

Songbirds K] Reed

Seduction in a song is twice as sweet...

Cross Strickland is the king of his empire. As the CEO of a major record label, his life is work and he leaves room for little else. Women are for stress relief and plus ones at events. Emotional attachments are for the weak.

Ava Monroe and Knight McKay are former lovers who remained best friends because they both realized the truth about their relationship—it was missing an extra spark. They turned their passions to music, and the duo is being granted the break of a lifetime when Imperial Records offers them a chance to land a contract.

The sexual tension climbs and Cross finds himself drawn into a threesome he didn't see coming. It's one thing to share a woman, but his attraction to Knight is over the line...isn't it? The depth of feeling for these two scares him in more ways than one, and he makes a break for it.

But when tragedy strikes, the two songbirds have to make a choice. Move on, or fight for their man.

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Songbirds

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SONGBIRDS

KJ Reed

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Chapter One

"Who are they?"

"Undiscovered talent, Mr. Strickland. Hobbs found them in a dive bar, in some college town in the Midwest."

Cross stared at the glossy photo in his hand, a young man, probably in his mid to late twenties, grinning at something off camera with a lopsided smile, punctuated with a five o'clock shadow. His brown hair a little shaggy, his eyes a clear blue. His tight tshirt showed off muscles, but he ran more to lean than bulky. Next to him sat a woman, her head thrown back, eyes shut, river of blonde hair cascading down her back as she cradled a microphone between delicate hands.

Cross shifted in his seat. The reaction had to be from the pretty blonde alone. "Good looking pair." He tossed the photo down on his desk, already littered with papers. "Marketable faces. What's the style?"

"Hobbs says they're a little of everything. Mostly do covers, wide variety. Play almost every night at the bar, they both work there too." Hardy Smith, Cross' scout manager, shifted from one foot to the other, his hands in his pockets. "He seemed like a decent guy, not a shit like some of the other regulars at open mic. And she wasn't a pretentious bitch. Mouthy, but not bitchy."

Cross watched his manager move restlessly. *Why does everyone look scared to report to me all the time?* Even Smith, who was the closest thing Cross had to a friend, always seemed on edge around him. "Has he made contact yet?"

Smith shook his head. "Not yet. Waited for your approval."

"Good." Nothing pissed Cross off more than scouts going rogue and making choices before waiting for consent. He gave a sideways glance at the photo, then before he thought better, asked, "They a couple?"

Smith blinked twice and his brow furrowed in thought, obviously thrown off balance. Cross didn't much care for the personal lives of artists as long as the music was good and they didn't fuck up beyond redemption. "Hobbs didn't mention it."

"Go ahead, offer to send them out here for a meeting. Hopefully the music is as marketable as their looks." When he looked up and still saw Smith standing, he grunted. "Are you waiting for an engraved invitation to get the fuck out of my office and do your job?"

Smith opened his mouth, snapped it shut without saying a word, then turned and speed-walked out of the office, practically leaving a dust cloud in his wake. Cross smiled. He didn't bring Imperial Records up to be the biggest label in the country by being a Nancy-Pansy, that's for damn sure.

Something made him pick up the photo one more time, rotate his chair to the left so that the natural sunlight from his floor-to-ceiling window hit the glossy paper. Cross wondered what the man was smiling at. He looked like the type who smiled often. What had made the woman laugh, throw her head back, baring her silky throat?

They looked so young, though they were probably in their late twenties. Not that Cross was over the hill at thirty-five. But he just felt so damn old. He dropped the photo on his desk.

Yeah, well, building an empire will do that to ya. Get the fuck over it, Strickland.

He swiveled once more in his chair, turning to look out in the fading afternoon light, the sky no longer blue but shades of pink. The city was at his feet. Chicago...his city. A man's city. And he had conquered it with the same tenacity and grit that had helped him triumph in the music business.

Ironic, that. He tilted his chair back, propped his heels on the desk and grabbed a file at random off the never-ending stack waiting for his attention. Cross didn't play an instrument, couldn't read a note of music. And yet he was the king of his industry, because he knew what would sell, what would be the next big thing. Anticipating the

market was his main strength, knowing the buyer, and manipulating their subconscious into wanting his product.

And he was good. Damn good. He didn't give an inch, he was still on top of his game at every turn. So why did everyone act surprised when he expected the same from those who worked for him? If it took tough love—without the love part—to get shit done, then that's what he would dish out. He wouldn't leave the fate of his company to chance, to hope. He would do his damndest to make sure things ran as close to perfect as possible for as long as he was able.

Failure was never an option. Not in his world. His legacy was to be one of unerring triumph.

Looking down, Cross forced his fists to unclench around the file he was choking. With deliberate movements, he set the papers down and smoothed them, eliminating wrinkles caused by his frustration. He stood, flicked his wrists and shrugged his shoulders, settling the impeccably cut suit jacket around his six-foot-two frame. Cross knew there was only one thing that would ease the tension that had settled into his gut, tightening his muscles and locking his jaw. He needed release, and since it wasn't going to come in the form of a woman – between women as he was – he was destined for the gym.

He grabbed the bag he kept stocked and ready in one of the office cabinets and headed out the door. His heavy footsteps sounded a warning it seemed, and people scurried the other way, ducked in offices or slid up against the side of the hallway to avoid getting in his way. Good. He had places to go and he didn't want to deal with anyone right now.

He made his way down to the company gym, noticing but not caring that people all conveniently finished their workouts almost as soon as he started his. He glanced over at the treadmill one of his agents had abandoned. He'd only been on for seven minutes, according to the screen. *Pansy ass.* Cross set his treadmill for a blistering pace, unable to

go anything but full speed ahead. He ran until he felt less like he was being chased and more like he was chasing...something. Always something.

His gray t-shirt was drenched, turning the material a darker hue. He hit the weights next, benching without a spotter. No point in counting on anyone. Leg presses and squats followed, all done with his max weight. Moderation was for assholes.

In the end, release was bittersweet. Cross wasn't so in denial that he thought one workout—or good fuck, when the opportunity presented itself—was enough to last. But for the moment, it was good enough. It would have to be, he had shit to do, an empire to rule.

* * * * *

"Who wants us?" Knight pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, leaned his forearms on the bar he was standing behind. Ava stood on the customer side, ready to run beer and appetizers to the ungrateful collegiate crowd. She couldn't stop staring at the short, middle-aged man in the suit who stood out in the mess of frat boys and sorority 'hos.

"Mr. Strickland, Imperial Records." When Knight continued to give the man a deerin-the-headlights look, he sighed and turned his balding head to Ava. "Ms. Monroe, do *you* speak English?"

Ava wiped her hands on her jeans, thinking that the loud music in the college bar had permanently ruined her hearing. She set her serving tray next to Knight's arms on the scarred wood. "He wants us for what, exactly?"

"Mr. Strickland has asked that we fly you out to see him, meet with him, give him a taste of your music and style."

Knight found his voice long enough to ask, "Why?"

"Because I said you were good. And you are," he added, looking between them. The scout waited, apparently understanding that the information had yet to sink into their heads. And thank God, because it had a long way to go before it took root.

A record company. Wanted to talk to them. Two college dropouts who just wanted to serve beer for the chance to play and sing on Tuesday and Friday nights. Ava's head was swimming, feeling as if Knight had poured a pint of Guinness in there to slosh around.

Apparently, the scout was done waiting. "Look, it's a good opportunity. I'm not saying this because he's my employer, I'm saying this because it's the truth. Cross Strickland may be a son of a bitch sometimes, but he damn well knows what he's doing." Leaning in conspiratorially, the man lowered his tone, his voice almost drowned out by the crappy generic rap playing through the speakers. "You'd be an idiot to pass up the chance." He settled back in his chair, a satisfied look on his face, as if knowing he had done everything within his job description to convince Knight and Ava that this wasn't an opportunity worth missing. The cherry on his persuasive campaign sundae came in the form of a business card slid across the bar, nudging Ava's fingertips until she picked it up.

Glancing at the card in her hand, she felt overcome. She and Knight had never expected to be discovered, never dreamed of making it big. If the duo had wanted a shot at the big time, they would have moved to L.A. or New York or some other Mecca of industry long ago instead of pulling beer and being groped every night of the week for minimum wage and maximum frustration.

"Look," the agent cut into her thoughts, standing as he spoke. "I wrote my own cell number on the back of the card. I'll be in town until tomorrow afternoon. If you want the opportunity of a lifetime, gimme a call before two p.m. tomorrow." With that, the man was swallowed by the collegiate crowd that bum-rushed the bar on a Thirsty Thursday night.

And just like that, Ava was forced to get her head back in the beer-serving game. A Thursday night crowd was something to contend with. But between running drinks and collecting cash, her mind wandered back to the scout's words.

You'd be an idiot to pass up the chance.

She was content, comfortable in this college town bar, serving drinks and playing when she could. From all he'd said, Knight was too. But was being content a good enough reason to say no? Knight believed in Fate, though Ava was more skeptical. But if Fate was giving them the shot, who was she to tell Her no? It wasn't as if the trip to Chicago was a guaranteed record deal. It could turn into nothing more than a free vacation on Imperial Record's dime. But disbelieving as she was about Fate and Destiny and whatever Knight subscribed to, she couldn't shake the feeling that going to Chicago would change both of their lives forever, record deal or no.

* * * * *

Hours later, his head pounding, soles of his shoes sticky from spilled drinks and his jeans forever imprinted with the smell of light beer, Knight let himself into the studio apartment he rented three blocks from the bar, Ava on his heels. Flopping himself down on the twin bed he'd had since childhood, he stared at the ceiling, almost too tired to move. His best friend lowered herself more carefully, her head at the foot of the bed, a safe distance from his shoes. He let his hand wander up and down her calf, the touch as natural to him as breathing.

Following a crack in the ceiling with his eyes, he gazed around the room, over pictures of musicians he worshiped, a print of Jim Morrison taped to the wall. His keyboard lay nestled in a corner next to the cheap desk he purchased at a yard sale, holding his piece-of-shit laptop that was due to die any day. His guitar case was on the floor, covered in faded, peeling stickers from other bands, venues. It suddenly all seemed so childish. Not the place a twenty-eight-year-old man should live.

Already, things were changing, and they hadn't even decided to take the trip. Yesterday he had been commending himself for not being materialistic or vain about his living situation, about being practical and dealing with a small, cramped space that sufficed. That it didn't matter. Now, it screamed, "Time to move on and move up, McKay."

Well, shit. If things were going to change, might as well go all the way. "So, what do you think?"

Ava didn't have to ask what he meant. Best friends since the fourth grade, they barely had to speak out loud half the time. They had tried being lovers at one time, and while it was comfortable, pleasant enough, something was missing. They both agreed to let the lovers drop and continue on as best friends. "It'll change everything," she replied, not looking at him.

"I know." When she said no more, he knew her answer.

Knight rolled to one side, reaching for his cell phone in the other pocket and the card he had stuffed in his wallet. Dialing the number with a shaky finger, he almost hung up on the second ring when he heard an impatient, gruff, "Hobbs."

"Hi, hello. Barry, this, uh, this is Knight McKay—oomph! And Ava Monroe," he added, rubbing a rib where her toe had made contact. Obviously Ava didn't want to be left out. He glanced over at the clock, winced when he saw the time. "Sorry, I didn't realize how late it was. We just got off work."

"Well? I'm assuming you didn't call to tell me a bedtime story."

Knight cleared his throat. "Uh, no. No bedtime story." Why was this so hard? "I we," he corrected quickly to avoid another kick, "were just calling to say yeah." When no answer came, Knight realized that "yeah" wasn't very descriptive and almost slapped himself. "I mean, yeah, we'd like to take you up on the trip to Chicago."

More silence, and Knight was sure he had blown it when he heard, "Pack your bags, bring your guitar, meet me out front of the bar tomorrow. One p.m." All that followed was the dial tone, telling him that the scout had hung up.

"Well?"

He looked at the face he recognized almost as well as his own. The only person left in the world who loved him. "One o'clock tomorrow, in front of the bar."

Ava was silent, for maybe the third time in her life. Then she rolled off the bed, adjusted the skimpy top she wore for better tips and walked to the door. Turning as she grabbed the knob, she asked, "Can we do this?"

He didn't have an answer, so he shrugged his shoulders. It was enough for her, as she nodded and left. He knew she'd be there tomorrow, ready to go.

Knight forced himself to get up and shower, the tepid water and generic soap washing away the smell of smoke and stale beer. He padded back to his bed naked, tossed the covers aside and crawled in. He set his alarm, something he rarely did since he never had to be at work until nine in the evening, and closed his eyes, willing sleep to come.

Chapter Two

Barry led Knight and Ava, followed by the bellhop carting their luggage, to a door at the end of the hall. "We put you guys in a suite. Common living room with a kitchenette and two separate bedrooms. If you want two different rooms, say it now or deal with it on your own later."

Knight looked at Ava, who simply shrugged. They each shook their head, and Barry unlocked the door for them, stepping into a suite of rooms that kicked his studio apartment's ass. The size alone would have swallowed his place. Everything screamed class and money. The cream carpet was thick and spongy, the wallpaper pristine and bright. Light poured in through a massive window with the curtains drawn back, hitting metal and chrome fixtures around the room, setting them with a glare.

He walked into the outer sitting room slowly, turned once, then steeled himself against the feeling of awe again. He really had to get his head out of his ass if he didn't want these people thinking he was a bumpkin hick. Obviously Ava felt the same way, because she looked at the scout and gave a noncommittal, "It'll do."

Barry's lip twitched, but he just nodded. "I'll be back for you at seven." He turned to walk out the door before Knight remembered a question.

"What are we supposed to wear tonight?"

One hand on the doorknob, Barry looked back, gave him an assessing glance. "Just...just be yourselves, all right?" With another nod, he left.

Be ourselves. Great. Helpful.

Ava, now no longer on guard, gave him a huge grin. "I get first pick of the bedrooms!" She laughed as she raced off like a kid in a candy store to check out the accommodations.

Well, there was nothing to do but follow the advice. Knight reminded himself that they wouldn't be in this position in the first place if they didn't have any talent, if the scout didn't see something in the duo worth taking another look at. He just had to keep that thought in mind.

* * * * *

At ten minutes to eight that night, Cross sat in his office, drumming his fingers on the armrest of the chair. He'd had Hobbs rush to get McKay and Monroe here so they could start the process as soon as possible. Scouts had a shit job, and Cross knew it. Catering to talent and their ever-changing whims while still trying to do their job within Cross' strict boundaries.

Challenging, to say the least.

Didn't mean Cross felt bad for them. Just meant he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Owning his own company gave him that luxury. Control was an asset, a highly desired one.

Unfortunately, control didn't help with the raging tension that kept him on edge.

What Cross really wanted was to find the woman who could keep up with him. Some woman who would help him find his release without wanting a commitment or to talk about feelings or some shit like that. Sex. Fucking, really. Finding release, getting on with life. Was it impossible to find a woman who wouldn't turn fucking into something more? Because *more* was something he didn't want to give.

Workouts were only doing so much by way of relieving tension. He could sweat, he could tax his muscles, but it wasn't the same.

Maybe he should call Ivana, see if she had anyone new. A woman after his own heart, she'd come into their arrangement with the same ideals, expecting the same thing from Cross that he'd expected of her...nothing. After a mutual parting of ways, Ivana still called once in a while to suggest a woman for him to see. As an agent with a local modeling firm, beautiful women weren't exactly scarce for her.

Pussy would be easier to come by, except he kept himself to the strict rule of never sleeping with artists, or anyone coming in with a demo, for that matter. Cut down on the number of people who could use sex to their advantage.

Cross forced himself to take three slow, deep breaths to relax his body and then stood, smoothed down his suit with cool, controlled movements and made his way down the hall to the conference room. He had potential artists coming in five minutes – supposedly – and he didn't need to be riled up. Business required a level head. He'd worry about his ever-growing problem later.

Two more minutes passed, and the conference room door opened. Cross turned to see Barry Hobbs. Behind him were McKay and Monroe. He was tall, almost as tall as Cross, but leaner, his limbs moving with fluid ease. She was petite, her blonde hair swinging with her bouncy steps, her face freshly scrubbed, an easy smile tilted her pink lips. They looked exactly as he expected.

His reaction to the pair, however, was nothing like he had imagined. The air was suddenly sucked from the room, and he fought the urge to loosen the collar to his shirt.

What the hell is wrong with you, Strickland? Pull it together.

Before Barry could introduce the pair, the woman stepped around her partner and walked right up to him, not quite coming up to his shoulder. She stuck out a tiny hand and said one word. "Monroe."

Young, but ballsy. Cross grasped the hand offered, glad for a firm grip in return. Delicate strength. "Cross Strickland."

"Knight McKay," the other man said as he pumped Cross' hand.

He indicated the chairs at the end of the long boardroom table. "Have a seat." Crossing the room, he pressed the intercom and asked his secretary to have dinner sent in, then turned and studied their new possible talent.

