



THE MISSING BUTTERFLY

MEGAN DERR

LESS THAN THREE PRESS

The Missing Butterfly
By Megan Derr

Published by:
Less Than Three Press

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Edited by Sabrina
Cover art by Megan Derr

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Electronic Edition January 2010
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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-936202-07-2

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MEGAN✧DERR

*PROLOGUE

"Sorry I'm late!" Cassidy stumbled to a halt in the middle of the room, barely avoiding face planting on the hardwood floor. He shoved back errant curls and attempted to look especially contrite and apologetic, with a side of puppy, please do not kick.

Bruce, Jake, and Eddie simply shared a roll of the eyes and went back to fiddling with their respective instruments.

"What kept you today, fearless leader?" Bruce asked, neglecting his bass just long enough to ask.

Cassidy tossed his messenger bag aside, then stripped off his tie and oxford, kicking off his fancy shoes before striding to the microphone. "My new advisor is a bit long-winded, but I'm just about all set for my classes. Mostly just financial aid stuff to take care of now, and I can start with the fall session. No manager will be screwing us over, baby!"

Jake snorted and rolled his eyes again. "We've got a long way to go before we have to worry about a manager, *honey*."

"Sugar, with your fingers and my voice, it's only a matter of weeks. Maybe months. Definitely not years. By the time I'm nineteen, Four Butterflies will be number one in the universe."

"Stop getting ahead of yourself, dickhead, and warm up," Eddie said, twirling his drumsticks in warning.

Cassidy rolled his eyes at them, but obediently paid attention to his microphone—and promptly started singing 'I'm a Little Teacup' in what Bruce called his 'Girls Will Throw Panties' voice. Bruce liked that voice, 'cause his favorite daydreams pertaining to rock and roll fame were the girls and the panties and the girls without panties.

Which was fine by Cassidy, he preferred his naked to be boy shaped.

Something struck the back of his head, and he bent to retrieve the crumpled paper, whipping around to throw it right back at Eddie, who looked too innocent to actually be innocent. "You're a drummer. Hit the drums, not me."

"Then sing a good song."

"Fucking play then, for me, bay-bee," he said, singing the last bit into the mike, batting his eyes and then immediately ducking an empty soda can. "Philistines," he said loftily, then signaled, and they began to practice in earnest.

Cassidy sang for all he was worth, just like he did every time, all the time. He had a voice, damn it, and his band had talent, and they would rule the world someday. He knew it.

Until then, he was weeks away from business school, the boy at the coffee shop had totally been flirting, and if he did well his first semester his parents would help him buy a new car. He didn't even mind going to see his sister in her doofy play in an hour.

Ack. Play.

But even as he started to call a halt, Bruce beat him to it—rather, Bruce's cell phone beat them all to it.

"You're supposed to turn that damned thing off during practice," Taskmaster Eddie said, scowling at Bruce through electric-blue bangs.

Bruce only blew him a kiss. "Time to stop, anyway. I have a hot date, Cass has to go watch his lovely little sister be Snow White—"

"Jailbait, asshole," Cassidy said. "If you ever touch my sister, I will kill you. After I make you eat your balls."

Eddie cut them both off with a crash of cymbal and stood up. "Pop is probably going to be home soon, anyway. I need to get his supper started. You losers get lost and make certain you're here tomorrow *on time*—" A pointed look at Cassidy. "Or else."

"Who needs a manager with Edwin around, eh?"

"Call me that again, Jakey, and you'll be eating your balls."

Cassidy protested. "Hey! No stealing my threats." He started to say more, but the sound of his own phone stopped him short. "Shit," he swore, seeing his neighbor's number come up. Interfering old busy body, she probably was calling 'on behalf of his mother' to see if he was on his way home to be there in time to go the play.

Raking back his curls, wiping sweat from his face with the sleeve of his t-shirt, he flipped the phone open and punched accept. "Hey, Ms. Snick—what, whoa, hold on—CALM DOWN. I can't—what—"

As her words finally made sense, Cassidy's face went ashen. He didn't notice the way his friends abruptly fell silent and looked at him with concern—didn't notice they were watching the pallor of his face, the way he was trembling. "Ms. Snickers—yeah, okay. I'm on my way. I-I-I'll get Jakey to drive me, you just stay there with Lindsay and Denny."

He closed his phone with a sharp snap and barely managed to shove it into the pocket of his fancy dress slacks. "J-j—"

Eddie abandoned his drums and came to him, gripping his arm. "Hey, man, what's wrong?"

"D-dead," Cassidy got out and tried to smile reassuringly, then realized how fucking stupid that was. "Car hit my parents. They're dead. I, uh, gotta go. Can Jakey—"

He didn't finish and didn't really remember much after that, until he got home and his siblings were crying and his neighbor was crying and there were police and Lindsay was still dressed up as Snow White—

As he held his siblings and cried with them, struggling all the while to listen to what other people were telling him, all Cassidy could think was that he had no fucking clue what to do.

*CHAPTER ONE

Secretly, Cassidy loved ties. He didn't like the fancy clothes—business casual, his ass—because he was always going to spill *something* on them and then back to the damned dry cleaners they must go. But he liked ties.

Though, most of that might be because his sister, so earnest on his first birthday after their parents had died, had given him a tie so he'd 'look even prettier at work'. He'd only waited tables, back then, but he'd worn that tie every single fucking day until nothing was left of it.

Now, he had a whole collection of them, courtesy of his brother and sister, and what was a man to do but like them, after so much trouble had been gone through to give them to him?

He adjusted the newest one, an Easter present, as he rode up the elevator, to day ninety three of his new job. Having long since developed a sense of humor, his sister had purchased him a black silk tie featuring monkeys climbing and playing along lengths of rope. Office monkeys, she'd declared. Hahaha, he'd replied.

The elevator chimed, and he stepped off, swiped his card against the reader to unlock the doors to the seventh floor suite, and slipped inside.

It was always quiet at seven in the morning. He'd gotten special permission to work seven to four so he could take classes, something which the company promoted and approved of—and he would not have to pay for them, which meant his paychecks could still go to Lindsay and Denny. Lindsay would need whatever he could offer for grad school here soon, and Denny... well, he would pick the most expensive arts college in the world, wouldn't he?

Cassidy shoved the thoughts away, determined not to worry about them for the moment. For now, Denny was working to save up his own money over the summer, and Lindsay needed nothing until the new term started. Everything was fine and covered. He could take it easy this morning.

Striding down to the break room, he put his lunch in the fridge, then started coffee brewing, flipping idly through random magazines as he waited for it to finish.

The sound of music cranked too loud through headphones made him jump, and he looked up to glare at whoever was disturbing his early morning peace—then hastily dropped his gaze back to the magazine, as he saw who it was, really *really* hoping his cheeks weren't going red.

It so did not help that his Manager on whom he *did not* have a crush, obviously had wicked taste in music. Though, he was going to go deaf if he kept cranking it that damned loud. Quelling an urge to do something stupid, like try to hold a conversation, Cassidy turned the page of the magazine which he really was not reading, wishing the stupid coffee would hurry up.

"Good Housekeeping?" a warm voice asked, full of amusement, and Cassidy only then realized that the music had stopped.

Cassidy jumped, jerked back, wincing as he heard a pained grunt that was the result of his elbow driving into his boss' stomach.

It was, he realized, going to be one of those days.

"Sorry," said Malcolm Osborne, Head Manager of Accounting for Amberton-Lord Entertainments, and the hottest thing Cassidy had seen since he'd tried and failed hard to date back when he was still a food service minion. Unlike Cassidy's mop of stupid black corkscrews—which, thankfully, his hair was currently too short to reveal—Malcolm's hair was smooth and straight and the softest of browns.

His eyes were the same soft, warm shade, and Cassidy had more than once caught himself thinking how Malcolm would look tousled and sleepy—

He coughed, and managed to mutter, "Sorry, boss."

"My fault," Malcolm said, smiling at him, looking faintly puzzled behind his glasses. "Didn't mean to scare you. Just amused by your choice of magazine."

Cassidy shrugged, and silently gave up looking at any and all magazines. God, did he have to pick up the girliest one in the room? "Not paying attention," he muttered, then the coffee machine chimed, and he fled to it, fumbling his mug out of the cabinet.

Malcolm, curse him, followed and fumbled his own mug—and why did that require standing so *close* and damn it, he would be wearing the yummy cologne again.

Honestly, on mornings like this, he missed waiting tables something fierce.

"I rather like these quiet mornings," Malcolm said. "Wish I could do it regularly like you." He made a face. "Pitfalls of management, alas." He smiled. Cassidy hated when he smiled. He went from handsome to *pounce* and why, oh, why, did Cassidy have to crush on his boss? It was hard enough being an office monkey, without struggling not to walk around, well, hard. "How are you doing, three months in, Cass?"

He hated when Malcolm called him that, too. The office girls had started it, and he'd tried to stop them, but there was no sense in telling a girl not to do something, he'd learned *that* raising Lindsay through her teenage years. Now everyone did it. Like they were his friends or something, even though they all ribbed him for being stuffy and straight-laced and too quiet and god, everything else.

Like they'd have really given this kind of job to the real him.

Pouring his coffee, he mumbled something about doing okay, then fled the break room and all but ran to the relative safety of his cubical. Once there, he turned on his computer and arranged his paperwork for the morning, then ignored all of it, unable to resist looking at the pamphlets and course guides for the business classes he would soon be taking. Hopefully.

After almost nine years of giving up school, giving up music, giving up...well, sometimes it had seemed like everything, though that wasn't fair.

But, business classes. An actual degree. He'd never use it to manage his own band or start up his own label... but he'd have it, and that was something, even if he had no idea what he *would* do with it beyond keeping his new job. The job it was a bloody miracle he had, given he had no college education and had only learned all he knew because he'd had no fucking choice.

Ugh, better not to think about it. He was finally out of that hell hole, so it was best to erase it from his mind. He had a good job now, in a plush little cube farm for a posh party business—or whatever it was actually called—and he would do whatever necessary to keep it.

He looked over the list of courses, the ones he'd marked. Was it stupid to be so excited and happy over something so mundane? But, he really could not wait. The money had always gone to his siblings, the house, the car, to his parents remaining debts. Now, thanks to the new job, he could do this one stupid little thing for himself.

If only his poor old computer lasted and was up to the strain of online courses. He wasn't so sure, not when it had been so bitchy about starting up that morning. Ah, well. He could just go to the library, if he had to, and eventually he'd have the money for a new computer. One step at a time.

Shoving the school stuff aside, he logged in and made himself get to work, immersing himself in numbers and checks and vendors. Around nine or so, the sounds of the office began to filter into his concentration, as those who started at eight settled down to really begin working.

He could hear Janice chatting a mile a minute at the reception desk with Jenny, her partner in crime. Steve's keys clicking away at five hundred miles a second as he typed, the girls in receiving bitching about customers, the other three guys in the whole accounting department talking about some sports game—something about a fullback. That was football, right? Eh.

Then Annie turned up her radio, muting enough of the other noise that Cassidy was able to concentrate again. Try as he might, though, he was not able to resist singing along softly—very, very softly—with the radio.

Back in his rhythm, he worked seamlessly until the jarring sound of his phone broke his concentration—and the name that came up on the screen shattered it completely. Grimacing, wondering if something was wrong that Malcolm would be calling him. Of course something was wrong. Or maybe he was getting paranoid in his old age, Cassidy thought with a roll of his eyes as he yanked the phone up. "Cassidy speaking," he said, trying to sound calm and professional, and not mildly panicked.

"Hey, Cass," Malcolm said, a smile in his voice. "Come see me."

"Okay," Cassidy replied, hanging up the phone and immediately fussing with his hair and tie and the cuffs of his pale gray shirt, grateful he'd remembered to press his slacks that morning, not that it mattered because he'd already jabbed his boss in the gut—

Disgusted with himself, Cassidy rose and left the safety of his desk, venturing through the maze of cubicles and meeting rooms to the corner office at the farthest end. Seeing that Malcolm was on the phone, he knocked lightly on the doorframe, hoping for a reprieve, but no, Malcolm was motioning for him to come in and close the door.

"How's your morning going?" Malcolm asked cheerfully as he hung up the phone, then reclined in his high-backed seat, and the sunlight spilling in from behind made him look entirely too touchable.

"Okay," Cassidy replied, anxiety growing by leaps and bounds. Getting called into the boss' office never boded well. Granted, he'd only ever had one boss before this, but he doubted that changed much from place to place. No news was good news and all that. Was he not working out? Gods, he only needed a few more years to pay off the house finally, and in six months he'd be done with the damned credit cards, and five years would see Denny through school—

If he had to go back to restaurant work, he rather thought he'd lose it again like he had on his twenty-first birthday. Only way worse. If he had to go begging for his old job... he preferred not to think about it.

"You've been with us three months and three days," Malcolm said, still smiling. "I should have done this Monday, but I got caught up in other things. I apologize."

"It's okay?" Cassidy replied, confused. "Is something wrong?" Please don't fire me, he thought.

Malcolm tilted his head, giving Cassidy a look he didn't quite follow. Concern, maybe? Except that didn't make sense. Shaking his head, Malcolm folded his hands together and rested them on the desk, leaning forward in his seat. "Not at all, though that does raise a question I've been meaning to ask. Why do you always seem so terrified? Is someone here bothering you? Do you not like the job?" His frowned deepened. "Have I done something to make you scared of me? I am deeply sorry if I have. I liked you very much in your interview, and you fit in well. I would like to see you happy here."

Cassidy barely hid a wince. "No! I'm fine, really." Even to himself, he did not sound convincing.

Obviously, he wasn't fooling Malcolm.

"Cass—whatever is wrong, you can tell me. I do want you to be happy here. You're an excellent worker, very quick to learn and improve, liked by the rest of the staff. If something is wrong, I am more than happy to work with you to fix it."

For one wild, crazy, stupid moment, Cassidy wanted to blurt everything, every last bit of it over the past eight and a half years.

Parents dead when he was only eighteen. No relatives willing to help. Even his nosy neighbor had been too intimidated to do much for them, in the end.

The piles of unexpected debt his parents had left.

Two young siblings who needed him, whom he could not bear to see go to strangers.

Giving up Four Butterflies, his dreams of music, to get a job to pay for all the things that had become his sole responsibility overnight.

Trapped in a shitty job with an evil fucking boss, who knew he was desperate, knew he could lose his only family, knew he had no choice—and so had made him do so much, too much, because if he was fired for even a day, they'd take his siblings, and they'd both known it.

Working days, nights, weekends, helping his siblings get through school, his sister into college, listening to the music of his dreams fade and fade, until it was at last gone, and all he had left was singing along with the radio and the odd night of karaoke in the city two hours away.

It had seemed like too much at times, but he'd never had a choice. Not that he blamed anyone, and it could have all gone so much worse, but he was turning twenty-seven in three weeks, and he felt much older than that. And now... now he had a new job, a chance to at least go to school himself, and he didn't want to lose it.

On top of all of that, because that wasn't enough, he also seemed to have an awful crush on his new boss. He'd gone from hating and being terrified of his last boss, to lusting after and being terrified of his new one. It would give him a headache, if he had the energy left for one.

But Malcolm definitely didn't want to hear all that. He wouldn't care, why should he? He just wanted a happy employee, because happy workers meant the business ran more smoothly.

"I'm—my last job was hell," he finally said, going with what truth he could tell. "I'm not used to a place like this. Uh—usually when the—my last boss called me into her office, it was not for any good reason."

"Ah," Malcolm said and smiled at him. "Well, I'll just have to call you in here often, for all kinds of good reasons, until you relax."

Cassidy just *knew* he was red-faced now, and he hoped to *god* it wasn't obvious what kind of dirty spin he was putting on those words. This whole crush thing really needed to stop. Wasn't twenty six too old for crushing? Wasn't that a kid thing? Damn it.

"On that note," Malcolm continued, "I did in fact call you in here for a good reason, though by now I hope you've figured that out. As I've already said, you're doing splendidly. You've also hit your three month mark, which means that your pay will increase seven percent. You have a great deal of potential and promise, so I think if you keep working hard you will go quite far. Reaching three months also means you can enroll for full benefits now; I'll email you all that you need for that."

Cassidy blinked. "Oh. That's—that's wonderful to hear. Uh, thank you."

Malcolm chuckled. "Thank you for doing so well. Certain you've no questions or concerns? I saw you're still interested in taking classes. If you need any help in that respect, do not hesitate to ask."

"Sure," Cassidy replied. "Thanks."

"No problem. Your raise will be reflected on your next paycheck, and started three days ago."

Muttering more thanks you, all but falling over in relief, Cass fled the office.

Back safe and sound in his own cube, he stared blindly at his monitor, work forgotten as it all began slowly to sink in.

A raise—and seven percent! That was enough to work with, definitely. Real benefits. Oh, man, the things he could do with the extra money. He hadn't really ever believed he would make, or get much of, a raise. He had no degree, no real office experience. He knew what he did because The Ogre at his only other job had made him do damn near all her work, including the accounting.

Maybe he could set the extra aside to save up for a new computer. Or maybe a new mattress, and finally get rid of the lumpy thing he'd been putting up with forever.

He smiled hesitantly, then more solidly, as it all began to really seem... well, real.

Still smiling, he forced himself to get back to work, eager now for his lunch break so he could call Lindsay and Denny to tell them the good news. Maybe they could go out to dinner tonight, celebrate a little bit. It was so rare *he* had a reason to celebrate anything.

Oh, they could try out that Mexican restaurant he'd been eying forever. When had he last enjoyed real Mexican? He couldn't remember. One of his birthdays? If it turned out to be good, they could go back for his birthday this year.

The thoughts widened his smile as he immersed himself in his work, thoughts of Mexican food and more money and new things playing in the back of his mind. He hummed along with Annie's radio, occasionally singing softly when he knew the words.

Until he realized, with a nasty shock, that the office was dead silent. Except for him. The back of his neck prickled, and he jerked his head up—and felt his face go hot as he saw at least six people staring at him from the entrance to his little cubicle.

"Sorry," he muttered, turning and accidentally sending his papers spilling off his desk, smacking his arm on his stapler, nearly upsetting his long-forgotten coffee mug. "I didn't mean to be loud," he said in a rush, barely separating the words. Damn it, he was normally smarter about not singing aloud *loudly*.

"No, no," Annie said. "You have a beautiful voice." She giggled and winked. "You should be a rock star."

"Ha ha," Cassidy muttered, ignoring the pain in his chest that should have stopped hurting by now because it was over and Four Butterflies had long ago turned into just Three and his life was different now and he knew better than to sing, damn it. He glanced at the clock on his computer. "Uh—lunch time—" he said, and bolted through the knot of people still looking at him, ignoring their confusion, amusement, and probably some annoyance.

Safe in the elevator, he covered his face with his hands.

Once, he remembered, he'd been loud and cocky and ready to take on the world. He'd loved attention, loved the limelight, had plans not just to take on the world, but to rule it.

Then everything had gone to hell.

Downstairs in the main lobby, he called Lindsay first. Her phone went straight to voicemail, but she was probably still at her summer job. He left her a message, telling her to text any reply. Then he did the

same with Denny, who was probably still asleep and would bother to climb out of bed in a couple more hours.

Now to eat. Damn it, he'd left his lunch upstairs in the break room. And the course stuff and his notes on who he wanted to call today. Cassidy hit his forehead with the heel of one hand. Honestly, some days he was a little too scattered and scared rabbit for his own good.

Sighing, he left the building and turned down the street he knew had a lot of cheaper places to buy food. Like hell he was going back upstairs, not until he had to, after that ridiculous panicked flee.

Mexican, he told himself. Think about the raise and going out for Mexican and other nice things. He raked a hand through his hair with a sigh and glimpsed a bit of the ink on his right arm that his sleeves normally hid. He'd have to be more careful the ink didn't show—on either arm.

He'd gotten his right arm done for his eighteenth birthday. He'd saved up half the money, and per the bargain, his parents had reluctantly given him the other half. They hadn't thought he'd manage the grades, or to save, or to do the five million evil chores, but damn it he'd done it all and done it damned well. In reward, he'd gotten a tattoo from his right shoulder all the way down his arm, stopping three inches from his wrist. That, his parents had insisted upon, so he could still 'look professional.'

Only after they were dead, had he appreciated that insistence.

When he'd turned twenty-one and had completely snapped from the responsibility, the fear, the loneliness, the confusion—when it had finally just all been too much, he'd gotten the second tattoo done, his left arm from shoulder to three inches above the wrist.

The right arm was all butterflies, in honor of his band. Well, then it had been his band. The left was just a mass of Celtic work because he'd always loved the stuff.

He could only imagine how he would appear to all his sharp, sophisticated, classy coworkers—and his boss—if they knew he was most comfortable in old jeans, wife-beater, tattoos bared, a fifth of Jack and belting out rock for all he was worth.

It just didn't compute. He knew that—and if he'd dared to be himself, they would have taken his siblings away, declared him unfit.

Christ, could he just stop sulking and dwelling? It had to stop at some point, right? Well, it would mostly get better once his birthday was over and done with. He was always at his most self-pitying right around his birthday.

School, he reminded himself. Soon, he'd start school. And they were definitely doing Mexican, damn it.

Nodding, determined, Cassidy strode into a sandwich place he liked but seldom had cause to visit, and decided he'd order his favorite meatball sub. He had a real job and it looked like he might be keeping it. That totally called for meatball subs. And a cherry soda.

*CHAPTER TWO

Cassidy rapped Denny's knuckles hard with the back of his spoon. "Hands off my guacamole."

Denny yelped and shook the wounded hand, scowling. "You are such an asshole when it comes to guacamole."

"Mine," Cassidy repeated, then narrowed his eyes and, just to annoy, asked, "Are you old enough to say 'asshole'?"

"God, shut up," Denny said, but his long-suffering tone was ruined by his grin. "Yes, I can say asshole, asshole. If you're not going to share the guac, then pass the salsa."

Cassidy obligingly passed the salsa, then went back to decimating his tortilla chips and guacamole. Mmm, they were so coming back here for his birthday. He paused in the devouring only to drain the last of his beer.

Lindsay looked at them both, laughed, and flagged down their waitress for more of everything. "I know the two of you don't go hungry, so why do you always eat like you've been starving for days?"

Not bothering to try and answer that, Cassidy simply thanked the man that brought his fresh beer and waited for more food to come. "So, now that we've discussed me to death, how's 'bout the two of you?"

Lindsay smiled. "We're fine, Cass. We're always fine, thanks to you."

"I'd be finer if I could have the car tonight," Denny said. "Promise I'll have it back for you to go to work tomorrow morning."

Cassidy lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I liked it better when I could make you be home by midnight. Why?"

"I need the car to take care of a few drug deals, rob a bank, drop off a couple of hookers, then set the principal's house on fire," Denny promptly replied. "Then maybe some old-fashioned pillaging, if there's time left over."

"Fine," Cassidy replied, "but don't call me to make your bail."

Denny grinned. "Nah, Linds owes me for that thing with the Chinese prostitute and the cop."

"It wasn't a cop, it was FBI. God, get it right," Lindsay replied.

Cassidy laughed, and absently thanked the waitress as she brought their fresh chips and all.

"Katie, Joe, and I are going to an art exhibit," Denny said after he finished shoveling a few more bites of food. "Katie was going to drive, but her muffler fell off this afternoon."

"It's fine," Cassidy replied. "So long as I get no upsetting phone calls and can get to work in the morning."

"Done and done," Denny replied. "What's for dessert?"

"You're not even done with dinner!" Lindsay said. "You've had like fifty pounds of chips and salsa, not to mention the entrees."

"So?" Cassidy and Denny chorused.

Lindsay threw up her hands in defeat and tried and failed to hide a smile. "Let's go for ice cream."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Denny said.

Cassidy agreed with a nod, and talk then turned to more mundane things—school for each of them, work the house needed, the possibilities of a proper vacation. He knew his siblings were both at the point of total independence—Lindsay well past—and he was secretly happy they did not simply take off and leave him behind. They never would abandon him totally, they were too close for that, he knew, but he dreaded anyway when their lives would eventually focus mostly on other things. What would he have left once they scattered to the winds?

He ate more chips and guacamole, eyes wandering the restaurant aimlessly—and stopped with a chip halfway to his mouth as his gaze landed on a man by the entrance. No, no, and again no.

Why, oh why, was Malcolm Osborne standing in the front of the restaurant? And why did he have to look so goddamn fucking edible? The man had been lethal enough in business dress, all prim and proper. Now... now was so much worse. Stone washed jeans that fit entirely too well, a dark blue t-shirt that fit better still and said Malcolm was no out-of-shape office monkey. Hair tousled, falling more softly around his face, giving Cassidy entirely too much idea of what he'd look like fresh from bed.

"Whoa," Lindsay said, her shocked voice snapping Cassidy from his lust-induced stupor. "I've never seen *you* undress someone with your eyes before, Cass." She giggled and glanced at Malcolm. "He is hot, though. Pretty as hell."

Cassidy went red and hissed, "I am not undressing him with my eyes or anything else. If he's in my head at all, which he's *not*, then he definitely has *clothes*. Plus he's my boss."

"*That's* your boss?" Lindsay demanded. "What was his last job? Swimsuit model?"

"Shut up," Cassidy replied.

Lindsay only giggled again. "So, does he swing your way or mine?"

