen to think he doesn't even compare to you."

Morgan caressed Julian's cheek. "Really?"

Julian nodded. "You're far more hot." He slid his hands higher on Morgan's thighs. "So much so, when everyone was talking about lunch, only one thing came to my mind as being able to satiate my hunger."

Desire heated Morgan's body. His cock, already half up with just having Julian on his knees in front of him, finished filling. "And what would that be?"

Julian opened the button on Morgan's jeans and dragged the zipper over the solid bulge inside. "I'll show you."

Morgan lifted his ass to edge his jeans and boxer-briefs down. His swollen rod rose free. Julian lowered his head. A hushed groan left Morgan as his cock slid along Julian's soft cheek. Julian kissed the shaft at the base, then teased the spot where it met the sac before putting his lips to the same spot and sucking.

Morgan rubbed one hand through Julian's hair, the softness sliding between his fingers adding to his pleasure. Julian's warm tongue licked a wet line up the vein on the underside. Morgan watched him trace the flared head and dip the tip of his tongue

into the slit. Just the sight of Julian with his cock made him want to come. And yet at the same time, he wanted to watch him suck and play with it for hours.

With Morgan's slit cleaned of fluid, Julian opened his mouth and shoved as much of the thick cock in as he could. His hand on the base, he pumped it with each movement of his head. Morgan couldn't take his eyes away from the vision of Julian sucking him, his skin turning shiny and slick with Julian's saliva. Julian added a twist each time he reached the head, hitting his sweet spot perfectly every time.

He wanted to hold off on coming, but Julian worked him so good, and what was more, looked so beautiful doing it. He started rocking his hips in small, urgent motions. Julian matched his pace, sucking and yanking on his cock harder. Julian moaned, and the sound finished him.

Morgan groaned between clenched teeth; his head fell back as he came.

Julian continued to pump him throughout the orgasm, swallowing quickly to take all his cum. He slowly eased Morgan's cock out of his mouth, continuing to gently lick and kiss at it for a few moments more. He smiled up at Morgan. "Do you feel more reassured now?"

"Very much." Morgan caught him by the upper arm and hauled him off his knees to kiss him.

Julian withdrew his tongue from Morgan's mouth. "I can't wait until later when I can be inside you."

Morgan grinned and kissed Julian's throat where it met his jaw. "Why should we wait until later? Let's go back to the hotel now."

"Weren't you just saying something earlier about your whole sense of responsibility and all that?"

"Yeah, but Brad did tell me I should lose it if I'm going to hang out with rock stars."

Julian stood up and held his hands down to him. "Remind me

to thank him.”

Morgan got to his feet with a pull from Julian, then released Julian's hands to close his jeans. They walked out of the dressing room to Kurt standing in the hall, holding a clipboard while looking at some equipment crates.

Kurt glanced at them, his gaze settling on Morgan. “There you are. I need you to help get the amps set up.”

Morgan detected a hint of Kurt's usual demanding tone hiding under forced niceness. He tried to think of how to tell him he was taking the afternoon off, when Julian rescued him.

“Actually, Kurt, I need to borrow Morgan for the rest of the day. I'm sure you can find someone else.”

The smile Kurt presented looked as if it caused him physical pain. “Of course, Mr. Forrester.”

Julian nodded his thanks and marched away holding Morgan's hand.

“You do realize you just made my life hell for the rest of this tour, don't you?” Morgan said.

Julian smirked at him. “Now how can your life be hell when you have me in it?”

Morgan pulled his hand from Julian's to wrap his arm around his shoulders. “You're right. Nothing could make it short of heaven so long as I have you.”



Remmy watched Julian and Morgan leave the stadium. He slowly looked away. He walked through the backstage, his head down, his mind moving through thoughts of what-ifs. Another roadie jogged up to him.

“Hey, Remmy. Julian's piano is here. I told the truck to go around back.”

“Thanks.”

Remmy returned from where he departed. He opened a back door with a weary shove, seeing the delivery truck waiting. He

directed it to the loading docks. Once in place, the driver jumped out and ambled to the back. He unlocked the steel doors and pulled them open.

Remmy stared inside. He took a slow step forward, then jumped in the back. Julian's personal and prized piano sat wrapped and padded as if it were fine porcelain. He saw hints of it through the wrapping, the rich wood color, the ornate carvings on the legs. Even silent it was a work of art.

He spun away from it and leaped out the truck. "It looks like it's in one piece. Come on in and take a rest from your drive while I round up some of the guys to unload it."

Remmy slowly closed the doors, gazing inside as darkness fell over the piano.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Julian pointed at the delivery truck and spoke to the limo driver. "Drop us off over there, please."

Morgan sighed. "Well, at least now I know what's more important to you, me or your piano."

Julian gave him an exasperated look. "You know that's not true."

One of Morgan's eyebrows rose. "Right. Because you canceling our afternoon love session to meet your piano fills me with so much confidence."