Leaning back in the seat, fingers laced together and resting over his flat abdomen, McKay looked at ease. He could have been poolside, for all the worry he had. In complete contrast, Monroe sat on the edge of her chair, constantly in motion in some

way. The fluttering of a hand, the bounce of her knee, twitch of her foot. She was a gallon of energy harnessed in a pintsized container. It wasn't nerves so much as it was just natural. She didn't strike him as a woman who sat still well.

Seconds later, his secretary bustled in carrying a tray of food from Cross' favorite restaurant. They didn't deliver, unless Cross was ordering. They'd probably kill an emu and serve it if he asked them to. After plates were distributed, Cross sat back and watched, observing their reactions to each other, to Barry, to him.

Sitting down in front of the two was something else. Each of them made conversation easily, as if Barry was a family friend rather than some guy they met two days ago. They didn't beg, they didn't plead. They made small talk, laughed about simple things, answered his questions with ease.

Damn it, I think I like them.

He watched as Knight picked up the bottle of water in front of him, fingers trailing through the condensation on the plastic. He felt transfixed, unable to look away as deft fingers swirled around the bottle tracing an unknown pattern. Those same fingers gripped the bottle, lifting for Knight to take a drink. Cross watched his throat work as he swallowed, the tan hollow of his neck throbbing once. He had the momentary urge to reach out and touch Knight's throat, feel the movement as he swallowed.

"So what time would you like Mr. McKay and Ms. Monroe back here tomorrow?" Barry asked the question, snapping Cross out of his nightmare daze.

What the fuck was that? He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, soothing the hairs that stood on end. As he glanced at Barry to answer, out of the corner of his eye he caught McKay's eyes, the look saying he caught on to Cross' unease.

He trained himself on Ava, the tiny woman in front of him. A more comfortable focus. Cross could understand the flicker of attraction here. Beautiful woman, healthy man, natural. She lifted a piece of food to her mouth, parted full lips and took the fork in, letting her teeth graze the tines. His cock throbbed in response, thinking about her teeth grazing his erection.

Someone said something amusing, and she laughed. Her hand came with natural ease to Knight's arm, squeezed once in a friendly gesture. He wondered if they were lovers as well as friends. He could imagine her sliding that small hand down to Knight's waist, unbuttoning his fly, straddling him and letting his cock enter her moist heat. He could see her thighs squeezing his as she experienced the rush to climax, her head thrown back in passion, Knight's strong hands around her waist in balance, his tan skin a contrast to her pale tone...

Seriously, what the hell was wrong with him? Picturing a woman with another guy? He didn't do guys, and he never slept with the new talent, female or otherwise. He was going sick in the head.

"Let's shoot for ten," he said, sounding harsher than he meant. "Might be a little waiting around, gets busy around here you know." He avoided looking directly in Knight's eyes. "Bring your guitar."

One corner of Knight's mouth kicked up, then the other in a smile. "Sure. Looking forward to it."

Alone in his office twenty minutes later, Cross realized how much he was not looking forward to tomorrow. There was something weird about the energy or vibe or whatever he got around those two, as if his mind were suddenly possessed. His nerves started to stutter, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. And although he hadn't felt bad during the meeting, he felt the cold sweat starting to coat his body under his suit.

God, he needed a woman.

* * * * *

Letting himself into his own room that night, Knight replayed dinner. He held his own, never felt overwhelmed. But something about Cross Strickland still unnerved him.

He flopped on the bed, toed his shoes off and laced his fingers under his head. It wasn't the man's position, or his power in the industry. Even the man's physical size,

impressive as he was standing over six feet, with wide shoulders made more broad by his obviously expensive suit jacket, wasn't what hit him.

It was the way Cross watched him with an eagle eye. Knight had expected to be scrutinized, looked over, observed. Both he and Ava discussed it. But Cross watched them with an almost dazed expression, as if something startled him. Had the CEO been a woman, Knight would have felt sized up like a lover. But this was Cross Strickland. Everything about him screamed power and authority. A man's man to the core. A man Knight wouldn't mind being admired by.

Knight was an open-minded person, believed attraction knew no boundaries. He'd had men, and he'd had women. Neither was better than the other. But seeing something that might have resembled attraction from Cross Strickland was, well, surprising.

He must have missed something, mixed up signals. A guy like Cross wanted women by the bucket-full, one for every day of the week. No, he misunderstood, misinterpreted. He would just have to keep his mistake to himself. God only knew how embarrassing it would be to be completely wrong.

Knight shifted so that he could pull the cover off the bed and slip between the sheets, not bothering to remove his clothes. Time to ignore the electric feelings he got from Cross and concentrate on his music. If they wanted any chance at all of being picked up by the record company he needed to be on his A-game tomorrow. That meant sleep, resting and not thinking about being attracted to his possible new boss.

* * * * *

Ava sat in the conference room again, Knight next to her, tuning his guitar, waiting for direction. Instead of direction, what she got was seven stares, all waiting for one tiny reason to dismiss them, call them a failure. Strickland was one of them, though his gaze was icier than the rest. It was like a harsher version of *American Idol*, with seven Simon Cowells as the judging panel. Where was a crazy Paula or wise-cracking Ellen when you needed her?

Ava's eyes kept drawing back to Strickland's unblinking gaze, like a magnet with no choice. His eyes never left her, except to impart that same unblinking stare at Knight. She wasn't stupid, she knew when a man was attracted to her. What surprised her was his reaction to Knight, as if he were feeling the same pull toward him as he was toward Ava. Even when they got there that morning, a quick handshake had Cross yanking his hand back as though he'd been shocked with static electricity from Knight's palm. The man was feeling something, and he didn't like it one bit. The thought almost made Ava smirk. Cross Strickland was human, and terrified of it.

That knowledge, that Cross Strickland was battling something so natural and human, gave Ava the comfort to perform with the same ease that she felt back home in the smoky bar, playing for the college set. They were simply playing for people, not robots, not stone.

Knight balanced himself on the stool brought in for him, one leg on the ground, the other propped up on the top rung, his guitar settled on his lap. She had her heels caught on the rung, her knees just a little higher than her waist. Knight reached in his pocket and pulled out his current favorite pick. Strumming a few chords, he launched into his first of three songs they were prepared to give. It was a soft Irish ballad. Definitely not the stuff that would sell in today's market, but it showed off Knight's skills and her vocal range. She lost herself in the music, listening to the chords. Her vision blurred, became hazy around the edges. Unsurprisingly, her vision tunneled toward Cross' stone-carved features.

After the final notes echoed in the room, there was an audible silence. She wasn't sure if they were supposed to keep playing or wait, so they both sat. She looked each of their audience members in the eye, lingering over Cross' face. Their gazes clashed like lightning, and Ava suppressed a strong desire to bounce her knees like a little girl with too much sugar in her system.

After another minute of awkward, heavy silence, she decided to hell with waiting and nudged Knight to signal him for another song. Looking up, she saw Cross' eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. Ava bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling.

Completing the song, she decided to wait them out. She could play the silent game, too. Knight was never a talker, it was always Ava that broke the silence. After a few moments, the committee turned toward each other, nodded, and exited the room without saying a word or glancing their way. Only Cross looked back once, his expression unreadable, before following the long line of judges. The seven dwarves of doom.

Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to crush dreams we go.

"Well, I think they like us." Knight gave a cheeky grin to Barry, seated in the corner of the room. "What happens now?"

Barry looked at his watch, rolling his wrist to force the face up. "They'll deliberate for a while, discuss options, and go from there. Doesn't usually take long, Cross only hires guys who know their shit." Glancing up, Barry looked as if he wanted to say something, but merely shook his head and said, "You did good, guys."

True to Barry's word, the *American Idol* judge-wannabes walked back into the room not more than five minutes later. Cross sat at the head of the conference table, and Ava would have sworn she could see a slightly gray pallor to his normally tan face. Probably the lighting.

Cross folded his hands over each other on the table, elbows wide, leaned in and said, "We're prepared to offer you an EP deal. You record four or five songs, we see how you do. How the public reacts to them. What the numbers are. Of course," he added, one corner of his full lips tipping up, "Imperial Records retains the rights to anything you record during your time here."

"Of course," Knight murmured.

Ava was almost unable to drag her eyes away from Cross' lips. Mentally slapping herself, she turned to Barry. "What do you think?"

Barry shook his head in reply. "I'm not a lawyer or your personal agent or – "

Knight held up a hand. "She just asked what you thought."

The scout pursed his lips, his eyes pinging over to Cross—who arched one superior eyebrow—before looking back. "I think it's a good deal. Nothing permanent, you get to see how they work and if you like their style, just as much as they get to see how you work." He shrugged one shoulder. "Good deal."

"All right then." Knight looked at her, and she nodded. He held out his hand to Cross. There was a moment of hesitation – which had Ava biting the inside of her lip to avoid smiling – before Cross grasped his hand in a firm shake. He turned to her and offered his hand, which seemed to swallow hers whole. There was no mistaking it, the big, bad CEO's palms were damp with sweat.

Standing, posture stiff, Cross said, "We'll meet downstairs in the studio tomorrow morning. Bring your guitar." He left the room, not looking back.

As the others filed out behind their fearless leader, Ava wondered if Knight was picking up the same vibes she was. Cross was attracted to her, but there was something between the two men as well. Oh, he was denying it, probably explaining it away as something stupid like low blood sugar. But her best friend and the CEO were as attracted as she was.

She made a mental note to think about it some. They gave themselves up for an EP Deal, and regardless of the outcome, it was going to be a hell of a ride.

Chapter Three

Cross let the leather chair fold around him as he leaned back and sighed. He'd escaped to one of the lesser-used conference rooms, finding solace in the peace. No intercoms here, no administrative assistant poking her head in every seven seconds with a new form, no phone ringing off the hook. For the next hour, he was free to just sit and relax, a perk that – ironically – was not often afforded him.

The door to the conference room hissed open and he bit back a groan at his hour being cut short. Then McKay popped his head in, looked around expectantly. When his eyes grazed over Cross, he jerked in surprise.

"Mr. Strickland, I'm sorry. I was supposed to head up here for a meeting but, uh, I guess I got the wrong room." The man rubbed a hand over his neck, as if embarrassed to have made a mistake in front of him.

"Come in." The words were out of his mouth before he could think it through. But he'd said it, so on some level, he must have meant it.

Knight hesitated a moment, then came in, guitar case banging against his leg. He set the scarred case on the conference table, shoved his hands in his pockets and waited.

The man was definitely not one for idle conversation, Cross thought, and appreciated that. So many people chattered without anything to say. After awhile, it just became like static from a radio, there but never important, never something to pay attention to. He liked someone who valued silence as much as he did.

"What's the meeting for?"

Knight's lips curved in a faint smile that had Cross' body tightening in reaction. And with that reaction, his temper spiked – at himself.

"Apparently I don't look cool enough when I play, so someone's going to show me how to look like a kick-ass guitarist."

"That doesn't bother you?" Male or female, most artists would hear the words "image makeover" and throw a hissy fit a two-year-old could be proud of. The tantrums varied—some screamed, some threw things, others cried or sobbed, some sulked in stony silence.

But Knight just shrugged. "I'm not the professional." Then his grin came, lightning quick, and Cross held a breath as the tightening started a low thrumming in his gut. "If someone works here, I figure you hired them, which makes them some of the best in the business. Why argue with that?"

He said it as a simple fact, not as praise or to suck up. "Well, okay then." When Knight shifted his feet, he knew he should dismiss the guy, point him to the right room. Instead, he asked, "How long you been playing that thing?"

Knight's hand brushed absently, lovingly over the scarred black guitar case, and Cross felt the hairs on his forearms raise as if they, too, had been brushed. "Since I was about eight, so about twenty years now. It was my first love." He smiled. "You're probably a kick-ass player. Or do you play something else?"

"I don't play anything." The admission came faster than he could censor it. He never – *never* – admitted to not being musically inclined. It gave artists the upper hand in something, and the high ground was his domain. Cursing himself, he sat, waiting to see what Knight would make of it.

The younger man looked down at his guitar, then back up. He shrugged. "Okay. Well, if you want to learn, I could show you a few chords." Then without another word he picked up the case by the handle, opened the door and asked, "So where is the other conference room?" When Cross pointed to the right, he nodded, gave a wave and a cheerful, "Thanks," and left Cross alone with his thoughts.

* * * * *

Go here, Ava. Go there, Ava. You're pitchy, Ava. You dress like a farmhand, Ava. That last track sounded like a dying cow, Ava.

She rolled her eyes as she walked across the lobby toward the elevator. Knight had been sent the past few days for extra guitar lessons, while she'd been tossed between stylists and vocal coaches who – apparently – found her next to impossible.

If she needed so much damn changing, why did they even bother asking for them to stay at all?

She saw the metallic doors of the elevators starting to close and she dashed to catch them. Already running behind, she didn't want to give the coaches anything else to bitch and moan about. Her arm shot through the slit just as the doors were about to shut, prompting them to spring apart again, revealing their one occupant.

Cross Strickland.

Well, shit.

He made her nervous. She hated admitting that, but it was the truth. She straightened her spine and walked in, standing a good arm's length away. Then she pressed the button for the top floor, noting Cross was heading two floors down.

They rode in silence, each facing the doors, neither looking at the other. Then, because she hated staying silent, she asked, "So how are we doing?"

The question seemed to take him by surprise, and he took a moment before he answered. "I think you're doing fine."

His deep voice seemed to fill the elevator cab, vibrate off the walls and make her nerves tremble in response. But the business-like crispness in his voice annoyed her. "That was generic. Are we really that crappy?"

He raised a dark brow. "I said you were doing fine."

"Yeah, but 'fine' is so wishy-washy. I mean, if we're sucking it up, I'd like to know. God knows everyone else around here seems to tell me that I'm one step up from a barrel of shit," she ended in a mutter.

At that, he smiled a little. "People giving you a hard time?"

"I just didn't realize there was more to this than just recording. I mean, I guess I knew on some level people didn't just show up and sing. But still. The hair and the wardrobe and the voice lesson after voice lesson and the '*You look like bad country*' and..." Her voice trailed off as she realized she was complaining to the one man who had the power to end it all on a whim. "It's been great!" she tacked on with a big grin.

His smile widened. "Uh huh. Well, you're holding up pretty well. So far, I haven't heard of anything being broken in a major temper tantrum."

"I'm not a thrower. I'm a sulker. First rate sulker, as Knight says."

"Noted." He looked up at the numbers flashing above the doors, and she did as well, seeing his floor was approaching.

He turned to her then and took her shoulders in his wide hands. "They all mean well, and none of it is personal. But you should be happy, and if you're not, that's a problem. Anyone gives you serious problems, you come to me. All right?"

The warmth from his palms seeped in through her shirt, sending fire down her arms to her fingertips, up into her chest to her heart which skipped a beat in response. Nobody in her life—nobody but Knight, that was—had ever cared if she was truly happy. But there stood the CEO of a major corporation. He looked so serious, so intent on safeguarding her happiness that her brain was at a loss. So she simply nodded.

The elevator dinged and he stepped back, then walked out into the hallway, turning out of sight without another word or a glance back.

* * * * *

"He watches us."

Ava stretched her back. "Thank God my body's used to harsh treatment from working at the bar," she muttered as she twisted and contorted her spine. Loud pops had Knight wincing. He hated when she did that.

"Sit down, Ava." He tugged once on her wrist and she plopped down on the sofa with him, turned so that her feet rested in his lap. Her toes wiggled, her ankles rotated.

Knowing what she wanted, he sighed and started to rub. It was usually easier to just give in when Ava wanted something, and her tongue would be looser if she was on the edge of ecstasy. "He watches us," he repeated.

"He does," she murmured, one arm draped over her eyes. "Hours in that booth, singing until my throat is raw, and I want to drop. And then he's just...there. Staring at us." She peeked out from under her arm. "So you caught him too?"

Knight nodded. "Slips in, slips out without a word. Same thing every day for almost two weeks now." He shrugged a shoulder. "I thought he'd speak up, but he just watches without a word." When Ava didn't respond, he used his thumbs to push on her insteps, smiling when she gave a breathy sigh. "Do you think he's good looking?"

His nonchalant tone must not have been convincing, because her arm flung out so she could stare at him, bug-eyed. "You think he's hot?" The question came out as if she was asking if he thought the world was ending tomorrow.

"Do you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Play duck and cover." Her arm dropped back over her face. "I think he's seriously hot. I mean, if you're into the whole hard-headed, egotistical, alpha-male thing." Her lips curved in a wicked smile beneath her arm. "Which I happen to be." In a lightning-quick move he should have anticipated, she maneuvered her foot until her heel was on top of his balls. Not painful, but the weight was very much a threat. "Now answer. Hot?"

How many women would be comfortable asking their ex-lover if another man was hot? "Yes. He is." Picking her foot back up gingerly, he placed it in a safer spot, moved on to rubbing her ankles. He chucked at her gaping mouth. "What? I'm not allowed to have a few alpha-male desires of my own?"