"I didn't exactly ask," Cassidy replied. "Seeing as it's none of my business."

"Gay," Denny broke in. "Definitely gay."

"How can you tell?" Lindsay asked.

"I can always tell," Denny said loftily. "Oh, he's looking this way." He smiled mischievously at Cassidy.

Cassidy was going to kill them both.

"Cass," Malcolm greeted, extending a hand. "I didn't know you ate here."

"First time," Cassidy replied, shaking his hand, reluctantly letting go. "Uh—"

"So your Cass' boss?" Lindsay said, before he could get another word in. "He talks about his new job all the time; so different from when he worked for the Ogre. Are you meeting someone? Care to put up with us a bit? It's nice to meet you."

Malcolm laughed. "I just came to pick up my dinner; I usually do a couple three times a week. I doubt your brother wants to put up with his boss off the clock."

"No, please," Cassidy said, managing to sound calm and not totally stare and drool the way he wanted.

Malcolm's smile brightened, and Cassidy wondered at that, but he was distracted from his thoughts when Malcolm half-turned and called out to the host in rapid-fire Spanish.

Some discussion, possibly argument, waged for a good three minutes. Then Malcolm dropped down into the empty fourth seat at their table, smiling again. "You must be siblings of Cass. You all have the same eyes and smiles." He extended his hand to Lindsay and Denny. "Malcolm Osborne."

"Lindsay."

"Denny."

"A pleasure. Are you both students?"

"I start grad school in the summer. Denny starts college then, too. We're celebrating Cassidy's three months."

Malcolm nodded. "A worthy celebration. I'm glad you agree, Cass. I'll buy you another beer, for it."

"No, you don't—"

But even as Cassidy tried to protest, Malcolm had turned away again, once more speaking—shouting—across the room in a spate of Spanish.

"Wow," Lindsay said when he'd finished. "You're, like, totally fluent."

Malcolm looked briefly embarrassed, but then shrugged and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Yeah. My little brother runs the restaurant; he and his wife are working on buying it from her father."

"Brother?" Denny repeated.

"Me," said a smooth, softly accented voice at Cassidy's left. Cassidy looked up, utterly confused to see a man of obviously Spanish decent. Handsome, though privately he thought the man had nothing on Malcolm.

"Carlos," the man introduced himself. "I'm Malcolm's little brother. I run this place and put up with him mooching food because he is too lazy to cook. Mal, man, you did not tell me you had friends coming. Would have given him a better table, eh? Hell, I did not even know you had friends. How much you pay them?"

"Screw you," Malcolm replied. "Cassidy there is my new employee. I'm buying him a beer to celebrate surviving the joint three months."

"Oh," Carlos said with a grin. "That one."

Cassidy choked, wondering what the hell that meant.

"Don't be a dick," Malcolm retorted, lobbing a tortilla chip at him. "I haven't seen you in three weeks, and I never talk business. Quit trying to scare him and give us that beer you're still holding."

Oh. Cassidy felt relieved—or told himself he was relieved, that Malcolm was not saying anything about him to anyone. Silence was golden, yes.

Carlos sniggered and handed over the beer, then snagged an empty chair and straddled it. "Yeah, three weeks, Mal. Where you been? Hiding and sulking, no? That is bad for you, bro."

Malcolm made a face. "Shut it. Where's my food?"

"Maria is making it up special for you, it will be here soon. She is fond of you, I do not know why."

"I'm prettier than you," Malcolm said.

Lindsay giggled, and Cassidy bit his tongue. Carlos snorted. "Bro, you are prettier than pretty much everyone." He turned to stage-whisper at the others. "Did you know, he's been offered modeling contracts—"

"Shut the hell up, or I'll kill you," Malcolm replied. "Or tell your wife about that thing in Bermuda."

Carlos gave him the finger and stood up, returning the chair he'd stolen. He spoke briefly to Malcolm in Spanish, then strode off, vanishing back to wherever he'd come from.

"Sorry," Malcolm said when he'd gone. "Brothers never play nice, and Carlos is worse than most." He winked at them.

"Not that it's any of my business," Lindsay said, "but I'm damned curious."

Malcolm threw his head back and laughed. Cassidy tried not to stare, he really did, but in the end all he could do was memorize every bit of the moment, Malcolm laughing so freely and openly and without

reserve, and ball his own hands into fists to keep from doing something stupid. Malcolm subsided as a woman appeared and kissed his cheek after setting down a large plate of spicy-smelling food.

"It's me, Carlos, and Antoine," he said after a couple of bites. We were all foster kids, and our foster mother was crazy enough to keep the three of us permanently.

Denny and Lindsay beamed, while Cassidy could only stare. He could not reconcile the easy, casual, beautiful man before him with his button-down if nice boss, or a kid brought up in the foster system. It was simply breathtaking.

"Cass raised us," Lindsay said.

"No—"

"After our parents were killed in a car accident," Denny added. "He was only eighteen, but he took it all on."

Malcolm's brows went up. "I see," he said quietly, and something in his brown eyes shifted, softened.

Cassidy could feel his face burning, and fussed with his pint glass. "It's not—"

"If you even try to say it's not a big deal," Lindsay said with a glare, "you will be wearing your precious guacamole."

"Fine," Cassidy retorted, making a face. "I won't say it—but you can't stop me thinking it."

Lindsay stuck her tongue out at him and stole the guacamole.

Cassidy pouted, knowing full well he was being punished.

Malcolm's laughter drew him again, this time because there was something different about it. Like how his eyes had gone all funny the moment before. Cassidy didn't know what to make of any of it.

"Oh, shit," Denny exclaimed suddenly, moving so quickly he nearly knocked over his soda. "I've got to go! They're going to kill me if—"

Cassidy rolled his eyes and held out the car keys. "Go, before the world ends. Call me if you're going to be late or something."

"Totally," Denny replied, ruffled Cassidy's hair just to aggravate, then bolted.

"Hey!" Lindsay bellowed after him. "You're giving me a ride back to my place!" She kissed Cassidy's cheek, threw money on the table, then rose. "Our treat. See you later, Cass." She turned briefly to Malcolm. "Don't let him do something stupid, like try to pay anyway. Thanks for being smart enough to hire him and keep him. See you again sometime!"

Then she was gone, still shouting after Denny, leaving Cassidy trying to decide between fratricide and suicide.

"Your siblings adore you," Malcolm said.

Cassidy could only nod and go for his beer. "Your brother seems equally fond."

Malcolm rolled his eyes, but smiled. "He used to be big trouble. Marriage and business is good for him. Want another beer?"

Yes, but Cassidy shook his head. "I'm pretty sure there's a rule about having four beers on a Thursday."

Snickering, Malcolm signaled a waiter. "Yeah—make it five."

Despite himself, Cassidy smiled.

Malcolm smiled back. "It's good to see you relax."

Cassidy froze, then shrugged and raked a hand through his hair.

"Hmm, and now I've tensed you up again," Malcolm said with a sigh. "I seem to do that."

"That is because you talk too much," Carlos said suddenly, appearing abruptly at Malcolm's elbow. He set their fresh beers on the table. He said something in Spanish.

Whatever it was he said, it put a disgruntled look on Malcolm's face, and the expression made Cassidy burst out laughing.

"See?" Carlos said smugly. "I make fun of you, everyone laughs."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm grouched. "Let's get Maria out here, see how you like being made fun of, huh?"

Carlos smirked—and his reply was drowned out by the sudden sharp ringing of a cell phone.

"Damn it," Malcolm said and fumbled a cell phone out of his pocket.

Carlos scowled, and the Spanish resumed—this time it was faster than ever, angry, loud, and complete with hand motions and almost terrifying expressions.

Malcolm shot it all right back, just as quick and vicious—then abruptly stood and strode from the restaurant, door slamming shut behind him.

A few final mutters, shooting the vanished Malcolm a disgusted look, Carlos heaved a sigh and said, "Sorry, amigo. Mal is a bit stupid when it comes to certain things. But, I will not trouble you, eh? I am certain you've had enough for one night."

Cassidy could only nod and stifle his own sigh as he looked around the table. The remains of dinner were scattered everywhere, silverware and napkins thrown hastily every which way. Well, how had he expected the night to end? Asking his fucking boss to go for ice cream with him, since his siblings hadn't?

He made a face and drained his beer. "What's the damage for the meal?"

"On the house," Carlos replied, and clapped him on the shoulder. "No one is allowed to argue with me. You see how well it went for Mal, eh? Enjoy the rest of your night."

Though Cassidy continued to try and argue, because the meal wasn't cheap, he only found himself outside, coat in hand, sighing into the cool night air. Alone and, he realized with a groan, no car. No doubt Linds and Denny had thought he'd get a ride from Malcolm, the bastard schemers. Great. His damned dinner, and he was ditched to walk home alone.

Sighing again, he shrugged on his jacket and cut across the parking lot, singing as he reached the road and began to walk home. He was halfway through an old favorite, a song he'd written years ago and improved here and there, when something black and sleek and sexy pulled up alongside him, an expensive stretch of shadow beneath an orange-yellow streetlamp.

The passenger window rolled down, and Malcolm leaned over to speak to him. "Sorry about earlier. Want a ride?"

Cassidy thought about saying no, because he really shouldn't say yes—but he didn't want to fucking walk home, and when the hell else would he ever get a chance to ride in a car like this, with a man like this? "Sure."

Opening the door, he slid down into the smooth black leather interior and immediately regretted his impulse. Sealed away in the car, washed in the smells of leather, man, some spicy cologne, traces of good Mexican food lingering, awesome music on an awesome sound system, and Malcolm so temptingly close...

He was grateful it was dark enough in the car to hide how much he was liking the situation. "Uh—is everything okay?"

"It's fine. Sorry I bolted like that, and for Carlos and me arguing like that in front of you. He means well, but..." He shrugged. "I am sorry I left. It was fun seeing you outside of work, relaxed." He shrugged again. "Lester Avenue, right?" He asked as he pulled away from the curb and drove down the street.

"What?" Cassidy asked, startled. "Yes. 547."

Malcolm laughed softly, little more than a play of shadow and light as they drove along dark streets, occasionally passing beneath a streetlight. "I remember it from your resume."

"Ah," Cassidy replied, trying not to cringe. His resume had been pathetic. He still could not believe Malcolm had hired him and was keeping him. That totally did not sound right, even in his head. Too bad it sounded so *nice*. Argh. Shut up, self. "You, uh, have a sweet ride."

He didn't need to see the grin; he could hear it in Malcolm's voice. "Maserati Grand Turismo," Malcolm said, and rattled off all kinds of things that Cassidy probably should have understood, but totally didn't. "I bought her mostly to piss my brothers off, but I admit I love her."

Cassidy could not think of a single thing to say to that. Carlos had paid for his meal without hesitation or good reason. Now his boss, a damned Accounts Manager, was driving him home in a car that had to have at least four and possibly five zeroes involved in its purchase. And he'd apparently bought the car mostly as a jab at his brothers.

Why did he seem to spend every waking moment of his life feeling in over his head? He'd always thought he'd be a world famous rock star by this point in his life, with flashy cars and a beautiful house, a string of gorgeous boyfriends. A yacht, a penthouse—he'd planned to own at least half the world, and have the other half simply waiting for him to bother.

Now, it all seemed so stupid and distant, the daydreams of an ignorant eighteen year old.

But it was still hard to take, seeing his crush put even further out of his reach. Bad enough Malcolm was his boss. Clearly he was a hell of a lot more than that; Cassidy could not even begin to imagine.

"Good music, too," he said at last, unable to come up with anything else no matter how hard he tried.

"Mmm," Malcolm agreed. "I have a weakness for good music."

What about washed up, never been rock stars, Cassidy thought wistfully. Then he reminded himself how stupid it was to have a childish crush on his wealthy boss, and how far past stupid it would be to act on that crush. Never mind that, no matter what Denny said, Malcolm could be and probably was straight.

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "With whatever was wrong before?"

Malcolm laughed in the dark, but it was a bitter, tired sound. "Yeah. Hopefully. It's over, anyway." He pulled to a stop in front of Cassidy's house. "Thanks for letting me eat dinner with you. I liked your family. Did you really raise them yourself, since eighteen?"

Cassidy nodded. "Of course."

"Indeed," Malcolm said, and his hand shifted, as though he were going to reach out and touch. But then it stilled and relaxed again. "You obviously did well by them."

"Thanks. Uh—tell your brother thanks for dinner. He didn't have to pay for it."

Malcolm blinked, then smiled slow and easy. "Did he? I see. Trust me, it was no big deal." There was a pause, then he combed a hand through his hair and said, "I was—"

The sudden blinding glare from headlights cut him off, and Malcolm instead only sighed. "If I'm not mistaken, that's your sister. I should let you go, anyway. See you at work tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride."

"Any time," Malcolm said.

Biting back what he would like to say to that, Cassidy only nodded again and reluctantly opened the door, sliding out of the car. "Good night," he said softly, before closing the door.

Malcolm drove off.

"Oh. My. God," Lindsay said as she came flying out of her own car. "Did he just seriously drive away in that car? That was your boss, right? Did you guys have fun in that sweet little number?" she asked, a definite hint of leer in her voice.

Cassidy grimaced, and strode to the house. "No. He's my boss. He's straight. He's way out of my league. And, oh yeah, he's my *boss*."

"I agree he's your boss, but fuck this out of your league shit, and he's about as straight as you, Cassie. Denny totally called that one, like always."

"How did we come to this conclusion?" Cassidy asked with another sigh, as he unlocked the door, flipped on the entry hall light, and kicked off his shoes.

"Cass, men only think they're being subtle when they're checking someone out. If you two had been eye fucking one another any harder, you would have been naked on that table."

Cassidy choked and whipped around. "Where in the *hell* did you learn language like that?"

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "Boys. I'm going to bed, I've got to run errands in the morning, and I want to get an early start. You should totally flirt with him, cause he was sure as hell flirting with you, and think of all the dirty thing you could do in that—"

Covering his ears with his hands, Cassidy fled upstairs. He wasn't certain what was worse—that his sister would talk like that, never mind about him, or that he liked all the delightful, dirty ideas she was putting in his head.

Argh. Work tomorrow was going to be a living hell. He was so never going to that damned restaurant again.

*CHAPTER THREE

Malcolm pointedly ignored the sniggering that came from above. When it only got worse, he finally cracked open his good eye to glare at the golden, freckled face smirking down at him. "Go away."

"My office," Antoine replied.

Grunting in dissatisfaction over this arguable fact, Malcolm sat up and said, "Then give me something to drink."

"What happened? Carlos said you got a call from Dickhead and flounced off last night."

Malcolm scowled. "I did not fucking *flounce off*. Carlos was being a dick, and it was bad enough we were arguing in front of Cass, so I left."

Antoine handed him a glass of whiskey. "Cass? That must be the pretty boy Carlos mentioned. Prettier than you?"

"Shut up," Malcolm replied and tossed the whiskey back. "Cass is my new accounts payable guy. He reached his three months yesterday and was out celebrating with his family last night at Carlos'. I ran into him, they let me eat with them. Then Bill called. But, I gave Cass a ride home later."

"Then you went to see Dickhead, I take it?" Antoine asked. "It's that or you picked a fight in a bar again."

"Fuck you. I haven't done random bar fights since college and you know it. I'm too old for that shit. God, why am I related to assholes?"

"Because you're an asshole too," Antoine retorted, refreshing his whiskey then sitting down next to him on the brown leather sofa taking up one corner of Antoine's massive office. "So why did you go to see Dickhead?"

Malcolm grimaced, preferring not to think about it and glanced down at his whiskey. "To tell him that when I said it was over, I meant it, and to stop fucking bothering me. I had his number finally blocked this morning."

Antoine's brows shot up. "You? Tell a bad choice in boyfriend to go to hell all by yourself? Without us doing it for you?"

"Fuck you," Malcolm said again, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Even I only have so much masochism in me for a boyfriend who thinks punching me is an acceptable end to an argument—not to mention I caught him with his hand on another's guy dick. I did dump him almost a month ago, you know. He just keeps coming back like a fucking bad penny."

Antoine sneered. "Naturally. You're rich, well-connected, and too fucking pretty for your own good, Mal."

"God, shut *up*. I came here to rest and recover, not listen to your yammering."

"So why did he punch you?"

"Because I tried to rip his nuts off after he tried to go for my car."

Antoine whistled. "The Maserati? Guess Dickhead did have a death wish. So what made you finally drop him? I figured it was all your usual half-assed attempts. Find a new bad boy to make you miserable?"

"Fuck. You," Malcolm said through his teeth. "I do not like bad boys. They just always turn out that way."

"Uh huh. Pull the other. You don't like your men unless they're at least eighty percent bad boy."

Malcolm flipped him off. "Flavor, I like bad boy flavor. I completely would not give a fuck if it was artificial flavoring. Believe me, I'd be okay with that."

Antoine laughed. "Good luck with that. I swore Carlos said you were making eyes at Mr. New Accounts Payable."

"Jesus, what are you two, gossipy old women? Stop talking about my goddamn love life." But he smiled at thoughts of Cassidy. "He's definitely easy on the eyes." So definitely, the way that soft-looking black hair was trying so hard to show its curls. Were they loose, floppy curls? Tight little corkscrews? Somewhere in between? Cass would look even better with his hair grown out a bit. Combined with those sad blue eyes... "He's totally jumpy around me, though, probably all the more after last night." He sighed. "I think full on real me would give him a heart attack. He doesn't even seem to own anything with short sleeves." He shook his head and tossed back the whiskey he still held.

"A straight laced, pretty little office boy sounds like good medicine for you," Antoine said. "One of these days, you're going to pick a bad boy who will leave you dead. Go with the office boy."

"Yes, mother," Malcolm sneered. "I don't need you or anyone else telling me who and how to date. Nor am I touching a fucking employee. Don't you read the employee handbook?"

Antoine snorted. "Hardly. Anyway, what are you worried about? I think you can afford to lose a job or six, Mr. Heiress."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "That's Mr. Heir, jackass."

"Too pretty," Antoine replied. "Anyway, your story is too Lifetime or Hallmark for an heir. You'll always be our little Heiress."

Malcolm shoved him off the couch, then stretched out on it again. "Don't make me brag about my car, Mr. My Job Pays More But I Still Can't Afford A Sweet Ride and Penthouse."

"And like six other houses," Antoine said. "You're such a little bitch. You seriously need a boyfriend who will take you down about fifteen notches."

That, Malcolm did not dignify with a reply. Instead, he only asked, "So can we order Thai for lunch?"

"You're paying," Antoine replied. "So are you hiding in my office like a pussy all day? Why bother coming in at all? You probably have like two hundred hours of sick time."

"It caps at one eight for upper management," Malcolm said. "I had shit to do, so I grabbed my laptop, sent an email that I'd be in meetings all day, and came here."

"To bother me."

"To bother you."

Antoine shook his head, then pushed a button on his phone, and asked his secretary to please order Thai for himself and his lazy ass brother.

"I'm lazy?" Malcolm challenged. "It's one thirty and you're just rolling into work. Don't accuse me of being lazy."

"I refuse to respond to the asinine comments of a Head Manager hiding in the office of the Chief Creative Officer in order to lick his wounds and preserve the last little shred of his dignity. Speaking of Chief, they're going to start trying to push you into the CFO position again. Baldwin is probably going to retire end of the fiscal year."

"Good for them," Malcolm replied. "I like being Head Manager of Accounting. I like ruling my little Land of Cubes and Numbers. Tell them to get someone who likes being pretentious and snotty and lazy like you, they want a new CFO so bad. I'm not it."

"You are such a little bitch."

"You already said that, and it takes one to know one."

Antoine rolled his eyes and changed the subject. "I'm going to Bridgeton tonight. Wally said he's heard repeated rumors of a sweet little number who pops in and out of the various karaoke spots, he's hoping to hear him and see if he's worth anything. Looks like the devil, sings like an angel, so they say."

"God, where do you get these lines?" Malcolm demanded. "The Book of Incredibly Stupid Clichés?"

"Yes," Antoine replied. "And, speaking of music, we've decided on the band for the annual company charity picnic."

"Oh?" Malcolm said, suddenly more interested in life than he had been until that point. "Someone halfway decent this time, I hope."

"No one I know, but I liked their sound when their stuff was played for me. A group called 'One Butterfly Missing.' Odd, even as band names go, but I'm sure I've heard weirder. Know them?"

Malcolm frowned thoughtfully. "Yeah. They've an awesome sound, but they can't keep lead singers for shit. They run through singers they way you run through lovers."

"At least mine don't punch me. Mine also will still talk to me when we pass each other on the streets. Also, cops don't recognize me on sight."

That deserved to be ignored, so Malcolm did so.

"Anyway," Antoine said pointedly, "you approve the band?"

"Not mine to approve," Malcolm replied. "You're the CCO. Do you approve?"

Antoine rolled his eyes. "Obviously I do, but I don't want to spend the whole damned time listening to you bitch about them if they're not up to your lofty standards."

"They'd be better if they could keep a singer, but their latest isn't bad. What other entertainments do you have planned for this year's charity picnic?"

Picnic being a grand understatement of what was really a ridiculously large barbeque and street festival all rolled together, hosted by the company and meant to raise money to support the arts in schools across the country—especially music. They rented out the entire west end park and hosted the 'picnic' from sunup to sundown.

"I have no clue," Antoine said. "Ask Steve." Steve being Malcolm's equivalent in the Creative department.

Malcolm sighed softly and lifted his laptop case from the floor without bothering to sit up properly. Rifling through it, he pulled out his bottle of aspirin and popped three of them.

He dropped the bag back onto the floor with another sigh, dropping his arm over his face to hide any grimace of pain he could not entirely keep back.

Thankfully, the bruise was livid and obvious enough that Antoine seemed to accept it as the only damage done. So long as Malcolm kept playing lazy and grouchy, no one would ask about further injuries. Christ, he hurt, from head to toe and back again.

He was also glad his brothers never slumped around the east end, because otherwise they'd have heard of a barroom brawl that had started out a lover's quarrel—ex-lover's quarrel—and ended up being one guy and a Louisville slugger against four guys. If they'd even breathed on his fucking car, his brothers would be arranging for his lawyer to get him out on bail right now.

Goddamn, he just wanted to be home in bed. He'd come in for totally stupid reasons that hadn't worked anyway, because as dumb as it was he just didn't want Cassidy to see him sporting a black eye and looking more than a little run down. Ugh, he really was too old for this shit. So why did it keep finding him?

If he had to be honest, half the reason he'd gone to pick a fight with Bill the Cheating Asshole Bass Player, was because finding the nearest flat surface and fucking Cassidy through it was not an option.

Christ, he really needed to find a better hobby than dating drama-whore bad boys. It chafed that his brothers were right, but there was little point in denying the obvious. He was too old to keep doing this shit, though he couldn't seem to make himself stop trying—"

"Malcolm!"

"What?"

"The hell is wrong with you? I've asked you the same fucking question like five fucking times."

"Well, I'm listening now, so ask it a sixth."

"Karaoke tonight, in Bridgeton. You should come with us. Get your mind off your wounds and your bad taste in men."

"Mm, no," Malcolm replied. "Where's my lunch?"

Just as he finished asking the question, and before Antoine could form a suitably scathing reply, a knock at the door ended the matter. The door opened, admitting their usual delivery guy from the Thai place three blocks from the office building. His hands were piled with delicious smelling boxes and bags.

"Money?" Antoine asked.

"Bag," Malcolm said, motioning lazily and not bothering to get up himself.

"Just so we're clear, you're a lazy little bitch."

"Yeah, but I'm extra super pretty, so it's allowed."

Thankfully, Antoine did not react to that with violence, only silence, as he grabbed Malcolm's bag, fished out his wallet, and paid for the food.

Delivery man paid and gone, Malcolm finally dragged himself into a sitting position and immediately set to work devouring the food. He'd had nothing but water, aspirin, and whiskey since waking up that morning. Food was definitely an improvement on the day.

"Just what time did you face plant on your bed?" Antoine asked, watching him while eating his own food at a more decorous pace.

"Three?" Malcolm posed, suspecting it was more like five. Thirty one was definitely too old for the bullshit he kept getting into, but he couldn't stomach the idea of giving up. It was just too depressing. "Doesn't matter. I'm here, and sooner than you I might add. I got some work done. So long as I lay low the entire weekend, I'll be pretty and right as rain again on Monday."

Antoine snorted. "Pathetic as it is, you look pretty even when you're banged up. I'm not certain you could ever look ugly, you little bastard. Makes me wonder why you always go—"

"God, shut up," Malcolm cut him off, exasperated. "I came here to rest and recover, not get nagged to death. If I'd wanted a thorough nagging, I'd have gone to mother or Carlos."

"Okay, okay," Antoine said, holding his hands up in defeat. "I just—fuck, Mal, it's no fun at all seeing you come in with black eyes and looking exhausted and broken down, over and over and over again." He dropped his gaze to his food, frowning awkwardly at his Pad Thai, voice gruff. "We just want to see you happy."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm said, tone just as gruff and awkward. "One day, I'll find my artificially flavored bad boy, and we'll all sleep better." His mind, treacherous bastard that it was, immediately flitted to Cassidy.