"I can't help it. When Brandon called and said the driver called him to say he was nearly at the stadium, I just had to be here for its unloading." Julian rested his hand on Morgan's thigh. "You're not really upset, are you?"

Morgan put his arm around Julian's shoulders. "Of course not. I wouldn't expect you to be any different. I'm just trying to make you feel guilty so you'll want to make it up to me with wild, crazy sex later."

Julian laughed. "You don't have to pull a guilt trip on me to get that."

"No, but it makes it more fun for me."

Julian gave him a light shove, then grabbed the door handle as the limo drew to a halt. He jumped out, Morgan hastening after him.

Julian rushed around to the back of the truck and paused at seeing one of the doors slightly ajar. "Damn it! Everything that's gone wrong and now someone leaves the doors open! Where the hell is Kurt? Where's Remmy? Where's the driver? Someone needs to be out here guarding it!"

Morgan stopped at his side. "You've been hanging out with Jesse too much. That was a near perfect prima donna impression."

Julian grinned at him. "It was, wasn't it?"

Julian reached for the door. It burst open from the inside. He sprang back, barely avoiding getting hit. A male figure in a black hooded sweatshirt leaped out, the hood covering his head and hiding his face. A booming crash came from inside. The scent of gasoline filled the air and a stream poured out from the back of the truck.

It took less than a millisecond for Julian to realize this was the person who'd vandalized his other piano. He whirled toward him, only to see Morgan chasing the culprit down.

"Morgan, no!" Julian raced through the parking lot after him. What if the guy had a weapon? A knife or a gun? Panic spurred him to greater speed. He needed to get to Morgan, stop him, protect him.

Morgan closed the distance between him and the hooded figure. He leaped, tackling him from behind. They both crashed to the pavement. As soon as they hit, the other heaved his body up against Morgan's larger one, scrambling to get to his feet. Morgan grabbed the sweatshirt in two fistfuls. The hood fell down, revealing a head of buzz-cut blond hair. The man twisted and threw an elbow back, nailing Morgan in the cheekbone. Morgan's head snapped to the side, his hold loosened.

The other sprang free and to his feet. Morgan surged forward to stand, his movements a fraction too slow. Rather than run, the other faced around and swung, throwing a punch into Morgan's cheek. Still unsteady from the first hit, Morgan crashed to one knee, catching himself from fully falling with a hand on the pavement.

A few strides away, Julian's gaze met the attacker's. Shock jolted through him at seeing Kurt, but only for an instant before rage pushed aside his panic from seconds before.

Car tires squealed. Julian looked beyond Kurt to a black Cadillac Escalade speeding through the parking lot toward them, a black van following. He knew Evan had rented one, and from the speed, it could only be him with Jesse and the others.

Kurt spun away as if to run. Julian slammed into Kurt's side, knocking him to the ground and falling after him. He landed on top and instantly shoved himself up. He gripped Kurt's shirt and shook him, yelling into his face.

"Why did you do it?"

Powerful arms enclosed Julian's waist and not only hauled him off Kurt, but lifted him from the ground, turned him, and set him down. Julian whirled around to go for Kurt once again, but found Morgan had moved him out of the way to have his turn.

As Kurt launched to his feet, Morgan smashed his fist into Kurt's nose, shouting, "I should've known!"

Kurt reeled back, falling to the ground. The Escalade screeched to a stop. The doors flew open, Jesse, Evan, and the others pouring out. Security sprang from the van. Morgan grabbed Kurt and pulled him to his feet. He spun him, yanking one of Kurt's arms up behind his back to restrain him.

"You're the one!" Evan yelled. His arm cocked back to throw a punch.

Jesse grabbed Evan's arm, wrapping his other one around Evan's waist from behind. "Ev, stop! You'll hurt yourself! Morgan's got it under control!"

Evan lowered his arm, but not without swearing and fixing Kurt with a lethal glare.

Two security staff grabbed Kurt from Morgan while a third relayed details into a cell phone to police. Charging footsteps came from behind. Julian turned to see a flood of security coming up on them, the back door to the stadium open with Remmy and other staff watching the scene with wide eyes.

Morgan turned to Julian and wrapped him in his arms. Julian laid his head on Morgan's shoulder, though his gaze remained on Kurt. He tightened his hold on Morgan, needing to feel the firmness of him, the reality that he was unhurt. With his adrenaline lowering, shock at what happened started setting in.

Jesse spun toward them. "Are you both alright?"

Julian nodded and lifted his head to meet Morgan's gaze. "I am. Are you?"

"Yeah," Morgan said softly.

Julian saw the redness on Morgan's cheek was starting to darken with a bruise. He gently cupped it with his hand. Morgan closed his eyes at the touch, then pulled Julian against him.

Evan moved to stand by them. "What the hell happened?"

Julian looked at Evan. "You know Brandon called to say my piano arrived. When I went to check on it, Kurt jumped from the truck. There was gas..." he snapped his head up to Morgan. "We have to go back to the truck!"