"Of course you can. It's just..." She bit her bottom lip, worried it with her teeth. "You've just never dated any guy remotely like him before. Not that I've probably met every person you've ever been with but, you know."

"You're right, I haven't." He let that sink in, for both of them. "So you're attracted to him, too?"

"Is that weird?" She struggled up on her elbows, feet still in his lap. "That we're attracted to the same guy?"

Knight thought about that, a little surprised at how easy the answer came to him. "No, I don't think so. I think it's kind of like both of us saying a celebrity is hot. We both see the same features, are drawn to them, but it doesn't matter 'cause it's not like they're going to show up in our bed anytime soon, you know?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her, gave a wink to make her laugh. "And even if they did show up in bed, I passed pre-school with flying colors. I can share."

Ava opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. She'd never been one to censor her words, never could hide her emotions behind a blank mask for long. But whatever she'd wanted to say, she shook her head and instead said, "I see what you mean. It's not like Cross Strickland is just going to pop up here and seduce us. Safe crush." She plopped back down, the couch vibrating with the move, and wriggled her feet. "You're slacking down there. Go back to the arches, they need some lovin'. They haven't been this sore since my first week working at the bar."

* * * * *

Fuck.

Cross paced the tiny confines of the elevator that climbed to the sixteenth floor at an agonizing pace. He didn't know why he was here, tonight, after suffering all day with the tingling awareness that hadn't started until those two entered his life. He should be out finding some woman to fuck. *Woman*. Maybe if Ava was around, not busy...

No. He didn't sleep with the talent. No matter the level of attraction, he didn't go there. Wasn't good business.

Easy to say before, when he hadn't felt anything more than mild interest for any artist. Suddenly, he was faced with the dual complication of not having a current lover

and being so disgustingly attracted to his new artist – fuck, artists – that he couldn't see straight.

Yeah. Easy to keep to the "Don't sleep with the talent" rule when you don't even want to. Now what, since you obviously do?

It was customary for Cross to make a house call on new artists signed, give them the personal feel. It's what made Imperial Records successful, the personal touch. But God, how he was dreading knocking on that door. He'd put off the trip, avoiding it with everything he had. Seeing them in the studio was bad enough. Watching them sing, laugh, be together, all from a safe distance. He didn't burn with jealousy, he was consumed with an unnamed hunger.

Their sweet, melodic harmony filled his mind. Pressure had built in his chest. The combination of Knight's nimble fingers plucking notes with hurried agility and Ava's rich, silvery voice made an irresistible combination that had haunted him ever since, invaded his dreams.

They sounded like something nature intended.

Songbirds. They sounded like they belonged in some enchanted forest, playing music for the fairies and magical woodland –

Oh, for the love of Christ Jesus. He pinched the bridge of his nose once, just resisted the urge to tip his head to one side and pound on his ear, as if that would force all the stupid, mythical garbage out of his mind.

The mirrored doors on the elevator reflected the stress on his face. He looked like shit. Mentally pulling it together, putting on the business persona, he started to look more like himself.

The elevator rumbled to a stop and the doors slid open to reveal the typical soft wallpaper, table and flower arrangement you could find at any decent hotel. He turned left, walking toward the end suite that he knew McKay and Monroe were housed in. The company always requested end rooms, given that the talent would likely practice and wanted to avoid annoying other patrons as much as possible.

Halfway down the hall, he turned on his heel and started back toward the elevator. He could do this another day, there was no rush. The duo wasn't going anywhere for the next few weeks. He could do it tomorrow, or the next day. Some day when his hand still wasn't warm with the heat from Monroe's or McKay's hand.

No. It needed to be now. For whatever reason, these two were hitting a nerve and it needed to be fixed. Now. Besides, he didn't want to admit to his manager that he didn't follow through, since Smith already knew he was coming this way. He spun back around and strode with ground-eating steps, pounding on the door with the side of his fist before he could give himself a chance to disappear.

There was silence, and for a moment Cross wondered if they had already gone to bed. It was only—he jingled his watch, rotating his arm until the face flipped up—quarter after ten. Bar employees wouldn't go to bed that early. Could be out, hitting up the night life in the "big city" as they'd see it. That idea hit him hard, and he didn't like it.

He almost considered himself off scot-free, able to leave without dealing with them when the door swung open and there he stood.

His eyes met with a tanned bare chest, jeans slung low on narrow hips. Cross could see a white line of skin just above the waistband. His feet were in plain white socks, and looking back up, he could see his eyes were still heavy with sleep, one arm was raised up and fingers raked through shaggy hair. *For fuck's sake, why is my mouth dry?*

Almost as if doing a double take, Knight's eyes widened and his arm dropped to his side. Mouth snapping shut, he opened the door a bit wider. "Sorry, sir. Must have fallen asleep." He looked at his wrist, bare, then twisted his torso, lean and sculpted, to glance behind him at the clock. "We didn't have an appointment, did we?"

"No." Acting casual, Cross leaned against the doorframe, forcing himself to ignore the high alert his body had gone into. "No we didn't. I just usually like to make a house call on the new talent, welcome them into the business. That sort of thing." Seriously,

he'd seen guys in more states of undress in a gym locker room. What was his deal? He was sick, coming down with something.

"Oh, well, all right." Knight swung one more look behind him, then opened the door all the way and swept his arm out in the international sign for *come on in*. The room was clean, if a bit messy. The plaid shirt Cross recognized he wore yesterday hung off the arm of the couch, his shoes apparently landed where he kicked them. Loose change sat on the coffee table, a fast food bag was crumpled on the end table with the lamp.

"Monroe around?" he asked as he surveyed the surroundings.

"She went for some groceries. Said she couldn't do any more fast food."

They each stood, hands in their pockets, rocking on their heels, and Cross was sure that Knight was just as uncomfortable as he was. Cross watched as McKay looked down at his feet, then realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. He snatched at the shirt draped over couch and started to button it up. "Can I, uh, get you something to drink, Mr. Strickland?"

"Cross." Why did he just say that? He always had the talent call him Mr. Strickland. "Yeah, whatever's in the minibar's fine." Wandering around the room, he glanced at the generic landscape hung over the couch, heard the fridge open, bottles rattle, door shut again. The window provided a decent view of the city's skyline. The night was inkblack, spots of light from windows dotted the world below. The moon, almost full, hung like a bright medallion, decorating the sky.

Something cold brushed up against the back of his hand, and he turned to accept the bottle of water. "Thought you worked in a bar," he said as way of a joke and conversation starter. He unscrewed the cap, took a swig, looked back to see a funny expression on McKay's face.

God, don't tell me you feel something weird, too. One of us needs to not be crazy, and clearly it's not me.

Chapter Four

McKay's face went blank after a moment. "I work in a bar, doesn't necessarily mean I drink." He uncapped his own bottle of water, took a drink, stared out the window. "You come home smelling like beer every night, the thought of drinking one starts to lose its appeal."

Another swallow had Cross following the lines of his throat. He simply nodded in reply to Knight's statement, glad that he wasn't going to comment on the weird electrical current. Cross looked back out into the night and felt his muscles relax themselves, tension lifted off his shoulders like a physical weight. When was the last time he had simply felt comfortable enough to be still?

"So, did you want to ask me something?"

The question pierced the companionable silence, and Cross was startled into looking back over to the artist. The moonlight and shadows played over his profile, throwing his features into relief, and something that felt like ice dropped into his gut.

"What?"

Knight took another swig of water. "You came here for a reason, I assume." He glanced over, and Cross almost felt his gaze stroke his face like a painter's brush to a canvas. "Did you have a question, comment, gift basket?" His smile punctuated the smartass comment, white teeth flashing in the darkness.

"Just wanted to make sure you are feeling welcome. Ask if you had any serious questions about the label, the process, whatever."

"Sure," Knight said, then snorted. "Are you seriously going to just stand there like that?"

Cross forced as much ice as possible into his stare. "Would you rather I sit?" The shit wasn't even intimidated. When was the last time someone didn't go running when he gave him The CEO Look?

One hard glare met him back, then Knight shook his head. "Fine. Whatever." He took another drink and, still staring out the window, asked, "What's your involvement?"

"My involvement in what?"

"The artists, the process." He gave another cheeky grin. "Or do you just sit in your ivory tower and let the minions handle everything while you count your cash?"

"Ass," Cross muttered into the bottle. He turned to the couch and paced until he was behind the coffee table. He set his water down. "It's simple. You'll work with the sound managers down in the studio. Lay down some tracks, meet with the technicians, and then -"

"I don't care."

"What?"

Knight set the bottle down on the end table. "I don't care."

"You just asked –"

"What I asked was where you come in."

"I don't. Not for a while anyway. I made the choice to have you brought out here, and after all of your tracks are laid down and released, a committee and I will make a final decision based on the public's reaction. I have veto power, of course."

"Is there anything you don't have control over?" Knight asked, walking toward the coffee table, his steps almost predatory.

"Not really, that's the beauty of being a CEO. Controlling what I want, pulling the strings." Cross stuffed his hands in his pockets, balled them into fists. Where the hell did this guy get off? He was being given the chance of a lifetime and he was practically

taunting the guy giving it to him. And worse, Cross enjoyed it. He looked over at the plant in the corner, studied the pattern of the leaves.

"Who pulls yours?"

"What?" The question startled him from his impromptu botany lesson. What the hell is he talking about? Pull wha... Oh, strings. Metaphor. Christ, Cross, get it together. Stop making something out of nothing. "Nobody. That's why I'm the boss. I answer to no one."

"Everyone needs their...strings pulled every once in a while." Knight gave him a wolfish smile.

Cross felt his palms sweat in his pockets. Why the fuck didn't he just tell Knight to shut up and walk away? Why was he listening to this shit? Why wouldn't his legs move?

"Do you?"

"Do I what?" Move legs, move.

"Want 'em pulled?"

Cross could only stare as Knight prowled to stand right in front of him. Cross, CEO of a major company, known womanizer, most jaded person he knew, was rooted to the spot as one man made a play for him. A man, making a move. And Cross wasn't leaving, punching or cursing...out loud anyway. What the hell was wrong with him?

He took a deep breath, filling his burning lungs with air, wishing the act would soothe his nerves. He debated for a nanosecond and decided to play obtuse, give McKay a chance to back off on his own. He injected as much steel into his tone as possible. "I'm not sure what you're getting at, McKay, but I will just say that I don't want anything pulled."

"Bullshit."

Who was this guy? "It's not bull—" Before Cross could finish, Knight shoved him up against the wall, his shoulders slamming hard enough to rattle the landscape above the couch.

Knight leaned in, his lips a breath away. "Push me," he said, his breath fanning Cross' face. The smell of mint invaded his flared nostrils. "Fight me. Say no." But Cross couldn't do anything. His limbs wouldn't move, his mouth was too dry for speech, his throat burned.

After what seemed like an hour, but was no more than a few seconds, Knight's mouth closed the gap and crashed against his. The pressure was intense, insistent. Cross' mind split into three parts. One wanted to shove Knight away and beat him bloody. The second wanted to grab him by the back of the head and make the moment last longer. The third wanted to hate Knight for making the second a possibility.

His mind hadn't made itself up yet when his body reacted for him. His lips responded to the pressure, giving back, opening slightly. His left hand came up to a narrow waist, his right threaded through shaggy hair. The tip of a tongue startled him, but not enough to break the kiss. Hesitant at first, then more boldly, Cross' tongue met his with strong assertion. The body crushing his into the wall was hard, powerful. So unlike the soft, rounded bodies of women he had slept with before. Cross didn't have to hold back, didn't have to worry about hurting a delicate female. He could push back, be slammed around. It was thrilling.

He felt something wedge between their bodies, and the unmistakable touch of fingers against the fly of his pants. The rasp of a zipper was enough to break the spell and Cross wrenched his mouth away at the same time his hands shoved Knight back.

"...fuck is wrong with you?" He couldn't keep his voice steady, and he noticed a tremor when he lifted the back of his hand to wipe his mouth. "Jesus, what the fuck?"

Knight's eyes were glazed for a minute before snapping back to the moment. Something flickered for just a moment—hurt? No, couldn't be—then he took another step back voluntarily, his chest still heaving, sucking in breath.

The door to the suite opened and Ava walked in carrying a bag of groceries. She glanced from one man to the other, her eyes floating back and forth as if she were watching a ping pong match. Cross knew what she was seeing. Knight looked like a

kicked puppy and he was breathing heavily. Her eyes hardened when she looked at him, and he knew she came to the conclusion that he was the puppy-kicker. *Fuck*.

With meticulous caution, Ava bent down and placed the grocery sack on the floor. Standing, she brushed back a wisp of hair, tucked it behind her ear, the motion helping to calm her nerves as thoughts and questions rushed through her mind.

Why is Cross here?

Why does he look pissed?

What did he do to Knight?

Forcing down the anger, she turned to Cross, pasting a sticky-sweet smile to her face. "Mr. Strickland, it's nice to see you." She knew there was an odd tension in her voice, and she didn't bother to disguise it. "Are you just here for a visit?"

The question seemed to spark some life into the stunned males. Knight turned without a word and walked into his bedroom, the door clicking quietly in his wake. Cross blinked at the door for a moment, then turned to her.

"I came to just check in, see how things were going, ask if you had any questions." True to his apparent nature, he took a step away from the wall and smoothed down his shirt, ever the powerful CEO. Ava wanted to rip the damn tie from his neck and hang him with it.

"Right. Well, apparently Knight has had enough for the evening, but I have a question or two." *Now or never, Ava.*

"All right." He clasped his hands behind his back, cocked one brow expectantly, looking devilishly handsome. Damn it.

"What's going on?"

"Pardon?"

Ava rolled her eyes, waved her hand toward the door that Knight had shut behind him. "I might not have finished college, but I'm not stupid, you know. And Knight is

the best thing that ever happened to me." She placed her hands on her hips, knowing it was cliché and not even caring. "So, I ask you again, what is going on?"

He seemed to be absorbing her question, and then he took one menacing step forward, the look on his face blank. "Best thing that ever happened to you?" Another step. "Care to explain that statement?"

Crap, she was losing steam. "You can't answer a question with a question."

"I just did." Another step.

"I'm not blind. I've seen you skulking in the recording studio, hiding in the shadows. You think nobody notices you because you slip in and slip out without a word. But I see you. And you see us. No," she held up a hand when he raised an infuriating eyebrow. "That's not what I meant. Of course you see us. You have eyes. But you *see* us. You watch with this intensity that's not professional." *And I like it. I hate that I like it, but I do.*

She paused, waiting for him to deny it. Waiting for the filter in her brain to start working again. When neither seemed to happen, she answered his question.

"Knight is my best friend, he's the only thing that holds me together sometimes. So yes, he's the best thing I have in my life." She shouldn't be intimidated by him. He was just a man, one man. But the closer he neared, the more she lost her head. She could almost feel the aggression and heat coming off his body in waves.

His next question stunned her.

"Are you lovers?"

"No," she blurted out, faster than she would have liked. "No," she repeated more calmly. "Both Knight and I realize we would need more than just each other to make that work." *But I love him. And why am I telling you this?*

Apparently that gave him pause, because he stopped his advance, his brows furrowed together. "What does that mean?"

His confusion at her statement gave her courage to continue. "Just what I said. We need, I don't know, more. Whatever that 'more' is, we're not sure yet." She shrugged again. "We're both open to whatever comes our way, as long as it makes us happy."

His voice sounded hoarse, as if he'd been shouting and his throat gave out when he whispered, "What would make you happy, Ava?"

You. Knight. "I don't know. I haven't found it yet."

"Is this it?" He surprised her with his gentleness, taking her lips in a tender kiss. All thoughts of resisting, playing cool, acting as though he didn't affect her flew out the window when his tongue traced the seam of her lips and she opened for him, a willing sacrifice. Not thirty seconds ago she was wondering how to kick him out for maybe hurting her friend, and now she wanted to devour him, lick him everywhere, let him fill her up.

His lips were hot, his tongue filled her mouth, leaving no room for breath or doubt. It felt right, it felt good. And as much as she had wanted to slap him earlier, she wanted to shove him down to the carpet now and have her way with him. His attention moved to her jawline, her neck, and he licked the pulse that beat rapidly before returning to drink from her mouth again. Dragging her away from the door, his hands guided her hips toward her bedroom and she followed him as if he were the Pied Piper of orgasms, kicking off her flats as she went.

Almost to the door of her room, he stopped. She was so engrossed in his kisses, in the anticipation that she didn't realize why until she felt another set of lips against the back of her neck. She stiffened, then realized it was Knight. She felt Cross' body go rigid, and she wondered what this meant to him.

His lips broke contact, and he touched his brow to hers. One darted glance over to where Knight's mouth lay against her skin was all he showed to indicate he knew they weren't alone. She was sure he would walk away.

Instead, Cross asked, "Are you all right with this?" in a harsh, graveled voice.

She had Knight, and Cross. Was she sure? Yeah, she was about to give up this opportunity like she was about to go jump off the Sears Tower.