He almost laughed, trying to picture it. Proper, anxious—terrified—red faced Cassidy dolled up as a pseudo bad boy, trying to talk and walk it. The idea was absurd, but just to annoy him, his mind went to dinner. To the way Cassidy had knocked back pint after pint of good Mexican beer. He'd downed it easily, like an enthusiast, a regular—not a good little office boy who drank piss or water instead of real beer.

A stupid think to latch onto, but it had stuck. Or maybe he'd just liked watching him drink it, watching that long throat, the slender fingers...

Turning from that line of distracting thought, he focused on the other reasons Cassidy was a bad idea. No one forced to turn into an adult overnight when he was only eighteen did it by being a bad boy. No, a kid that young, to keep and raise his siblings... and to always be so tense and petrified... that was definitely a straight arrow, walk the line, tow the line, bad boys are bad news type.

Which meant it really was for the best the sister had shown up before Malcolm had managed to ask if Cassidy wanted to see a band with him some time. He really needed to remember to keep it in his pants, not least of all because Cassidy wasn't his type at all. No, that was the least important reason.

Malcolm might have wound up inheriting millions from a long lost relative, and did his job to stave off boredom and such, but Cassidy obviously *needed* the job. It sounded like his last—and only other—job had been a fucking nightmare. Malcolm wasn't asshole enough to cost Cassidy his job just for a fuck or three.

Though, he bet Cassidy would be a hell of a lay once all that proper was stripped away.

"So, you're just going to go home and sulk tonight?"

"Yes," Malcolm replied in his most petulant tone. "Me, a tub of ice cream, and something incredibly violent and hot on my ridiculously large flat screen that costs more than you pay in rent."

"I really hate you . Also, you're the world's biggest baby."

"You have no room to talk." Finished wolfing down his food, he stretched out on the sofa again, burying his face in one of the throw pillows. "Cancel the rest of your appointments for today, so I can take a nap."

Antoine laughed, even as he rolled his eyes. "I don't do meetings here."

"Wise decision."

"So when are you going to drag your sorry ass home?"

"I have no idea. Trying to make it to end of day, but we'll see."

"Ah," Antoine replied, and set to work devouring all of the untouched sweet rice and mango. "Do you need a ride?"

"No," Malcolm cut in, giving him a withering look.

"Okay, okay," Antoine muttered.

On his desk, Antoine's phone buzzed. Then his secretary's smooth, efficient voice came over the line. "Mr. Osborne, Mr. Carlos is here."

Barely had she finished speaking, when the door flew open and then immediately slammed shut again behind him. "You!" he said to Malcolm. "I might have known you'd be hiding here."

"I didn't do it," Malcolm said, lifting his head briefly to offer the protest. He let it drop again, having a sinking feeling that he was busted.

Carlos snorted. "Oh, really? So someone else in a black Maserati took a bat to four guys outside of Pete's last night?"

"What!" Antoine demanded, shouting the word.

"Fuck," Malcolm said, and set up. He scowled at Carlos. "How the hell did you find out?"

Carlos looked as though he'd like nothing more than to swing a few punches of his own. "One of my waiters lives around there, saw your car on his way home last night. His father was at the bar, told the whole tale to him this morning. I heard it when he came in for his shift an hour ago. What the hell is wrong with you, man?"

Malcolm blew out a frustrated breath. "What the hell did you expect me to do? Let Dickhead and the Saggy Balls trash my car?" Never mind that, once certain he had nowhere to run, Bill would have gotten much, much nastier. The ones before Bill had been bad choices, though they'd started well enough, but Bill... either Malcolm was getting senile way to early in life, or he had a death wish like his brothers kept claiming.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Antoine demanded "Do you really want us to get a call from the hospital or the morgue someday? When the fuck are you going to stop all this shit and settle down?"

Malcolm snapped, jerking to his feet, snatching up car keys and the wallet Antoine had left out, and to hell with the rest of his crap. "What the fuck do you think I'm always trying to goddamn do?" he snarled, then stormed from the office, shoving Carlos out of the way hard when he tried to block the door.

Outside, he went for the executive elevator, taking it straight to the top level of the parking garage. Generally, he didn't drive his baby to work—too flashy, and he didn't want anyone asking how the hell he afforded it. But she was a beauty, and driving her made him feel better when nothing else did, damn it.

Except today, when all he could remember was the way Cassidy had looked in it, neat and proper, begging to be dirtied. Christ, he really needed to get whatever this was out of his system; lust for an employee and someone totally not his style was going to get old fast, especially when he couldn't do anything about it.

He never let anyone besides his brothers and a couple of others in his car. Cassidy, though... he'd felt like an ass just running out like that, leaving him all alone at his own damned celebration. Anyone who thought three months at a cube farm job worth celebrating deserved a damned fine celebration. Never mind he'd been walking home, Christ.

Malcolm sighed as he pulled out of the parking garage and began the slow and tedious process of getting through downtown traffic.

Why, oh why, had he gone and opened his mouth? His temper was going to kill him long before an ex-boyfriend managed it. But, what he'd said was true. All he ever was looking for was a settle down forever type of boyfriend. He just didn't want Carlos' white picket fence version of forever. He wanted his own brand—someone to see every day, every night, hit the bars and the bands with. Someone on whom he could spend his stupid ridiculous amounts of money.

Someone who gave him something better to do with his life than play Head Office Monkey simply because he'd get bored or do something insanely stupid otherwise.

Sometimes—all the time—he still couldn't believe it had happened. He didn't remember his parents. He'd only been two at the time, when they'd gone sailing one night and gotten snarled in a storm, going overboard and drowning.

No one had stepped forward to claim him. They'd tried to find his one remaining relative, a world traveling uncle whom no one had seen or heard from in nearly a decade.

Finally, they'd given up and he'd gone forever into the system, shuffled around until he'd landed at Annie's house, arriving alongside two other boys, one younger, one older.

The rest, as the saying went, was history.

Until shortly after his sixteenth birthday, when the long lost Uncle had turned up from seeming nowhere. True to his brother's jibes, Uncle Randy had been straight from some mushy made for TV movie—the kind they'd mocked growing up, unless their mother was in the room enjoying it.

Except the mushy movie had ended with his Uncle dead of cancer after just three years of getting to know his nephew and leaving that nephew hundreds of millions of dollars in money, property, stocks... Malcolm hadn't known what to do with it all; he still didn't know.

He spent it on family, where they let him, but for whatever crazy ass reason they mostly didn't let him—even when he bought flashy cars to annoy the fuck out of them.

His uncle had died alone, save for a nephew he barely knew and tons of money. He hadn't even been sixty.

Carlos was happy with his white picket fence life. Antoine liked being a player. Even their mom was happy remembering the husband with whom she'd been so happy. Malcolm was thirty-one. Call him paranoid, but it was starting to look like he wasn't meant for happily ever after. He seemed to royally suck at obtaining it.

Maybe he should take his money and travel like his Uncle. Money didn't buy happiness, but it could buy distraction. He could follow his favorite bands around. In a private jet. He could afford one of those, if he didn't already own one, at that.

Sneering at himself, Malcolm finally broke free of downtown traffic, restraining an urge to go as fast as he possibly could, because the last thing his day needed was a speeding ticket.

*CHAPTER FOUR

Home again, home again, jiggety jig, Malcolm thought, yawning as he closed and locked his front door, then dropped his keys and wallet on the entryway table. Then he kicked off his shoes and padded into the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of beer from the fridge and pulling down a bottle of aspirin from a small cabinet. Popping three of them, he took a swallow of beer, threw the cap in the trash, then ambled slowly from kitchen to living room.

Despite several days of airing, it still smelled of new everything—paint, wood, furniture, carpet, plants. Bill was lucky Malcolm hadn't called the fucking cops, after their last big blow out. He'd thought it their final, until the bar last night. Ugh. He was damned lucky his brothers seldom came to his penthouse to see him. They would have blown a gasket to see the wreckage.

The room looked good, though. Sick of the whole fucking thing and the too many sour memories the room brought now, he'd ordered the whole redone top to bottom. Now, with the wood and the colors and the daylight spilling in the floor to ceiling windows, he felt like he was sitting in the middle of a sunrise or something. He'd been leery when the designer had suggested it, but too apathetic to do anything but agree anyway. It seemed apathy could occasionally be good for something.

Draining his beer, he flopped down on his brand new leather sofa and almost immediately dropped off to sleep.

When he woke, it was dark, save for the neon and fluorescent glow of the city nightlife. He glanced across the room at the display on his DVD player. Seven thirty. The night was young yet.

He sat up with a groggy yawn, groaning as he stretched out stiff, sore muscles. Beyond a need for food and shower, he felt a thousand times better. Amazing what being dead for a few hours could achieve. Standing, stretching some more and raking a hand roughly back and forth through his hair, he padded across the living room and down the hall to the master suite all the way at the end.

There, he stripped off his clothes and made straight for the bathroom. In the shower, he turned the water to just short of scalding then cleaned himself with a vengeance, not stopping 'til he was red and well boiled and feeling more like himself.

Stepping out of the shower, he snagged one of the fluffy black towels and stepped carefully across black linoleum back into his gray and green bedroom. Like the living room, he'd had the bedroom redone a bit—in this case, however, he'd only bought a new bed and changed the color scheme a bit. He wanted no reminders whatsoever of Dickhead.

Throwing the towel into the heap of clothes earlier discarded, he walked to his closet and dresser and pondered what he was going to do the rest of the night. Lay low, he'd said. He really didn't fucking feel like laying low. The black eye was already doing a bit better; if he kept to the tamer bars in Bridgeton no one would bother him—and Antoine wouldn't find him, since he was trolling with Wallace for a songbird and so Malcolm knew which bars to avoid.

He didn't want to go anywhere near those bars anyway. No, tonight he just wanted somewhere nice and quiet. A bar where they would take one look at his black eye and laugh, not caring in the slightest so long as he didn't bring the trouble with him.

Good beer, maybe something pretty to look at—yeah, that was the ticket. Alcohol and eye candy. His mind turned to Cassidy then, the dark curls and sad eyes, but he firmly put that crazy-ass notion aside. Cassidy would take one look at him and run screaming for the hills.

Hell, someone like Cassidy probably had a pretty little girl making eyes at him and Cassidy all oblivious. He seemed the oblivious sort—certainly he hadn't noticed the time or twelve Malcolm had checked him out.

Shaking his head, dislodging dirty thoughts—for the moment, at least—he pulled on an old, well-fitting pair of jeans and a tight black t-shirt sporting the name of an old, favorite band in antiqued-looking flat gold script across the chest.

Then he strode back to the bathroom to put in his contacts before he finished getting dressed, stamping finally into an, trusty pair of boots and pulling his favorite leather jacket from the closet.

Back in the living room, he picked up the phone and punched zero for the main desk. "Jerry, hey. Who's in tonight? Yeah? Then have Brian bring a car around. Bridgeton. All night. That's fine. Thanks, man." Hanging up, Malcolm double checked he had all he needed for the night—wallet, keys, cash, cell, all accounted for. Shrugging into his jacket, he locked the door behind him and took the penthouse elevator downstairs.

A glance at his phone showed his brothers had been trying to call him. Screw them. At least they hadn't yet dragged mom into it—he'd fucking kill them if he did.

Downstairs in the lobby, a man with pale blonde hair and gray eyes stood waiting patiently in the informal slacks and polo uniform of the building. "Mr. Malcolm," he greeted, grinning. "Partying down tonight, sir?" He motioned to the black eye with a slight nod. "Aiming for a matching shiner?"

"God, I hope not," Malcolm replied with a laugh. "One shiner is enough for me. Know Red Jim's?"

"Yessir," Brian said, snapping a playful salute, before turning sharply on his heel and leading the way outside to the waiting car.

Settled in the back, music with a heavy bass rolling through the car, Malcolm let out a soft sigh. He might not be particularly happy with life, but he'd take these little snatches of contentment where he found them.

Bridgeton was two hours away, not worth the haul except on the odd weekend—but it was a good place to get away, to unwind in a way he couldn't at the bars back home.

Some nights, he went for live music and whiskey. Other nights, it was shots of vodka and dancing with something in tight leather. Sometimes, though, he just wanted a quiet little dive with good beer and the odd game of pool while he admired something pretty.

The two hours passed easily, mostly because Brian was good at his job. He was always worth the money Malcolm spent to be carted around like a spoiled rich brat. "No idea when I'll reappear," he said as he climbed out of the car, not spoiled brat enough to expect Brian to open and close doors for him. "Do as you like until I text or call."

"Sure, Mr. Malcolm. Have fun."

"Thanks. Later." Closing the door, he strode into Red Jim's and slid onto his usual barstool, immediately relaxing in the rundown comfort of a familiar dive. The bartender nodded in greeting, and after a moment brought over his favorite beer and shot of whiskey.

Malcolm smiled and nodded. "Thanks."

"Sure, man. You look like you had fun last night," the bartender said, vastly amused as he took in the black eye. "I hope you won."

"With the help of my Louisville slugger," Malcolm replied. "No trouble should be following me, though."

The bartender laughed. "I doubt trouble is able to stand right now, knowing you. Speaking of trouble, did you bring that sweet ride of yours tonight? I'd like to know ahead of time."

Malcolm grimaced, and tossed back the shot of whiskey. "No. How's life?"

"It's good. Rick and Phil are in, if you're looking to play a few games."

"Cool. Thanks." Malcolm threw some money down for the drinks, finished his beer and ordered another, then stood and ambled to the back right corner of the bar, where a battered old pool table was situated. Guys were scattered around it, some watching with interest, some watching with boredom, others not really paying any attention at all.

The two men playing nodded at him in greeting, and Malcolm returned it as he selected his own cue and waited for their current game to finish. Games here were always casual and generally any betting was for who bought drinks.

When a new game started and his turn came up, he picked his shot and lined it up—then immediately scratched as something across the room caught his eye. The other guys ribbed him for the fuck up, and he took it in absent good grace, tossing out a comment about obviously needing more beer.

Retreating to said beer, he scoped the eye candy across the room as surreptitiously as he could manage. He couldn't see the man's face, but the rest of the package was damned fine. A plain, tight black t-shirt hugged the slender frame, the short sleeves of it allowing the arms to show to perfection. They were inked, all the way down, stopping a couple inches or so above the wrists. Did they go all the way up to his shoulders? Down his chest and or back? The ink was damned impressive, even at a distance. He would swear the one arm was covered entirely in butterflies. That was definitely nothing he'd seen before.

There were rings on his fingers, and two more hung from a silver chain around the man's neck. Interesting. Wedding rings? They always seemed to be straight, such a pity. A flat cap was pulled down

low on his brow, further shadowing his face in the dimly lit bar. A heavy leather band circled one wrist, a thin chain on the other.

He was talking to another man, occasionally making gesture with his hands, or shaking his head, laughing. Were they together? But no, there were the rings around his neck...but that could be anything, really.

Malcolm wanted. At the very least, he wanted to get closer, see what his chances were, if any. The man, even sitting and mostly still, had that laid back, don't fuck with me ease that so drew him. It was the sort of manner that came from people who knew they had nothing to fear and didn't need to brag about it.

The sound of his name being called in exasperated tones snapped him back to attention, and he realized he'd been staring at hottie even longer than he'd thought. Shaking himself, he bent to the game and managed a few shots before finally missing one.

He was going to lose the game, but couldn't really bring himself to care. Stepping aside to give Rick room, he glanced back toward the table where hottie had been sitting.

Only to see hottie was gone.

He felt unaccountably disappointed and then irritated. One hottie had gone, but another would show up—and, he reminded himself, he had only come to look anyway. Temptation to touch was best to stay far away from.

But, it still irritated him.

He grimaced and put all his attention on the game, nursing a fresh beer after he lost. Rick joined him, snickering. "Don't scowl too much man. Everyone and anyone so inclined," he indicated Malcolm and himself, meaning the gay men in the bar, "has tried and failed to score with tattoos."

"Huh?"

"The pretty boy with the tats, man. You were staring so hard, everyone felt that gaze. Have you never seen him before?"

Malcolm shook his head, and took another swallow of beer. How the fuck had he missed him? "Does he come here often?"

"No, which is probably why. He comes once every third blue moon. We just all remember him. For the tats, or the blue balls he leaves us with," Rick replied ruefully. "Pretty as fuck and an ass to die for. Pretty certain he swings our way, but he never wants to hook up."

"Maybe I'll get lucky," Malcolm said.

Rick laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Maybe you will, at that. I know plenty of guys that'd fuck you just for the chance to get near your sweet little ride. I'm almost half tempted myself, whenever I see it. Now stop sulking and come play."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm replied, but set his beer down and rejoined the game. With the pretty distraction gone, he was much more able to focus, and eventually they began to play for shots—most of which he bought, because even sans distraction he sucked at pool.

By that point, they had a small crowd around them, laughing and harassing and smack-talking as the quality of game play rapidly degraded. They slowed a bit when they spent more time stumbling and missing than actually playing, and started to wind down when the bartender warned bar closed in an hour. Abandoning the table, hanging up his cue, Malcolm ambled over to the bar and slid several bills across.

The bartender said nothing, merely took the bills and tucked them discreetly away, but one corner of his mouth tilted up. "You're a good guy, Mal. Have a good weekend, and try to stay out of trouble."

"It always finds me, honest," Malcolm said, smiling drunkenly but genuinely. He turned unsteadily away, and began to make his way slowly and carefully to the door after calling good night to the others. He pulled out his cell as he walked, flipping it open, and—

He swore as someone crashed hard into him, causing the phone to go flying. While he didn't see it land, he heard the rather ominous sound of its landing. Wincing, he shook his head to try and clear it, and instead only made things worse. "Sorry—"

Again he was rammed into, and only then did he realize that the guy was paying him no mind because he was locked in an argument that escalated out of control right as Malcolm's comprehension dawned.

"Hey!" he tried, but only crashed to the floor for his effort. He heaved himself back up, clinging to a chair, only to have the chair banged into when he was halfway up, sending him back to the floor.

Then someone stepped on him.

After that, Malcolm sort of lost it, drunk and angry and not entirely certain which end was up, until he abruptly found himself outside on the pavement, breathing in cool evening air. Slowly things began to filter back in, until he realized he wasn't alone.

He turned to thank whoever had dragged him from the mess, wincing in pain—and froze.

The face was still shadowed, but there was no mistaking the tattoos. "Uh—" Malcolm could not think of a single fucking thing to say. "Thanks," he finally mumbled.

Soft laughter washed over him, husky and warm. "You're what my mom called 'a bit of a scrapper' aren't you?"

"Scrapper? My mom just said hellion," Malcolm managed, swaying on his feet a bit. "Thanks for getting me out of there. Didn't want to fight, tonight. Last night was enough." He clumsily reached up to touch the black eye, wincing a bit when the bruise stung.

"Last night? Did you stumble into a fight then, too?"

Malcolm frowned, and narrowed his eyes, staring fuzzily at the man, something... something nagged at him, but he was too fucking drunk and sore and tired to make the synapses in his head fire correctly. "My ex boyfriend and his asshole buddies tried to wreck my car," he said.

The head jerked up, but then quickly ducked back down, causing Malcolm's frown to deepen. He reached out a fumbling hand to stroke the tattoos. Celtic designs, he saw, ran the length of the left arm. And just as he'd thought, butterflies covered the right. He stroked one butterfly. "Gorgeous work."

The man jerked his arm away. "T-thanks. Did you drive your Maserati tonight?"

"No," Malcolm said. Something about that question... "Oh, fuck. My phone. They trashed it. I totally forgot." He pinched the bridge of his nose, and slumped against the wall, suddenly feeling at least twice his age. Honestly, when he was sober, he was going to be completely disgusted with himself.

"Uh—there's not much left of it, yeah. Sorry. I tried," the man said beside him, and held out the broken remains of Malcolm's cell phone.

Malcolm grimaced. "Great. So much for calling my driver to come pick me up."

The man almost looked up at him again. "Um. Driver? That wouldn't be that guy across the street, in the black car?"

"Huh?" Malcolm jerked his head up, then immediately regretted moving that quickly. But, sure enough, Brian was parked across the street, reading some book while he waited for Malcolm to reappear. "Uh, yeah. That's him. You need a ride somewhere man."

"No, I catch the bus. Just wanted to make certain you didn't die." The voice held a tone of disapproval, but Malcolm couldn't find it in himself to be irritated. Too drunk and tired, he supposed. Or his rescuer was too pretty, for all that he still hadn't gotten a look at the man's face. He fought an urge to rip off the flat cap, not wanting to piss the guy off—and god knew he respected privacy and shit.

But, he wasn't letting the dude take a fucking bus. "Screw that." He latched onto the guy's wrist and dragged him across the street. Drunk he might be, but he wasn't letting someone who helped him bus it home. "Hey, Brian."

"Hey, Mr. Malcolm."

"Take him home, first." He opened the door, and dragged the guy inside, locking the doors before he could escape and ordering Brian to go.

"Sure, Mr. Malcolm. Hey, man, what's your address? I can GPS it."

The man was silent, then finally leaned forward and muttered something that Malcolm didn't quite catch. Finished, he sat back and slunk into the far corner of the car, looking more than a little wiggled out.

"So what's your name?" Malcolm asked. "I feel bad you totally helped me out, and I know shit about you. Saw you, earlier this evening."

"Uh—Jonathan. You really don't need to give me a ride home."

"Yeah, I do," Malcolm replied. "You probably kept me from getting dead." He yawned, and wished suddenly that he'd had less alcohol, or that there was more to consume. "My name's Malcolm."

Jonathan nodded.

On drunken impulse, Malcolm slid across the seat, just close enough their thighs touched. "You're scared of me." Something fluttered through his mind again, a familiarity to the words, but again, they wouldn't connect. He ignored the feeling of déjà vu, irritated. "Why?"

Jonathan only laughed. "I'm not scared of you. I just didn't expect to pull you from a fight or get escorted home."

"Ha!" Malcolm said, shaking his head slightly to get rid of the sudden overwhelming exhaustion. "The way you look, I bet anyone would be more than happy to give you a ride home any day, any time." He reached out to touch the tats again. "These really are gorgeous. Must have been hell, getting them."

"They were worth it," Jonathan said quietly, and reached up to tug on the small brim of his flat cap.

Malcolm grabbed the hand and pulled it away. "You are scared of me, I can tell. Others are, for one reason or another. Cause I have drivers. And a car. And other stuff."

Jonathan laughed softly again. "I'm not scared of you. There's nothing scary about a man who'd pick a fight with six guys and not care a bit he's losing, or a man who paid the tab for the entire fucking bar and obviously has done so before."

"You...I thought you left." He grimaced as the words struck him further. "I guess there really isn't any reason to be scared of a dumbass who'd be that fucking careless in a fight." He ignored the comments about money.

"It was cute," Jonathan said, snorting with amusement. "Stupid, but cute."

Malcolm shrugged. "Stupid is the story of my life. So if you're not scared of me, why are you so twitchy?"

He couldn't really see Jonathan in the dark, but he could feel the eyes upon him like a touch. It made him shiver. The only good thing about being three steps from alcohol poisoning was how easy it was to do the stupid shit that was the story of his life.

Leaning forward, he curled a steadying hand around Jonathan's head and took his mouth in a slow, careful kiss—totally expecting to be shoved away, punched, something, even if he had sensed certain vibes in that unseen gaze.

Instead, Jonathan made a choked, whimpering sort of sound, and then hands were sunk deep into Malcolm's hair, as though clinging for dear life and Malcolm was being kissed back as if their lives depended on it.

Not one to waste a good thing, he shifted his hold to grab Jonathan firmly and haul him close, all but into his lap, falling back into his own corner of the car and continuing the thorough kiss, one bleeding into two, bleeding into who knew how many, until a sudden discreet cough startled them apart.

Then panic seemed to hit Jonathan like a whip, and he fled the car faster than Malcolm could manage to formulate words, dashing off into the depths of an apartment complex he didn't recognize—but given the short trip, they were obviously in or just outside of Bridgeton.

So Jonathan lived in Bridgeton. That was something, if not much.

Heaving an aggravated sigh, he raked his hair from his face and slumped back in his seat, not looking forward to a two hour drive with nothing better to do than ponder the hot kisses and avoid pondering how his brothers were going to kill him when they found out about this. "Home, Jeeves," he said tiredly.

Brian laughed. "Yes, Mr. Malcolm."

Malcolm closed his eyes as Brian drove on, resigned to his torture, recalling every last tidbit of those kisses, of how good the mysterious Jonathan had felt spread on top of him. Rick had said no one ever managed to score the man—so why had Malcolm not really had much trouble at all? A pity he was so damned drunk. Sober, he might have been able to do something more than steal a few kisses.

He also realized his chances of ever seeing the man were pretty slim. Heaving a sigh, he shifted to sit more comfortably in the seat, watching without really seeing as the scenery rolled on by, little more than black save for the odd patches beneath street lights.

At some point, he dozed off, because he woke to Brian gently nudging him outside his building. Stumbling out of the car, he fumbled for a tip and pressed it into Brian's hand, muttering good night as he half-walked, half-stumbled into his building and made straight for the elevator the front desk man had waiting for him.

In his penthouse, he dumped all his crap on the entry table, stumbled to his bedroom, stripped off his clothes, and fell into bed.

The smell of coffee woke him, and Malcolm groaned with dissatisfaction that he was awake. He glared blearily up at Carlos. "Go the fuck away."