Morgan glanced in the direction of the truck and saw Remmy. "It'll be fine. Remmy's got it."

Evan stabbed the air with his index finger toward Kurt. "And now I want to why the fuck you've been trashing his instruments!"

Kurt turned his head away. "Fuck off."

Evan lunged for him.

Jesse grabbed him around the waist again, and when Evan halted, he leaped around him to stand between him and Kurt. He placed both hands on Evan's chest. "I don't think punching the shit out of him will help. There's probably only one person he'll talk to." Jesse's gaze went to Julian.

Julian met Jesse's eyes. He slowly looked at Kurt. Kurt glanced at him, then lowered his gaze. Julian eased back from Morgan, who reluctantly let him go. He stepped toward Kurt, stopping a few feet back when he felt Morgan rest his hands on his shoulders from behind. He willed his voice to come out calm and steady.

"Why did you do it, Kurt?"

Kurt kept his gaze lowered.

Julian gnashed his teeth. The urge to scream at him, punch him, knock him to the ground rose in him again. He battled it

back and instead sought to find any patience left in him. "You might as well tell me, and all of us. Because I'll tell you, I plan to prosecute you for the damage you did. Cutting the wire was bad. Smashing my piano, horrible. But planning to burn my most cherished instrument? That's nothing less than loathsome and despicable. And if that was the step you were about to take, just what would've been the one to follow? Was I next? Was Morgan?"

"I never wanted to hurt you," Kurt grumbled.

Julian's voice rose with disbelief. "Never wanted to hurt me? How could you not realize what you were doing *was* hurting me?"

His voice still a mumble, Kurt said, "I meant physically."

Julian shook his head in confusion. He glanced at Morgan for help.

Morgan looked at Kurt. "Are you in love with him?"

"What?" Kurt snapped. "No, I'm not in love with him! I'm not queer like all of you!"

Anger flooded Julian. "Then why the hell did you do it?"

Kurt attempted to move toward him, but was the guards shoved him back. "Out of everyone and everything, I always made sure your instruments were treated like gold! But do you even give a shit? Do you care how hard I work to see that things are set so perfectly for you? I've admired your talent since I first heard you play. But you," his expression turned disgusted, "you don't even acknowledge I exist. You don't even remember you promised to show me how to play!"

Julian startled back a step. "When?"

Kurt tried to lift an arm, only to have it wrenched by a guard. "During the first tour!"

"I would remember if I had said something like that."

"You obviously don't and it's proof of what kind of person you are! I bust my ass, and bust my ass, and bust my ass! But you don't care! I even tried to win the auction!"

Julian's eyes widened. "You were the one on the phone."

“Yeah, I was. I thought since I was staff, I might not be allowed to participate, so I was trying to not let anyone know. But none of it matters because you don’t give a shit! Then he comes in,” Kurt’s gaze went to Morgan in a hateful glare, “and gets your praise, your respect, everything!” He returned his gaze to Julian. “But you know, I’m glad for it, because now I know you for what you really are. You’re not a great artist or great pianist. You’re a liar and a slut.”

Morgan leaped around Julian.

Before Julian or the security staff could react, Morgan slammed Kurt with another fist to the face. Two of the guards grabbed Morgan and hauled him back.

“Fucking prick!” Morgan yelled.

Julian pushed one of the guards away and grabbed Morgan’s arm. “Stop before you get hurt. It’s over now.”

Morgan relaxed at Julian’s touch and words, but continued to glare at Kurt.

Julian faced Kurt. Blood streamed down Kurt’s face from his nose and over his lips. Julian motioned to one of the guards. “At least let him wipe his face.”

One guard grudgingly released Kurt’s arm, and Kurt cleaned the blood from his lips with his sleeve.

“Now tell me, honestly, did I really promise you I’d show you how to play piano?” Julian asked. “What did I say?”

Kurt pressed his sleeve to his nose. “It was when we first met. I said to you, ‘I hope to learn more about playing piano from you.’ And you said, ‘I doubt I could show you much, but you may catch a trick or two from me.’”

Julian shook his head. “But that’s hardly me promising to show you to play. I’ll admit I don’t remember that conversation, but if those were our words, hearing them now, they sound like nothing more than niceties.”

Kurt’s eyes narrowed at him. “Maybe they were to you, but they were more than that to me.”

Julian stared at him, his mouth slightly agape.

Morgan gently turned Julian away from Kurt. "Come on. Let's just get away from him."

As they walked from him, two police cars rolled through the parking lot in their direction.

Jesse looked at the guards. "You guys let the cops know what happened and tell them when they need to talk to us, to come inside." He caught up to Julian and Morgan. "Well, we always knew he was a bit nutty."

"He seemed so dedicated to his job, though," Julian said. "So proud of it, so devoted, so—"

"Obsessed," Morgan finished.

"He's right," Evan said. "I never trusted him. The way he'd talk to everyone in the band, and how he treated staff clued me in that he had some issues going on. I told Greg I didn't like him as a staff manager after I met him, but Greg insisted even if his personality was quirky, Kurt's experience couldn't be beat."