"Yeah," she whispered, trying to keep her voice steady, so as not to scare off whatever good luck fairies had dropped this basket of yummy temptation in her lap.

After a breath, Knight's lips moved against her skin again, raising goose bumps in their wake. They brushed softly, barely touching, tempting, a whisper of a kiss across the back of her neck. She shivered once, and Cross' lips plundered hers in a glorious storm.

Someone's hands came up to cup her breasts, plucking at her nipples through the tank. Knight's, maybe. Her fingers gripped the back of Cross' head as the men continued their assault on her senses. A hand moved low on her abdomen, the touch causing liquid heat to roll inside. Knight's teeth abraded her neck, Cross' tongue swept her mouth. Another hand was pulling up her shirt. The fact that she had no clue whose hand it was only heightened the sensation.

Knight—she was almost positive it was him—slid fingers up her ribs, taking her shirt with him. Both men broke their contact as the shirt slipped over her head, and neither missed a beat, both returning to her like magnets. Someone—Cross?—made quick work of her bra, and her breasts were free before she could be sure.

She was positive it was Cross who broke the connection of their lips and moved to her breasts, worshiping and suckling until all she could do was moan. His hands slid around her back, fingertip-light caresses sending a tremor through her. Knight's hot kisses moved down her spine, and suddenly Cross inhaled sharply.

"Hey!"

Her eyes snapped open. "What?" She looked down, wondering if she had somehow stepped on his foot or –

"The bastard back there bit me," he growled, starting to look around her. She cupped his jaw with her hands and pulled him back for a kiss as she heard Knight's low chuckling.

"Baby. It was a nip."

"Just watch what you're doing," Cross responded through bared teeth.

Knight appeared over her shoulder. "Same goes." But he had a shit-eating grin.

"Ahem," Ava interrupted. "If you two can't behave..."

"Oh, we can behave," Knight replied, slipping back down on his haunches behind her, trailing his tongue along her bare back as he went.

"I'd prefer not to behave, myself," added Cross, a devilish glint in his eye as he knelt down in front of her, nipping and suckling past her breasts to her belly.

"Whatever you do, either of you, just don't stop," she breathed, wondering what pagan god she had pleased to be in this sort of heaven. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, wanting to just feel.

Hands crept inside the waistband of her jeans, dipping in, tracing and tantalizing. Her heart was racing at the thought, the anticipation of what was to come. Ha, come. Pun not intended. Would they both continue on, or would one – or both – give up? Oh God, that would be torture.

Someone's hands—she quit guessing—unzipped her jeans, the rasping sound echoing loudly in the otherwise silent room. Calloused hands gripped the top of her hips and snaked down her legs, her jeans following to pool on the ground, leaving her only in her...oh God. She looked down suddenly and when she glanced back up, saw Cross grinning wolfishly.

Chapter Five

Oh shit.

She was wearing her granny panties. Having absolutely no time to do laundry before their trip, she had simply grabbed what was clean. And what happened to be clean were her less-than-sexy underwear, including her "I'm bloated and don't want a lacy thong riding my ass crack all day" panties. The ones that came in a pack of seven and cost four dollars at Walmart and covered way more than they had to. This was truly a Dear Diary moment, minus the diary and plus two sexy witnesses.

She shoved her hands down to her hips, attempting to get rid of the evidence, but it was already too late. Knight, damn him, had already started a deep, chest-rumbling chuckle. Cross, for his effort, wasn't laughing. But then again, Ava wasn't sure he knew how to laugh. He did, however, know how to stare at someone in a way that said, *If I laughed*, *I'd be doing it now*.

"This is a treat for me, I have to say." One corner of his mouth tilted up. "You see a lot of things living in the city, but these might be a first." He took one corner of her elastic and let it snap back against her hip.

Oh, God, let me sink into the ground...

Knight tugged on the roomy behind, indicating he was equally amused by her surprise drawers. "Even back home in the boonies, we don't see these often."

"Shut up!" she hissed, turning her head to look down at him. This was humiliating, to say the least. And her best friend-turned-maybe-lover was not helping. When his chuckling turned to outright laughter, she said, "All right, I'll just go to my room and leave you two here to—oomph!" She was suddenly flying through the air. Landing on the couch knocked the wind out of her and Cross' body draped over her.

"You're not going anywhere," he growled without venom. He was teasing. Did he even realize that he was a completely different person? Gone was the CEO without a sense of humor, who looked as if he could give you an ulcer with a stare. Here was a man who wasn't afraid to play, to have fun.

Putting on a pretend pout, she sighed with resignation. "Fine. Have your wicked way...ways with me." Try as she might, she couldn't stop her lips from curving into a pleased smile. Knight simply chuckled and moved to sit on the coffee table in front of the couch.

Grunting his approval, Cross took his time dragging her now-damp granny panties down her thighs, revealing her pussy to his and Knight's sight. Ava fought back the urge to squirm under their hungry gazes. While he continued to work her panties down her legs, Knight reached out with one hand, massaging her breasts, tweaking her nipple. Gentle caresses on the inside of her thigh had her knees parting on their own.

Knight bent over her breasts, one hand still kneading and plucking while his tongue traced a moist circle around her areola. Another tongue, however, seemed to be just as busy as she felt a wet line drawn down the seam of her damp opening. She gasped and let the warm sensation roll over her, her blood thickening, the world slowing down. Every brush of a tongue brought a new pleasure.

Parting her, Cross delved into her silky heat, making a hum of appreciation that reverberated through her body. His fingers gripped her hips so hard she knew she'd have bruises in the morning, but oh God, she didn't care. He made his way up to her clit, the flat of his tongue massaging and tormenting. Her body—unused to the dual sensation—raced toward release.

She didn't have to utter a warning, though, as Cross must have felt her tension in her thighs. He eased back from her clit, moving back down to her slick channel. Thrusting in and out, he tongue-fucked her until her hips bucked off the couch. Knight's hand came to her belly, soothing and exciting all at once, and then his fingers

dipped lower. Knight gathered moisture from her pussy and Cross' tongue and teased her clit.

Oh, God, there were no words.

Her nerves tightened, her abdomen contracted, and then the shock spread through her, sparks showering behind her eyelids. She bucked under the restraint of male hands, but they held her steady. A feral cry came from her throat, and she arched back, a moment of catharsis taking over her replete body.

Minutes later, she cracked open one eye to look at the two men responsible for her sated state. Knight's face was split with a proud grin, as if he finished a marathon, cured cancer and saved a litter of puppies from a burning building in one afternoon. Cross, on the other hand, still looked hungry, as if satisfying her had only stoked his fires. The thought of what else might be in store sent a tremor through her boneless body.

"That was..." She couldn't continue, so she raised one hand—with considerable effort—and flicked her wrist to indicate her pleasure.

"Didn't suck, did it?" Knight asked, grin still firmly in place. He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss. Next to her ear, he whispered, "This is it, isn't it?" Ava could only nod her head in response. He was right. She and Knight never would have worked out as a couple. They loved each other. But something had always been missing. Apparently, that something had been a someone. Cross, for whatever reason, seemed to round them out. And he was going to hate it when they said so.

Why say anything? They didn't have to have a "feelings" talk now. Enjoy the moment, have some great sex, and they could do the "feelings" talk later. Knight wouldn't blurt it out, she knew that for sure. But regardless of the timing, how would Cross react?

That was fucking amazing.

Of all his sexual exploits—and he'd had a few—Cross had never actually been a part of a three way, not even being the sole man with two women. The thought should be making his skin crawl, especially after that moment he and Knight had before Ava returned. But instead, it was only heating his blood more. Together, they gave Ava one intense orgasm, and he wasn't done.

"How you feeling?" The sensual curve to her full lips told him she was in postorgasmic heaven and had no plans to leave the state anytime soon.

His hand stayed on her hip, thumb stroking the soft flesh. "Do you think you're up for more?" He kept his voice low, trying not to make her feel pressured, when he really wanted to command her to spread wide 'cause his balls were about to burst.

After a brief hesitation, looking first to Knight, then him, she nodded. Her eyes grew wide, as if she just had a thought, and she bit her lip. "I, uh, I don't have..."

Cross cocked one eyebrow. "Condoms?"

Despite the ridiculously erotic position she was in, and that she had just had two men bring her to orgasm, the word condom actually made her blush. "Yes. I mean no. I mean, I don't have any."

Cross looked at Knight, gave him a pointed look, one any male would understand.

"Yup. We're good." The cocky shit gave him a wink and brushed a kiss on Ava's forehead. "I'll be back," he promised before standing and walking to his room.

Alone with Ava, Cross suddenly realized he didn't know what to say. She sat up, all five-foot-four of her, and made his job easier by just crawling into his lap. Cross had never been a cuddler, hated it in fact. It implied there was something more than sex happening in the bed, it was intrusive.

But listening to her breathing as it slowed down, her head on his chest, it was less intrusive, more comforting. And for whatever reason, when Knight returned, his fist clutching several foil packets, his hackles didn't rise, jealousy didn't swell.

Doesn't mean anything. Good round of sex, that's all. I've been talking about needing a woman, and here she is.

"Is she asleep?"

"No," Ava said, shifting, her little bottom rubbing on his still rock-hard cock. "Just recharging. You boys know how to take it out of a woman." She chuckled, turned her smiling eyes to Cross, and something tightened in his chest.

Heartburn. It's just heartburn.

Cross patted her hip once, then scooted his arm under her knees and stood, lifting her with him. "I think we might want a more comfortable arena for round two." He carried her to the middle of the living room then paused, looking between the two bedroom doors. Would she see it as an invasion if he automatically went into hers? But it felt weird bringing a woman into another man's room...

"My room, please." She laughed. "I don't even wanna know what Knight has managed to do to his room in the time we've lived here."

"I'm not that bad," Knight grumbled behind his back.

"Worse!" Ava called as he toted her into the neat bedroom.

Her blinds were still pulled back, revealing more of the night sky. A cream bedspread lay out over the king-sized mattress, a small arrangement of flowers were on the desk, lending a slight sweet scent to the air. Pale pink wallpaper holding a metallic tint reflected the blazing lights, illuminating the entire room. The closet was half open, showing clothes hung neatly inside.

"Tidy little thing, aren't you?" Cross murmured to her as he walked to the bed. He debated for a moment, then let her drop from his arms, plopping to the mattress below, her body bouncing once before settling down on the feather-soft comforter.

"Hey!" she cried, feigning indigence, her arms crossed over her chest. "See if I ever let you go down on me again."

One corner of his mouth crept up before he caught it. "If I want to, I will." She didn't have a chance to reply before he put one knee on the bed between her thighs, bent over and crashed his mouth down on hers. He was so involved in her lips, her

tongue, that he barely heard Knight rustling beside them. He glanced over and saw Knight removing the shirt he had put on earlier, muscles flexing and rippling.

Rippling muscles? Shit, I've lost my mind.

Ava mewled, and Cross' attention returned to the woman in his arms. God, she was so responsive. Zero to orgasm in five minutes. He needed to slow down. He sat up and started to loosen his tie, watching as Ava sat up on her own, her eyes glassy with passion. She reached over to Knight, who leaned down and kissed her with lazy ease. He could see their tongues meet, and his cock pulsed in response.

What the hell was wro – no, not going to even analyze it. Just let it go. What happens in the bedroom is nobody's business.

His tie loose, he started to unbutton his shirt, and he saw Ava's nimble little fingers working on the fly of Knight's jeans. He forced himself to look away, concentrate on a spot on the wallpaper while he shrugged out of his shirt, dropping it on the floor next to his tie. Looking back, two naked bodies—one hard, masculine and one softly feminine—were tangled on top of the bed. And his only thought was, *Move over. I'm coming in.*

Ava lay stretched out, Knight to her left, one leg draped over her calf while he licked and bit his way down her jaw to her neck. Cross quickly shucked his pants and sprawled to her right, staking claim to her body with a possessive kiss, and his hand wandered down to her belly. He moved down to her breasts, not wanting to be gentle. He bit down a little harder than he had meant, and he heard a gasp. He looked up, prepared to apologize, but she gripped the back of his head with her hand, pressing him back, breathing, "Don't stop."

Thank God.

Something brushed his cheek as he went back to his worship. He didn't have to turn his head to know that Knight had joined him, taking control of her left nipple. The additional contact heightened his awareness, reminded him this wasn't an average fuck.

His hand wandered down lower, tracing the Y-shaped seam at the juncture of her thighs, enjoying her tiny noises of pleasure and that her legs split almost on instinct. He let his fingers tease just moments before diving into her hot warmth. One finger, then two tunneled deep inside, her juices were so hot he almost pulled back.

Knight's fingers tangled with his, and Cross froze, not moving until Knight focused on Ava's clit, apparently having no further ambition than pleasing her. Cross let go of the breath he hadn't known he was holding and continued working his fingers in her tight passage, feeling her throb around him.

"I...I need..." Ava tried to speak, gasping for breath.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Don't make me say it," she mumbled, turning her face into his forearm. From her profile, he could see a rosy blush staining her cheeks, and that *heartburn* became more fierce.

He glanced at Knight, wondering how this was supposed to work. Reaching over her head, he grabbed a foil packet from the pile Knight had left, ripping it open with his teeth. He didn't have time to sheath himself before one delicate hand took the packet from him while another wrapped around his now-suffering cock. Her hands were efficient, having him suited up in seconds.

Cross was just about to stretch over her, to cover her with his frame when she pushed his shoulder back until he lay flat on the bed. Crawling over him with the agility of a cat, she gave an impish smile. "Sorry...I've just always wanted to push a strong man down." Her smile grew and her attitude was infectious.

His cock lay nestled in the V of her legs, riding the seam of her pussy, and he had to fight the urge to grab her hips and impale her. That wasn't the way things were going to work. Not this time, anyway.

The sound to his left reminded him that an audience was present. But Knight apparently didn't feel like staying an audience member for long, as he straddled Cross' knees, his chest to Ava's back.

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Knight bent forward at the waist, his motion pressing Ava down in front of him until her body was draped over Cross, making her the middle of a man-sandwich. For reasons Cross didn't want to examine too closely, it didn't bother him. What did bother him, however, was how tight his balls were. He was about to growl out for Ava to take him when he heard Knight whisper in her ear.

"Where is it?"

Ava's eyes were half-closed, the expression almost dreamy. "Where's what?"

"You know what," Knight whispered, biting her ear.

Cross was about to ask what the fuck they were talking about when he saw her eyes go wide with understanding, her face and throat flushing.

"Inside pocket of my suitcase," she muttered. "The one with the zipper."

A light, painless slap from Knight was the response, and the mattress dipped as Knight's weight left the bed.

"Care to clue me in?" Cross asked, his eyebrow raised in question.

"No," Ava said, her head shaking so that fine blonde wisps swung around her face, framing her like a halo, a beautiful angel.

A beautiful, naughty angel.

Thank you, God.

"Got it." Knight came back to the bed holding a bottle of...lube.

"Lube?" He couldn't believe it. "That's what you're embarrassed about?"

"Yeah, well... Shut up." She gave him a quick, stern face before he could see her mouth wobble with the effort to hold back a smile. "Good girls don't travel with lube."

"Probably not," Cross agreed. "But I bet the ones who do are more fun," he said, squeezing her hip, reminding her exactly what position she was currently in, and that they had passed *good girl* about thirty minutes ago.

One corner of her full mouth twitched, then the other until she threw her head back and laughed, a deep, long belly laugh. The motion rubbed her hips forward, grinding

her pussy over his erection, reminding him once more about their unique—but sexy situation.

Knight resumed his position behind Ava, and Cross made the choice to not bother questioning. As long as Knight kept his attention on her, no problems. Just another fuck.

"You ready to go, sweetheart?" Cross asked, wondering if she would chicken out. It would hurt—his balls and his pride—but he'd accept it. He just hoped it wasn't going to come to that.

Only a moment's hesitation showed, then resolve and determination flared in her expression. Her eyes took on a cat-like quality, and she leaned far enough that she could whisper in his ear, "I'm as ready as you are, and from what I can feel, you're pretty damn ready."

She didn't know the half of it.

Cross' hands went to her waist, lifting her up. The tip of his cock pressed against her entrance, her juices were flowing like warm honey. He gritted his teeth and forced his body to take control, to override the urge to pump into her like a horny teenager who didn't know what the fuck he was doing.

Ava eased down, but her angle was wrong and his head slipped out. He was still holding her up and didn't want to release her hips, so he said, "Sweetheart, a little guidance would go a long way here." He felt a hand grasp him at the base of his penis and lift it away from his stomach. A strong, capable hand. Nothing like the delicate, cool one that had encased him earlier.

He looked down and saw long, tan fingers firmly gripping his cock, fingers that belonged to a man. Knight was reaching between Ava's thighs and keeping Cross' erection pointing due north.

"What the fuck?" He tried not to panic, but emotions were starting to overwhelm him.