"Did you get into another fight?" Carlos demanded, as he got a good look at Malcolm's face. "I swear to god, we come to talk and now I just want to kick your fucking ass."

"You always want to kick my fucking ass," Malcolm replied, sitting up and taking the coffee. "Get the fuck out so I can dress."

Rumbling threats and curses in English and Spanish, Carlos obeyed.

Malcolm pulled on boxers and jeans, retrieved his coffee, then wandered into the living, ignored his brothers as he passed them, fetched aspirin from the kitchen, then finally returned to the living room to deal with the brothers.

"I didn't get in a fight last night, not the way you think," he said, before they could start in with the yelling and lecturing. When they gave him scathing, disbelieving looks, he flipped them off and explained the whole night. Minus the kissing, which he only fuzzily remembered and was none of their fucking business anyway.

Antoine swore when he had finished. "That's seriously who helped you? Butterflies all up one arm, Celtic stuff all up the other? Dark hair, blue eyes, keeps largely to himself?"

"Yes..." Malcolm replied, confused. "Why?"

"Damn it, man, that's the karaoke guy Wally and I were trying to find last night! It so fucking figures he dodges us and goes to the one fucking place you'd be. Damn it!"

Malcolm snorted. "Well, I'm glad I didn't go with you, then."

Antoine narrowed his eyes.

Malcolm beamed innocently, and went to get more coffee.

"You fucked my karaoke player!" Antoine bellowed after him. "God damn it, why didn't you bring him home?"

"Oh, my poor straight ears and mind," Carlos complained good naturedly.

"I didn't fuck him," Malcolm said when he returned. "We made out in the car while I took him home. He fled. Otherwise I would have brought him home, and I would have told you to get the hell out this morning."

Carlos rolled his eyes. "Can we please stop talking about fucking men now? I need to go home and touch my wife."

"Ew, girls," Malcolm retorted.

Antoine laughed at both of them, then pointed at Malcolm. "You. The next time you spot that guy, call me or Wally immediately, if not sooner."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm replied. "Where's my breakfast?"

Carlos threw a pillow at him, but then went to fetch the breakfast he'd brought from the kitchen, as Malcolm obediently began to repeat the whole night to Antoine, all the while thinking of those kisses, and how badly he wanted to steal more under better circumstances.

✕CHAPTER FIVE

Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, *god*.

Three days later, he still could not keep from repeating those words ad nauseam. He rubbed his temples with his finger tips, telling himself for the five thousandth time that it was okay, Malcolm hadn't identified him, had been so drunk he probably didn't remember any fucking thing from that night—

Which should not depress him because holy goddamn fuck shit he'd seen his boss in the bar and instead of fleeing he'd just slunk off to watch from a distance and then he'd thrown himself into the fight to get Malcolm out and then he'd let Malcolm drop him at a random apartment complex but not before *he'd given in and kissed his drunk as a skunk boss like he was some sort of treat*.

Honestly, what the fuck had he been thinking?

He hadn't, Cassidy thought sourly. His thoughts had pretty been 'hot-yum-more-naked-oh fuck'. Christ, he was lucky Malcolm hadn't recognized him, even if it was sort of depressing that Malcolm had totally never realized even if Cassidy had been trying to make certain—

And he was making his headache worse, not better.

Really, there was no telling yet if Malcolm had pegged him. He'd called in sick Monday, and it wasn't quite eight o'clock now. He could only just hear the others beginning to trickle in, and Malcolm when he didn't come in early tended to roll in just after eight.

Cassidy heaved a sigh and gave up working, deciding instead that at least fetching a cup of coffee would give him a different place to drive himself fucking crazy. He'd thought yesterday was the Day That Would Never End, but Tuesday was rapidly taking over that title.

In the break room, he huffed in annoyance to see someone had emptied the coffee but not made a fresh pot. Sighing, he set a fresh pot to brewing and cleaned out his mug simply for something to do. Turning back to the brewing coffee, he saw that someone had set out muffins and pastries on one of the half dozen tables in the room.

Ooh. He looked over the choices, thrilled to see there was a strawberry danish amongst the offerings. Yay, one little good thing in his stupid damn day. Picking it out, he immediately took a bite, making indistinct noises of appreciation as he made quick work of the pastry.

"Good?" a voice asked, sleepy and husky and entirely too familiar.

Cassidy gasped, choked, and promptly bent over in a coughing fit. God damn it—why did Malcolm always attack him in the break room? Okay, attacking might be exaggerating slightly.

"Sorry," Malcolm said, sighing softly. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's—" Cassidy cleared his throat. "It's okay. My fault. I was a million miles away."

Malcolm smiled faintly. "So I see."

Cassidy flushed and turned away to fix his coffee, saying nothing when Malcolm stood beside him to do the same, struggling not to *notice* the man but oh, god, it was so much harder to ignore him now that he knew what he was missing. And he'd only gotten the slightest taste.

Shit, shit. Stop thinking that way, cause god he did not need to explain to his boss why he was sporting a boner.

"Have a good weekend?" Malcolm asked into the silence.

What, Cassidy wondered miserably, had he done to piss the universe off so much? He looked up, half-terrified to death, half-hopeful despite himself, to see if Malcolm was fucking with him or something.

And was far more crushed than he thought he should be, to realize the question was completely innocuous. "Fine," he mumbled, and dropped his gaze back to his coffee. "Yours?"

He barely heard Malcolm's reply, too lost in his own misery.

What had he really expected? For Malcolm to realize who he'd kissed? For him to stroll into work today and say 'Hey, Jonathan, what's shaking? Wanna pick up where we left off some time?'

That was stupid, and it didn't matter, because he wasn't stupid enough to say yes to something like that. Except he thought maybe he was that stupid. He never in a thousand years would have thought Malcolm was...

Not so prim and proper after all. Even twelve sheets to the wind, he had fought like someone used to handling himself in a brawl. He fought like a pro, drank like a pro, charmed like a pro, and kissed like he'd been born for it. Jeezus. Cassidy was never going to get that small moment of bliss out of his head. Spread over Malcolm's lap like a cat in need of petting, taking all he could get from that wicked, perfect mouth—

God, he really needed to stop thinking about it. Right now.

"Cass?"

"Huh?" Cassidy said, snapping from his thoughts, flushing darker still as he realized Malcolm had been talking to him, and he'd been totally oblivious. God, why was he such a fucking idiot outside of the dives and karaoke bars. He turned away guys all the time, chatted up others, got along with bouncers and bartenders, but he couldn't string words together to save his life when Malcolm was within ten yards.

Malcolm's mouth quirked. "You're really out of it, today. Are you certain everything's okay?"

"Uh, yeah," Cassidy managed. "Just tired, I guess. Was up late. Uh—what were you saying?"

"I wanted to know if you were thinking of attending the company picnic in two months. They say picnic, but it's a huge blowout charity thing. Food, booths, games, and they always bring in an awesome band.

They'll formally announce this year's band in about a month. You should definitely come. It's the last weekend in July. Half the city attends, I think."

Cassidy nodded. "Sure. Sounds fun. I'm sure my siblings would love them. Oh—is it okay to bring them?" He'd never done company stuff before, he had no idea what was okay or not. God. Sometimes he felt so stupid.

But Malcolm only laughed gently and reached out—and it seemed he was going for Cassidy's hair, but in the end he only altered the move and dropped a hand briefly on his shoulder. "Of course it's okay, I'd love to see them again. They seemed cool; it's obvious you raised them well. That must have been hard."

In reply, Cassidy only shrugged, discomfited as always when people tried to make a big deal out of it. What should he have done? Run for the hills and left them to strangers? "It's nothing. We're family."

Malcolm nodded and turned away. "To work I go, I guess. One day of slacking was more than enough. Have a good day, email or call if you need anything."

Then he was gone, and Cassidy could breathe again, and he wondered how in the fucking hell he was going to keep working here when all he could think about was his boss and how damned good it had felt lying on top of him and kissing him until they were both senseless.

He forced the thoughts away only because he really did not want anyone in the office asking why he was hard—oh, god, he would have to throw himself out the nearest open window—and finally trudged back to his desk.

Settling down, he forced himself back to his work, this time managing to concentrate, if only barely. He did not look up again until the amount of talking and giggling increased by a startling amount. Standing up to peek over the top of his cube, he found the source of the racket at the front desk, where all the women and a few men were clustered around a tall, playboy-handsome man who had the sort of looks that made it hard to pin his age.

He saw movement from the corner of his eye and saw Janice had come to stand by him. "Uh—is that someone important, I'm going to guess?"

Janice laughed, but in her kind way, blue eyes sparkling as she slid them toward him. "Important, oh definitely. That's Antoine Osborne." She laughed again as she saw his face flood with comprehension. "Yeah, as in related to boss man." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder at Malcolm's office. "Antoine is the elder; he's also the Chief Creative Officer for Amberton-Lord Entertainments. They say half the reason we do so well in the music industry is that Mr. Antoine is friends with at least half the industry."

"And he's bedded the other half," Connie said, sidling up to join them. Cassidy was beginning to feel a little guilty, for listening to gossip, but he could not bring himself to walk away.

Anyway, Janice and Connie were blocking the way.

"Male or female," Connie continued in her furtive little whispers. "Mr. Antoine is smooth with everyone and everything. Could tempt me," she added with a mutter. "Just don't let my boyfriend hear me say it."

Janice giggled at her, swatting her in playful disapproval. Then she turned back to Cassidy and gleefully gave up her own bit of dirt. "They say Mr. Antoine is best friends with Wallace Burgundy. Do you know—"

"The music scout?" Cassidy asked, unable to believe what he was hearing. Even back when he was a dumb, stupid, reckless kid, he'd known that name. Wallace Burgundy... god, he'd discovered so many of the artists Cassidy loved. He and the guys had heard he'd be around that summer, it was why they'd been so psyched...

And then he'd lost his parents, lost his dream, but he hoped the guys had been found by Wallace, or someone else. He'd like to hear them on the radio someday.

Then it struck him that Wallace was friends with Antoine, and Antoine was Malcolm's brother...jeezus, sometimes the world seemed entirely too fucking small. He never should have landed a job with an entertainment company, even a small one like this. Maybe he was a masochist.

Besides, there was no saying it was true—office gossip wasn't any different than kitchen gossip, and ninety percent of that was bullshit. This was probably the same. But jeez, Malcolm had one brother who more or less owned a restaurant and another who was the Chief Creative Officer—which sounded important—for the same business where Malcolm was a simple Head Manager?

A head manager, he reminded himself with an inward sad sigh, who owned a Maserati and could afford to have someone drive him to Bridgeton and back, after he paid everyone's tab at the bar—

Why, he thought miserably, could he not be crushing this bad on a—a stock boy or something. Why did it have to be a fucking prince charming in a steel and glass tower and a 120,000 dollar steed?

God, he really hoped it was just a crush. People got over crushes. He'd had little crushes on customers before, and he'd gotten over every single one of them. He wasn't dumb enough to do more than crush on his boss.

Except he had the sinking feeling he was so over his head when it came to Malcolm, and damned if there was anything he could do about it. Whatever it was, it burned a hell of a lot hotter than any crush, no matter how hard he tried to pretend.

It was totally easy, without lying to himself at all, to blame his massive stupidity in the car Friday night on pent up lust. If the ride had gone all the way home, instead of that stupid apartment complex, he'd have begged Malcolm to fuck him and damn the consequences.

That hadn't been the only reason though. He'd liked Malcolm seeing the real him, tattoos and all, and wanting him bad—even if he hadn't known it was Cassidy. Which was part of the problem. If he marched into Malcolm's office right this second and stripped off his shirt, revealing his tats, that he was Jonathan, would Malcolm still want him?

Or, Cassidy thought with an old, tired sigh, did he come with too much baggage? Playing house since he was eighteen, with little to no help, harassed and terrorized for years by a crazy ass bitch of a boss, feeling so much older than he really was, and still clinging secretly to a dream that had died long ago?

His first and last attempt at a relationship had ended with the guy saying precisely that—too much fucking baggage. That had been the straw that broke his back, that drove him to do a lot of stupid shit when he turned twenty one. After that, he'd given up relationships.

He shook himself from his thoughts, focusing again on the fount of gossip still gleefully pouring forth from the two women.

"I heard he and Burgundy are more than friends," Janice said with a wise nod, eyes locked on Antoine, still by the front desk.

Connie snorted at this. "Not hardly," she challenged. "I saw Mr. Antoine myself at the McCormick just last week with some overdone tart on his arm. Anyway, Burgundy is married."

"When has marriage ever stopped a man?" Janice demanded scornfully. "Anyway, everyone knows that marriage has been on the rocks for years. Who could resist—" she cut herself off abruptly at the sound of a familiar squeaking as Malcolm's office door opened. They all turned nearly as one to see Malcolm striding toward them, no doubt headed to meet his brother.

He smiled and slowed to a stop as he reached them, nodding in greeting. "The ladies bringing you up to date on all the gossip?" Malcolm winked at the women, still smiling all the while, but Cassidy thought he saw something strained in the easy expression.

But, that wasn't really hard to figure out. Flashy car aside, Malcolm obviously didn't go in for attention. He had money, and a lot of it, that much was plain—but he'd spent hours at a dive on the east end of Bridgeton, he'd discreetly paid the tab for everyone in the bar, and hadn't acted like anything more than just another Joe Blow the whole night.

So, he had the money and probably the connections, but settled for Head Manager. What else was he hiding, beyond a devastatingly talented mouth? Unless that wasn't a secret; Cassidy really preferred not to think about it.

He really hated that strained look on Malcolm's face, and fought for a way to ease it, even if he could barely look Malcolm in the face without turning bright red and wanting to run. But he managed it, even managed a smile, and said, "If I wanted gossip, I'd just go ask Carlos. They were only telling me Mr. Antoine is your brother—it's cool to have a face to put to him."

That drew a genuine smile from Malcolm, and he squeezed Cassidy's shoulder briefly. "We're going there for lunch, I'll tell him you said hello—and that he's not to tell you a damn thing." Then he continued on his way to the front desk, where his voice immediately carried back as he started to mock yell at his brother. "Hey! Antoine, we've had this discussion before. You are not allowed to flirt with my staff, and any phone numbers acquired are to be surrendered to me forthwith."

"Forthwith? It's so easy to tell you actually paid attention in school," Antoine retorted. "I have nothing to surrender to you, forthwith or otherwise. Anyway, I outrank you, so I don't have to do what you say. I'm allowed to talk to whomever I want."

The bickering continued, the small crowd around them a perfect audience for the antics, until at last the brothers said farewell and departed for lunch."

"Too much pretty in that family," Janice said with a sigh. "I cannot tell you how many women mourned the loss of Carlos a couple years ago when he got married." She turned to face Cassidy. "But, there are still two left. Did you ever see the spread of them, in the city's local magazine?"

Cassidy choked. "Spread?" Oh, gods, he did not need to be putting 'Malcolm' and 'spread' in the same sentence or even thought. "About what?"

"Cities most eligible bachelors," Connie said. "That was, oh, not quite a year ago. Malcolm was furious about it, since Mr. Antoine dragged him pretty much kicking and screaming. He hid in his office for like a month straight, after it came out, and more or less refused to answer any of his phones. People were placing bets on when we would find Mr. Antoine's corpse and how Malcolm would kill him."

"Hang on," Janice said, eyes bright with mischief. "I still have a copy."

"That is sick and sad," Connie told her.

Janice rolled her eyes. "Please, like you don't have your own stashed somewhere."

Connie did not deign to reply to this, but when Janice returned with the magazine she took it away and flipped immediately to the correct page. "Here we go—aren't they totally gorgeous?"

Totally, Cassidy wanted to say, and that made him wonder why they were asking him. It wasn't normal for chicks to ask guys if they thought other guys were gorgeous. He eyed them warily, but they only looked knowingly back.

"Sweetie," Connie said gently, teasingly, "if you stared any harder at Malcolm, your eyes would fall out of your head."

Cassidy flushed dark and jerked away, mortified to be so easily busted and—

"Oh, you're freaking him out," Janice said, scowling at Connie and catching Cassidy by the arm. "Hey, shh. It's okay. Please, calm down. No one here gives a damn. Didn't you see Bobby flirting harder with Mr. Antoine than even Jacquelyn could manage?"

Nodding stiffly, Cassidy slowly made himself relax and not make a break for the elevator lobby. He drew a shaky breath, and nodded again. "Yeah," he said quietly. "They're gorgeous."

Connie clucked in amusement. "I won't bother to ask which one is your favorite. Ever seen that car of his? I haven't, except here in the magazine," she said with a long sigh of the monstrously unfair.

"No," Cassidy said, taking the coward's path, deciding it was much safer not to admit that Malcolm had given him a ride home last week. He didn't want them making jokes or laughing insinuations, now that he was apparently outed, especially since it didn't seem like they knew Malcolm was gay. Or at least bi...but Cassidy's gut, or maybe wishful thinking, told him Malcolm's only interest was in men.

He glanced down at the magazine again, looking at the picture of Antoine and Malcolm standing back to back, dressed to the nines in fancy suits. He barely noticed when the magazine was handed over to him,

flipping the page to take in the profile page for Malcolm—where he stood posed in fashionably beat up jeans and a tight t-shirt, designer sunglasses, leaning against his black Maserati.

Oh, the things Cassidy wanted to do and have done when it came to Malcolm and that car. Shaking his head at himself, he read the cheesy magazine profile about Malcolm being the middle child, a popular Head Manager, his one indulgence his flashy car, his likes and dislikes in food, music, so on and so forth.

None of it really captured Malcolm much, not really. It didn't capture how close he was to his brothers—men to whom he was not even blood related, and that only made it more impressive. It didn't mention his smile, or how kind and generous he could be, or how kissing him had torn Cassidy's world apart.

But he said only, "It really doesn't seem like something he'd do. How did Antoine make him?"

"No one knows, but boy howdy, be grateful you weren't here when he was still pissed off about it. When those two go at, even Satan and God stay out of it," Janice said, and sniggered at some memory. "You'll have to go to lunch with us sometime, we can tell you about *all* their fights. They've quieted down lately, but there was a period there they seemed to have a death match every week."

Connie laughed. "I've heard before it's even worse when the third brother gets into it, as well. We don't see him very often around here, though. Probably a good thing. That much pretty would ruin anyone's ability to concentrate."

"Everyone keeps calling them pretty. Guys don't like to be called pretty," Cassidy said, amused by it despite himself.

His words just made Connie giggle, and reach out to ruffle his hair. Cassidy might have been annoyed, if he hadn't been so surprised. "Oh, now, I bet plenty of girls and boys called you pretty and you ate it right up. Probably broke all their little hearts, too, *pretty* as you are."

"I never broke anyone's heart," Cassidy replied. "Scout's honor or whatever."

The women laughed, and Janice reached out to touch his hair herself. "I do not believe you, with that face and those eyes and these curls." She clucked her tongue. "I truly doubt it."

Cassidy flushed, because it was true that even his small handful of quick and meaningless hook-ups had admired his 'pretty curls'. His only real Ex had liked his hair, too. Though he kept it short, still the curls showed through. Short of something drastic, like military short, there was really no help for it.

They laughed more as his face went bright red.

"Oh, stop harassing him," Steve said suddenly, returning to his own cubicle, which butted up against Cassidy's. "You're just jealous your hair isn't that pretty. And probably jealous you're too old to tap that." He winked at Cassidy, then sat down, vanishing into his cubicle.

The women squawked and protested and laughed and flushed, but finally stopped touching him. "Cassidy isn't interested in us anyway," Janice said loftily.

"If you ask me," Steve's voice came drifting up, "gay men are the smart ones. Every time my wife starts screaming, I wonder why the hell I had to be born straight. Now get back to work, cause if you're still standing there when Malcolm returns he's going to make you deal with the filing cabinets for the next six months."

Janice and Connie both grimaced at the threat, and conceded defeat. "I'm so telling your wife when I see her that you think about turning gay whenever you argue with her."

"And I'm telling your boyfriend," Steven retorted, "that you keep the bachelor profile of your boss in your desk."

Rolling her eyes, Janice thrust the magazine back at Cassidy, who fumbled to keep from dropping it.

"This is yours!" he protested. "I don't want it."

They both laughed at him, and pet his hair again before striding off to their own desks again. "Sure you do," Janice replied. "There's more pictures." She winked at him, and then vanished into her cube.

Mortified, Cassidy sank back into his chair and threw the magazine in the trash. He didn't need pictures, as stunning as they no doubt were. He had enough problems already, striving not to think about how it had felt to be spread across Malcolm's laps, his long fingers fisted in Cassidy's hair.

*CHAPTER SIX

These days, being alone in the house was becoming less unusual. Cassidy dreaded the day being completely alone was standard operating procedure. He wouldn't know what to do with himself, when he was no longer bellowing for Denny to put his damned art supplies away, the hallway did not double as a closet, or bickering with them over groceries, bargaining over chores, demanding to know why the hell they had to keep blowing through the monthly minutes—

He really would be lost when he came home to a house filled with silence, day after day, into weeks, into months.

Shaking his head, he picked up his shot glass and tossed back the shot of Jack he'd just poured, slamming the glass back down and returning to his writing. Music throbbed through the house, bass making everything vibrate to the beat. Most of the house was dark; he knew it well enough light wasn't really necessary, and he had little need for all but the kitchen and bathroom at present.

On the table, alongside the bottle of Jack and his shot glass, were scattered sheets and scraps of paper, filled with words, some crossed out, others written in, notes and doodles and bits of music.

Writing songs was a bit like pouring acid into a bleeding wound, but sometimes he simply could not help himself. Shutting off the music was damn near like shutting off his breathing, or tearing off his limb. Clinging to it hurt, but he still thought it would hurt more to stop completely.

For years, he hadn't been able to leave the house except for work, too busy taking care of the shambles of his family to live his own life much. But, as Lindsay and Denny had gotten older, and were out of the house themselves with increasing frequency, he'd been able to mold a little bit of a life—such as it was. For a long time, his only break had been coming home from work and remaining in the driveway for half an hour or so, just sitting in the car, listening to his music, drinking a beer when he could afford one.

When they'd started going out, leaving him alone for the night, he'd started cranking his music and sitting at the table, sometimes writing, sometimes simply listening. For a while, that had been enough. As his restlessness grew, so did his siblings, giving him a little bit more freedom. Eventually, he'd been able to start his occasional visits to Bridgeton to drink, Karaoke, and occasionally hook up in an alleyway or a room rented for an hour or two.

Minus that brief, stupid stint when he'd tried the dating thing, a fellow slave beneath the thumb of the Ogre. But, he'd moved on to bigger and better things soon enough, speeding away from Cassidy and his baggage as quickly as he was able.

After his nights in Bridgeton, he typically returned calmer, if not exactly better.

He scratched out a line and rewrote it, sneering at himself for being hooked on love songs lately. Honestly, how much more pathetic was he going to get before this damned obsession or whatever the hell it was with Malcolm, finally worked itself out of his system.

Christ, he needed to get over it. Face it, he told himself; whatever had happened a week ago in the dark of that car, he needed to forget about it. No doubt Malcolm already had; likely, he'd moved on to better, less mysterious and more cooperative pastures.

He poured more Jack and shot it, setting the glass down and retrieving his pen.

The weather was warm, but not so bad yet he had to turn on the AC. Though he still occasionally missed the house in which he'd grown up, the one into which they'd moved only weeks after their parents died was infinitely more affordable and easier to maintain. After his parents had died and most of the money had gone to debts and problems about which he'd somehow never known, the lawyer had helped him to get this little house on Lester.

It was a pretty small, quiet street, spaced far enough apart that no one cared if he cranked the music a bit with all his windows open. He never turned it up high enough to cause real problems, anyway.

He sat in the kitchen, straddling a chair at the table, bent over its low back to work on his song writing. He wore nothing but an old, ratty pair of jeans, the weather warm enough he could skip a shirt. The overhead light shown yellow-orange light down on him, warming his skin and making the tattoos seem all the darker.

Lindsay was gone for the next week or so, off to spend some time with friends before they all went their separate ways to jobs and grad schools. Denny had gone off for a weekend party thing at a friend's house. Cassidy wasn't exactly thrilled about that, knowing some of Denny's friends, but he wasn't going to be an asshole—Denny would call him if something went sour, and he was eighteen now, even if Cassidy found that hard to believe at times. All the time. Lindsay being twenty one still weirded him out, hell.

It was the perfect sort of weekend for inviting a lover over, and he thought with a sigh that it was probably for the best he didn't have Malcolm's number. Shaking his head, he bent back to putting words upon the page.

Until the doorbell rang. Frowning, wondering who the hell would be knocking on his door at nine thirty, he turned down the music then strode to the front door. Opening it, he barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Pizza. Lindsay had probably ordered it, knowing full well he seldom bothered to eat much when he was on his own.

The man—god, kid, really, he couldn't be older than Lindsay, had a smile frozen on his face that rapidly turned into an obvious attempt not to gawk. His eyes were damned near the size of the pie he was delivering, as he scoped Cassidy out with no subtlety whatsoever. "Uh—you ordered the meat supreme, sticks, and soda?"

Cassidy smiled, slow and easy, trying not to chuckle as the kid flushed. "Sounds right. What do I owe?"

"Uh—seventeen—seventeen eighty nine."

Just because he couldn't resist, loved the way kids got so huffy, Cassidy asked, "Are you even old enough to drive?"