Julian's voice came out hushed. "He was pushed too far. That's all. And I'm the cause."

"Hey." Morgan stopped and gripped Julian's shoulders, forcing him to look at him. "Don't blame yourself. You and the guys aren't the only band he works with. It could be he had more of a thing for you than some of the other artists, but if he didn't erupt on you, he would've done it on someone else."

Jesse nodded. "Yeah, Jules. I think it's pretty clear he's been rocking one wave short of a shipwreck for a while."

"Yeah, but if that's true, then maybe it'd be better to get him help rather than press charges."

Morgan stared at him. He looked to Jesse, Evan, and the others, seeing they were all staring at Julian with the same expression of disbelief. He put his arm around Julian's shoulders. "We'll talk about it later. Let's get you inside for now."

Julian nodded and looked back at Jesse as they started walking again. "I was surprised to see you guys. Why'd you come back

early from lunch?”

“We ended up deciding to just get a couple pizzas and bring them back because we didn’t feel like getting pounced on by fans.” Jesse stopped and spun around to go back. “Shit! The pizzas! They’re still in the truck.”

Brandon held out his hand to stop him. “Shun and I will get them. I think it’d be better if all you guys stayed away from Kurt right now.”

“I agree,” Morgan said.

Kenny frowned at Jesse. “I can’t believe with everything that’s happened, you’re worried about food.”

“It’s comfort food,” Jesse said. “It’ll be good for Jules to eat.”

Brad stepped around everyone to go to Julian’s side. He laid his hand on Julian’s back. “I’m just glad you’re okay. When I saw you running through the parking lot, then going after him...” his words trailed off, as if he didn’t want to voice his thoughts of what he feared.

Julian smiled at him and touched Brad’s shoulder. “I’m okay, so there’s nothing to worry about now.”

“Yeah, thanks to him.” Brad nodded at Morgan.

Morgan turned a loving gaze on Julian. “Well, I’m only okay thanks to him, too. We protected each other.”

Brandon walked up carrying three pizza boxes. “As any couple who love each other should.”

Jesse laughed and looked at Julian. “I was just surprised to see you running so fast. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Julian slapped him on the arm. “Not all of us feel it’s necessary to kill ourselves running five miles a day.”

“I don’t either. I just like keeping my endurance up.” Jesse winked at Evan.

Chuckling, Julian took Morgan’s hand and walked toward the truck and Remmy.

Remmy looked at them. “What’s going on?”

Morgan told him all that happened.

Remmy's jaw dropped halfway through the story and after Morgan finished, it took him several seconds before he could speak. "I...I just can't believe."

"Well, believe it and be grateful," Jesse said. "You were one of our top suspects."

Remmy gasped. "Why me?"

Morgan gave him an apologetic smile. "Because you acted so distant and odd with me after I told you I was gay. I thought maybe it made you uncomfortable and you could be retaliating."

Color rose to Remmy's cheeks and deepened by the second until his face burned red. "I didn't mean to act strange. It's just...I had a crush on you, but I didn't think you were into it, so I didn't make a move. Then you told me you were gay and seeing someone, and I was kicking myself. I was thinking of trying to approach you, but then I saw who you were with." He looked at Julian. A sad smile touched his lips. "I knew I couldn't compare to you, so I've been working on moving forward and thought the best way to do it was to keep my distance." He turned to Morgan. "I'm sorry I acted weird, man. I was just so damn disappointed."

"I had no idea," Morgan said, his surprise revealed in his voice.

Remmy let out a couple soft chuckles. "Of course you didn't. I was too shy to let you know."

Jesse jumped into the conversation. "But you're over him now, right?"

Remmy nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't like I was in love. It was just a crush. Or lust." He blushed again and glanced at Julian. "Sorry."

Julian smiled at him. "I can certainly relate to lusting after him, and if you're over it now, then we're fine."

Jesse interrupted again. "You're certain you're over him? You don't have anything like strands of his hair saved in a Ziploc, or jerk off while holding a tissue he sneezed in, right?"

"Okay, on both things, ew and no," Remmy said.

“Great!” Jesse gave him a hard pat on the back. “Congratulations, you’ve just been promoted to staff manager.”

For a second time, Remmy’s jaw dropped, this time leaving him speechless.

Evan sighed. “You might’ve wanted to discuss this with your manager before making a decision like that.”

Jesse turned to him. “Does my manager oppose?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Perfect!” Jesse patted Remmy on the back a couple more times. “Now gather your guys and get that piano unloaded before the gas fumes absorb into the wood.”

Remmy snapped out of his daze. “I don’t know how to thank you, Jesse. I...I’m in shock.”

“You can thank me by doing a good job,” Jesse said, leading the way into the stadium.

Julian gripped Morgan’s hand as they followed. When everyone walked into a dressing room, Morgan pulled him aside.