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"Calm down. Your hands are busy, her arms are too short to reach. Chill." The mellow, almost lazy tone to Knight's speech washed over him, and instead of resistance, he just saw logic. *No biggie. Got a free hand, help out. Nothing to make a deal over.* Cross repeated the mantra to himself as Knight guided his cock back into position.

It's just a helping hand. Literally.

The blunt head of his cock eased into Ava's slick passage, and all thoughts of resistance faded away in the wash of pleasure. God, she was soaking wet and so tight. Ava wiggled a little, shifting her body lower until her bottom made contact with his thighs and his tip bumped against resistance. Her tiny sigh of pleasure was almost his undoing, and he gritted his teeth as he once more regained control of his body.

"How's it feel, Ava?" Hearing Knight's voice was less jarring than it had been earlier, his smooth tone soothing and gentle.

"Mmm," she purred, her eyes closed. She rotated her hips so that his cock made a three-sixty inside. "Full, amazing."

Knight grazed one palm down her back and nudged until she was completely draped over his body, her breasts pushing into his chest. Cross cupped her face and kissed her, content for the moment to just stay buried deep inside her while she moaned her pleasure.

Then a feminine gasp cut through the air.

Chapter Six

Cross pulled back and asked, "What?"

She turned her gaze to look behind her, and he crunched his left oblique to look around her head. Knight was still behind Ava, his erection riding the cleft of her behind. His thumbs were parting the cheeks, and he looked at them, questioning with his eyes.

"Ava?" The one word rolled out of Knight's lips, his tone letting her know it was entirely her call.

Cross expected to see panic, maybe fear, trepidation for sure, in Ava's eyes when she looked back down at him. Instead, she looked almost serene, as if Knight were asking her on a picnic instead of permission for anal sex.

"Are you all right with that?" she asked.

Him? Was he all right with it? She was the one who was about to be taking it from two ends, and she wanted to know if he had any objections? When was the last time a lover had cared so much about what he thought, what he wanted?

"If you want it, I'm not gonna say no, sweetheart." He struggled to keep the questions, the excitement, the anticipation out of his voice. He couldn't remember when he had felt something more than just mild relief in bed.

Ava closed her eyes, tilting her head back to face the ceiling, exposing the long, white column of her neck. Her face was untroubled, but he could see her pulse beating a rapid tattoo beneath the marble silk of her throat.

"If you don't want to..." His voice was gravely, even to his own ears. But he refused to let her do something she was scared of, maybe even terrified of.

But she met his eyes with confidence. "I want it. I think...I think we all want it." Her pause was expectant, as if she was waiting for him to jump up and down going, "Oh, me too!" Like hell. Instead, he signaled his acceptance with a nod, hoping that was enough.

Apparently, it was. She shifted forward more, shimmied her ass for Knight's pleasure. Knight, who had been silent during the exchange, made a grunt of approval.

Though he couldn't see what was going on, Cross' senses reached another level. Sounds and scents and touches layered on top of each other to create an experience not unlike a magnificent, decadent cake, one he couldn't want to dive into. He heard a cap open, felt Ava's breasts crush into his as her breath hitched.

"Ava, tell him what's happening," Knight's smooth-as-honey voice encouraged.

"There's, um, lube and, I mean...Knight, he knows what's going on back there." The flush that stained her porcelain skin was adorable.

Adorable? I don't think things are adorable.

Well, apparently you think Ava is when she blushes.

Cross smoothed back a piece of hair. "You don't have to tell me." He could feel everything.

"Go ahead Ava. You know you wanna say it out loud."

"Do you have to know me this well?" she asked under her breath.

"Go ahead."

Cross kissed the corner of her mouth, and she smiled at him with relief.

"He's – " She sucked in a breath, tilted her head back, then dropped her forehead down to his. "He's got one finger in. Oh, God, Knight..."

Another man's name. She said another man's name while Cross' dick was buried inside her. Where was the jealousy, the anger? It was absent.

She wriggled and squirmed, and he kissed her, a deep drugging kiss meant to take her mind—and his—off whatever was going on behind her. She delved into the kiss almost gratefully, thankful for the distraction that allowed her to relax.

"Two fingers," she murmured against his lips, and flicked her tongue over his teeth.

Her voice was steadier, she was more comfortable. And he knew she was enjoying the play. Her hips were trying to pump, held back only by Knight's body pushing her down. She had nowhere to go.

A hiss of breath, and she whispered, "That's three," next to his ear.

"Doing all right, Ava?" Knight's voice was laced with equal parts excitement and concern.

"Yeah," she breathed, her breath fanning Cross' cheek. "Yeah, I'm good." Cross rewarded her relaxation with another kiss, his hand straying to her breasts to pinch and pluck her nipple. She moaned, her hips trying once more to move, her inner muscle gripping and contracting around him.

Fuck this was hot, and they hadn't even moved yet. Hurry up back there, damn it.

A whimper escaped her lips, and he immediately eased back and asked, "Are you all right?"

"No. I mean, yes I'm fine. He just stopped and..." She glanced to her right, and Cross' peripheral vision caught Knight reaching for a condom. At this point, that would only mean one thing.

Double penetration.

Another first for Cross. Sharing a woman had never really occurred to him before, not that there was a chance he ever thought he'd want to be in a bedroom, naked, with another man anyway. But suddenly, the knowledge of what was about to happen had his cock throbbing, and Ava's walls pulsed around him in response. She looked down, and her lips curved subtly, telling him she knew he was excited by the prospect, and that she was too.

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He hated that she could read his mind. And he loved it.

The rip of the packet crackled in the heavy silence, Ava's breathing grew a little erratic, and Cross was concerned.

"Have you ever done this before?" he asked, kissing her cheeks, her nose.

Her head shook in response.

"Never?" Talk about jumping into the deep end. "Ava, you don't have to –"

She touched a finger to his lips. "I trust you. Both of you."

Those words sank into his soul, spreading a warmth through his body that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with emotions he refused to acknowledge.

Leaning around her, he made eye contact with Knight, now behind Ava and sheathing himself. "You better know what you're doing back there," he growled. "Don't fuck it up."

Knight's too-knowing eyes met his, and he was reassured by the depth of caring that showed in his gaze. Caring for whom, he wasn't going to think about. "I'm not going to hurt her," he reassured.

Cross nodded once and returned his attention to Ava. Despite her willingness and anticipation, he knew she would tense up. It was only natural. His job was to distract her, keep her calm enough to get to the good part. He reached down with one finger to dip into her flowing juice and spread it to her clit, rubbing and teasing.

Ava moaned and lurched forward. God she was responsive. His other hand brought her head down for a sensual kiss, one meant to take her to another place. Her tongue met his, matched his thrust for thrust. She rocked forward slightly, and Cross knew it wasn't from her but from Knight. He ran his hand from the nape of her neck down her back, fingertips tracing her spine in featherlight motions, feeling the goose bumps rising on her skin.

"Fuck, Ava, This is amazing," Knight groaned.

"Are you..." she asked tentatively.

"Not even close, we're just getting started back here. Baby, relax."

Fuck. Cross didn't want to rush her, but even without moving, being inside her was dragging him toward release faster than he wanted. "This isn't going to work."

Ava's wide eyes were glazed when she met his. "Why?"

He almost didn't answer, the truth almost felt like a weakness. But in the end she needed to know. "Sweetheart, you feel a little too good, and I want Knight back there to take his time and get it right. But I'm not sure I can wait."

"Oh." She lost the glazed look, her eyes becoming sharper, the corners of her mouth turned down. Disappointment rang in his ears, and though he was sure he couldn't fix the problem, he wanted to. Oh, he wanted to, if only to make her smile again.

If only to make her smile again?

Well, whatever. Unusual situation, unusual thoughts. He brushed it aside.

He was at a loss as to what to suggest, but someone beat him to the punch anyway. A quick tug on his balls pulled him away from the finish line faster than a mom busting in on a teen jerking off to *Playboy*.

He saw Ava's hands on either side of his head, which only left...

"Fuck dude, do you have to keep touching me?" The panic and anger in his voice masked the confusion he felt. Disturbed that a man was touching him sexually, turned-on by the same.

"Worked, didn't it?" Knight's slightly amused voice taunted him. "Not about to come, are you?"

"A little warning next time," Cross grumbled, realizing he just admitted as much that he didn't think this was the last time they'd be in this position. Another wave of confusion swept over him, which worked as a decent distraction from the task at hand. That was the only reason he agreed to this, wasn't it? Because it was only a one-time shot. Something to check off his bucket list.

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Ava wiggled a little, her eyes widening, bringing him back to the moment. She made a little noise, and he knew she was going to tense up, only making it more difficult, and possibly painful. He went back to his work with her clit, feeling it grow hard under his fingers. His other hand moved once more to her breasts, working them with the same tenacity that his mouth devoured hers. Little sounds came from her throat, but he knew they were from pleasure and not pain.

"Tell him, Ava." Knight didn't have to expand further.

"He's, he's almost..." she whispered against Cross' lips. "Oh God, this is unbelievable."

"What?" He brushed a tendril of hair behind her ear.

"It's so... I'm so...full." She shook her head, dislodging the piece of hair he had just tucked away. "That sounds stupid, like I ate too much. But...I can't say it any other way..."

Cross knew exactly what she meant. Before, it had been great, being surrounded by her wet heat, her muscles clamping down on him with possessiveness. But now, everything was tighter. She was fighting the urge to move, and the angle had changed.

It was, in short, fucking amazing.

Looking around her shoulder, he asked, "Are you situated back there?"

"Yeah, I'm in. And holy mother...this is incredible." Knight's teeth were clenched, a muscle in his cheek twitching, and Cross knew he was using every bit of restraint to not thrust. He knew because it was the same for him.

"Ava," said Knight. "Ava baby, how you doing?"

She wriggled in experiment, both men groaned, which brought out a mischievous smile. "Not too bad, actually."

Cross groaned again. "And to think I was worried you would be overwhelmed. You're gonna kill us instead."

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"Probably," she said, her voice turning husky. She bit his bottom lip, then licked the swollen flesh. "But what a way to die, right?"

Ava rocked forward, propelled by Knight's gentle push, and Cross caught her groan in his mouth.

Cross pushed up, burying himself to the hilt in her warmth, backing out as he felt pressure from Knight's entrance.

Knight's entrance.

He could feel Knight's dick rub up against his as they shifted in and out, one always filling as the other retreated. And for fuck's sake, it was turning him on.

I've gone over the deep end, and apparently I like drowning.

Cross chose to ignore those feelings as he took Ava's mouth in a hard, possessive kiss. Knight's hands slipped between his chest and her breasts, working her nipples. The backs of Knight's fingers brushed and rubbed against his chest, only heightening the experience.

Ava's breath was coming faster, almost panting. "You're close," he said. She merely nodded in response.

"Thank God," came Knight's voice. "I'm about to explode. She's practically choking me with her ass."

Cross could imagine, since her pussy was trying to milk the release out of him. He was close, so close. He could just let go and...

No, she wasn't ready yet. And he wasn't going over without Ava.

Or Knight.

When the hell had another man's orgasm started mattering to him?

Ava's body started twitching, her belly was quivering. She was right there, he knew it. With Knight's hands still manipulating her breasts, Cross reached down once more and thumbed her clit.

That little bit was all she needed to send her over the edge. Her body convulsed, pulsed around his cock. She threw her head back and screamed, the sound echoing off the walls of her bedroom. Her continued release brought his own. He snarled his warning only moments before his release crashed down on him like a ton of bricks. Behind her, he heard Knight's shuddering gasps, felt his shaking through the thin membrane of Ava's body that separated them.

Euphoria settled down around him like a blanket, cocooning him in pleasant warmth, dragging him to unconsciousness. His final thoughts before he drifted off were that he could die a satisfied man.

Knight lay on his side, Ava's back securely tucked to his chest, her front curled around Cross' side, her head pillowed on the Cross' shoulder. Knight gently stroked the edge of her breast, her hip, her thighs, the repeated movement as comforting to him as to her.

It was, without a doubt, the most amazing sex of his life. And he was pretty sure that it had nothing to do with him getting the anal end of the stick and everything to do with who he was still in bed with.

Ava's silence spoke for itself. She was never one to stay quiet for long, so her lengthy meditation was a testimony to how she felt about what had just happened.

But Cross...Cross was, well, asleep. He hoped. The man kind of went under as though someone hit a switch. Responsive one minute, dead asleep the next.

Knight still hadn't worked out his feelings for Cross yet. Despite the man's bluntness, his hard personality, Knight knew better. It was a facade.

Ava was easier. He had loved Ava for so long. And he knew she loved him. But they were both aware that a relationship between the two of them was just missing something. From what went on that evening, Knight would say the thing that was absent was Cross. He was the missing part of the puzzle. It was never supposed to be

just Ava and Knight. It was clear now that the full equation included Ava, Knight and Cross.

Unless... Unless Cross blocked both him and Ava out. Knight wasn't stupid, the thought of a real relationship probably freaked the power CEO out in a major way. Add in that the relationship would involve another guy, and he would probably run for the hills. No, he'd force *them* to run for the hills. Cross Strickland wouldn't run from anything.

But how could Cross deny what had gone on? This wasn't a one-night fuck. Neither Knight nor Ava would let him reject such amazing possibilities just because it freaked him out. Not good enough. Not nearly good enough of an excuse to refuse all three of them the pleasure and happiness they could find.

He squeezed Ava's hip, and she turned sleepy eyes toward him.

"What?" Her voice was hoarse from her screaming. Knight felt a surge of pride and battered it down to focus on the topic at hand.

"Do we need to talk about this?"

"Do you and I need to talk about it?" Ava looked back at Cross' sleeping features. In repose, his lips weren't set in a grim line, but softened. His brow wasn't constantly furrowed in frustration or thought, but smooth and untroubled. "No. But I think we need to talk to Cross about it."

"He won't talk."

Ava sighed, her back moving against his chest. "I know." She snuggled closer to Cross, took Knight's hand and pulled him tighter against her back, creating a cocoon out of their bodies. The pea in a man-pod.

He wondered exactly what it would take to get Cross to admit that there was more here than just a one night stand. Because Knight and Ava both knew he felt the difference. Getting him to admit it, however, was going to be the challenge.

* * * * *

Ava awoke slowly, her body coming to consciousness with languid ease, clutching to the edges of sleep. She rolled and heard a very masculine groan, realizing at the same time that her elbow had come in contact with something hard. Cracking one eye open, squinting against the bright morning rays peeking in through the open curtains, she found that hardness was apparently Knight's abdomen.

"Easy on the body, baby." He rubbed his stomach with an exaggerated grimace. "Lucky you didn't hit lower."

Ava grinned. "No, I'd like to keep certain parts in perfect working order." She stretched her arms above her head and her body groaned at the movement. She was sore. Did she work out last nig –

It all came crashing back to her at that moment what had happened the night before. She had had a three way with her best friend and the CEO of the biggest record label in the country. She'd been filled by two men at once, and loved every minute of it.

She turned, expecting to find Cross to her left where he had fallen asleep, and found only a dent in the bedspread. From the lack of warmth, he'd been out of bed for some time. Ava did a quick search around the room, noting the bathroom door open, showing it empty, along with the rest of the bedroom. His clothes were missing. And in the silence, she knew he wasn't in the outer portion of the hotel suite, either.

"He's gone."

She turned once more to look at her best friend. "Apparently." The fact that he left, without so much as a note, was a sharp stab to her heart. There was no point in joking about it or brushing it off. Knight knew her too well to be fooled by any pretense. All she could do was bite her lip, lecturing herself that tears were pointless.

Maybe he had a meeting and didn't want to wake us.

On a Sunday? A CEO's work is probably never done. You're only fooling yourself.

He was gone, and he had no intention of returning. He got what he wanted—one great fuck—and left. Left both her and Knight with their hearts bleeding. Well, at least her heart felt as if it were bleeding. One quick glance at Knight's decidedly blank face only confirmed that he was just as hurt.

Well, screw him. She didn't need him. She was just fine without him.

Oh who the hell are you kidding? You know he was the missing piece.

Well, they couldn't force a piece that didn't want to fit. As much as Ava wanted to remain hopeful that he truly hadn't left them high and dry, she knew better. He left because he wanted to pretend it never happened. Whether that was because he had feelings that he wasn't used to and it freaked him out, or maybe the thought of another man doing something for him was too much to handle. Whatever it was, he was denying all of them a great experience simply because he didn't want to deal with it.

Ava slid off the bed, her body twinging as a reminder of the glorious night of passion. Now it was a dual reminder that it hadn't been enough. She wanted more, she wanted Knight *and* Cross, and Cross was determined to stay away.

She walked to the bathroom, hearing Knight putting the room back to rights behind her. Turning on the shower, she let the hot spray soothe muscles and aches. Let the water pounding over her body and face be a cover for her unwanted tears and gasps for breath as she sobbed.

Chapter Seven

It wasn't happening again.

Cross had been repeating the mantra to himself the past week. It was a one-time shot, an experience he could look back on when he was ninety and his balls had stopped working a decade before. It was a great fuck, and he was glad he had it.