The wide eyes flashed with indignation. "I'm twenty one."

Maybe. Barely. Honestly, he shouldn't give in to temptation, but the kid was looking at him so hard he was going to break something.

"Just a sec," Cassidy said, and vacated the doorway briefly to fetch his wallet from the hallway table. Returning to the kid, he handed over the twenty. "There's what I owe and half your tip."

The kid took the money, frowning in confusion. "Half?" He handed over the food absently, clearly more focused on the odd statement.

Cassidy took the food and carefully balanced it all in one arm, then used his free hand to reach out and cup the back of the kid's head, pulling him lightly forward—plenty of chance to resist, to get away, but the kid only eagerly went along—

His hair was soft, and he tasted a bit like bubblegum as Cassidy kissed him long and slow and thorough. Not terribly experienced, but he bet that wouldn't last long; the kid definitely wasn't *that* shy. He broke the kiss after a bit, and smiled as he drew back, putting a solid distance between them again. "There's the other half. Have a good night, kid. Thanks for the food."

He watched a bit, until the kid had gotten in his car and driven off, then closed and locked the door before carrying his food into the kitchen. He shook his head at himself all the while. So easy to tease and flirt with a random stranger he'd never see again. So easy to be himself around people who didn't matter. But he couldn't do more than sputter and blush and act stupidly around the one person he really wanted to see *him*.

Which was kind of funny, when even on a good day he wasn't certain which him was real anymore, if any of them were real. The only thing he did know was that none of him could just walk up to his boss and say 'make me feel less alone.' There were too many reasons that was a stupid idea.

Sighing, he pushed his music away and broke into the food, picking up his cell to text Lindsay a thank you.

Mmm, pizza. Not as good as Mexican, but it would definitely suffice. Pepperoni, sausage, beef, bacon, and she'd even remembered to add banana peppers and mushrooms. He ate half the pizza and breadsticks, saving the rest for tomorrow night, and even drank the soda Lindsay had pointedly ordered—but undermined her efforts by adding a couple of slugs of Jack to it.

Cranking the music up again, he sang along loudly as he cleaned up dinner and finished his Jack and Coke then wandered into the living room to collapse in his recliner—a birthday present from his siblings a couple of years ago. Even now, they never sat in it themselves. It was his and his alone, they insisted. He'd called them dorks, but he did love the thing to death.

Sitting there in the dark, drinking and singing, enjoying the cool night air and the way the music throbbed through him, he tried to convince himself that at the end of it all, he really didn't have anything to complain about.

God, going out was a stupid fucking idea. But then again, how paranoid was he really going to be? What were the honest to god chances he would run into Malcolm again? They must have both been slumming it in Bridgeton for years, and never noticed each other before. So, he'd seen Malcolm once, and that was way over in east end. He was more north tonight, where all the karaoke fiends and such hung out. Such places didn't strike him as Malcolm's scene—not Office Malcolm, or Maserati Malcolm, or Bar Fight Malcolm.

Anyway, he wanted out. It was Saturday night, and he was tired of sitting in an empty house. Better to be alone in a crowd, and he liked to believe he'd earned his odd night of singing to drunks and other would-be rockers and whoever the hell else strolled in to risk abusing his ears.

He sat the bar, still sweaty from his most recent number. His limit was generally three, but he was tempted to go for round four and maybe five tonight. He just wanted out, and he wanted to sing, and he didn't want to go home to that empty fucking house.

Calling for a beer, he listened to the poor dying cat currently attempting to croon out something that should be sultry, but definitely was not, though he persevered even as the audience razed him with drunken good nature. Smiling, Cassidy tugged lightly on the brim of his flat cap and paid for his beer, murmuring a thanks to the bartender.

He really shouldn't go past three songs. Bad enough people already knew his face and voice; he didn't even have to be arrogant to know that his voice attracted attention. Hell, he'd fucking banked on his own talent once to carry him all the way to the stars. But that was the past. He was just here to have fun, and he didn't want people bugging him and going past his three song limit definitely drew the risk of people noticing him too much.

So far, he was two songs down and one to go. He could probably just go hit another joint tonight, though thinking that immediately resurrected his paranoia all over again. Argh, he'd decide after his last song here. Which he'd sing after another beer or two.

Someone sat down next to him, but Cassidy ignored him, pulling his hat down low reflexively and focusing on his beer. Minus those nights when he was cruising, he rarely had any interest in talking to anyone. Red Jim's had been a rare exception to simply chilling and talking—and that exception was now definitely gone. He was a tad reckless, not massively stupid.

Talking, for the most part, was simply a waste of time. It never got him what he wanted—a real friend, or someone who might turn into a lover, a partner. So, he didn't generally bother. He wasn't a glutton for punishment, after all.

Well, he was, but he was already punishing himself something fierce with Malcolm.

"You have a stunning voice."

Cassidy stiffened and looked up—and then fought a sudden urge to swear loudly and profusely while he bolted for the door. What in the goddamn fucking hell had he done to piss off the divine? What about his karma had he so jacked up, that he kept running into fucking Osbornes? "Thanks," he said tersely, not inviting further conversation, and just to be certain he added, "but whatever you're selling, I ain't buying."

Any other time—that being Time Before Malcolm—he might have taken up one or two offers Antoine might have made him. It wasn't hard at all to see why the man could have whatever he wanted, male or female, whenever he wanted it. The man was a player born, it showed in every last fiber of him. Once upon a time, Cassidy would have gladly spent an hour or two in the sheets with him.

Now, however, all he wanted was to get the fuck out of Dodge.

"Man, I have friends who would pay several handsome zeroes for your voice—especially with all the pretty packaging."

Cassidy fought a sudden urge to laugh hysterically. Antoine was scouting him. The rumors of his connections must be true, then, at least partially. "No, thank you," he said, voice still cool. "Leave me alone."

Two business cards slid into his view—one for the CCO of Amberton-Lord Entertainments, the other for Wallace Burgundy.

"I'm the CCO," Antoine said. "My name is Osborne, Antoine Osborne. Burgundy is an old friend of mine, and I can see you know that name. You sing like platinum, man. Don't you want a shot at the big time? Guys like you always do."

Cassidy laughed bitterly and slid the business cards back to him. His stars were long faded and normalcy had too strong a hold on him now to be easily slipped. Anyway, stupid as it was, he didn't want to be anything without his long-gone Butterflies.

They'd totally hated the name, when he'd first come up with it—but it was too perfect, he'd insisted over and over until they saw reason. They all had butterflies for last names, and what were the fucking odds of that? Besides, he'd told them, an awesome band could make the dumbest name the coolest band name in existence. Men and women would gleefully scream for them, one day. So Four Butterflies they had become.

Then they'd turned into Three, and he'd fallen away to be a solitary Monarch.

Cassidy took a long pull on his beer, willing the old memories away, wishing more wouldn't come. But they came.

At first, they'd all tried to keep in touch, but eventually it just grew too hard, too painful, to hear as they climbed and traveled and tried to reach the top. Too painful for him, probably a chore for them. He kept hoping to hear them on the radio, to hear they'd become a raging success, but he knew it would also cut like a knife when they did.

Hell, could he be a rock star now?

No, he didn't think so. Fame wasn't an instantaneous thing. It was dedication and hard work, sacrificing a thousand other things to make the climb. It took time and effort, things he didn't have, wouldn't have for another few years. His siblings were nearly there, but they'd need him for a little longer yet.

Even to his own ears, it all sounded like thin excuses—but he was a never-been, far worse than a has-been, and he didn't want to find out the hard way that his rock star days had well and truly slipped away. He wasn't that reckless and carefree anymore. It had long been beaten out of him. Hell, maybe he'd just beaten it out of himself.

Antoine slid the cards back. "Don't decide now. You were made for it, man, I promise. Your name is Jonathan, right? Keep the cards, what can it hurt? If you ever change your mind, give me or Wally a call."

Cassidy laughed again, not caring how bitter he sounded, because the bitterness at least was honest. "Made for it? No one is made for anything. Life is too capricious for shit like 'made for'. I ain't your next rock star, *man*. I come here to drink and sing to drunks. Otherwise, I belong to the company store. Whispers of fame are worth shit to me." He met Antoine's eyes, briefly noticing how they'd widened as Cassidy spoke. "Now fuck off and leave me alone, or I'll tell Tony to have you bounced, Mr. CCO."

"Fine," Antoine said quietly. "I'll go for now, but I'm not giving up on you. A voice like yours—a *passion* like yours—wasn't *meant* to be wasted here, singing to drunks and wannabes. Change your mind and give me a call, I swear you won't regret it."

Then he was gone, leaving Cassidy sneering at an empty barstool and feeling suddenly bereft, hopelessly depressed. He almost called for another beer and a shot of Jack, but then decided that his night was ruined and he may as well go the fuck home.

Though he was tempted to toss the business cards or simply ignore them, he reluctantly picked them up and pocketed them away. That same masochistic streak that had him making eyes at a boss he'd never get to touch again, jacking off to a moment he wished had lasted longer, gone much further. He wasn't a glutton for punishment—he was the fucking definition of the phrase.

Stalking from the bar and out into the warm night air, he walked down the street to the lot where he'd parked his car. For awhile, he just sat there, letting the light buzz of a couple of beers fade away. Finally, he started the car and drove off, leaving Bridgeton behind and slowly returning to the city, to reality.

He hated the drive home; it always gave him too much fucking time to think.

Could he do it, a voice whispered at the back of his mind. Tell Denny and Lindsay he was going to do it, leave normal life behind to try and make it as the star he'd always wanted to be? To hell with being Joe Blow, to hell with playing house? Was that fair or selfish? Would they approve? Be okay with it? Dislike it? Tell him gently that he shouldn't even try?

He gripped the steering wheel tightly as the thoughts spun through his head, giving him a headache, long-lost daydreams clashing with reality, with thoughts and images of Malcolm weaving through all of them. A rock star was on par with filthy rich Most Eligible Bachelor wasn't it? That would make him good enough, appealing enough, put him far above and beyond stupid little Office Monkey.

His siblings would never begrudge him anything, and he knew that, but it wasn't fair to take advantage of that generosity.

Still, the dream was tempting, as much as he hated admitting it. Could he still do it? But what if Denny and Lindsay needed him, and he was somewhere he couldn't get to them? He was still their guardian,

even if technically they were both of legal age now, but only eighteen and twenty one, he knew all too well how too fucking young that still was.

The sudden sharp, piercing ringing of his cell snapped him from his thoughts, and he only just avoided jerking the wheel in his surprise. Snatching his phone up from where he'd tossed it in a cup holder, he glanced at the name on the screen, then flipped the phone open and hit 'accept'. "What's up, Denny?"

"Bro, come get me. This party is taking a fucking turn for 15 to life, and I don't like it."

He sounded scared, despite the attempt to keep his voice simply irritated.

Cassidy swore silently. He so should have fucking told Denny no—he knew parties like that nearly always wound up a bad idea. Damn it. But all he said to Denny was a calm, reassuring, "Tell me how to get to you, bro. I'll be there quick as I can. I'm heading back from Bridgeton, half an hour from home now."

"Thanks," Denny said quietly, and quickly rattled off directions, and Cassidy was for the thousandth time grateful he'd always laid down the law that his siblings had to be able to tell him how to get to and from wherever they were going.

"Hang tight 'til I get there," Cassidy replied when he'd finished. "Tuck away somewhere, lay low. Call if you need to, I'll be there soon."

"Yeah, I am. Locked myself into the upstairs bathroom. See you soon." The relief in his voice was palpable, and as he hung up Cassidy made a mental note to step up his plans to get Denny a car of his own. He'd hoped he could push it off another year, but that simply wouldn't fly anymore.

When he was forced to halt at a stoplight, he fumbled in his back pocket and withdrew the two business cards. He stared hard at them, the names, the numbers, the titles, all they represented. Then he rolled the window down, and as the light turned green, he threw the business cards out. He wasn't going anywhere; not yet, maybe never.

Driving as quickly as he could, he made his way back to the city, cutting around it to the ritzier neighborhood just outside the main northern part of the city proper. Following Denny's directions, he rolled up to a glittery McMansion, lit inside and out and threatening to fall down beneath the force of the pounding music.

Leaving the car running, he strode to the door and slid inside, not bothering to knock. A couple of kids—little more than spoiled little rich punks—glared at him and started to demand who the fuck he was, and what the fuck he thought he was doing, but Cassidy knew he had a presence and instead of saying anything, the kids shut their mouths and went back to the beer he knew they weren't old enough to have.

He kept traveling through the house, scaring off anyone who tried to stop him with looks when the tats and his obvious age weren't enough.

Upstairs, it wasn't hard to find the bathroom Denny had chosen as his hiding place. Pounding on the door, he called Denny's name. A second later it opened, and Denny looked at him with abject relief. He

also looked pale and shaken, and no fucking wonder, with all he'd seen going on during his short trip through the house. "You are so never allowed to go to these things again."

"Didn't know it would turn into this, I swear. I thought we were going fishing and shit," Denny said, looking wretched. "But then a bunch of people crashed, and it turned into 'let's get arrested or dead'. Can we go home now?"

"Yeah," Cassidy replied, and took his arm, then led them back downstairs and to the door.

They were stalled at the door by a small crowd of men—all of them drunk and or stoned, and not a one of them friendly. "Denny, my man, where you going and who's this?"

"My brother," Denny said flatly. "I'm going home. This shit ain't my scene."

"You can't bail on us! Come on!"

Cassidy recognized the man, and silently banned him from the house or even going near Denny ever again. Not, he sensed, that he'd have to work hard to get Denny to obey him. He drew Denny back and stepped forward. "Back the fuck off, kid. You don't want to fucking tangle with me."

The four guys all sized him up, taking in his lean build, the tats, his face—and three of them fell back, leaving their ring leader standing alone.

The ring leader stepped forward, as cocky as only a kid or a drunk could be. Unfortunate for the moron that he was both.

"Back off," Cassidy repeated in a low voice. "Bad enough you already tried to mess with my brother. You try to fight me, you'll only wind up hurt."

"Che," the kid replied with a sneer. "I can take you." He then threw the sloppiest punch Cassidy ever saw, pathetically easy to dodge, and really, hitting him back would be like shooting fish in a barrel—but sometimes, the only way to teach anyone anything is to do it the hard way.

So he punched the dumbass, who dropped like a sack of potatoes and lay out cold on the tile floor of the entryway.

Everyone else gathered around, drawn by the sounds of altercation, scattered like terrified birds.

"Let's go," Cassidy said, and that time no one got in their way as he yanked the door open and stalked back to the car, Denny close on his heels.

In the car, Denny laughed. "Man, bro. I'm sorry all this shit happened, but you're so fucking badass when you want to be. They'll be talking about you forever."

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "You're not allowed to hang out with them anymore, and no more house parties unless I've vetted them. Christ, I so can wait for you to go to college. I am not looking forward to the phone call I'll receive then."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Denny replies, but smiles another relieved thanks. "I didn't drag you from a party or anything of your own, did I, bro?"

"No," Cassidy replied.

"Anything fun happen?"

Cassidy shook his head and carefully did not think about scouts and business cards and far away stars. "It was a pretty boring night. It'll be nice to get home."

"I totally agree with that."

Nodding, because he didn't trust himself to manage speaking anymore, Cassidy drove them home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cassidy had punched someone.

Malcolm stared at Cassidy's knuckles in shock, only barely remembering not to stare openly as they made their coffee in the break room. He wondered, suddenly, just how long he'd been matching his breaks to Cassidy's so they had a few minutes alone here each day.

He could not take his eyes from the fight bite. That was definitely a wound taken by punching someone square in the mouth. Whoever Cassidy had punched, the guy would be lucky if he hadn't lost a tooth. Who in the hell *had* Cassidy punched? Since when did flushing, mumbling, ready to bolt in a moment Cassidy know how to swing a punch?

Dumping creamer in his coffee, Malcolm asked, "What happened to your hand? Looks like it hurts."

Cassidy stiffened, then with obvious effort slowly relaxed. "Cut it doing house maintenance stuff this weekend." He grimaced. "Playing house is not all it's cracked up to be when shit breaks."

"I agree. That's why I don't live in one," Malcolm replied with a grin. Then he wanted to kick himself, because now he would probably have to admit he lived in a penthouse. He could lie, but one lie always led to more, and he had enough crap to keep track of without outright lying for no good reason.

But, for better or worse, Cassidy only nodded in reply, and did not ask further questions. "Smart move."

"You look tired. Get enough sleep? You can go home sick if you're not feeling well."

"No, I'm fine," Cassidy said, shaking his head, looking suddenly anxious. "Just tired. I'm fine, really." He looked up, sad eyes almost fearful now, then dropped his gaze again hastily, as if afraid of what he might see—or, Malcolm thought suddenly, of what might be seen.

He shook off the weird thought. "Well, if you want to go home, just say. Myself, I had a very boring weekend, followed by a very boring week, and it's looking to be a very long, boring Friday. Paperwork has got to be the most boring thing on the face of the planet."

Cassidy smiled briefly, making a noise that sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh. "If we liked doing it, I guess they probably wouldn't pay us to do it."

"This is true," Malcolm said. "So how was your weekend, evil housework aside? I hope less boring than mine." He hadn't even managed to get into a fight. His brothers, mature individuals that they were, had proclaimed they were going to fall over and die of shock. He'd told them to go fuck themselves, asserting his own maturity.

Despite a burning need to go find his tattooed hottie, he'd told himself it was stupid to go hunting for a man who had probably already forgotten all about that night. He was hopeless, but not quite pathetic—yet.

When Cassidy only gave a noncommittal response on his weekend, Malcolm switched tracks. "So are you still going to the picnic? They'll be announcing the band week after next. You're into music, yeah? I know you recognized the music in my car, when I took you home that one night. The girls say you're always singing along with the radio."

Cassidy went bright red at that, and started trying to stare holes into his coffee mug. "Yeah, I try to be quiet though. I didn't realize they could all hear me. Sorry."

Malcolm grimaced. "That's not what I meant. My impression is, they wish you'd sing more and at higher volumes. Anyway, I just meant you'd be sure to enjoy the music. Are you certain your hand is okay?" he asked, switching subjects.

"I put some stuff on it," Cassidy replied, balling his hand into a loose fist and letting it fall by his side to be half hidden by his pants leg. "It'll be fine."

Malcolm nodded, and gave up conversation for the time being. Cassidy was clearly in full on quiet mode today. "I guess I've avoided my monthly reports long enough." Clapping Cassidy on the shoulder, maybe letting the touch linger a beat or two, he finally forced his feet to move and returned to his office to slug through the dreaded reports. Every month, when the damned things cropped up and could no longer be avoided, he seriously questioned why he played Head Office Monkey instead of jet setting around the world.

But, really, that was a no brainer. And lately, Cassidy seemed to have become one more reason to stick around, even if Malcolm could not see logically how that made sense. Cassidy could barely talk to him at the best of times.

He might be fantasizing about Jonathan when he stroked off, but it was the sad, sad eyes of Cassidy that hit him like a punch to the gut. He thought about Jonathan, but he also thought about how Cassidy might look spread across his lap.

Was Cassidy the soft, pliant type? Or did all that anxiety melt away in bed and show more of the spark hinted at when Cassidy had been at the restaurant? Was he submissive? A little aggressive? Malcolm would dearly love to find out, but more than that he wanted to know why Cassidy was so anxious all the time, why he seemed always fearful. He wanted to strip the sadness from those eyes, and see what they looked like bright and happy.

It was stupid. Not quite four months, Cassidy had been here. By now, employees had usually spilled their life stories to anyone who had no choice but to stand still and listen—or those desperate enough to avoid work.

About Cassidy, he still knew so woefully little.

His parents had died when Cassidy was eighteen. Instead of turning his siblings over to foster care, he'd taken responsibility of them. That said more about Cassidy than he suspected Cassidy realized. It said a hell of a lot.

He also knew Cassidy took his coffee with only a small amount of cream. He suspected that when not drinking biohazard office coffee, Cassidy took it black.

Cassidy obviously loved his siblings, where so many probably would have come to resent them.

He was almost boyishly happy about the college courses he'd be starting soon, and Malcolm sensed a lot of that was a lost opportunity.

His last boss had been a monstrous bitch. He was terrified of losing this job, despite the fact he had nothing to worry about.

He never wore short sleeves. He had Malcolm completely enthralled and was completely oblivious to it.

Malcolm let his head thump against the top of his desk, and gave up any attempt at working. He was going to have to do something about Cassidy, but damned if he knew what yet.

He pushed away from his desk and stood up. If he wasn't going to work, then he would go and bother Antoine. Decision made, he grabbed his laptop bag and fled his office, heading for the elevators and taking one straight to the thirty first floor. He waved to Antoine's secretary, who only smiled and waved him through.

Antoine looked up from his computer, and smirked when he saw who it was. He stopped typing whatever he'd been working on, and said, "I ran into your tattooed hottie Saturday night. He turned me down cold, it really hurt my feelings."

Malcolm scowled. "Why the hell were you hitting on my hottie?" he demanded.

Antoine snickered. "Making out with the man for a few minutes does not make him yours, you know."

"No, but it does mean back off, I called dibs," Malcolm retorted.

"You're hilarious when you're obsessing," Antoine replied. "Anyway, Mr. Possessive, I didn't hit on him. But, like you, that's how he took it at first. If I'd been cruising, I think I would have gone home crying."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "I'm guessing you weren't able to hook him? Wally usually has better game than that."

"Wally had to bail on the evening. The Banshee demanded his presence." Antoine made a face.

"Ah," Malcolm said. "So my hottie turned you down on all fronts. Must be losing your charm Mr. Smooth."

"Fuck you. Poking around a bit more, though, it seems the man mostly keeps to himself. He's hooked up, but those were few and far between. He's definitely never pulled a guy out of a fight and then gotten into a car with him."

Malcolm shrugged, playing at nonchalance. The jealousy he'd felt at hearing Jonathan had hooked up—of course he'd fucking hooked up, come on, what was he, in high school?—had been soothed by hearing Jonathan had treated him different.

Ugh. How could he have it so bad for his employee and be obsessed with a mystery all at the same time? That didn't seem fair.

He wished he remembered more of that night. So much of it nagged at him. He would say that'd teach him to drink so damned much, but he knew better.

"So I'll meet you there at eight."

"Huh?" Malcolm blinked. "What?"

"Stop daydreaming about tats and pay attention to me," Antoine said, exasperated. "I said, you're coming with me Saturday night. Meet me at Louie's about eight."

"Make it six, I'll buy dinner," Malcolm replied. "I deserve good food first, if I'm going to be dragged around karaoke joints all night."

"Hey, if we find him, there's a good chance you'll get sex, so stop your damned whining."

"No," Malcolm retorted, just because it did Antoine good to be disobeyed.

Antoine ignored him, and pointedly went back to typing.

Pointedly ignoring *him*, Malcolm pulled out his laptop and alternated between the stupid monthly reports, and checking on his own myriad accounts—yes, still a millionaire.

"One day," he said, when Antoine's silence started to become obnoxious and insufferable, "I'm going to buy this company just so I can fire you."

"You're a millionaire, not a billionaire, Mr. McDuck. Anyway, you can't fire me. Your business would collapse without my beautiful, charming presence."

"Oh, to test that theory," Malcolm replied, and closed his laptop with a snap. "I'm taking an early lunch."

"You're not a very good manager, always ducking out and hiding and taking early lunches."

"Tell the CFO to fire me, then," Malcolm said. "My department runs like a well oiled machine, the rest of you are just jealous. Also, you might be CCO, but I know how to 'misplace' your paycheck, so be nicer to me. You coming?"

Antoine flipped him off, then shook his head and said, "No. I'm meeting Wally. Bastard is finally going to file for divorce, but you did not hear that."

Malcolm nodded. "I know nothing. Going to lunch. See you when I see you."

"Later," Antoine said, already slipping back into his work.

Smiling, feeling horribly like a slacker but not really able to make himself care, Malcolm took the elevator to the lobby and hit the streets.

His own apathy should definitely concern him. Perhaps it was time to start being a bit more serious. But would he do? Perhaps all the restlessness simply came from being pulled between two hotties. Not that Cassidy or Jonathan cared, but that never stopped an obsession.

Now, where to eat?

"Mr. Malcolm! Mr. Malcolm!"

Malcolm turned, mostly at the shock of hearing a strange female voice call his name—but he placed it even as he saw her, and returned her smile of greeting. "Ms. Lindsay, a pleasure to see you again. What brings you downtown today?"

She laughed and latched onto his arm, walking alongside him as he resumed. "Running errands, crossing and dotting everything before I go off to grad school in August. Keeping my brother in line?"

"Your brother keeps himself in line better than a five star general could an army," Malcolm replied.

"God, don't I know it," Lindsay replied, but with a fond smile. "Mom and dad were never half so strict as Cass could be, but then again, they weren't afraid of social services."

Malcolm nodded. "Would you like to eat lunch with me, or were you in a hurry?"

"I could eat," Lindsay replied. "You sure? I didn't meant to bother you; I was just was surprised to see you. We really enjoyed dinner, Cass especially, not that he'd ever say." She wrinkled her nose at her absent brother. "He really likes the job."

"I know," Malcolm said, and opened the door to a favorite sandwich shop, motioning for her to precede him. They shuffled into line, and he couldn't help but ask, "Your brother seems to have hurt his hand. He said it was doing house maintenance."