“I want you to really think about pressing charges against Kurt. For your own safety, he needs to be locked up. Then you can worry about how to get him help. We’ll talk to a lawyer and see what can be done. Maybe there’d be a way to send a shrink to him behind bars.”

Julian looked into his eyes. “I want you to be safe too, so I agree. I’ll let the police handle him.”

Morgan caressed Julian’s cheek. “You shouldn’t have gone after him.”

Julian laid his hand over Morgan’s heart. “Neither should you.”

“I only wanted to keep you safe.”

“And I wanted the same thing. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Julian tipped his head back to meet Morgan’s lips. Morgan

embraced him as Julian's tongue glided into his mouth. Julian put his love, his joy, his relief into the kiss. Everyone and everything disappeared around them. As the kiss came to a slow end, Morgan rested his forehead on Julian's; Julian kept his arms around him, neither wanting to loosen their hold on the other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Julian walked out of the bathroom, rubbing a towel over his wet hair. He looked at Morgan sprawled across the bed on his stomach, his eyes closed, half his bare back uncovered, the towel from his own shower discarded on the floor. A soft smile rose to Julian's lips. It took nothing more than to see Morgan lying there, peaceful and safe, to flood him with gratitude. After everything they'd gone through that day, he made a silent promise to himself to never take for granted having Morgan at his side.

He was still partly in disbelief at all that'd happened. Talking to the police should've made the reality sink in, but it still seemed unreal. Yet despite it all, the show had to go on. Jesse offered to cancel the concert for him, and he was grateful for the thought, but told him no. It was true he didn't feel like performing. He wanted nothing more than to lie in Morgan's arms. But with going on to perform, felt it would be a step toward healing, if not forgetting. He did have to admit, it felt amazing playing his cherished piano on stage. Though now that the culprit behind the vandalism was caught, he decided to send it back home. He didn't want to risk it getting damaged on the road.

Julian patted Chopin on the head before moving toward the bed. He turned off the lights and slipped under the covers. Rather than lie beside Morgan, he lay on top of him, his chest on Morgan's back, and embraced him as much as he could.

A pleased groan rumbled in Morgan's throat. "Is this how we're going to sleep?"

"I was thinking so." Julian placed a gentle kiss on Morgan's bruised cheek. "I feel like I can't get close enough to you."

Morgan took Julian's hand. "I feel the same way. It always felt good to have you touching me, but right now, it's amazing." He lay quiet for a moment. "Are you still thinking of getting Kurt help?"

"Yeah. I'm going to call my attorneys tomorrow and see what

they have to say. Don't get me wrong, I want him to be punished for what he did, but simply punishing him isn't going to help him get over whatever issues he has."

"I have an idea what kind of therapy might help him, but you'd probably disagree with it, since it'd involve me with a baseball bat."

Julian slapped him on the hip and Morgan's body shook with laughter beneath him. Morgan shifted to flip over. Julian lifted up, then once Morgan was on his back, settled on top of him again.

Morgan wrapped his arms around him, clasping his hands behind Julian's back. "I should warn you, I've been doing some thinking."

"That *does* sound foreboding. What have you been thinking about?"

"Us, our relationship, the tour, our future."

One of Julian's slender eyebrows rose. "And here I thought I was joking when I said it sounded foreboding."

Morgan gave Julian's ass a sharp pat. "I'm being serious."

Julian lowered his head and kissed Morgan's neck. "Then continue."

"I want to be with you, even more than we are now."

Julian lifted his head to meet Morgan's gaze.

Morgan touched the backs of his fingertips to Julian's cheek. "It's a weird thing, working on the tour. We're always close, but always so far apart. We're together, but separate. And after today, that's not going to work for me anymore. It wasn't in the first place, but at least it was more tolerable after we started being open. Now, not even that is enough."

"So what do you want?" Julian asked softly.

"I want to spend more time with you. I want to be at your side in everything you do." Morgan grinned. "Or at least in everything you want me at your side for. But I don't know how I can do that

while working. I know Remmy would let me travel with you and the guys, but then I'd always be arriving later for setup, and if I'm going to start doing more events with you, even just meet-and-greets, my work time will get cut into there, too. Then resentment really will start building between me and the other roadies."

"There's one way around it all."

"What?"

A smirked quirked Julian's lips. "I think you know."

"I'd like it better if you said it."

"Ah, but if I said it, that'd make things so easy on you."

Morgan sighed. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

"It's called payback. Remember when you made me fumble my way through asking you for a committed relationship?"

"I should've known that'd come back to haunt me."

"And it has. Now get on with spilling it."

Morgan laughed softly. "Alright. I do know one way things could work out. I'd have to quit being a roadie. Which would mean..." he took a deep breath and let his words fly out on the exhale, "I'd need your help." He cleared his throat. "Financially." He spoke more quickly. "But not fully. I have some savings and some more things I could liquidate at the store, which I'll probably have to do if I really am going to go back to school." He paused. "Oh, I didn't tell you I decided I really am going to do that, did I?"