But it wasn't happening again.

So why was his body not listening to his brain? Phantom hands crawled over his skin at the most inconvenient moments, eliciting shudders that he had to pass off as cold chills. He woke up that morning reaching...for Ava or Knight, he didn't know.

Knight. Fuck. Why was it that he was just as hung up about Knight as he was about Ava? For some reason, he couldn't seem to separate the two. It was as if they were a pair of handcuffs, binding him together and not letting him go.

"Your two o'clock is here, Mr. Strickland."

His administrative assistant's voice—projected through the intercom on the phone—snapped him out of his daze. He'd been staring out his window at the sky, unseeing, for God knew how long.

He leaned back, pressed the button and said, "Send them in." He had no clue who *them* was, and it didn't matter. He'd deal with whatever they wanted and get rid of them. Business was one thing he couldn't concentrate on today.

"Sad that I had to schedule an appointment to see someone so soon after sharing an orgasm."

His head whipped around and he saw Ava leaning back against the closed door to his office. A sad smile played on her lips, her eyes were watchful.

"I didn't realize you needed to see me." *But I sure wanted to see you.* He wrapped his professionalism around him like a shield. "What can I do for you?"

Her smile, already so heartrending, wavered, then fell away. She pushed off the door and came around the side of his desk to stand in front of him. Not what he wanted. He didn't need her standing there, within arm's reach, her unique scent teasing his senses.

"I want to know why you ran."

He mentally slammed an iron lid over the images floating in his mind. "Look, it was easier. We had a good night. It was unexpected, not something I normally do with the talent. But it was pretty nice. And the night's over so..." He shrugged.

She stared at him, almost through him, as though she were trying to read his thoughts by concentrating hard enough. When she said nothing more, he jerked his head. "Thank Knight for me. And don't worry, it won't affect the outcome of your contract one way or the other."

At that, she stepped back as if he'd slapped her. It might have been kinder if he had. Then she recovered and stalked up until her knees bumped his, her hands on her hips, mouth set in a mulish line.

"Listen up, Cross Strickland. I get it. You're scared. Fine, we're all scared. But that wasn't just sex. It wasn't just a fuck." She paused, as if waiting for him to deny it. But he couldn't speak, so she went on. "It was more, it's been building up to more and you feel it too." Then, without warning, her hand darted to the back of his neck and she swooped down to crush her lips to his.

He didn't resist, and she all but crawled into his lap, straddling his thighs, her knees digging into the cushions of his leather chair. Grabbing her hips, bringing her closer, he slanted his head for better access. Her lips left his, cruised up his jawline to press a kiss on the hollow below his ear.

"Don't give up on us. The three of us. Not yet," she whispered, and tugged on his earlobe with her teeth.

He groaned, was close to promising her the stars if - no. His mind came back with a snap, and he lifted her off to stand on her own two feet, rolled the chair away until he could stand himself, a good distance away.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, running a hand through her hair.

"No." It was all he could say, he didn't trust himself to elaborate.

She took a step toward him, and he matched it with a step back. Seeing that he wouldn't change his mind, she shook her head. "Why?" she asked again softly.

The plea in her voice nearly broke him in two. "I—I can't." Please accept that.

She stared at him again with that unwavering concentration, trying to see his heart. And after a moment, she must have seen the writing on the wall he built around it. "I'm sad. For you, for us. Just...sad." With that, she turned and left.

* * * * *

Stubborn. They were worse than a pair of mules.

Knight sat with Ava on her bed, going over sheet music. He knew she'd gone to see Cross that morning. Didn't agree with the choice, but it was hers to make. He thought Cross needed time to absorb, fight through the conflict.

Instead, Ava demanded an answer, and when she didn't like what she got, she shut down. From her account of the meeting, Cross had too.

Sometimes it was a burden being the only reasonable one in a relationship.

"Ava, let's give it more time. Give him the distance. We have to meet up with him soon to see what's expected of us while we wait for the numbers to come in. Maybe by then he'll have come around."

She sniffed, shuffled some papers. "I wouldn't want him anyway, even if he did figure out what he was losing."

"I'm hurt too," he said softly, and saw her eyes water. "But he's just more set in his ways. These feelings ambushed him and it's a lot to take."

She blinked away the tears, knuckled the lone streak of wetness on her cheek. "Can we get back to the music, please? I need to get to bed early. I have an *Ava*, *Your Hair Looks Like A Bird's Nest* appointment early tomorrow morning."

Pair of mules, he thought again, hefting the guitar to his thigh.

* * * * *

Cross avoided them as if it were his job. With the duo being stuck down in the recording studio, it wasn't hard to do. Nobody noticed the change in his pattern, except Smith. Smith, who had been with him from the beginning. He had made comments here and there about Cross pushing himself too hard, looking as though something was on his mind. He would never pry, he valued his job too much. But he knew something had changed, that something was affecting Cross. The way he kept mentioning Ava and Knight in conjunction with what was wrong, he was dangerously close. Cross couldn't hide it for long.

A quick call to Ivana after Ava left his office Monday had yielded a model named Maya. Young, beautiful and thirsty for fame, she was eager to be seen with someone as influential as Cross Strickland. Dinner at a well known restaurant, some posing for the paparazzi, and he'd cemented himself once again as a forever bachelor, at least in the eyes of the public.

Maya wanted to be seen with someone powerful to boost her image, and he just wanted to forget for one night that there were two people who had made him feel something. But instead of using her body to erase the feeling of large, strong hands running over him, or delicate fingers wrapped around his cock, he dropped her off without so much as a kiss and headed home. To sleep in his king-sized bed alone. Again.

He'd probably take her out once or twice more. She annoyed him with her chatter about always dreaming of becoming a singer. She was a model. Get over it. But she was simple, easy, he didn't have to worry about having feelings for her.

Now, sitting in the conference room, he waited for the two artists to meet him and Barry to talk about their EP deal. And, he could admit it to himself, he was scared. Scared of what they would say, scared of what they wouldn't say.

The door swung open and both Knight and Ava walked in, followed closely by Barry. Knight looked hesitant, but Ava's face was frozen, her features set as if she were a maiden warrior preparing to head to battle.

His chest burned, his stomach rolled. There was no point in playing it off as heartburn anymore. Even he couldn't manage to fool himself like that. But whatever it actually was didn't matter. It had to be squashed. Business as usual.

The two sat down across from him, and Cross could tell they were holding hands under the table. What he would have expected to be jealousy came in the form of longing instead. He steeled himself, forced his voice to be professional and direct. No emotion. Business was never emotional.

"The board met, discussed the situation, reviewed the work you've done in the studio, and we are prepared to offer you a contract."

"That seems fast. Don't you have to wait for numbers to come in first?" Knight asked.

"No need. I've made my decision without them." He slid documents across the table, wishing one of them would reach out and brush fingers, even just a tiny bit of physical contact. Anything.

They didn't. Each waited as if in silent accord, neither reaching for the papers. He let go, sat back in his chair, and told himself he didn't care.

"The contract is standard. I'd suggest having a lawyer look over them before signing. If you don't have anyone, my assistant can refer you to a few that we work with regularly." Why weren't they saying anything? They just sat there, staring at him as if he had food on his face or something. Desperate for a reaction, he added, "Barry will tell you it's a good deal, especially for newcomers."

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Barry sat silently, watching the scene play out. Damn if the man wasn't attempting to read minds.

Cross sat, arms folded over his chest, waiting for something. Anything. And still they sat, just staring between him and the papers. Finally, Knight made a move, and it wasn't what he expected.

"We talked it over, what would happen if you offered us a contract." Glancing at Ava for a moment, the musician looked back to Cross. "And we've decided to say thank you, but no."

He couldn't breathe. They were saying no. They were walking away. Leaving without so much as an explanation.

"Barry, out." He didn't bother looking at the scout. After he heard the scuffle of the chair pushing back, and the click of the door being shut, he gave the two deserters a hard stare. "Care to explain why?"

They passed a look between them, some silent message that Cross couldn't understand. Then Knight spoke.

"We'd like to hear your reasons why we should stay."

Business he could understand. "If you look down here at paragraph two—"

"We'd like to hear your reasons why we should stay," Knight repeated, his voice soft but full of steel.

Checking to make sure the door had closed, he said, "If this is about that night—"

"No." Ava shook her head once, firmly. "This is not about the other night. This is about us realizing that we are two very small fish in this big pond, and if acting the way *certain people* do is what makes you a big fish, we want nothing to do with it."

"Obviously, this is about the other night, so why don't—"

"What this is about, Mr. Strickland..." Cross winced inwardly at Knight's use of his formal name. "Is how things were handled afterward." The man raked hair out of his eyes and sighed. "If you want to deny what happened, what you felt, we can't force

you. But we're not going to stick around where we're not wanted, where we have to have a constant reminder of what could have been if you weren't so scared of, well, whatever. Unless you have something to tell us? Or ask us?" He looked expectant, almost hopeful.

Cross' mind reeled. What could he say to get them to stay while still keeping his pride intact? There didn't seem to be a way that he could think of.

"It is what it is, Cross. You've obviously already moved on, so we'll follow your lead. We were content where we were back home. You sought us out, not the other way around," Ava added.

Moved on...moved on. What the hell was she... "Maya? Are you talking about Maya?"

Anger – the first real emotion she'd shown since stepping into the room – flared in her eyes. "Don't talk about her. Don't you dare mention her name to me." She stood, the chair toppling over behind her. "We're done. You had your chance, and we were willing to talk about it. To work with your fears. But no." Her palm slapped down on the table. "You shut us out, walked out on us before we even had the chance. Well, fine." She turned on her heel and walked to the door. "Have a good life, Cross." The door slammed behind her, leaving only Knight in the room with Cross.

"She's upset," Knight offered, his voice subdued. "She was hurt, finding you gone. We both were. We weren't going to make a big deal out of it. But you didn't trust us enough to stay and talk. You shut her out when she came back to you. Then you just moved on with that woman, and..." He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, sighed. "It would have been good, the three of us. We felt it. I know you did too." One shoulder shrugged up and down. "But we aren't going to stick around where we're not wanted, so..." He opened the door.

Cross' lungs seized, his heart beat double time. "It's a mistake," he said before he could stop himself.

Knight looked back, hope in his eyes. "What is?"

My letting you go. "You two saying no." He just couldn't bring himself to admit the truth. "You should reconsider." The bite in his words made him want to cringe.

Knight shook his head, the hope in his eyes melting away. "No. No, I don't think we will." He turned without another word and shut the door behind him. The click echoed in the empty room.

Empty. How symbolic.

Chapter Eight

"I hate him."

Ava was lying curled up on the bed with Knight in his studio apartment, the TV on low in the background.

"No, you don't." Knight soothed a palm over her hip. She was dealing with the hurt the best way she could, letting anger smooth the jagged edges of the pain. He could understand that.

"I do. He's stubborn and pig-headed and just...just...wrong. And stubborn."

"You said that one already."

"Well, it was worth repeating," she spat out.

Knight bit the inside of his lip to keep from smiling. *Stubborn* was a word Ava was well acquainted with.

His cell phone vibrated on the night stand, and he reached over Ava to pick it up. "Don't move or anything. I'll get it," he said, sarcasm dripping.

"'Kay," she said, and snuggled deeper into the pillow.

"Brat," he mumbled as he flipped the phone open. "McKay," he answered.

"McKay, Barry Hobbs. How are things?"

"Barry, uh, good. Fine." Ava sat up sharply, her head narrowly missing his chin. "What can I-oof!-we do for you?" He rubbed the rib that Ava had jabbed with her elbow.

"Oh, good, Monroe's there too." The agent cleared his throat. "Just got a call from Smith, and we both thought you two should hear it from us first, before news got out."

"Hear *what*?" His blood cooled, and the air in the studio seemed to have dropped twenty degrees.

"Look, it's none of our business what goes on between people, so that's not the –"

"Hear *what*?" Knight repeated.

"Knight." Ava's horrified whisper cut through to his heart. She was pointing to the TV.

Police are reporting that Cross Strickland, founder and CEO of Imperial Records, was stabbed in his Chicago condo earlier this evening. He was transported to Mercy Hospital in a currently unknown condition. Witnesses say they heard shouting at 4:17 this afternoon, and saw a woman sprinting through the halls moments later. This program has it on record that Strickland was in the company of Maya, a model whose career is taking off, for lunch this afternoon. Police have not given out the description of the woman seen fleeing the building...

Ava looked at him, her face white as a sheet, her eyes welling with tears.

"Barry..."

"Sorry, kid. Guess we didn't beat the media after all."

"Is...is it true?"

There was a heavy sigh. "Yeah, it's true."

"Is he..."

"He's alive. Knife tore through his gut and he sustained a traumatic head injury. He was out of surgery last we heard, and doing all right. Not great, but he's fighting." The scout's voice was hoarse.

Fighting. The word rang in Knight's ear as he hung up the phone. His vision tunneled to one spot on the wall, his mind blank but for that one thought. *Fighting for his life*. He looked over at Ava and saw her curled up at the foot of the bed. Her knees were tucked up under her chin, arms wrapped around her shins. She looked almost child-like in her vulnerable position, and Knight wanted to protect her with a ferocity he had never felt before.

"What should we do?" Ava's voice was muffled against her knees.

He thought on that a moment. He knew what he wanted to do, what instinct was telling him to do. But his mind was still on the defensive.

"We have to go," she answered for herself.

"Yeah," he said, looking at the now-mute TV report. "We do."

* * * * *

Antiseptic stung her nostrils, the stark-white walls made her eyes hurt, and the beeping from the monitor was driving her crazy. But that beeping was the reassurance that Cross was still alive.

It had been a week since she and Knight came back to Chicago to see him. A week of sitting in a sterilized room with no personality, watching Cross' chest move up and down in a weak rhythm, drinking horrible coffee and eating even worse food, and collapsing on a cheap motel bed – thanks to the fact that they were on their own dime.

Barry, God bless the man, had helped her and Knight find transitional jobs in a bar close to the hospital after they quit and packed what belongings would fit into Knight's car to make the trip up to Chi-town. He and Smith had been updating them religiously.

She and Knight took opposite shifts, one of them trying to be at the hospital at all times. In that, too, Barry and Smith had worked their magic. The hospital had put up a fuss about allowing non-relatives in, but through who knows what power, they now had full permission to be with him at any point.

It was killing her. The waiting, the not knowing. They said he was healing, that it was good he wasn't awake for the pain, that a full recovery was very likely.

If he woke up.

Tired of sitting still, she got up and rotated a vase of flowers ninety degrees, letting them soak in sun from another angle. Barry would be coming by later, she remembered, and she needed to have her week's schedule ready to give to him.

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What an interesting pair, Barry and Smith. Neither of them had condemned or scoffed at the devotion Ava and Knight had to Cross. Neither had seemed surprised either. She knew he never would have mentioned anything about their relationship to the employees, which meant they must have seen it themselves. It was, for lack of a better word, encouraging.

But nothing was going to matter if he didn't wake up, if he didn't move, open his eyes. Live. She walked back to sit by his side, placed his cold hands between her warm ones, chafed them. She had run out of stories to tell him an hour ago, so she contented herself with watching his chest rise and fall, each breath a reassurance that he was still fighting.

Her eyes had glazed over and she didn't know how much time had passed when something jerked in her hand. Instinct had her jumping back, the chair toppling over, falling to the dull linoleum floor with a clatter. What the hell had...

She saw it again. Cross' hand was twitching. The nurses had warned them that at times, the body just twitches, and not to be too excited.

But this was more than a twitch. His hand was, well it was almost like, as if...

As she watched, his hand balled into a fist, the fingers curling with agonizing slowness. Then they released and his palm once again lay flat on the bed.

"Cross?" she whispered. "Cross, can you hear me? It's Ava." Creeping up to the side of the bed, she brushed a hand over his forehead, and it wrinkled under her touch. "Cross," she continued, keeping her tone gentle. "If you can hear me, do something. Make a fist, blink, anything." The last word was caught on a choked sob. She realized immediately that wouldn't help, and pinched her arm to cut off the tears.

Nothing, no movement, no sounds. And then, his fingers flicked. Curled into a ball, then released.

There was no stopping the tears this time. Ava ran to the door, yelled for a nurse and dashed back to Cross' side. "Cross, Cross do it again." She put her hand under his, and the nurse came in just in time to see his fingers curl around hers and squeeze.

* * * * *

Recovery was a bitch.

No, Cross corrected himself. The boredom that came along with recovery was the bitch. He could deal with other parts.

Like when Ava snuck in, quiet as a mouse because she thought he was asleep. She would always tug the blankets under his chin, brush a cool hand over his forehead to check for fever. Then, before she left, she would brush her lips over his cheek in the saddest, sweetest gesture he'd ever received.

The moment he'd been released from the hospital, Ava and Knight had moved into guest rooms in his condo. Didn't even bother to ask, just took over. He'd started to complain, but Ava had told him that it was a done deal, to shut up and get over it. So he did. Wasn't as if he had any family that would be swooping in to play nurse anyway.