Lindsay slid him a look, pensive and amused and, Malcolm suspected, too knowing. Then she snorted. "House maintenance, hah! You tell him I told, I'll murder you."

"I promise not to breathe a word."

"Denny got stuck at a party that went bad. Cass went to pick him up and punched out a guy there." She threw her head back and laughed at Malcolm's disbelieving look. "I'm serious. Cassidy is tougher than he probably comes off at work. He's... used to playing mouse at work." She grimaced. "You really should have seen the bitch who lorded it over him before, though he'd kill me for telling you anything."

Malcolm frowned in thought. "It was a diner, right? Blue something." He'd memorized several details from Cassidy's resume, but former place of employment hadn't really stuck.

"Bluebird Diner," Lindsay replied, tucking back a strand of hair in an obviously nervous gesture. "Mary Winston was his boss." She said nothing more, as her turn at the counter came up and she put in her order.

Adding his own, Malcolm paid before she could, waving off her protests and thanks. "Let's sit by the windows."

Lindsay nodded, and they settled in with their food, and Malcolm should totally be ashamed of himself for getting what dirt he could from the sister—but he was totally shameless about shameful behavior in this case. He wanted the sad eyes to go away.

"Cassidy was telling us about the company picnic," Lindsay said after a few minutes of silence while they ate. "He's more excited than he likes to let on. Denny and I are looking forward to it, too. It's cool to see him doing so well, you know? Even if it's not what he would have chosen." She shrugged and focused on her food.

Malcolm wanted to ask what Cassidy would have chosen, but sensed that was prying too far. He didn't want to go that far behind Cassidy's back.

"You knew he'd punched someone, didn't you?" Lindsay asked.

"I know a fight bite when I see one," Malcolm replied. "It just surprised me to see Cass sporting one."

Lindsay giggled. "To hear Denny tell it, you should have seen him throw the punch. Cassidy is quiet until he's riled, but when he's riled—look out."

So, feisty underneath the shy. Malcolm wanted to see that feisty like burning.

"You should have seen the night these punks tried to trash our yard on Halloween. We found out later they'd already hit other houses on the street. Cass heard them from the kitchen, snuck outside. We never saw what happened, but we heard them scream, man. Screamed all the way down the street as they ran away." She dissolved into giggles again.

Malcolm laughed, mostly because her laughter was infectious. He really wanted to see Cassidy like that; not terrified of him and almost as silent as a grave when the office girls weren't coaxing or outright shoving him into conversation.

He wanted Cassidy comfortable with him.

Lindsay smiled at him, and Malcolm again sensed she knew more than she should—though how she knew any of it was beyond him. Thank god he'd never really had to deal with women, past knowing what to say or not to say to his brothers' girlfriends.

Bluebird, was it? Hmm...

"Oh crap!" Lindsay burst out suddenly. "I'm going to miss my bus!"

"Bus?" Malcolm asked, confused. "Why did I think you had your own car?"

Lindsay grinned, and boy did he know Up To Something when he saw it. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"I had to run my errands downtown today, so I had Denny drop me off before he took the car to go pick up Cassidy's birthday present."

"Birthday?" Malcolm echoed. How had he not known Cassidy's birthday was coming up? "When's his birthday?"

"Thursday," Lindsay replied. "We're celebrating Friday, though, so we can take him back to your brother's place."

"What did you get him?"

"A new computer," Lindsay replied. "He's had the same poor old clunker for years. He's made certain Denny and I have good laptops for school, but he never gets around to his own upgrade, the dork. So we're doing it for him. Denny went to pay and retrieve today."

"Sounds awesome."

Lindsay beamed, then looked at her watch and sighed. "And now I have totally missed my bus. Guess I'm waiting for the next one." She shrugged.

Malcolm was immediately contrite. "It's mostly, if not entirely, my fault. I can give you a ride home, or wherever, if you like."

"Aren't you supposed to be at work? It's not a big deal, really. I'm done for the day, now. Waiting for a bus won't kill me."

"I'm allowed to take long lunches if I need them," Malcolm replied. "Anyway, good deed for a good deed. You talked about your brother, so I shall escort you home."

Lindsay laughed. "Fair enough. Thank you for lunch, and the ride."

"Any time. I'll tell Carlos to expect you sometime Friday night and the occasion. They'll set you up proper."

"That's totally way too nice of you," Lindsay replied.

Malcolm shrugged. "Cass is a good guy, and I'd like us to be friends. I want to see him relax, be happy."

Lindsay smiled at him, her eyes bright with something she obviously wasn't going to voice. "Me too. You going to join us for dinner on Friday, then?"

Tempting, very tempting, but... "Nah. He should relax and have fun with his family. Maybe next time." Next year, he'd take Cassidy out for the sort of birthday dinner to which siblings weren't invited. Yeah, he liked that idea.

Lindsay nodded and followed him out of the sandwich shop and to the parking garage of his office building. An hour later, returned from dropping Lindsay off and doing a bit of scouting about for a certain diner, he bought a coffee from the café across the street then returned to Antoine's office.

It was, at present, empty. Good, he could get into mischief without Antoine pestering him. First thing was first; Malcolm sent off an email to the necessary office women to see to it the accounting department put something together for Thursday.

Then, he pulled up his various accounts to take stock of things, pulling up other sites and files as he considered his options. Then he called his lawyer. "Hey, Joey. I want to buy a restaurant. No, a particular one. A diner. Do all my zeroes look like they care? No, no, what I want is..." Quickly and concisely, Malcolm laid out what he wanted to do. "Yeah, Carlos. Of course he'd kill me or at least try. Fine, fine. Call me back when I'm allowed to show up and fire people. Email or fax or overnight whatever I need to sign. Thanks. Bye."

"What—"

Malcolm jumped, nearly sending his laptop crashing to the floor. He glared up at Antoine. "When the hell did you get back?"

"About ten minutes ago. Why the hell are you buying some dive way the hell across the city?"

"Because I feel like it," Malcolm said shortly, and went back to typing.

Antoine groaned. "I know that look and tone. I had a sneaking suspicion lately. You're already gaga over someone new? Who is it? Not your tattooed hottie, you'd have said already. Who has you hooked, and what's on his arrest record?"

"Fuck you," Malcolm replied.

"Fess up or I'm going to beat the shit out of you," Antoine said, dropping down next to him and prodding him none too gently. "Or tell mom."

"God damn it," Malcolm snarled. "Fine. Cassidy." Hopefully the asshole wouldn't remember who that was.

Antoine frowned. "Should that—oh! Wait a second. You're smitten over your new employee? But, he's a straight arrow type, isn't he? Basic Office Monkey." He started howling with laughter. "Oh my fucking god, you finally fell for a non-bad boy."

"I hope you choke on your own smugness," Malcolm snapped. "He isn't basic, and I don't think he's entirely a good boy, and does it really fucking matter? Oh, shut the fuck up already!" He shoved Antoine off the couch, then kicked him for good measure when the bastard just kept laughing.

Finally Antoine stopped laughing. "Touchy, touchy. So why the diner, then? What's that got to do with Mr. Employee?"

Malcolm slumped down in his couch, and muttered, "Nothing."

"Give it up, or I'm telling Carlos."

"You'll tell Carlos anyway, you dirty little fink. Fine. It's where he used to work. His former boss was a raging bitch and half the reason he's always terrified here. I'm going to buy the restaurant, then go fire her. Just for fun, I'm going to make Carlos my Head Manager or something. Then he'll own one restaurant, and by the end of the year they'll own the Mexican place, and he'll be a respectable businessman. Though he still won't be able to afford a Maserati."

"Asshole," Antoine said, but sounded almost cheerful as he said it. "How cute, you're being all knight and stuff for your Office Monkey."

"I hate you so much."

Antoine snickered and moved out of hitting and kicking range "I hate you too. Now, stop being Mr. Heiress and get back to the monthly reports before your boss comes in here to find you."

Malcolm groaned, but at a look from his brother and in no rush to deal with his boss, he finally pulled the reports up and got to work.

*CHAPTER EIGHT

Malcolm drained his beer and glared venomously at his brother. "If you dragged me out here just to laugh and mock while the music makes my ears bleed, hell will hath no fury like a millionaire with a vendetta."

"Certainly it will have no one prissier," Antoine replied, unimpressed. "Stop whining, it doesn't actually make you prettier."

"Yes, it does," Malcolm retorted and called for another beer. "I don't think our mysterious Jonathan is showing."

"Patience is a virtue," Antoine said, mostly just to try his patience. "It's only nine o'clock, simmer down, Princess. He'll show. Wally's pretty certain he's nailed the guy's pattern, and I don't think I scared him off the other night."

"Speaking of Wally, how goes that thing I don't know about?"

Antoine made a face. "Shit, he hasn't even breathed a word of it yet. He's getting all his ducks in a row first. The dumb bitch isn't going to get her way this time."

"What finally tipped it for him?" Malcolm asked. "She's had her claws in his balls since, what, your sophomore year?"

"Yeah," Antoine replied. "I don't know, he won't say exactly." He shrugged and downed most of his own beer. "At this point, I'm just glad he's breaking free."

There was a question or two Malcolm had always wanted to ask Antoine, in regards to Wally—but one, he could not imagine it, because Antoine the Player was so firmly entrenched, imagining anything else was just weird. Two, he liked breathing, and he suspected if he dared to call Antoine out, he would cease to perform that vital function.

"Well, if he needs any help, just let me know."

"Yeah, yeah," Antoine said, and with a vague flapping of hand, changed the subject. "So are you going to break company policy sometime in the near future?"

"None of your business," Malcolm replied.

Antoine rolled his eyes. "How did he like his little office birthday party?"

"I think once he stopped freaking out he really liked it," Malcolm said, smiling at the memory. "The girls have a knack for calming him down."

What did it say about him, that he was only so interested in being here? He'd rather go home and relive all of Cassidy's smiles at the party, the way they'd even gotten him to laugh a bit, relax by some small

measure. He now also knew that Cassidy liked his pizza with lots of meat, didn't care much for soda, and had gone for the chocolate cake rather than the vanilla.

He heaved a sigh when Antoine gave him a smirking little look and with a grimace said, "Oh, shut up. So maybe—" he stopped as the latest voice on the karaoke stage cut through him. Jesus H. Christ, the voice was the fucking wet dream to end all wet dreams.

Antoine, he realized, hadn't been smirking for the reason Malcolm first surmised.

Glancing toward the stage, he saw Jonathan. Holy hell, he'd forgotten how utterly fuckable the man looked. Like before, he was dressed in dark jeans and a black t-shirt, both fitted to drive a man crazy. The flat cap was on his head, pulled low. "Fucking hell, he can sing."

"Yes," Antoine said smugly.

Malcolm swallowed and could not be bothered to reply, too enamored of the man on stage, singing like a rock star, so far beyond the wannabes eying him jealously. What was a voice like that doing in a shithole like this?

Then Jonathan looked up, and the lights from the stage fell just right, and Malcolm didn't even notice that he'd dropped his beer and spilled it everywhere, oblivious to Antoine's squawks of protest. "Fuck me, that's Cassidy!"

No way in hell—but it was. Mostly sober, with more light, and not wiped from a fight... now that he could see, he would know those eyes, that face, anywhere. Jonathan was Cassidy, which meant he'd made out with Cassidy all those nights ago, and he was so going to wring that pretty little neck the first chance he got.

But as he'd spoken, Cassidy had jerked, eyes going to him—and then going wide with horror and panic. It would have been funny, had he not looked so fucking *scared*.

Then Cassidy abruptly bolted from the stage, making a beeline for the nearest exit.

"Damn it!" Malcolm said and ran after him.

Chasing Cassidy out the side entrance, he raced down the alleyway, lunging at the last moment. "Cassidy!" Grasping Cassidy's arm, yanking hard, he nearly sent them both crashing to the crowd, but managed at the last moment to twist enough he landed hard against the wall. His breath wooshed out of him, and he barely managed to keep hold of Cassidy. "Cass!"

Abruptly Cassidy froze, looking like nothing so much as a terrified, wide-eyed cat.

Moving without real thought, Malcolm reached up with one hand to lightly cup Cassidy's face. "Why did you run? Why...why would you hide this?"

Cassidy only stared at him a moment longer, then abruptly began to tremble. "B-because I'm not supposed to do it," he said, then began to try and struggle to get free. "Let me go."

"Not if you're just going to run away," Malcolm replied, though he did loosen his hold a bit. His other hand he still kept lightly cupping Cassidy's cheek. "Cass... this whole time it was you, and you never said a word." He laughed, even if he wanted to shake Cass senseless and still wring that pretty throat. "I've been tied up in knots over two men for weeks, and all this time they were the same guy."

"Huh?" Cassidy said, startled into looking up at him.

Malcolm didn't give him a chance to look down again, grasping his chin firmly and keeping his head tilted up. "Cassidy...look, can we go talk somewhere?"

"Uh, okay," Cassidy said, looking resigned to whatever terrible fate he imagined was in store.

"You're not going to bolt if I let go?" Malcolm asked, though he didn't really think so—at this point, if Cassidy had wanted to break free and go, he could have.

At that, Cassidy scowled. "No. I said we'd talk, we'll talk."

"Fine," Malcolm said and let him go.

Cassidy stepped back, looking twitchy and scared and so miserable, Malcolm almost felt like a jerk for busting him. He wanted Cassidy to smile, and jeez he looked as edible as he had the first night Malcolm had seen him like this, only more so because it was Cassidy not some stranger—

He didn't even realize he'd moved again, until he felt Cassidy's gasp against his mouth, felt soft, warm lips move against his. What he didn't feel was a protest, and he didn't want to give Cassidy a chance to come to his senses.

Wrapping his arms around Cassidy again, loving the way holding Cassidy felt, he pulled them flush together and kissed hard and deep, desperate to stake some sort of claim this time, loathe to let Cassidy escape a second time.

"This—this isn't talking," Cassidy said when they finally broke apart, but he made no effort to pull away or otherwise free himself from the arm around his waist or the hand fisted in his hair.

Malcolm laughed softly, briefly, and reluctantly let him go. "No, I suppose not, but I'm not going to say I'm sorry."

The barest of answering smiles flitted briefly across Cassidy's face, before it was buried by an anxious frown again.

"Come on, then," Malcolm said, and snagged Cassidy's hand, keeping firm hold of it as he led the way to the special garage where he'd parked his car for the evening—he wasn't taking any more chances with crazy, violent exes.

When they reached it, Cassidy made a choked, whimpering sort of sound. Malcolm eyed him. "Something wrong?"

"Did you have to drive this car?" Cassidy asked with a strangled laugh, and it was so strange still, seeing Cassidy as Jonathan. The tattoos and tight clothes, the flat cap over unrestrained curls, all the bad-boy flavor drizzled over the sad eyes and sweet demeanor he associated with Cassidy.

If he got any harder, he was going to break something and the night would turn very tragic. "What's wrong with my car?" he asked.

Cassidy laughed again, sounding amused, half-hysterical, and resigned, and Malcolm had never known one laugh to contain so much. "Do you know what kinds of thoughts I've been having about you and this car since you first gave me a ride home? I was hard the whole way."

Malcolm groaned, one hand balling into a fist, the other gripping his keys too tightly, before he forced himself to relax. "Get in the damned car, or I will not be held responsible for bending you over the hood and pounding into you as hard as I can."

This time, Cassidy groaned, before obediently opening the door and sliding down into the passenger seat. "Where are we going?" he asked once Malcolm had settled in the driver's seat and started the car.

"Somewhere you're comfortable," Malcolm replied. "I don't want you running away from me again."

Cassidy gave that strange laugh of his again, yanking his flat cap from his head and scrubbing a hand agitatedly through his curls. "I think we're past me getting away clean, man. I never should have fucking risked it, not after you and your brother each found me once."

"I cannot fucking believe you made out with me, then played it so cool on Tuesday." Malcolm bit the words out. "Were you trying to play me for a fool?"

Silence reigned for a moment, then Cassidy said quietly, "I didn't want to get fired, and I didn't know if you wanted work and pleasure mingling, and I'm supposed to be a good office monkey—not this. Not anymore." He ran a down his face, breath ragged as he exhaled, and stared out the window at the dark city.

Malcolm said nothing as he wove through the city and eventually reached the highway, careful to watch his speed because the cops just loved trying to pull him over, and he was so not in the mood for it. "I don't understand," he said at last. "Why is it such a bad thing for you to be yourself?" he hazarded, because he sensed this Cassidy was much more natural than office Cassidy. The tattoos alone seemed to state that loud and clear.

"Because I was eighteen, and they wanted to take my siblings away, and for years after they never left me the fuck alone," Cassidy snarled, trembling in his seat, and the words tumbled out so fast, Malcolm wondered how long he'd been holding it all back. "Every goddamn day, I worried something about me would cost me what little I had still had to lose."

"Screw this," Malcolm muttered, and took the next exit, turning at random streets until they were on a dark, deserted street. Turning the car off, he reached over and tugged Cassidy over as best he could in the awkward space. "Cass—no one can take them away now, and no one is going to hurt you for being you."

The dimness of the car lights were still more than enough for him to see the sad, sad eyes. No one so young should look so old—and no one should look so scared.

"And why wouldn't I want to mix business and pleasure?" he asked, hoping being a bit less serious might relax Cassidy a bit. "I've been thinking of little else since I hired you. Then I met Jonathan, and found myself torn by two people."

Cassidy pulled away, and Malcolm let him. "You didn't recognize me at all. You were drunk and beat up though," his mouth quirked briefly, then faded away into sadness again. "Still, I was sure you'd figure it out... but you had no idea. So I left it."

Malcolm reached out to grasp his arm and tug him back, but found himself distracted by the tattoos. Beautifully done, and they must have cost a bloody fortune. Given Cassidy's probably tight situation, they must be pretty damned important to him. "No wonder you always wear long sleeves," he said. "I just thought you were particularly strict about adhering to office policy."

The arm trembled slightly beneath his hand, and Malcolm hated it. "Cass, you don't have to be scared of me. Please." He looked up, begging with voice and face, unable to bear that Cass was scared of him, of this. "I swear to god, I just want you to stop being sad and scared."

Cassidy burst out laughing, though it sounded more like a strangled sob.

Malcolm cut the awful sound off with a kiss, sinking a hand into the so-soft curls, not caring how awkward or uncomfortable the location was, his only concern to soothe Cassidy.

Who made a soft, indistinct noise that could have been anything, then shifted to cling as tightly as he could in the limited confines of the car.

Though he was all for finding a more accommodating surface and disposing of their clothing, for the moment Malcolm kept the kiss slow and easy, like savoring a fine wine until Cassidy began to soften and relax in his arms, until it no longer felt like Cassidy would shake himself apart any second.

"Cass," he said softly when the slow kisses finally stopped, brushing feather-light kisses across his face, nuzzling one cheek. "Please, don't be scared of me."

Cassidy surprised him by clinging, and Malcolm was really starting to wish they weren't in his damned car. "You're my boss, and I need that job, and what happens when you no longer need me but I need the job?"

"Fuck that," Malcolm said. "I don't need the job. I'll quit if you want me to, because this isn't about me being your boss."

"Quit?" Cassidy demanded, recoiling. "How can you—but I guess money is no object, is it?"

Malcolm yanked him close and kissed him again, but this time it was hard and bruising. He wanted Cassidy to feel it long after the kiss ended. "Stop it," he said when they broke apart. "Stop finding fucking excuses. Yeah, I have money. But I didn't ask for it, and I don't flaunt it. Are you even going to give this a try, or are you just going to keep looking for excuses to hide away?"

The very last thing he expected Cassidy to do was laugh. "So a Maserati isn't flaunting?" he asked, ducking his head to hide his amusement.

"Oh, shut up," Malcolm replied, mouth twitching. "Besides that."

Cassidy nodded. "As hot as your not flaunting it piece is, I would really prefer we go somewhere more comfortable."

"Sure," Malcolm said and started the car again. Then he realized he had no idea where they were. "Just tell me how to get back to the highway."

"You got us lost?" Cassidy asked, doing a poor job of smothering a laugh.

"Oh, be quiet," Malcolm said. "I was more interested in calming you down. I swear, man, it's depressing how scared you are of me by day and holy hell, how different you are by night." He wanted to explore those tattoos with his tongue for a very long time, and then the rest of the lithe, compact little body.

Cassidy made a choked noise. "I'm not scared of you. I was freaked out by wanting my boss, and then trying not to die of pent up lust after that night in the car followed by you having no fucking clue."

Malcolm groaned. "It is so very weird to hear Mr. Proper Little Office Monkey talk like that."

This time, Cassidy's laugh was low and husky. "Weirder than knowing it was me straddling your lap and all but begging for a ride?"

"Stop that right now!" Malcolm said with a strangled laugh. "I still have to drive. Fucking hell, your little office routine hides a hell of a lot of evil."

Cassidy said nothing, but there was a lingering smirk in his voice as he said, "Turn right here, then left at the light, that should take us back to the highway."

Malcolm nodded and asked, "So where are we going? Are your siblings expecting you back anytime soon?"

"They told me it was my birthday weekend, and if I came back before Sunday afternoon, they'd resort to blackmail and other nefarious means," Cassidy said, amused and aggravated. "Speaking of people making decisions and doing things for me, am I ever going to be allowed to pay for my food at Carlos'?"

"No," Malcolm said. "Not if you're dating me."

Cassidy was silent, and Malcolm wondered if he'd gone too far too fast. Or maybe Cassidy didn't want...

"I'm not a very good bet," Cassidy said, so quietly Malcolm barely heard him. "Too much baggage."

Malcolm nearly stopped the car right then and there, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Fuck that," he finally managed to say, unable to form a more intelligent, adult response. "You want baggage,

we can compare sets. I don't give a damn about baggage. I just want to know if you're willing to give us a try. And by the way I won't take no for an answer."

Cassidy sighed. "I can't believe you fucking found me. I can't believe we've never crossed paths before, at least at Jim's."

"Me neither. Apparently you popped in here and there, and I never noticed."

"I never noticed you either," Cassidy replied. "You gave me a fucking heart attack that night."

"Yeah, well, you left me with a hard on and massively confused," Malcolm replied. "It's really not fair you've known this whole time, and I was the drunken clueless one."

Cassidy snorted. "Stop getting drunk and stumbling into bar fights. Speaking of, you get into a lot of fights, don't you?"

"Not on purpose," Malcolm replied. "Mostly I just have bad taste in boyfriends. Until now, anyway."

"We'll see," Cassidy said softly, but Malcolm would take it, because 'we'll see' was a definite maybe, possibly even a 'yes' and the rest was just details.

"So we still haven't decided where we're going," Malcolm said. "If you don't decide in the next five minutes, we're going to my place." His words were met only with silence, and Malcolm wondered if he'd gone too far again. It was going to take getting used to, Cassidy's odd blend of bad boy and straight-laced. "No suggestions?" he finally asked, when he couldn't take the silence another second.

He could just see Cassidy's mouth curve, from the corner of his eye in the dark. "I was waiting five minutes."

Malcolm was silent a moment, startled—then laughed and laughed and really wished they did not still have an hour's worth of driving still to go.

*CHAPTER NINE

Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god. He was in such deep shit, but how was he supposed to care when Malcolm tasted so fucking good—hot and male and a hint of beer. They hadn't even made it out of the parking garage, and he couldn't care about that either, not when his hands were shoved up under Malcolm's shirt and Malcolm's hands were gripping his ass—

He moaned and scraped his nails across sweat-slick skin, already half in love with the way that made Malcolm shiver. God, it was so fucking stupid to be giving in like this, no matter what Malcolm said or how convincingly he said it, but nothing else felt so good and right outside of standing behind a microphone and singing his heart out.

"You know," he managed to say between kisses and moans. "This still isn't talking."

"No," Malcolm agreed, sounding almost cheerful, and nipped along the length of his throat, interspersing the sharp bites with laps of his tongue at random points. "We'll get there. Eventually."

Cassidy couldn't bring himself to argue with that, and said only, "Why don't we get to your bed? Or at least your place, and not your parking garage."

Chuckling against his mouth, dropping once last hard, long kiss upon it, Malcolm pulled away and led the way across the parking garage to an elevator where he had to use a key before he could push the button for his floor.

Then Malcolm dragged him close again, and Cassidy went easily, drunk on how it felt to be so free and easy with Malcolm, that Malcolm obviously loved what he was seeing. Alcohol had nothing on the buzz of being seen and wanted.

The chiming of the elevator broke into the kiss, and he pulled his hands out of the back of Malcolm's jeans only because they had to leave the elevator.

He got a glimpse of a kitchen, living room, the city lights beyond, hallway, and then he landed with a grunt on what seemed to be a very large bed. Then Malcolm was covering him, his weight pressing Cassidy into the bed, and it could only be better if—"Naked," he gasped out and suited word to deed by fumbling for Malcolm's shirt and getting it off, raking his nails down Malcolm's smooth chest, completely in love now with that little shiver.

Then the rest of their clothes were dispensed with, and he drank in the sight of a naked Malcolm, committing all the fine details of it to memory, the way the dimmed lighting turned his skin a warm gold, the sheen of sweat upon it, the soft brown hair tousled by Cassidy's hands. "You are too goddamned pretty for your own good—or mine."