Julian kissed him lightly on the lips. "No, you didn't, but I'm glad to hear it. Which means, I'll help you now." He kissed him again. "I'll help you through school." He placed another kiss on him. "And I'll beat you if you liquidate a single instrument." He kissed him once more.

Morgan laughed. "And I believe you would since you keep that riding crop handy." He exhaled a breath, letting out the last of his tension and embraced Julian tight, his voice coming softer. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Julian put his lips to Morgan's cheek, letting him feel his smile. "I'm doing this for purely selfish reasons since it means I get to have you with me all the time."

"Then I'm grateful for your selfishness."

Julian brought their lips together. As he slid his tongue into Morgan's mouth, Morgan sucked it deeper. He eased back, though wasn't willing to take his lips from Morgan's. "You don't have to be grateful, you don't have to thank me. You're my partner, Morgan. I want to help you because I love you."

"I love you, too." Morgan squeezed Julian against him as he kissed him once more.

Julian stroked Morgan's hair, his face, his neck, and shoulders. His fingers traveled over every inch of him he could reach. To do nothing more than touch and kiss Morgan satisfied him in a way like he'd never known. This was his future, what his life would be every day from this moment forward. His joy at the thought made him smile through the kiss.

Morgan stopped kissing him. "What are you smiling about?"

"My future." Julian gazed down at him. "It's a beautiful thing to be able to see and touch it."

Both smiled as their lips met again.

Morgan rubbed his legs along Julian's. He wanted to embrace Julian, to cling to him, and know he was okay. When everything that had happened earlier, his only thought had been to protect Julian. He didn't care about the piano or himself. He wanted to catch Kurt and beat him into the ground to ensure he'd never be able to hurt Julian again, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally.

When Kurt stunned him with the elbow to the cheek, he thought he'd failed. In that split second, he waited for Kurt to strike again, but then Julian had appeared. He strengthened his hold on him. His Julian, all fire and courage as he protected him. How it was possible for his love to grow he didn't know, but in that instant it did, and he knew all his days now belonged wholly to Julian.

Morgan felt Julian shift his hips, pressing their hard cocks together. A husky groan left him. He raked his fingers down Julian's back to his ass. Julian thrust on him, and at the friction of Julian's cock grinding on his own, Morgan broke the kiss and arched his head back. Julian kissed down his throat and moved lower. Morgan's breath fled as Julian sucked at one of his nipples and pinched the other. He needed Julian inside him. A moment before, he was content to hold him. Now that they'd pushed up their passion, he felt desperate to connect with Julian's body.

Morgan combed his fingers through Julian's hair. "Let's cut the foreplay short tonight."

Julian lifted his head, a smirk on his lips. "I think we've already been at that for some time."

Julian kissed the center of Morgan's chest, then moved off him to get the lube. Morgan flipped to his stomach again and kicked the blankets off. Julian turned back with the lube in hand, his gaze landing on Morgan's beautifully sculpted ass. He moved over him and sat back on his heels between Morgan's spread thighs. He ran one hand down Morgan's back, over the lines of muscle. As he reached his tailbone, he drew the tip of his middle finger across it and lightly over the outside of his crack. Morgan rolled his hips at the gentle touch.

Julian bowed his head, kissing the backs of Morgan's shoulders. He traced his spine with his tongue down to the tip of his tailbone, then followed the same path back up, ending his journey as Morgan turned his head for a kiss. He slowly pulled back to sit up again and slicked his fingers. He eased them between the solid ass cheeks and rubbed Morgan's small hole. Morgan parted his thighs still more and pushed up to his touch.

Julian lay beside him, kissing Morgan's shoulder and the back of his neck as he stretched him. Morgan raised and lowered his hips with every thrust Julian made. Julian pushed a third finger into him. He heard Morgan's breath leave him, saw Morgan's hand grip the bottom sheet in a fist. He worked him a few moments more, then withdrew his fingers.

Julian brought his body over him. He guided his cock to

Morgan's hole. As the head touched it, Morgan lifted his ass off the bed, silently showing his desire to take it in. Julian pushed down, his cock head pressing into him. Once his full length was buried inside Morgan's heat, he relaxed his body on top of him and held him. He drifted one hand down Morgan's arm and took his hand; Morgan locked their fingers together.

Julian started with slow, gentle thrusts. With all they had faced that day, having their bodies joined brought him comfort and peace. From the soft, purring moans Morgan made, he knew he felt the same way. He nuzzled into Morgan's hair; his lips explored him in tender kisses.

A needy groan came from Morgan. He bumped his ass up against Julian's body. Julian understood what he wanted. He thrust harder, faster. Morgan's hold on his hand tightened.

Morgan spoke between quick breaths. "Jules...Julian...I love you. So much. So very much."

Morgan's body constricted, then released as he came with a loud moan. Hearing and feeling Morgan's pleasure pushed Julian's to the edge. He thrust a few more times, then clenched Morgan's hand with painful force as he emptied his cum inside him. He dropped heavily on top of him. His body rose and fell with the deep breaths Morgan took.