Secretly, he was glad he didn't have to hire a private nurse. He relished the sweet care Ava gave, the silent strength Knight provided. Though he'd cut his tongue out before he admitted it.

The whole time they'd been around, they'd avoided any serious conversation. All talk centered around his recovery, the company, small talk. Never once did they explain why they left the way they did, ask why he treated them they way he had.

It was the unwritten rule. Keep it light, keep it safe, and maybe everyone could escape this situation with their pride intact.

"Finally ready to do something?"

Knight's question cut through his pathetic mind ramblings. Struggling to sit up without wincing, he said, "Yeah, just let me get around and we can go shoot some hoops, go for a 5k jog. Maybe invade Cuba."

"Smartass," Knight replied with no bite. His guitar case plopped down on the covers next to Cross' leg. "You mentioned before you didn't play anything, and I figured you might want something to do. How about a lesson?"

It was either that, more sleep, or a reality TV marathon that was destined to turn his brain into oatmeal. "Fine," he said, keeping his voice crisp and impersonal. "Nothing else to do."

Knight sat across from him, showing him the proper finger positions. After a few false starts, the younger man shook his head. "This position is really awkward. It's easier to show from behind."

The phrase had Cross immediately stiffening, both his spine and his cock. Thank God the guitar hid the boner. He was about to say no, but Knight had already shifted behind so that his legs were straddling Cross' ass, the heat of his chest burning Cross' back.

"You're going to put your fingers here, and here," he said, warm breath swirling around Cross' ear while Knight's capable fingers guided his to the positions. "And your right arm goes here," he continued, draping around Cross' elbow, creating a cocoon of long limbs and hushed words.

Knight guided him through a few chords, and he was so focused on his finger placement that the first brush almost didn't register. But then he felt it again, that slow, light tease of lips on the back of his neck. Instinct had him tilt his head, ask for more without words.

Knight's breath heated a moist patch of skin right below his hairline, his breathing was heavy and labored. Under the pretext of adjusting the guitar, Cross shifted slightly – yup, he was right. Knight's cock was as hard as his own.

Knight sucked in a breath on contact, then retaliated with a graze of his teeth. Not a bite, not a nip. Just enough pressure to leave no doubt that it was a response. To let Cross know he was interested.

Cross was about to turn around when something snapped in his mind. Something screamed, *You can't do this.*

He shook his head, shifted forward until there was a safe gap between their bodies. "I can't." Silence.

"I just can't," he said again, feeling desperate to explain himself but not having the right words.

Knight sighed, and he felt his own soul shudder in response. Then the bed dipped as Knight stood and left, taking another piece of Cross' worthless pride with him.

* * * * *

"Stop hovering. You're like a damn helicopter."

"Well, pardon me for making you healthy," Ava huffed.

"I think I liked it better when he was unconscious," Knight said, trying to lighten the sick-room mood. Ava had been clucking like a mother hen, and it was impossible to miss how much it annoyed and strengthened Cross in equal parts. "Leave the grumpy bear alone before he bites your arm." *I learned from experience*.

"Grumpy bear my ass," Cross grumbled, and Knight smiled. As much as he bitched and moaned, they knew he was glad not to be alone, even if he wouldn't admit it out loud.

Cross was gaining strength every day. By next week, he would be ready to return to work, to his normal life. Whether that included him, or just Ava, or neither still remained to be seen. He hadn't kicked them out yet, making no waves when he and Ava started staying in—separate—guest rooms in his condo. He hadn't demanded Knight leave after their guitar-lesson-turned-sensual-misfire the day before.

But he wasn't leaving without a fight. Time to poke the bear a little.

"Ava, why don't you get the patient some water?" Before she could argue, he reminded her, "Remember the doctors said it was good for him to stay hydrated." The mention of doctors' orders had her scurrying out of the room like an eager first-year nursing student.

The door closed, and Cross sighed in relief. "Thanks." He shook his head. "I'm sure she means well, but it's almost more exhausting with her here than when she's gone."

"Yeah, she does mean well." He sat down on the chair positioned close to the head of the bed, keeping his posture relaxed, a contrast to the nerves that were flying around inside. "You mean a lot to her."

Cross stared straight ahead, acting as if nothing had happened between them.

"To both of us," he added quietly.

No reaction.

He wondered if he should drop it, let it go. *No, get it out in the open now, give him time to think about it.* Don't give this chance up.

"All right, fine. It's gonna be said, whether you want to hear it or not." He took a deep breath, steeled himself against the outright rejection that might come. "Ava is in love with you." The silent man's eyes darted over, then shot back to the wall. "And whether you want to hear it or not, I care for you, too. Maybe that freaks you out, scares you, pisses you off, but there it is." He crossed his arms over his chest, doing his best to not grab Cross' shoulders and shake the man.

Cross made no movement, no noise. The room was still, and he heard footsteps coming down the hall, signaling Ava's inevitable return.

"I haven't asked you for a single thing. But I'm going to now." He stared hard, willing Cross to turn his head, to look back at him. He was disappointed when Cross didn't rise to the challenge, but continued on anyway. "Whatever you do, just let her down gently. Say whatever you want to me, call me whatever names you want, tell me to fuck off. But as much as she likes to act tough, she's vulnerable. Just, let her down gently."

There was no emotion in his eyes, no response to Knight's request. Ava came in at that moment carrying a tray with a bottle of water, glasses, a pitcher of iced tea and a cheery smile.

Damn. He's gonna crush her...and me.

Chapter Nine

Three more days of agonizing rest and healing later, Cross was back to being a pain in the ass, but a walking pain in the ass. Ava tried to remind herself that with every annoying male sound, every sarcastic comment, it was a sign he was almost back to one hundred percent.

Almost back to not needing them.

She rejoiced and mourned all at once. Her heart was so torn, so full of conflicting emotions that she wasn't sure how it kept beating.

Her things never left the suitcase unless she needed them. Ready to leave at any moment, she thought a quick exit would be easiest. Nothing would be easy about this though, she couldn't kid herself.

Knight hadn't said much besides a warning not to push him, not to mention their relationship, or lack thereof. But she had to bite her tongue thirty times a day to keep from saying a word. She wanted to yell, scream, beg, plead. Ask why. Why wouldn't he give them a chance? Why wouldn't he go with something that felt so right?

But Knight was right. It was his decision alone, and she couldn't make it for him, much as she wanted to. He was set to go back to the office the next day, so this was it. She wasn't needed to play nursemaid any longer, her usefulness had run its course. If he didn't say a word, then that was that. The sting of tears was ever-present, despite her self-lecture that they were pointless and weak.

"Ava."

The word was a sentence all its own, a command to turn around. Cross was in the doorway, taking up all the space, sucking the oxygen out of the room.

"I need to talk to you." He turned and left before she had a chance to reply. No question, no request, no please. Just a statement, and she was expected to comply.

As much as she hated it, she followed him down the hall to his room, surprised by the destination. He walked to the corner of the huge California king bed, leaned against one bedpost, and looked at her.

She glanced around the room she had spent so much time in, holding his hand as he recovered, chewing her lip in worry, crying silently while he slept. It seemed warmer now, somehow. Maybe because he wasn't lying on the bed, battling for the chance to recover fully.

Apparently, he wasn't going to speak first, so she said, "Did you need something?" She forced the words around the lump in her throat, keeping her tone light, unaffected. What a lie.

He simply raised one dark eyebrow, then said, "Come here."

She shouldn't, she should go back to her room, put her last-minute things in her suitcase and leave. Before he had a chance to further smash her heart. Instead, she took a step into the room.

"Shut the door behind you."

She reached behind her and pushed so that it would swing closed. It didn't latch, but it was close enough. Walking into the room, she had to force one foot in front of the other. He looked so, well, stoic standing there. His emotions were impossible to read.

Stopping just out of arm's reach, she waited to see what he wanted, forcing herself to be prepared for rejection. Instead, he reached out his arms, and she willingly walked into them.

Not quite the reaction she had expected from him...or her.

He drew her in, cradled her against his chest, large arms wrapping tightly around her. Cross' chin came down to rest on top of her hair. She could feel his heart beating, and the moment was so special, so intimate that she lost her breath.

She was about to step back, break contact, when she flew through the air and landed in the center of the enormous mattress, knocking the wind out of her.

"What the he—" She couldn't finish before lips claimed hers in a drugging kiss. His mouth was hungry, insistent, and she refused to resist. If this was their last time, their last moment, she would embrace it and keep it for her memories. Arching her back, throwing her arms around his neck, she gave as well as she got, putting her heart into the kiss.

Large, warm hands burned her skin as he slid her shirt up, over her head. Her bra quickly followed, and Cross set himself to feasting on her swollen breasts, her nipples furled and begging for attention. Each pull with his teeth, every swirl with his tongue reflected low in her belly, causing another wave of dampness to soak her panties.

His hand was on the waistband of her pants when they heard a knock, and the door creak.

"Cross, have you seen Ava? I can't find her and we need to -" Knight stopped in his tracks. His mouth dropped as he stared at them, face slack.

Ava wasn't sure how Cross would react, whether he would yell, throw her out, throw them both out...

"I thought you closed the door," he simply said, one brow raised in question.

"I, uh, I did. It didn't latch though." Who was this person that had his hands on her breasts, and what did he do with Cross?

"Mmm." He nipped at her breast once more, then sat up. She waited for the explosion, but all he said was, "Well?"

Knight stood completely still, shock and confusion written on his face. *I know the feeling*. At Cross' question, he stepped all the way into the room, shutting the door behind him.

"Lock it."

What the hell was he up to? Knight walked into the room after locking the door. Had he decided one more fuck for the road? He figured Ava wouldn't object to being

used once more before getting tossed out? It was going to be bad enough when he told them to leave. This could only make things worse.

Couldn't it?

As much as he hated it, Knight couldn't deny that he wanted one more moment with Cross, one more moment to take with him when this was over, when there were no more chances to make it work.

Apparently, Ava felt the same. Either that, or Cross was helping out with the newest version of a monthly breast exam.

He walked to the edge of the bed, Cross' eyes never leaving him. Stopping, he motioned to Ava, still spread out on the bed half naked. "You look like a human sacrifice."

She rolled to one side, propped herself on an elbow and gave him a scowl. "Shut up, Knight."

Cross, predictably, looked unrepentant for his part. He shrugged a shoulder. "I was in the mood, she was up for it. No harm."

No harm, until they left. Then who would pick up the pieces? Seriously though, why did Cross want him there? As if hearing his thoughts...

"It's okay if McKay stays?" he asked Ava, his voice more gentle than expected.

She looked at Cross, then to Knight. She bit her lip, then nodded. Cross may not have noticed, but Knight saw a moment of hope in her eyes, and he prayed that moment didn't bring her heartache later when it was doused.

"You in, McKay?"

Not quite. As perverse as it was, Knight had to hear him say something, anything. "In for what?"

Cross scowled at him. "Checkers. What does it look like?" He motioned over Ava's body.

"I want to make sure I have it right," Knight replied, leaning against the bedpost, hoping his body language gave off a cool, unaffected vibe. "You want me to be in the bedroom. Have you noticed we're in your own home? Doesn't it bother you that someone might find out?" Though it was a private residence, he did have a housekeeper who had free access.

The air was thick with tension, and he saw Ava's eyes widen with disbelief that he would have stood up to the music mogul. But in the end, he had to know.

Cross' face hardened, and his voice was rough when he said, "What a man does in the bedroom is nobody else's fucking business."

Knight nodded once, agreeing with him. "Just checking." Without waiting for further invitation, he hopped up on the bed, lying down next to Ava. On the pretense of kissing her cheek, he whispered, "Will this only make it harder?"

Her delicate hand came up to cup his cheek. "I don't care. I need it." She kissed him softly then turned to Cross.

Cross was already in the process of unbuttoning his shirt, muscles stretching taut on his chest and abs when he shrugged his shoulders back to let it fall to the ground. Ava's eyes glazed over as she sat up, but Knight's gaze became sharp, watching every ripple, every curve, memorizing the body he'd never see again.

The scar below his rib was a raw pink against his tanned skin, puckered instead of smooth. The contrast was terrifying, a reminder of how close to death he had come. Ava's small fingers traced down his ribs to the healed wound, circling the flesh that was his keepsake for life.

"Forget about it," he said gruffly, nudging her hands away from the mark. "I don't want it mentioned anymore. It doesn't have a place here. It's over."

Knight thought Ava might argue, but she chose to nod and lie back down instead, blinking away tears.

Knight decided to take one more shot at forcing Cross to fess up, speak what was on his mind. "So you want to share again?" It killed him to say the words so casually, as if Ava was just a vessel for pleasure and Cross didn't matter at all.

Cross gave him a hard look, one he couldn't define or interpret. Then he shook his head and reached for Ava's waistband. "Let's just see where things take us," he said, leaving Knight more confused than before he asked the question.

Cross undid the button to Ava's jeans, and Knight watched with anticipation as the man's hands skimmed up her ribcage and covered her breasts, thumbing the nipples until they were tight nubs. Acting on instinct, Knight reached out and unzipped her pants, brushing shoulders with Cross.

Dragging her pants off, Knight smiled and hooked a finger under the elastic band of her skimpy lace panties. "These don't appear to be the lingerie I know and love."

She slapped his hand. "Shut up or you can leave."

He nuzzled her pussy through the fabric, felt how damp she was, heard her breath hitch. "Now why would you want me to leave?"

There was no answer.

He flicked his tongue down her seam, the material providing a buffer. But even through the underwear, he could tell she was becoming wetter by the second. The thought was intoxicating. Even more so was the sight of Cross' hands on her stomach, his mouth attacking her breasts with tenacity. Knight's cock stiffened almost painfully, begging to join in. *Not yet*.

His finger returned to her hip bone and he eased the panties down an inch before her hand clamped on his wrist, forcing him to look up.

"Why is it," she asked with teasing light in her eyes, "that I always seem to end up naked first while you two are almost fully dressed?" She smiled. "It's the twenty-first century boys. Equality, and all that jazz. C'mon." She propped herself up on her elbows, motioning for them to stand up.

Cross raised himself from the bed first, a feral smile on his lips. "What's fair is fair, then." His pants quickly dropped to the floor and he slid them off, along with his shoes and socks, leaving him in gray boxer-briefs. He gave a pointed glance at Knight. "Can't disappoint the lady, can we?"

Knight shook his head, wondering where the uptight CEO went. But he wasn't going to question it. Shedding his clothes down to his boxers, he looked back at Ava, who had taken the time to slip her panties off. Her hair was like a blonde waterfall over the edge of the bed, her legs were together, knees bent and over to the side. A pagan princess. Their princess.

He could only watch as Cross strode back to the bed, lifting Ava up to her knees, scooting her to the edge of the bed so that she was eye to eye with Cross, who was still standing on the floor. Hands moved over skin as he watched their tongues meet. He could see Cross' cock pulsing beneath the fabric of his underwear, watched as the man's hands slid down Ava's belly to part her folds, delving in with a touch that made her squirm and moan.

Now or never, last chance to make an impression.

He didn't second-guess before he walked behind Cross and slid his fingers into the band of his boxer-briefs. The man didn't say a word, maybe didn't even register the featherlight touch, he was so busy with Ava.

The waistband moved down narrow hips, and he lifted it away to miss snagging Cross' erection. Down his thighs to his ankles, the fabric slid, Cross never responding to the loss. Knight didn't know what that meant, but he was ready to up the ante.

Staying behind, he reached around and wrapped one hand around the man's engorged cock. The appendage jumped eagerly at his touch, but the man himself stiffened, turned to stone. Muscles in his back coiled, ready for action. Knight stopped breathing for a moment, waiting for Cross to shove his hand away, turn around and slug him, anything. But he didn't move.

Light, whispery caresses reached the back of his hand, urging him to move. Ava, encouraging him to advance down the path he had chosen. Her touch emboldened him and he gave one long stroke, almost an experiment to see how far Cross could be pushed. His thumb traced the head, moving down the slit, following the vein on the underside of his thick cock.

When still no reaction came, he started to stroke in long, slow motions. A few strokes and the muscles of Cross' back started to relax. Knight could almost hear the ice cracking around the man's resolve. He went after Ava's mouth with a hunger not easily fed. She wouldn't mind, Knight chuckled to himself. If that helped him accept what was happening, so be it.

Stroke after stroke had him excited, anticipating more. When Cross finally turned, breaking the contact, he was disappointed, wanting to bring Cross to climax himself.

Cross looked at him, and it was impossible to miss the demons battling in his eyes. He was out of his comfort zone, was unsure of himself, confused. But he wanted it. Knight knew the feeling well. He took pity on the man, deciding to let him lead the way. Maybe being in charge would help the confusion, the uncertainty.

"What do you want?"

The question apparently took Cross by surprise. "Does it matter?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"It does to me. And Ava."