Malcolm laughed and grabbed hold of Cassidy's right wrist, lifting it to his mouth and kissing each butterfly he could reach, tongue sliding across them as though enjoying some treat. "I'm pretty? Fuck, Cass, you're positively deadly."

"Only if you don't fuck me," Cassidy replied and abruptly shoved with his free hand, sending Malcolm toppling over with a startled yelp. Snickering, Cassidy straddled him—but the laughing rapidly turned into moaning then, when they both had the breath left to make any sound at all.

"Stuff is in my nightstand," Malcolm managed to get out, and Cassidy rolled off him so Malcolm could get to the nightstand.

Soon enough they were back to touching and gasping, and Christ, it had been a long damned time since he'd let anyone at his ass. Not in a million years had he thought it would ever actually be Malcolm's fingers pushing and turning and stretching him, though he'd always known that he'd beg this shamelessly if it *was* Malcolm.

Above him, Malcolm muttered something Cassidy didn't quite catch, but then he stopped caring, as the fingers withdrew and Malcolm was pushing inside him, so hot even through the condom, and he was tight enough still he'd be feeling Malcolm for days.

The next time they did this, he definitely wanted to ride, but for the moment he was more than happy to hold on for dear life and let Malcolm fuck him through the mattress until they both came with shouts that filled the bedroom.

He waited for the moment of panic, the urge to flee, the oh shit oh shit oh shit what have I done, as they cleaned up and settled down. He really should leave, return home, and hope like hell this wasn't going to cost him his job—

But he was tired, from drinking and singing, the nastiest shock of his life followed by running like a bat out of hell, then all that had transpired with Malcolm... There was also the simple fact that Malcolm felt good, pressed up against him from behind, arm a reassuring weight draped over him.

It was impossible to feel alone, wrapped up with someone in bed, warm and sated and sleepy. But, responsibility could not be entirely ignored. "I should call home, tell them I won't be home until tomorrow?" He tried to make it a statement, not a question, but it was hard to believe that Malcolm would let him stay the night even if all evidence pointed to that very thing.

Malcolm yawned, then shifted, rolling away briefly to fetch something from the far nightstand. A phone, Cassidy realized. "What about your car?" Malcolm asked.

Cassidy froze, then groaned and buried his head in the pillow. He heard Malcolm laugh, then a warm kiss was pressed to his shoulder. Of all the—he'd actually forgotten about his damned car. Christ, he was an idiot. He glanced up as Malcolm started speaking, wondering how the hell he was going to muster the energy to go fetch his car at this hour.

But Malcolm was talking on the phone, not to him, he realized. "Jerry, hey. Two favors—one, call this number," he rattled off Cassidy's home number, "and tell them Mr. Cassidy will not be returning until Sunday evening. Two, need you to send a couple of boys to go fetch a car from Bridgton for me." He listed all the necessary information about Cassidy's car and finished with, "I'll leave the keys outside the door. That's fine. Thanks, Jerry. Bye."

Replacing the phone on the nightstand, Malcolm looked at Cassidy. "Where are your car keys?"

"Uh. Pants. No clue where those are, though," Cassidy looked around the room without really seeing anything, mind awlirl.

Malcolm smirked, and threw back the covers to clamber out of bed, presenting Cassidy with a splendid, evil view as he hunted around the bedroom for their discarded clothes. It almost made Cassidy forget what was going on. "Did you—is someone actually going to get my car? Linds and Denny are going to give me unmitigated hell, you realize, when they get a call from your whatever that I won't be home." Until Sunday evening, Malcolm had said. That meant they were spending all of Saturday together? The thought terrified and thrilled him all at once.

He'd barely finished speaking when his phone started going nuts with the chiming—two texts right in a row, and he knew exactly who they were from and what they were about, groaning as Malcolm rifled through the pants he'd located and tossed Cassidy his cell phone.

The first text was from Lindsay and said, 'Getting laid in style, nice.' He was so going to kill her. When had his sweet little sister turned so damned dirty?

The second text was from Denny, and said only, 'hahaha' which in Denny speak, meant he would never, ever, in a thousand years, let Cassidy live down the fact a third party had called them to inform them Mr. Cassidy would not be home for a couple of days.

"I hate siblings," Cassidy said, tossing the phone aside and flopping back down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Then he glared at Malcolm. "I'm going to kill you."

Malcolm laughed. "Be right back." He left the room, Cassidy's car keys jingling, bare ass horribly distracting until it vanished.

That's when the panic began to set in, pounding through his head ninety miles a minute. He'd just begged his boss to fuck him. His boss lived in a penthouse and drove a car that cost more than Cassidy's house and had arranged for people to just go pick his car up two hours away and oh, god, he so should not be here.

"Hey—"

Cassidy jumped, and wondered when Malcolm had returned. Anything Cassidy might have said was cut off by a kiss, slow and deep and soothing. He loved how it felt when Malcolm sank a hand into his hair, tangling his fingers in Cassidy's curls.

Malcolm shifted, so that he was laying half on top, half alongside Cassidy on the bed, a tangle of limbs and linens. The kisses were a low burn, and Cassidy did not really mind when the steady fire consumed his rush of panic.

"Stop looking so scared," Malcolm said when they at last broke apart, brushing a last soft kiss to his jaw. "I promise, Cass, I have no intention of hurting you. Leaving you sore, yes. Hurting you, no."

Cassidy managed to smile at that. He just couldn't... he wanted to be here, so damned much. Common sense said he should get dressed and grab a taxi, figure out his damned car tomorrow. But common sense wasn't being loud enough to drowned out want and need, which cried out to stay put.

So stay put he did, against all sense, pulling Malcolm down for another long session of kissing, and whatever else they could muster the energy to do.

The smell of coffee woke him, and the growling of his stomach kept him from any chance of going back to sleep. Yawning, refusing to think too much because that would only lead to panicking, Cassidy sat up in bed and swung his legs over the edge. He scrubbed at his face, then took in the bedroom for the first time and wasn't that sad. But, there'd been no real chance last night. Beyond stumbling to the bathroom, then back to bed, he hadn't paid any attention to his surroundings.

It was a handsome room, green and gray, mellow wood. All high quality stuff, that was easy to see at a glance. He moved to the window on the far side of the room, and drew back the curtains. Then he had to pick his jaw up off the floor when he saw the view of the city below. He *knew* this building, it was the only apartment building in the city tall enough to look down on the city this way. The Swallow building. A penthouse here... if he even dared to think about the cost, he'd give himself a heart attack.

Dropping the curtain back in place, he turned and headed for the bathroom. This, too, was nicer than he'd bothered to notice last night. Black and white was the theme throughout, but it didn't come off as cold as he would have thought.

He wondered briefly if he should ask for something before getting a shower. Malcolm was the reason his ass was sore, however, so he could permit Cassidy a shower.

Cassidy was really hoping Malcolm hadn't changed his mind, and Cassidy would be sticking around until Sunday. Come Monday, he'd have a hell of a lot of thinking and decision making to do, but he could play pretend for a day and a half, right?

Putting his tangled thoughts aside, he turned on the shower and once the water was right, slid inside. Oh, that felt wonderful. It didn't matter how he fiddled with his shower, he could never really get it as nice as he would like. This was fantastic, it felt like bliss.

He was just reaching for the soap when he heard the door open, turning when he heard the shower curtain move and felt cold air from outside slip in. "Good morning," Malcolm said, looking him up and down, eyes at a low burn when they met Cassidy's.

Cassidy groaned. "Stop looking at me like that. You've had at me enough for now."

Malcolm laughed. Fuck, Cassidy could stare at him forever and a day. "I was just coming to see if you were amenable to being awake. I guess so. Coffee's on. Breakfast is on its way." He leaned into the shower, uncaring that his head was getting soaked, and stole a quick, hard kiss.

Then he was gone, leaving Cassidy bemused but smiling.

So he obviously wasn't being kicked out quite yet. Cassidy finished his shower quickly, then returned to the bedroom. There, he found his clothes were nowhere to be found. On the bed, however, was a pair

of black lounge pants and a worn and faded green tank top. Pulling on the clothes, he kept the towel to scrub at his hair as he wandered down the hall to the main portion of the house.

Like the bedroom, the living room was handsomely done, but in tones and colors that made Cassidy think of a sunset. Most of it also looked new, and he wondered idly if Malcolm had lived here long. He shrugged the thought off, though, far more interested in the smell of coffee—good coffee.

As he reached the granite-topped bar that divided living room from kitchen, Malcolm pushed a mug of coffee toward him. "Black, right?" Malcolm asked.

Cassidy looked at him in surprise. He always drank his office coffee with as much cream and sugar as he could stand to hide the taste of cheap, stale coffee. "How did you know?"

"The way you fix it at work," Malcolm replied, smiling. "Just enough stuff to ease the worst of it. I had a college roommate who did the same thing."

Returning the smile, Cassidy sat down on a leather-covered barstool and sipped at the coffee, which was not good, but damned good.

Malcolm leaned across the counter, and Cassidy met him halfway, sinking his free hand into Malcolm's soft, still-damp hair as he returned the very long and thorough good morning kiss. Oh, yes, he did like playing this sort of pretend.

"Hey," Malcolm said softly when he finally drew back.

"Morning," Cassidy replied, feeling suddenly and unaccountably shy. He glanced down at his coffee, though his hesitant smile never faded.

"I was thinking—"

But whatever Malcolm was thinking, was put on hold as the doorbell rang.

"Must be our food," Malcolm said, and started toward the door. He stopped abruptly as the sound of the doorbell was almost immediately followed by the sound of the door being unlocked and opened.

Cassidy hid an amused laugh in his coffee mug, not as horrified as perhaps he should be by how angry Malcolm looked as he stared in the direction of the door and the two men who soon appeared.

Antoine, Cassidy recognized immediately. The other man he did not recognize, but he could guess. What with one thing and another, he had nearly forgotten that it was his damned karaoke that had started it all.

So this was the great and powerful Wallace Burgundy. He was good looking, in a way that would have made him cute in his younger years. Somewhere in his mid to late thirties, now, the cute had smoothed out into a classy, distinguished look. Dark brown-red hair that had the barest hints of gray to it, brown-gold eyes, and a slightly crooked nose that did not at all detract from a charming smile.

He stood next to Antoine, and it was a more impressive picture still. Red and gold, casual clothes that cost more than his best suit. It was little wonder those two were used to getting whatever they wanted. Cassidy eyed them warily as they approached, glaring a bit when Antoine smiled at him.

"When the fuck are you doing here?" Malcolm demanded.

Antoine snorted. "You know damn good and well we're here to speak with the little songbird you kidnapped last night. Of course we're here. That was the plan all along."

Cassidy stiffened, drawing back. What? All of it—everything— "You only brought me here to—to get me to sign some fucking contract?" he asked, looking at Malcolm, half-tempted to throw his coffee, or maybe just go with old school and punch the bastard, except it had all seemed...

"No!" Malcolm burst out, catching his hand to keep him from going, shooting Antoine a murderous look. "That was never my plan at all, and if my dipshit brother doesn't shut his damned mouth, he's going to find himself in a world of hurt."

Antoine rolled his eyes. "My plan. It was my plan, not yours. Christ. Drink some more fucking coffee, Romeo."

Wallace laughed and deposited bags of food on the bar, then slid onto the seat next to Cassidy. He held out his hand. "Wallace Burgundy. Wally, please. It's a pleasure to meet you, even if I suspect it's not mutual."

Cassidy shook his hand. "It's mutual, though you may change your mind when you realize my answer to your question is always going to be no."

"Why?" Wally asked, and reached into his back pocket, pulling out a small notebook spiral bound across the top. He flipped through it, rattling off information he must have gathered from the clubs and bars in order to pin Cassidy down. It was equal parts flattering and creepy. "Everything I've heard about you," Wally continued, "says you have the talent, the skill. Experts and amateurs agree you were born with a gift."

"My reasons are my business," Cassidy replied. "I'm no longer interested in a professional career." Not while his siblings still needed him. Not when he would have to fly solo, when he wanted to be Four again so badly.

"*No longer* interested?" Wally repeated.

Cassidy scowled, furious with himself. "Back off."

"Man, you sing like a dream," Antoine said from where he stood fixing two cups of coffee. Moving to the bar, he handed one of them to Wally, who thanked him with a smile that Antoine absently returned. "That sort of voice is a rarity, people dream of being born with that sort of talent."

Cassidy sneered. "It isn't waking up in a cradle born singing. I'm no fucking fairytale. My voice is a lifelong obsession, hours upon hours of training and practice, and spending the rest of my time doing a

million odd jobs to fund the voice lessons. It's hours upon hours of devotion. It's hard work, not dumb luck. Don't make me out to be some miracle. I'm good, not divine."

"Which makes it all the stranger that you don't want to pursue a professional career with it. Obviously the dream is there. I'm trying to offer you a chance to fulfill the dreams you obviously have. Of course you have them. Who doesn't dream of such things?

Cassidy could feel his temper snap, like an old, dry branch. "Who doesn't?" he snapped, setting his coffee down so hard it sloshed and splashed over the counter and his hand. "Who doesn't dream of such things? I'll tell you who doesn't—try an eighteen year old kid who gets a phone call that a drunken asshole plowed into his parents' car, killing all parties. Try a dumb kid suddenly told that he's two seconds away from losing his siblings because he's just a young, dumb kid. Try a dumb kid who suddenly has to figure out how to be a fucking adult, who has to give up fuck everything—including stupid dreams—in order to keep the only family he has left. My band went on toward fame and fortune without me eight years ago. I have a different life now. I don't have the luxury of being able to pursue long dead dreams. *That's* the sort of person who doesn't dream of such things. So fuck off and leave me alone."

He shoved away from the bar and fled back to the bedroom, then realized how stupid that was—it wasn't his bedroom, it wasn't his haven.

But it still smelled like sex, like Malcolm, and even though he wanted to be angry at everyone and everything, with Malcolm for bringing him here—that wasn't fair, and even if it was, he still somehow found comfort just by being in Malcolm's bedroom.

That probably meant he was in deep shit, but he'd sort of already known that and hell if he knew what to do. It wasn't the fall that would kill him, he thought sourly, it would be the sudden stop at the end.

He tensed as he heard someone come in, the door close quietly. Malcolm drew near but Cassidy did not turn around to face him. He curled and uncurled his hands restlessly, wishing his head would sort itself out—wishing more that Malcolm would take away his ability to think.

Arms draped over him from behind—cautiously at first, but they settled firmly when Cassidy did not pull away from them. "I'm sorry," Malcolm said quietly. "It's true I went to hear Jonathan sing, and maybe score. I knew my brother wanted to sign you, but I swear all I wanted was to see you again."

Cassidy nodded, leaning back slightly in the arms now holding him.

"They shouldn't have spoken the way they did, and I'm sorry for that, too," Malcolm said.

"They were trying to make me a rock star," Cassidy said with a sigh. "They were trying to do a good thing. They didn't deserve to have me blow up at them. My problems are mine, no one else should have to hear them, least of all people who want to make me famous."

Malcolm turned him around, an arm still around him, keeping them close, only breaths apart. "I want to hear them. I want to know whatever I need, in order to take the sadness from your eyes."

Cassidy stared at him, completely stunned by the words. No one actually said shit like that, and definitely not to him. Unable to think of a reply, never mind a worthy one, Cassidy simply pressed a kiss to Malcolm's mouth. The kiss was slow and deep, a comforting, steadying sort of kiss, and Cassidy hoped it conveyed all the things he could not put into words, or even sort out.

This whirlwind thing they had going was probably going to blow out of his life as suddenly as it had blown in, and Cassidy hoped it left him some remaining piece, but he suspected it would not and damned if there was anything he could do about it.

He reached up to curl his own fingers around Malcolm's neck, one kiss melding into another, until they seemed so thoroughly tangled up in each he could almost pretend getting untangled again was impossible.

Lost to the kisses, to the smell and the feel of Malcolm, he barely noticed when they made it to the bed, except it meant that he had Malcolm's weight pressing him down. God, he loved the way that felt. "You make me crazy," he murmured, as clothes were discarded, and he began to lap and suck and bite at Malcolm's skin, adding new marks to those made last night.

"Mutual," Malcolm breathed against his skin, matching every kiss and caress, already so well acquainted with Cassidy's body. Cassidy gasped and writhed as Malcolm teased at his hole, one finger sliding in and out.

Malcolm laughed against his throat, nuzzling. "Tempting, tempting."

"Do it," Cassidy said, moaning. "I'm not that sore." He didn't give Malcolm a chance to ask him if he was sure, just yanked him down to give a kiss that said it very clearly.

Soon after, his nails were digging into Malcolm's shoulders as Malcolm thrust into him, keeping up a steady, relentless rhythm until Cassidy could take no more and cried Malcolm's name as he came.

He lay panting long moments after they were stretched out and settled on the bed. Malcolm kissed his shoulder, nuzzling it before finally laying still behind him. "I hope your brother and his friend left," Cassidy said eventually, because he didn't want to know they'd had an audience, and that audience was waiting to harass him again.

Malcolm snorted. "They wasted no time running for their lives. I can't promise Wally will leave off trying to change your mind, but he'll at least be more tactful about it."

Cassidy nodded, feeling tired of it all.

A soft kiss was pressed to the space just beneath his ear. "Do I still stand a chance of spending the day with you?"

Whatever chance Cassidy stood of saying no, that he really should go, vanished beneath the weight of that quiet, wistful tone. Smiling, Cassidy replied, "Only if you fix me more coffee."

Malcolm laughed and turned him to give Cassidy a proper kiss. "It shall be done."

*CHAPTER TEN

Cassidy turned as he heard the door to the break room open and tried to stifle his disappointment when it only proved to be a gaggle of office women instead of Malcolm.

Honestly, he should be relieved he'd seen neither hide nor hair of Malcolm all day. Whether Malcolm was busy or simply avoiding him, Cassidy couldn't say, but it really was just as well. He had no faith he would be able to hide the shift in their relationship; one look at the wrong time and everyone from the head honchos on the top floor to the rent-a-cops in the lobby would know he was sleeping with his boss. Urgh. How the hell had he gotten himself into this mess, when he'd told himself not to do it five thousand times?

The women all tittered and giggled, and Cassidy realized too late that he probably should have got while the getting was good because they were hunting for fresh gossip, and he was obviously the prey. "So, Cassidy," Janice said with what she obviously thought was a sly look. "You look different today. Have a good weekend?"

"Uh—yeah," Cassidy replied. "Good."

"What did you do?" asked Caroline.

Cassidy frowned. Why did they care? Were they that bored? "Uh—dinner and stuff," he said, then realized that was a dumb answer.

"Oh, someone took you to dinner? Who?"

"Um. My boyfriend," Cassidy said, right as the door opened and Malcolm appeared. Cassidy flushed all the darker, as he saw Malcolm had heard him, and the women had all dissolved into their damned giggles, and really why were they so damned crazy? Surely going out to dinner with one's boyfriend wasn't that interesting? Everyone did that.

But, they only continued to make their silly girl noises and asked five thousand more questions. Malcolm, the jerk, carefully ignored all of them and only took forever fixing his coffee. Cassidy was going to kill him very, very slowly.

Janice winked. "Well, dinner would certainly explain that mark on your neck."

"What!" Cassidy said, nearly shouting, slapping a hand to the portion of neck Janice indicated, his face turning all new shades of red. He barely managed not to glare murderously at Malcolm, who took that moment to bolt like the rat bastard coward that he was, coughing ever so mysteriously as he fled.

Cassidy was definitely going to kill him.

The girls lost it completely at that point, and Cassidy decided he'd kill them first. But later. For the moment, he took his chance and fled like a coward himself, running back to the questionable safety of his cubicle.

He'd just sat down when his phone buzzed, telling him he had a new text. Taking out his phone, he flipped it open and read, 'Elevators'. The intelligent thing would be to ignore the summons, and it would serve Malcolm right if he did so, the ass.

Cassidy glanced at his monitor clock, saw it was twenty minutes to quitting time, and packed all his shit up.

"Oh, leaving a bit early?" Janice asked, winking at him.

"Y-yeah," Cassidy said, suddenly feeling guilty and ashamed and crap, he'd only been here a few months he shouldn't—what if he pissed people off—

Janice laughed and made shooing motions at him. "Get, then. Have fun. Tell your boyfriend to be more discreet." She winked again then vanished into her own cubicle.

Cassidy made a beeline for the elevator lobby, immensely relieved when no else talked to him or giggled at him or otherwise attempted to mortify him to death.

"Cass!" Malcolm's voice came from the farthest elevator, head sticking out briefly as he motioned for Cass to join him. Cassidy shook his head—that was the executive elevator, and he so was not surprised Malcolm had access to it.

Reluctantly, Cassidy joined him, feeling like he was going to get in big trouble or pretending to fit in where he never stood a chance of actually belonging. An interloper, that's all he was, really.

But, once the doors slid shut, he could not resist the opportunity to thwack Malcolm hard. "I can't fucking believe you left a goddamn hickey!" he hissed. "I can't believe neither you nor my siblings said something. I hate all of you. A lot."

Malcolm rubbed his abused arm, and bent to plant a mollifying kiss on Cassidy's mouth. "Didn't do it on purpose. Not my fault you're fucking edible."

Cassidy flushed and gave serious consideration to strangling Malcolm with his tie. He settled for glaring.

Malcolm snickered. "You're going to give yourself away, always turning red like that, baby."

That just made Cassidy flush all the more. "Don't call me that. Do I look like a fucking girl to you?"

"No, as a matter of fact, you look like a naughty, naughty office boy to me," Malcolm replied.

"I hate you," Cassidy said, unable to believe he was teasing and playing about the things that actually had him scared to death. Malcolm was still his boss, and Malcolm was also rich and connected. It would be Cassidy who suffered the most when shit fell apart. But together like this, it was hard to think about reality.

Especially when Malcolm bent to kiss him again.

Cassidy whimpered, unable to believe he was standing in an elevator kissing his boss, doing everything he shouldn't be doing and fuck if he didn't love it. His own stupidity was going to kill him, but Christ what a way to go.

The elevator chimed, and they broke apart, as Malcolm led him across a fancy lobby, waved to a woman in a bright red suit, and through a set of double doors. Beyond the doors was an office easily the size of Cassidy's house—at least most of the downstairs, anyway. The nameplate on the enormous desk said 'Antoine Osborne'. Good grief.

Before he could say anything, though, he was back in Malcolm's arms and being soundly kissed. "Have dinner with me tonight," Malcolm murmured against his mouth.

"Huh? Why?" Cassidy asked.

Malcolm looked at him in amusement. "Why not? Can't a guy take his boyfriend to dinner?"

"Ah," Cassidy flushed, remembering the break room. He'd thought Malcolm had overheard that. He hadn't meant to say boyfriend, he didn't want to presume.

The teasing smile faded from Malcolm's face. "Unless you didn't—"

"I didn't mean to presume," Cassidy said quickly. "But, uh—"

Malcolm's smile returned, tripled in brightness, and he stole another quick kiss.

"So why are we here?" Cassidy asked. "This is your brother's office."

"Yep," Malcolm said. "I hide here all the time, especially back when I was two seconds away from calling my new accounts payable guy into my office for a very personal chat."

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "Or when you had a black eye from bar fights that you didn't want your employees to see?" he asked.

Malcolm smirked and said, "Sort of like calling in sick the Monday after secretly making out with your boss over the weekend?"

"Touché," Cassidy conceded, making a face.

Laughing, Malcolm wandered over to what Cassidy realized was a bar and poured himself a drink. "Want anything?"

"Uh, no. I'm good." Cassidy shook his head, as bemused as ever by all the small details of Malcolm and Malcolm's life he kept learning. It was a million light years beyond his own life. "Um. Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Malcolm said, wandering back toward him, a glass of whiskey in one hand.

"Why do you—why are you just a manager and all?"

"Instead of living the idyllic life of a jet setting millionaire, you mean? Because from what I've seen of that life, it's incredibly lonely. I'd only live like a king if I had someone to run off and play with me." The look and heat directed at Cassidy then was quiet but forceful, making it plain that if Cassidy wanted to apply for the position, it was his for the taking.

Cassidy swallowed, and wished he'd asked for a drink after all. "I—I can't run away—" He bit off the 'yet' that tried to tack itself on, but only barely. What was he thinking, trying to mooch off Malcolm. He hadn't worked this hard, come this far, just to wind up as a sponging boyfriend.

Malcolm seemed to hear the unspoken word anyway, if the small, happy smile was any indication.

They were moving too fast. Way too fucking fast. Just because he'd spent four months dreaming and fantasizing about precisely these sorts of stupid, sappy moments along with the nights of fantastic sex, did not mean they should be going ninety miles an hour right now. Malcolm was smart, charming, funny, sweet, hard working, so far from spoiled brat it was crazy, a hell of a brawler, a damned good drinker, and fucked like a dream. None of that, however, excused Cassidy's already daydreaming about distant future type things.

Really, what sort of life could they build, when they were so drastically different in terms of finance, station... It already seemed so lopsided at times.

But then Malcolm moved close and held him closer, and kissed him senseless and all Cassidy could think was 'yes'.

"Stop making out with your new boyfriend in my office," Antoine said. "Nobody gets action in my office unless it's with me. Why are you here?"

"I needed a place to hide and make out with my new boyfriend," Malcolm retorted, grinning.