Julian kissed Morgan behind his ear. "I love you, too."

Morgan kissed Julian's hand and kept it against his lips. Julian laid his head against Morgan's, and closed his eyes, feeling contentment and happiness spreading through him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

His eyes covered with a black blindfold, Morgan stumbled for the third time and cursed under his breath. One of the hands resting on his shoulders to guide him gave him a pat.

“Stop shuffling and pick up your feet,” Brandon said.

Morgan turned his head as if he could see Brandon. “I’m shuffling so I don’t fall on my face.”

Brandon pushed on his shoulders to keep him walking. “You’re going to fall on your face if you don’t pick up your feet.”

“Here,” Shunichi said. He stepped around Morgan and took one of his hands. “You have Brandon pushing you from behind and me guiding you in front. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

“That may be, but I’m not really into the whole *ménage à trios* scene, you know.”

“We know,” Brandon said. “You only want one man, but he’s the one who asked us to torture you like this, so blame him.”

“Can’t you guys even give me a clue as to what’s up?”

“No,” Shunichi said firmly.

Morgan sighed. “Then lead away.”

He at least knew they were at the stadium and Julian was up to something. In all their mornings together, Julian had never beaten him out of bed, but today he woke to a knock on the door and cold sheets beside him. He thought Julian must’ve run out for a moment and forgot the key, so he was more than a little surprised when he opened the door to Brandon and Shunichi.

He also burned with embarrassment since he hadn’t bothered to check if it was Julian and opened the door wearing what he went to bed in, nothing. He had froze for a brief instant before slamming the door, though, from the laughter on the other side, he guessed Brandon and Shunichi didn’t take it as a rude action. Once dressed, he let them in and was told they were to bring him

to the stadium on Julian's orders.

Morgan felt the slope of the aisle as they walked down it, then Brandon and Shunichi stopped him. He reached up to the blindfold. "Can I take this thing off now?"

Brandon slapped his hand away. "Not yet."

Morgan dropped his hand to his side and waited.

"Okay, now."

Morgan tore the blindfold away. As he did, soft notes from a piano filled the empty stadium. His eyes needed a moment to adjust, but his ears didn't and instantly recognized the first notes as Conquest's ballad, "Tomorrow." He looked at the stage as Jesse's golden tenor rose to sing, but didn't see him. Rather than stand front and center like he always did, Jesse stood off to the side in the shadows, and a single spotlight illuminated Julian sitting at the mahogany grand. Jesse's voice lifted over the piano:

*"Many people want to know,
What the future holds.
But I see mine, every time,
I look into your eyes.
Days of laughter and tears,
Love and fears,
Shine in your gaze.
And give me so much hope,
For all that may come our way.*

The piano notes grew in strength and speed as Jesse entered the chorus.

*"I'll be in your arms...tomorrow,
When the first light shines.
I'll be in your arms...tomorrow,
When the daylight dies.
I give you all my tomorrows,
From now to eternity.
Without you at my side.
None would exist for me..."*

Julian softened the piano, playing notes holding a Chopin-like sound in the instrument's interlude. Jesse's voice lifted again.

*"I know what a gift I have,
With you by my side.
Living days of passion and lust,
Care and trust,
Into the unreachable sunrise.
Each night in my arms,
I hold my future close.
You're my heart and soul
My today and tomorrow,
Every heartbeat belongs to you."*

The piano grew louder as the chorus came on again.

*"I'll be in your arms...tomorrow
When the first light shines.
I'll be in your arms...tomorrow,
When the daylight dies.
I give you all my tomorrows,
From now to eternity.
Without you at my side.
None would exist for me..."*

Julian brought the piano down, the notes so soft, it seemed like the instrument whispered behind Jesse's voice.

*"Now and forever,
Forever and always,
We're meant to be together.
And all my tomorrows,
From this moment forward,
Exist only for you..."*

Jesse repeated the chorus, carrying the last note as he faded his voice. The piano followed into silence.

Morgan stared at the stage. Julian looked toward him, a soft smile on his lips. Morgan took a breath to pull himself from his trance. His voice barely crested a whisper as he spoke. "This was for me?"

Brandon laid his hand on Morgan's shoulder and leaned toward him. "It was. In case you don't know, you're very much loved."

Morgan glanced at him. He took in Brandon's smile and for the first time since he'd seen him, no jealousy rose in him. Julian was his. Completely, wholly, unconditionally. He nodded in gratitude to Brandon, then looked back to the stage. Jesse walked up the aisle toward him with Evan's hand in his, Kenny and Brad following, but Julian remained on stage.

Jesse stopped in front of him. "You boys have one hour for your private concert. We kicked out all the staff, so the place is yours. I know it's not much," his mischievous smirk shone over his features, "but anything it inspires you to do, you can save for the bus when we leave. Since you'll be traveling with us now."

Jesse walked past him. Morgan spun around. "Jesse, thank you. I don't know how to express how much I appreciate what you just did and for welcoming me to be with you guys."