He absorbed that for a moment. "Fine. What I say goes?"

Knight glanced at Ava, her smile a confirmation that it was the right decision. "What you say goes."

Cross grunted, then turned and gave a playful slap on Ava's ass. "Lie back, and scoot to the head of the bed." She hurried to comply, failing miserably to hide her pleased smile.

Knight waited for instruction, determined to help Cross feel as empowered in this uncertain situation as possible. He didn't have to wait long.

"Get rid of those." Cross' hand waved toward his crotch, indicating the boxers. Knight stepped out of them without comment. The man motioned his head toward the bed, and Knight climbed on, waiting in the middle, Ava's beautiful body within arm's reach.

He hesitated only a moment before saying, "Go down on her."

So, Cross wanted to watch. Fine by him. "Hey gorgeous," he whispered as he leaned over and kissed her, his hands weaving in her hair. He liked pussy as much as the next guy, but he also liked the slow burn, the buildup to the big show.

The corner of his mind registered a rattling sound. A drawer, condoms probably. He moved down her neck, across her collarbone to her breasts. He took the creamy white flesh and sucked, hard.

Ava gasped, pushed his head away and stared at the red spot left behind. "Did you just give me a hickey?" she asked incredulously.

"Love bite," he amended with a smile, and kissed the mark as if to demonstrate his affection.

"It's a hickey, you horny teenager," she said through gritted teeth, and they both turned when Cross' chuckling hit their ears, a sound they had never heard before.

Cross was leaning against the wall, shaking his head. "Get over it, Ava. You're not exactly the virginal cheerleader here, are you?" He gave her a wicked smile. "And thank God for that."

Ava merely rolled her eyes and lay back down. Knight nodded graciously to him and continued in his exploration of Ava's lush curves. Another unfamiliar sound popped, but he didn't stop to see what it was. His attention was focused on the pair of breasts in front of him. Suckling and nipping had her whispering his name, and Cross'.

Devoting his time to her body, he jumped as something cold brushed his ass, the shock forcing his head around. To his surprise, Cross was behind him, bottle of lube laying on the edge of the bed. Cross gave him a look that said, *Tell me no. I dare you*.

So, he merely nodded and turned his attention back to Ava. A sharp intake of breath behind him was all he had to know that Cross got the message. But would he do it?

The answer came in the form of a probing finger, hesitant at first, then more sure. Knight breathed in and out deeply, relaxing his body, concentrating on pleasing Ava and letting Cross work from behind. It wouldn't be his first go on the receiving end, but he could guess it would be the Cross' first experience...with a man anyway.

The finger was joined by a second, stretching him deliciously, putting pressure in a forbidden place. Knight moved down to Ava's belly, wet kisses and bites coinciding with the rhythm of Cross' fingers. The heavily aroused breathing behind him mixed with Ava's delicate, panting sighs, filling the air with expectation. He shifted his body down farther, felt Cross move behind him, giving him room to maneuver so he could reach Ava's thighs.

He ran his teeth down her inner thigh, smiling as she quivered, smelling her arousal in front of him. A third finger joined the first two, and Knight bit down at the stinging sensation, not at all sorry for the muffled shriek Ava gave.

Then he was empty, all signs of Cross gone. He forced himself to concentrate on Ava, her pussy glistening with moisture. But the ripping of foil renewed his hope. He wouldn't give in to the urge to look behind, to question, to let Cross know how much this meant to him. The barest hint of emotion, of anything but sex, might send him running the other direction.

Just as Knight's tongue opened the seam to Ava's folds, the cold, wet sensation returned, along with the feeling of something blunt, bigger than a finger. His cock.

Fuck. Here we go.

He made the movements with his tongue precise, measured. Up one side and down the other, he outlined her outer lips, never quite reaching her hot spots. Her juices were hot on is tongue, her musky, aroused scent surrounding his senses. Cross's cock pushed in, the lube paving the way, and Knight pushed back slightly to help.

As Cross' cock slid past his inner muscle, he heard the low groan signaling Cross' pleasure as he slipped almost fully in. *Back atcha, buddy*. The movement thrust Knight forward, his tongue moving deep into Ava's pussy. He heard her own whimper of bliss. God, what teamwork.

The thrusts started, slow and hesitant, then gained both speed and force. He could feel Cross' balls against his ass, his fingers digging into his hips. Knight moved from Ava's slick tunnel to her clit, massaging and sucking, letting his teeth scrape every so often when Cross would give an extra deep push. The combination of Ava's scent and taste with the feeling of Cross behind him was almost too much.

And yet, not quite enough. He knew he wouldn't come from the fucking alone, and he needed his hands for balance or he couldn't take care of Ava. But that was fine with him. Missing an orgasm was worth it for the experience.

Her breath came out in short puffs, repeating his name, Cross' name, incoherent words of praise and ecstasy. Her juices were flowing freely over his tongue, and he sucked to taste more. Cross' own breathing was labored, hard. They were close, both of them.

Without warning, his cock, still stiff and aching for release, was surrounded by strong fingers. Cross had reached around to grab his erection, pumping him with his hand while filling his ass. He did it of his own accord, with no prompting, and with confidence. That knowledge brought Knight closer to release than any other single act.

"Oh God, Knight, oh, oh God. Cross, I'm, OH!" Ava's scream coincided with her convulsions, almost pushing his head free from between her thighs, but he held on tight, determined to ride her through to the end. Her release, the taste and scent of it,

the sheer satisfaction of bringing her to climax while Cross rode his ass brought him to the brink.

Cross growled a warning, and his body draped forward, his chest covering Knight's back while his hand drove around his cock. In and out, his ass was filled while his erection was covered, and he knew he was about to come.

He wanted to warn him, let him know in case it was too much, in case the man wanted to let go, but then he felt a bite on his shoulder, like a stallion during mating, and the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced was on top of him before he could say a word.

His shouts were muffled in Ava's thigh as he turned his head, his own hot seed pouring out onto the bedspread while Cross shuddered on top of him, masculine noises coming from his chest, reverberating through Knight's spine. The climax left him weak, and he had just enough presence of mind to fall to the left, avoiding landing on Ava by inches. Cross, miraculously, remembered to roll to the right as he collapsed behind him, both cradling Ava, too tired to move, too tired to do anything but suck in air.

God, that was fantastic. What a way to go.

Chapter Ten

Hours later, Cross woke up in bed, the cover thrown over him, Ava's hair in his face. He blew a puff of air to move it, choking when more only seemed to fall in his open mouth.

How the hell do women function with all this crap everywhere?

He lifted his hand and brushed the golden strands out of his eyes and mouth. Free to breathe and see, he turned his head to see Ava curled up, her back and bottom lying against his side, facing away from him. He searched over the top of her head, but Knight wasn't there.

"I'm here."

The quiet statement came from the window. He was wearing jeans and nothing else, the contours of his back and arms outlined to perfection in the late afternoon light. Knight stood gazing out the window, a contemplative look on his face.

What did you say to a man you had just fucked in the ass and jacked off? They didn't teach that part in sex education.

"When do you want us to go?" The soft question had his mind reeling, and his heart tightened in his chest. He couldn't answer, that would have required oxygen and somehow he seemed to be lacking it. When he didn't immediately respond, Knight must have taken it negatively. "That fast, huh? I'll wake up Ava, we'll get out of your hair."

"No." The word was out of his lips before he could think, before he knew he could breathe again.

"No, what?" Knight arched one brow, and Cross wasn't sure whether he wanted to punch the man or drag him back to bed for another fuck.

"I never said I wanted you to leave."

"Who are you talking to?"

Ava's sleepy voice had him looking down into her beautiful face. Her hair was a tangled mess on the pillow, her cheek had a crease from the pillow, and her eyes were glazed. It hit him at that moment. He loved her. Loved them.

"Either. Both." He sat all the way up, let his head drop in his hands, gathering the *cojones* to say what had to be said. Scrubbing his palms over his face, he continued. "I don't know why you two came back after the way I treated you the las -"

"Bullshit."

Cross' head snapped up, looking into Knight's eyes. The man's face was set, serious and confrontational. Beside him, Ava stirred, laid a hand on his arm.

"I think what Knight means is that –"

"Don't speak for me, Ava." Knight took two steps forward then stopped, fists clenched at his sides. "For someone so smart, so capable of building an empire, you can be a first class dumbass."

He couldn't remember the last time someone had stood up to him, let alone called him a dumbass. The thought momentarily rendered him speechless, something else completely foreign to him.

"You know exactly what brought us back. Sad that you're not man enough to just deal with it, though." Knight shrugged one shoulder.

"Hey, asshole, who's running this conversation?" Maybe he had a point, but really, did he have to kick a man when he was vulnerable? It was hard enough for Cross to admit to himself that he had feelings for a woman, not to mention a man as well.

Knight crossed his arms, leaned his shoulder against the wall. "Start saying something worthy of a conversation, and you can run whatever you want." A slow smile tilted one corner of his mouth.

Best to get this over with, and quickly, before he lost his nerve and fucked it up.

"Being stabbed gives a guy a lot of time to think. Since I couldn't use my favorite way to pass time in bed..." He gave Ava a smile, loved that she blushed, then looked back to Knight, whose posture had relaxed a bit. "Thinking was the next best thing. And I realized...I don't care."

He could hear the sounds of traffic on the street below, horns honking in aggression, music being played by a neighbor a few floors down through the open window. Neither of them made a sound. Then Ava asked, "Don't care about us?"

He looked between her and Knight again, wondering how they couldn't understand, wondering if he got their feelings wrong and was about to make a huge ass out of himself. Too late to go back now. He took a deep breath, said what was in his heart, and let the chips fall where they may.

"I don't care what others will say about our situation. I did, or at least I thought I did. I'm in the spotlight, I'm seen and talked about constantly. It's not exactly possible to keep any relationship I have a secret." He smiled ruefully. "Just like Maya. She wanted to use me for publicity, a record deal, but got pissed when I wouldn't continue dating her. Normally," he added wryly, "women just do something like cut up your underwear or break dishes. They don't stab you for breaking it off."

His voice was harsh, a matter-of-fact tone replacing the more joking manner of earlier. "The fact is this. I want this...relationship to work. I want you to stay."

He looked at Ava, who glanced at Knight, who was staring at her.

He saw the confusion, realized they were still unsure. He needed to clarify.

"Both of you."

Neither Ava nor Knight said a word. Out loud, anyway. They were doing that annoying thing where they read each others' minds that drove him up a fucking wall. He hated that he couldn't tell what they wanted, couldn't be a part of the silent conversation.

Cross was a man who could sit through a meeting where millions of dollars were on the line and not break a sweat. But now, waiting for them to finish up their private

convo, he felt clammy, something was crawling under his skin, he wanted to shake his hands to rid himself of the nerves.

Of the possible heartache.

He forced himself to be stone still, to accept whatever came his way. He wouldn't whine about it, or beg for it. He'd accept it and move on.

Bullshit. He wasn't a Nancy boy. He'd fight. He owned an empire for chrissake. He knew how to act like a pit bull, not let go of something he wanted.

And he wanted them.

"Why?" It was only one word, but coming out of Knight's lips, it sounded more like a plea. Pleading with him to give the right answer. No pressure or anything.

"Love." Cross looked away as he said it. Begged them silently not to make him go further. To accept that words weren't his thing, that he'd said what he could. He'd never felt more vulnerable, even when he was lying in the hospital.

More noise from the street filled the wordless bedroom. Then the mattress shook lightly, and he heard a feminine hiccup. He was almost afraid to turn and look.

Almost.

Ava sat, arms wrapped around her shins, her face to her knees, shoulders shaking in quiet sobs. He'd seen women cry before. Artists always thought it might help their chances, women would cry when he broke up with them. He'd seen more mascara run than behind the scenes at the Country Music Awards. But this one woman, with a bad case of bed head and crease marks on her face, was his undoing.

And yet, he had no clue what he had done wrong.

"Ava, I..." His voice was rough, even to his own ears. He couldn't finish, and didn't have to.

She lifted her head, tears streaming down her face, her eyes red and puffy, and whispered, "I love you both."

Cross felt his heart expand in his chest, and he looked over at Knight.

"You mean it." It was a statement rather than a question, but Cross nodded in answer anyway. He would have said more, but he was knocked flat on his back by a flying projectile that happened to be a very sniffly Ava.

Her arms were around his neck and she was peppering his face with kisses, uttering stupid, meaningless phrases that they would laugh at later. The mattress dipped, Knight joining them. Cross sat up, taking Ava with him, planting her in his lap. Her arms clung around him as though she was afraid he would escape.

He looked at the younger man, and held out his hand. "Well?"

He paused only for a second before putting his hand in Cross', and Cross yanked him over, colliding with Ava, falling back on the mattress in a giggly chuckling mess.

It was bliss.

* * * * *

One month later...

"Move over," Ava yelled as she launched herself onto the bed, landing in her spot between Knight and Cross. Knowing her pattern, each shifted away until she scooted up to lean her head back on the headboard. The remote was on Knight's lap, and she snatched it away. "Whacha watching? Better not be action crap."

Cross snagged the remote from her in one fluid motion. "No, we were not watching *action crap*, as you so eloquently put it." A click of the button took the system off mute and a familiar entertainment news show background came on the screen. "We were waiting to see if they have any red carpet coverage from the release party for G. Money last night."

"Ah." She snuggled down, molding into Cross' hard body. She loved how warm he always was, how safe she felt when he put his arm around her. Under her hand, his heart beat strong, something she never took for granted any more. The bed dipped as Knight shifted to spoon her, his hand resting on her hip.

They watched in silence as the show's host, Samantha Barstow, wrapped up the last story and introduced the next piece.

"And in music news...rapper G. Money's sophomore album was released yesterday to rave reviews. The red carpet was rolled out for last night's launch party at Club Gen, hosted by Imperial Records CEO Cross Strickland."

A clip followed of Cross standing on the red carpet, lights flashing. Knight let out a low wolf whistle, and Cross slugged his shoulder, a silent admonition to be quiet.

"Viewers might remember little over a month ago when Strickland was stabbed in his Chicago apartment by model-wannabe Maya."

Ava snorted. "Bitch." She would have had a few more choice words to say, but Cross hushed her with a quick, hard kiss.

"Maya is currently out on bail and is awaiting trial. But we're happy to report that he's made a full recovery, as you can clearly see."

The screen was full now of the three of them. Ava on one side, Knight on the other. Their arms were linked around Cross' back, a united front, followed by them giving an interview to a reporter on the sideline.

"Strickland was joined on the red carpet by little-known artists Knight McKay and Ava Monroe."

"Ouch," Knight muttered, and Ava chuckled, lacing her fingers with his.

"McKay and Monroe were set to sign a contract with Imperial Records last month, but declined the offer. When asked if they were pursuing another record company, McKay had this to say."

Knight's face filled the screen, his voice was in surround sound.

"We're content with what we have, and we're not looking for something more."

"Nice answer," Cross murmured.

"Speculation was rampant about this interesting trio, and what it meant that McKay and Monroe were by Strickland's side the entire time. But when asked for comment on the unique relationship, Strickland replied that everyone was happy, and that's what mattered. Cryptic, but there it is!"

The host's cheerful face blurred and a commercial rolled. Cross cut the power. The silence enveloped them. Then, because being silent had never been her forte, Ava spoke.

"Are you upset? I mean, it was our first time out in public, trying the whole three against the world thing. Are you okay with it? We could scale back, come late to events if it bothers you, or maybe -"

Her words were cut off with a smacking kiss from Cross. "I couldn't be happier." Then an unholy gleam glinted in his eyes, and he started to tug up her tank top. "Well, actually there's one thing that could make me happier..." he began.

She stifled a giggle. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

Her pajama bottoms slid over her behind, and Knight kissed her shoulder. "I'll just take a wild guess here and say that Cross would like to institute a No Pajamas rule for tonight."

"Tonight? Hell, I was thinking indefinitely," Cross growled, lifting the shirt over her head.

Ava snuggled back into the pillows while her men lavished attention on her body. They shared a quick, fierce kiss over her abdomen before returning their attention to her. She thought back to Cross' statement from the night before.

Everyone was happy, and that's what mattered.

She sighed. Happy, as so much more.

About the Author

KJ Reed is an inconspicuous housewife by day, folding laundry, changing diapers and washing dishes with pleasure. But late at night, when the rest of the household is asleep and not making messes she has to pick up, she writes erotic romance. She took up writing one day when she realized the voices in her head weren't multiple personalities, but characters begging to come out and play.

A military wife, she's fortunate enough to be surrounded by manly, Alpha-tastic inspiration on a daily basis. Nothing stirs the blood quite like a platoon of sweaty Marines running by in formation, does it ladies? Of course, she'd tell you where she lives, except by the time you're done reading this biography...she's probably moved again.

KJ is currently working on her next erotic romance, hopefully hot enough to singe your socks off. She loves email and is semi-compulsive in her need to quickly respond. So send her a shout out, tell her what you liked and what you want to see more of. You're almost guaranteed a response.

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