Jesse faced him. "You don't have to thank me at all." He held his arms open. "You're part of our family now."

Morgan hugged Jesse, whispering another soft, "Thank you."

Jesse laughed as he drew back. "What did I just tell you? Now go get your man. He's waiting for you."

"I will."

As Kenny passed, he held up his hand and Morgan slapped it in a high five.

Brad stopped in front of him. Morgan looked into Brad's eyes, not certain what to expect. Brad had treated him civilly, but he certainly couldn't call it warm.

"You know," Brad said, "even though Jules said you weren't to blame for him being distant and not being honest about you

guys, I'm not going to lie, I've still blamed you."

Morgan tensed. He really didn't want to get into a fight with Brad, not now, not after all Julian had done to make this special time for them.

"But," Brad continued, "I also realized it was wrong putting all the blame on you. It took a while for me to come to that conclusion, even with Jules and everyone else telling me. But even if you were to blame for Jules being distant, what you did to protect him yesterday proves to me what kind of man you are. So," he held his arms up and open, "welcome to the family, man."

Relief washed over Morgan. He stepped into Brad's arms, hugging him as equally tight as Brad embraced him. "Thanks."

"No, thank you for taking care of him. He's a special guy." Brad laughed as he released Morgan. "And he needs to be taken care of. He's been needing his horizons broadened for a long time. Seriously, twenty-six years old and he'd never peed outside."

Morgan burst out laughing.

Still chuckling, Brad walked by him, throwing a final, affectionate pat on Morgan's back. "Now go get him."

Morgan watched the guys walk away. He turned back to the stage and Julian sitting patiently. He hurried down the aisle, and at reaching the stage, jumped and pulled himself up over the edge.

Julian rose from the piano as Morgan approached. He barely finished standing before Morgan pulled him into his arms and to his lips.

Julian wrapped his arms around him and smiled through the kiss. "Surprise."

Morgan laughed softly. "I can't believe you arranged this."

"Well, you're more than overdue for your private concert." Julian took his hand and sat on the bench, pulling Morgan down beside him. "The set-list is yours to choose. I'll play whatever you want, even all classical."

Morgan laid his hand on Julian's thigh. "How about a mix?"

Classical, ballads, and rocking this thing out?”

“Sounds perfect. What do you want me to start with?”

Morgan gave him a tender kiss on the lips. “How about *Fur Elise*?”

Julian returned the kiss. “Our song. You couldn’t have picked better. Play it with me?”

“I’d love to.”

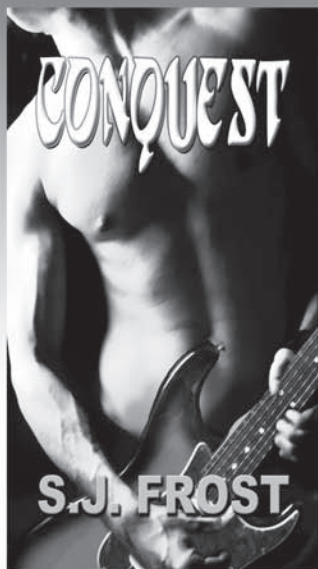
Julian put his fingers to the keys. Morgan placed his hands beside him. Together, they played the first soft notes. Julian turned to him. Morgan gazed into his eyes and tipped his head toward him. Julian met Morgan’s lips, and through the kiss, their fingers floated over the keys, sounding their love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

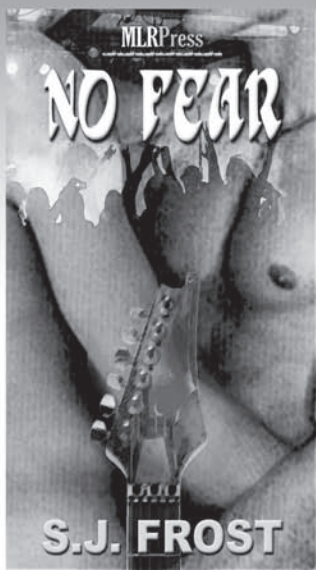
S.J. FROST resides on a mini-ranch in Ohio with her husband and son, as well as a kind-hearted German Shepherd, a Collie who is the anti-Lassie, a few kooky cats, and some very special horses. She enjoys experimenting with her writing and dabbling in different genres, though it's guaranteed that no matter what she writes there will be hot erotic action appearing somewhere in the story. She's a romantic at heart, which is reflected in her writing. The majority of her work is m/m, though she's had the occasional m/f piece published too. Her short stories have been featured in several erotic and romance anthologies including, Best Gay Romance 2007 Edition, Girls on Top, and Surfer Boys, all published by Cleis Press, Ultimate Gay Erotica 2008 and Best Gay Love Stories: Summer Flings, both published by Alyson Books, and Honey Flava published by Atria Books.

You can find out more about the author and upcoming works at: <http://www.sjfrost.com/>

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looking for words.”



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