Antoine rolled his eyes and ignored Malcolm in favor of pouring himself a drink.

"You're the one who emailed to say you needed to talk to me," Malcolm said. "I figured it was easier to catch you here rather than find you later."

Grimacing, Antoine tossed back the contents of his glass, then refilled it. "Yeah. I didn't mean to interfere with your date, though. It's about Wally. It can wait 'til tomorrow. Go have fun." He tossed back the second drink, poured a third, and wandered over to his desk.

To judge from the drinking, and the general air of unhappiness around Antoine, Cassidy surmised the matter *could* wait 'til tomorrow, but definitely shouldn't. He stepped away from Malcolm. "We can go out tomorrow."

"No," Malcolm said. "Go ahead to Carlos'. He'll get you set up, and I'll join you in a bit."

"Okay," Cassidy said, because it wasn't worth arguing about here. If it seemed like he really should go home, he could leave from the restaurant. A silly date, as much as he was looking forward to it, shouldn't take precedence over family.

Malcolm kissed his cheek, and Cassidy replied in kind, then departed, hoping they worked out whatever was wrong.

As he waited for the elevator to reach the parking garage, his mind tried to pull up all the office gossip he'd heard over the weeks—about Antoine being friends with Wally, more than friends with Wally, Wally's marriage being a mess. Then he shook his head, and dismissed all of it. Whatever was wrong, was none of his business, and he had problems enough of his own anyway.

Traffic getting out of downtown was shitty as always, but Cassidy really didn't care today. Content to enjoy the downtime, he put his windows down and his music up, singing along for all he was worth as he crawled along, not caring at all if people glared. Whatever his problems were, he did have Malcolm for the present, and that made him want to smile and sing.

Eventually he broke free of the traffic, and drove to Carlos' restaurant. Parking, locking his car up, he strode toward it—and had barely stepped a foot inside when Carlos appeared at his side. "Mal texted me to say you would be along. Come, come, I have set up one of the family's rooms for the two of you."

"What—" But he was given no chance to reply, and finally gave up until he was dragged into a handsome, secluded dining room with a beautiful view of the city.

Carlos snagged a chair, turned it, and straddled it, draping his arms over the top of it. He'd set two beers on the table, and took a long drink from one of them. "So I hear you are not just a little office monkey after all. Can I see your tats? I always wanted some like yours, myself—all over my arms, torso, you know. But my mother screamed at the idea, and then my girlfriend screams, and now that she is my wife, she screams more loudly than ever. So I do not get tattoos."

Snickering, amused that he was apparently some sort of oddity, Cassidy ignored the ingrained panic that tried to flare up and unbuttoned his shirt, shrugging it off and setting it carefully aside.

Whistling, muttering in Spanish a moment, Carlos finally said. "I like them. Very good work. Girls, man. You are lucky you do not date them. They scream about such things. No wonder Malcolm has it so bad for you." He grew suddenly more serious then. "He likes the bad boys, you know. Always has. Except they turn out to be much worse than he would actually likes, you see? Some of them have roughed him up pretty bad; it's why he is so good in a fight, as you have seen. They trash him, his apartments, the one before you tried to go after his pretty little car. Antoine and I, we find them and make certain they stay away for good, you know?"

Anger shot through Cassidy, hands balling into fists. "Who the fuck hurt him? Why the fuck did you let them live?" He'd break their fucking faces if they tried that crap while he was around. Hell would freeze over before he let anyone else lay a hand on Malcolm.

Carlos looked at him, then grinned. "I like you. Do not worry; we'll call you if there is someone who needs his ass kicked in regards to Malcolm. You know Mal is already at least half in love with you. Antoine and me, we'll make you regret it if you hurt him in any way. Do not be like the others."

"I won't," Cassidy said and meant it. He was the greatest of fools, and so in over his head, but he wouldn't walk away until Malcolm told him to get lost. "I'm not going anywhere until Malcolm tells me."

"Then you had better get used to being around," Carlos replied. "I think he's as likely to tell you to get lost as I am to tell my wife. I will get you another beer, and some food."

Cassidy nodded, grateful he was left alone, and tried to gather his thoughts. Okay. So whatever vague and half-hearted plans he'd had about extricating himself before it was too late were now totally bust. He swallowed the last of his beer.

Okay, okay. He could date his millionaire boss. Oh, god, how the hell had he wound up in this mess? He'd asked himself that question five million times already, but so far no answer had appeared. Shit like this didn't happen to him. What crazy ass thing was going to crash into his life next?

Carlos reappeared just as Cassidy was about to reach full freak out, setting down chips, salsa, guacamole, and more of the dark beer Cassidy liked so much. "So," Carlos said with an evil grin. "Which incredibly embarrassing childhood story would you like to hear first?"

Cassidy's mouth twitched, and he made a mental note to never leave his siblings and Malcolm alone together. But he would totally take full advantage of Malcolm's error. "I'd be willing to bet there's at least one story involving Malcolm dressed like a girl."

In reply, Carlos burst out laughing, slapping the table in amusement. "At least one! My friend, there are dozens. Speaking of Malcolm being a girl—"

"Finish that sentence, Carlos, and I'll go to the kitchen and tell your wife all sorts of interesting stories about your college days," Malcolm said from the doorway, making Cassidy jump.

Carlos ignored him. "Did you know, Cass, that Malcolm was offered seventeen different modeling contracts while we were growing? Up through college. Really, it might be more than that, I think he was careful to hide some of them from us. I mean, seventeen! Some of them, we think the scouts believed he was a woman. One of them, he was dressed as a woman at the time. That was—"

His words were cut off and turned into laughter, as Malcolm yanked Carlos from his seat and more or less threw him out of the room. Malcolm then slammed the door shut and took the seat from which Carlos had been forcibly removed. He glared at Cassidy. "Vile betrayer."

"I'm not going to pass up a chance to hear all about you in drag," Cassidy said with a grin. "You're probably even prettier when you're dolled up—but for the record, I do prefer you as a boy."

"Oh, I was pretty certain of that, given the way you beg," Malcolm drawled, smirking when Cassidy flushed.

Rallying, Cassidy replied, "So was it only seventeen times?"

Malcolm made a face. "No, it was twenty three. If you ever tell anyone that, especially my brothers, I will kill you."

Cassidy laughed. "It's your own fault, being so damned pretty."

"Yeah, yeah," Malcolm replied. "So what else did Carlos tell you while I wasn't here to prevent it?"

"Only that he and Antoine would kill me if I ever hurt you," Cassidy said and drank more beer.

"I'm going to murder them," Malcolm said, barely unclenching his teeth long enough to get the words out. Then he shot to his feet, yanked the door open, and began bellowing at about fifty decibels in fluid, angry Spanish.

Cassidy pulled the guacamole closer, stole Malcolm's beer, and watched as Carlos reappeared and the two brothers went about arguing loudly and colorfully.

Finally, Carlos wandered off again.

"You guys argue a lot, don't you?"

Malcolm grinned. "What makes you think that?"

Cassidy just shook his head. "Speaking of, how is Antoine? I really can go home, if you need to hang with him. He seems pretty upset about Wally. They're pretty good friends, yeah?"

"Yeah," Malcolm said, turning more serious. "Look, this is top secret, but Wally is getting divorced. He's been with the bitch since he was a sophomore in college, and Antoine has always hated her guts. Antoine wants my help digging up a bit of dirt, shit like that."

"I won't say anything," Cassidy replied. "So, uh, not that it's any of my business, you can tell me to fuck off. Are Wally and Antoine, uh, just friends?"

Malcolm downed most of the beer Carlos had left when he'd gotten tossed out. "I dunno. It's the sort of question, if I dare ask, I'll find my face turned into pudding. I think, though, that Antoine has always hated the wife for extremely personal reasons. It'll be interesting to see how the divorce and Wally being single affects everything." He shrugged, then smiled. "But I didn't come here to talk about my brother and his weird ass love life. I came to seduce you."

"I think we're a bit past that, considering what we did all weekend," Cassidy replied.

"Yeah," Malcolm said. "I know you're uncomfortable, though, me still being your boss and all. That reminds me of the other reason I wanted to take you to dinner tonight, and why I was in absentia all day."

Cassidy suddenly felt anxious. "Um...why? Do I want to know?"

"Dunno. I'm resigning from the company."

"What! Why? You shouldn't lose your job—"

Malcolm cut him off with a soft, fond laugh, reaching out to tweak Cassidy's nose. "Let's be honest, Cass. I don't need the money. You asked me yourself why I bother to do it when I'm wealthy. I'd rather have you than this job—let it finally go to someone who could actually use it. There are other things I can do,

until I can convince you to run away to the Bahamas or something with me. Okay? So, don't be upset, please? My last day is technically the day of the company picnic. Oh! Speaking of which, they released the name of the band today. I'm sorry you missed it, because you're probably the only other person who knows them. A group called One Butterfly Missing."

"What?" Cassidy said hoarsely, knocking over his beer when he meant to grab it. "That—no—" Oh, god, they were actually going to be there? He was going to—he couldn't— "I can't go," he said, and stood up, pacing the room, heart near to thudding out of his chest, eyes burning because he couldn't see them but he wanted—and what if they didn't even care or remember him well but they'd changed the name of the band and god he'd have to hear them sing with someone who wasn't him—

He gave a rough, startled cry as he turned and crashed into something hard, then slid his arms around Malcolm and held tight.

"Your arm," Malcolm said softly, sinking a hand into his hair, keeping him close, not seeming to notice or care the way Cassidy shook in his arms. "Butterflies. You're the missing butterfly, aren't you?"

Cassidy only nodded, unable to speak, and held fast to Malcolm as he tried not to think about finally seeing his friends again and not standing with them...

*CHAPTER ELEVEN

Malcolm took one look at the cluster of women in his office, and though briefly that while running like a bat out of hell might not be the better part of valor, it was the better part of staying alive and healthy.

"Good morning," he said slowly as he stepped into his office, and quickly moved around the desk to put it between him and the Pack. "Can I help you lovely ladies with something?"

Janice, whom Malcolm always privately thought of as Pack Leader, smiled at her 'I know more than you want me to know' way and said, "We were just worried about Cassidy."

"Cassidy?" Malcolm asked, not quite certain yet what to think or feel, except that he was fairly certain they were busted. "Why are you worried about Cassidy?"

Janice snorted, and around her the other half dozen women or so all made similar noises of disbelief. "He's been a bit down the past couple of weeks, and much jumpier than usual—and usual is bad enough."

"He's fine," Malcolm said, even if that wasn't entirely true. Cassidy had been quietly depressed and stressed as hell ever since learning that One Butterfly Missing was playing at the picnic. Malcolm still wasn't convinced Cassidy would go to the picnic, despite the promise he'd extracted.

And maybe, just maybe, the interfering he would be doing later that day would begin to put things right, though at the end of it all, it came down to Cassidy.

"You're not mistreating him, boss? He is a few years younger than you," Carrie said, clucking and resting her head in one hand, eying him. "Your life is probably a bit more colorful than he's used to."

Malcolm almost started laughing hysterically at that, and he was so tempted to taunt them about failing as know-it-alls—but her first question drew all his attention. "What do you mean, am I mistreating him? Of course I'm not mistreating him. He's an excellent employee, and a good guy, so of course I don't mistreat him."

"It wasn't as an employee we meant, and you know it," said Betty. "We meant as your boyfriend."

Malcolm rolled his eyes, and gave up. "How did you even know? For god's sake, don't tell Cass you know, he'll have a heart attack. Not that it's any of your business, but I am *not* mistreating him."

"You two haven't been half so subtle as you obviously think," Janice said. "You've been grinning and actually coming to work. He's stopped making sad, wistful eyes at you and sings more often. Have you ever heard him sing boss? He's dreamy, there's no other way to say it." She and the rest of the women sighed and smiled.

"Yes," Malcolm said, carefully not thinking about the few moments when he heard Cassidy sing—catching Cassidy singing in the kitchen while he cooked or cleaned, singing in the car, the shower, and most precious of all were those nights they lay in bed and Cassidy sang just for him.

Cassidy had looked at him sad and wistful? Huh. He fought a stupid urge to grin like an idiot.

"Then why is he so distressed, lately?" Janice demanded.

"One, personal reasons that are none of your business. Two, he can probably sense you're on to him and it makes him tense. He really is scared to death he'll lose his job because he's dating his boss."

They all rolled their eyes. Connie said, "Please. The one rule no one around here follows is the one about fraternization. Almost all of us would be fired, company president included, if they ever attempted to enforce that rule. He shouldn't worry."

"Telling him not to worry is like telling you not to gossip," Malcolm replied dryly.

The woman dissolved into gales of laughter. Janice sighed. "I guess this means you are no longer the most eligible bachelor in the city. What a shame."

"Yes," Malcolm said, rolling his eyes. "What a terrible, terrible shame. Get out of my office and get back to work, before he busts us."

"Okay, okay," the women conceded. "But you'd better treat our boy right, boss, or there'll be another office meeting about it."

Malcolm smiled. "Then I guess I'd better behave."

After they departed, he settled in to get some work done. He hadn't told anyone he was quitting, not wanting it to hang over the picnic. It would be announced then, and hopefully they wouldn't kill him too badly.

He studiously did not check the clock every five minutes—god, had it really on been five minutes? The waiting was going to kill him, it really was.

The phone rang, making him jump. "This Malcolm. Oh, hey. Really? Excellent. I'll meet you there, then. What about—oh, even better." Hanging up, Malcolm fetched his cell phone and texted Cassidy to meet him in the parking garage. Then he sent out an email saying he'd be away from the office the rest of the day.

He ignored the Looks that followed him from the office, and took the executive elevator down to the parking garage. Cassidy was already waiting for him, looking like a scared rabbit, but he smiled when Malcolm appeared. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Malcolm replied, and cupped the back of Cassidy's head to tug him forward for a kiss.

There was a half-hearted protest, as Cassidy rested his hands on Malcolm's chest, but he kissed back with enthusiasm, face flushed when they finally broke apart. "Where are you sneaking off to?"

"I need to meet with my lawyer, finalize some stuff I've been working on. I think he gets unreasonably excited whenever I do anything with my money and all." He stole another kiss and sorely wished there

was time for a quickie. "I'll see you tonight, and if I don't beat you home, I shouldn't be far behind." He'd always liked his penthouse, but he hadn't loved it until Cass started to be a regular part of it.

"Uh—actually—" Cassidy dropped his gaze, then dragged it back up. "I—my siblings too—wondered if you'd like to come over for dinner. It's not as fancy—"

Malcolm kissed him, cutting off all the silly things Cassidy was trying to say, comparing their different homes and lifestyles. Cassidy was inviting him over to have dinner with his family. "I can't wait," he said when he finally allowed Cassidy to breathe. "Should I bring anything?"

"Uh—wine or something, if you'd like, but you definitely don't have to. We should have it all covered."

Malcolm nibbled at Cassidy's jaw, making the fingers pressed against his chest dig into his shirt. Then he stole a last kiss, before finally making himself step away. "What time?"

"Eight for dinner, but come over whenever you like."

"I'll be there," Malcolm replied, and with a wink, finally slid into his car. Driving off, he fought downtown traffic, then cruised along the highway, taking an exit that led a pretty little suburb well outside the city proper. He pulled up to a handsome blue house, just two blocks from their mother's house.

He was about to get out and go ring the bell when the door opened, and Carlos waved at him. Then his wife joined him, and waved as well, and Malcolm grinned as she kissed Carlos goodbye.

"Hey," Malcolm greeted, as Carlos slid into the car.

"Hey," Carlos replied. "I am still annoyed you are putting me in charge of another restaurant, man. I have my hands full with one."

"Because you try to be a manager and an owner, which is all well and good, except you have to hand over the reins to a manager sometime. You're really damn close to owning the Mexican place, and with Bluebird in your pocket now...two restaurants will be a worthy challenge for you, my brother."

"Yeah, yeah," Carlos replied. "So you haven't told me much about it."

"Don't know much about it, really," Malcolm said, and drove the twenty minutes to the diner. "I haven't even seen it yet." They rolled into the parking lot of a dive that definitely had seen better days, but it was well over half full, so it couldn't be a total wash. "This is it, I guess. Yeah, there's Joey's car." He pointed to the sleek Aston Martin parked well of harms' way in an empty corner of the parking lot. "Must be inside already."

Carlos nodded, and climbed out of the car, and they walked together into the restaurant. Joey waved to them from where he sat at the counter, demolishing what looked to be breakfast of all things. Not that he needed to flag them down; he was dressed in a tailored three-piece suit and had hair so bright a red most people thought it dyed. "Whatever else you guys do to this place, keep the pancakes," he said by way of greeting.

In reply, Carlos stole Joey's fork and a bite of pancake. "Yeah, you're right. The pancakes stay." He flagged down a waitress and put in his own order.

"Just the house club for me, please," Malcolm told her, "and we need to see the manager."

"Sure," the waitress replied, and went off.

A few minutes later, a short, corpulent woman in frumpy, ill-fitting khakis and polo cam through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Malcolm could see from the hardened expression on her face as she saw them, that she knew exactly who they were and why they were here.

He left the talking to Joey for the time being.

"Ms. Winston," Joey said pleasantly. Joey was always at his best when he got to flash his shark teeth. "I believe we spoke on the phone."

"Yes," she said flatly. "Mr. Brighton and I parted ways last night. Damned foolish of him to be selling this place, and after I said I'd take it off his hands the end of this year." She did not bother to hide her anger and resentment, and Malcolm might almost feel bad for her, except for Cassidy. She looked them all over, eyes lingering on Carlos. She started to say something, obviously about Carlos, but at the last only said, "Well, I can show you around after hours, but I'm too busy now—"

She either didn't hear, or chose to ignore, the snort of contempt from a waiter at the opposite end of the counter. All around them, other workers and customers made similar noises and expressions over this statement.

"That won't be necessary," Carlos said. "After today, we will be closing the diner down for remodeling. This place definitely needs a makeover."

At that, nearly every worker in the place sidled closer, obviously trying to eavesdrop to learn of their fates with the diner closing for an unknown length of time. Carlos pitched his voice accordingly, but never took his eyes off Ms. Winston. "Those employees we choose to retain will be compensated for the time they are not able to work."

"You can't do that, this place has always run just fine exactly the way it is—"

"It might surprise you, what we know about this place," Joey said, and quietly pushed several sheets of paper across the counter.

Winston stared at them in silence.

Malcolm gave her several minutes, then tried not to sound smug or cheerful as he said, "I suppose now is as good a time as any to inform you that you're fired. If we ever again find you on the premises without my express permission, we'll contact the authorities."

Her face went white, then red. "You can't do this! I've been here twenty years."

"Eighteen, and every one of them was spent being lazy, giving bribes, taking bribes, bullying, harassing, and otherwise making miserable the lives of your employees."

"You can't prove it!"

"Maybe, maybe not," Joey said coolly, though they all knew he could prove plenty without even trying. "We have more than what is presented here, though that is certainly incriminating enough. The testimony of your employees would also go a long way, I promise, especially that of Mr. Monarch, given his good standing and connections."

"Cass?" A waitress asked eagerly. "He's doing well, then?"

"Very well," Malcolm replied, smiling at her. Then he turned back to the Ogre, and his smile vanished. "I told you to get out. I meant now."

Mouth tight, Winston turned sharply and stalked back the way she had come, pretending to accidentally knock over and breaking several dishes and other things on her way.

"Note all damages," Carlos told a nearby waiter, "so that they can be properly deducted from her last paycheck. Someone bring me more coffee, and the books for this place."

"Yes, uh—sir," a waiter said hastily, and bolted off to obey.

"I am in charge now," Carlos announced, standing up to present himself to the room. "My name is Carlos Osborne. You may call me Carlos." He pointed a thumb at Malcolm. "This is the new owner, Malcolm Osborne, my brother. You may call him obnoxious."

Malcolm sniggered, and pulled his sunglasses from where he'd perched them on top of his head, sliding them onto his face. "Carlos, we'll leave the rest to you. Call if you need a ride home. Joey, let's go meet our three thirty."

Outside, Malcolm laughed and laughed. "That was fun. Give Carlos whatever funds he needs to remodel the place. I'm sure he'll have a blast, even if he is grumbling."

"Of course. I'll meet you back at the office." Joey glanced at his watch. "The three thirty should be there already, unless he decides to show up late. Hopefully he is smarter than that, though if he were, he would not be meeting us, I suppose."

"How did he sound on the phone?"

Joey snorted, and tucked a strand of bright red hair back into its place in his perfect, professional haircut. "Definitely interested. I admit your scheme seemed crazier than usual, when you laid it out, but as we stand now I think it will actually work. Somewhat pathetic, really, given his position."

"Just goes to show he's not the right fit."

"Do you have the right fit in mind, then?"

"Come to the company picnic and find out," Malcolm said with a grin. He jingled his car keys at Joey. "See you at your office."

Joey nodded, and strode back to his own car, glaring at some gawkers before sliding behind the wheel.

Malcolm followed him back into downtown, passing his own office building and continuing on straight to heart of downtown—Government Plaza, it was called, for the courthouses and federal buildings that occupied its four main corners. Joey's firm took up seven floors of the thirty story building that was the second tallest in the plaza.

In the parking garage, he slid his car into a spot right next to Joey's.

"I'm amazed," Joey said as they walked toward the elevators, "that you haven't destroyed your car yet. Given the way you're drawn to trouble—"

"Like a shark to a lawsuit? I mean blood," Malcolm interrupted. "At least I've never sued ex-lovers just for the hell of it."

Joey shrugged indifferently. "It's not my fault it proved to be the most interesting part of those relationships. Come on, then." He punched the button for the thirty-first floor, then led the way to his office.

When they reached it, Joey's office smelled of fresh-brewed coffee and his secretary's lilac perfume. She smiled at them before departing, murmuring quietly about phone messages, meetings, and that their three thirty was waiting in conference room D.

"Thanks, Sherry," Joey said with a smile.

Malcolm helped himself to the coffee. "You and Antoine and your fancy offices. My house isn't as fancy as you boys live it in your executive offices."

"Which house would that be? The penthouse. The beach house? The cabin? The French chalet? Or—"

"Alright, alright," Malcolm said, lifting one hand in defeat, the other still holding his coffee. "None of them have an office like this, though."

Jason ignored him, minus a dryly amused look, and retrieved a file stuffed with paper from his desk. "Shall we?"

Malcolm handed him a cup of coffee—black, just like Joey liked it, and always had, except in college where he'd had to drink nasty stuff he'd disguised with cream and sugar. Leaving the office, they went down the hall to the conference room where their appointment waited.

At the far end of the long, wide table which occupied most of the room, sat a man with spiky, multi-colored hair. He wore tight jeans and a tighter shirt, a look that wasn't all that flattering on him. Not like it was on Cassidy. He had more tattooed skin than bare skin, and at least a dozen piercing scattered across his face and ears. Malcolm supposed he was moderately attractive, but there was something decidedly lacking about him.

"You are Ronald Jameson," Joey said, more a statement than a question, then added mostly as an afterthought, "Thank you for coming."

Ronald eyed them. "You offered money. Lots of it."

"Yes," Joey said, and Malcolm suspected he was one of the few who could read that Joey was completely disgusted by this opening statement. "Quite a lot of it, but our terms are very strict. I believe we already spoke of them, on the phone, but we will go over them again now. Here is the contract for you to read over, and sign if you choose."

He took a sip of his coffee, letting the prolonged silence do some of the talking, not relenting until Ronald was shifting restless and anxious in his seat. Then Joey continued with, "Our terms are thus. We would like you to leave The Missing Butterfly. However, we do not want you simply quitting today. Next Saturday, you are not to show at the concert at which you agreed to play. On that day, you will cease to have any contact whatsoever with your former band mates or anyone otherwise related to it. You will not discuss this arrangement or its terms with anyone. Should you violate a single term, you forfeit all the money given to you. The full details are laid out in the contract. Shall we give you a few minutes to read it over and form any questions you might have?"

Ronald shook his head, and only pointed to the paragraph that outline the sum which he would be paid. "This is for real?"

"It will be wired minutes after you sign," Joey assured.

"Sure, man. Group sucks anyway."

Joey frowned. "I urge you to read the contract carefully, and understand fully what it is you are getting into."

"You want me to vanish. I dig it. No coming back no bothering them, no mentioning you're paying me to beat it, no asking for more money."

"Yes," Malcolm said. "That is essentially it. If you ever decide to try and return, too bad, so sad."

"Yeah, yeah. They're too fucking picky and whiney anyway. I'd rather have all this in my bank account, and maybe take up solo work." He took the pen Joey handed him, and signed his name with a flourish.

Taking it, Malcolm signed his own name, then handed the contract to Joey and pulled out his cell phone. A few minutes later, he closed it, all arrangements with his bank made.

"That concludes our business," Joey said, and rose. "Thank you, Mr. Jameson, for being so agreeable."

"S'cool, man," Ronald replied. "Thanks for the money. See ya." Joey called Sherry, who escorted Ronald out, while Joey and Malcolm returned to Joey's office.

Malcolm poured more coffee and settled himself on the fancy sofa facing an impressive view of the city. Joey joined him a few minutes later, absent now of his jacket, vest, and tie, the perfect business hair

disheveled. When Joey was on the clock, he was on, and when he was off, he was off. "If I were your boyfriend, I'd be kinda really pissed at your presumption and control-taking."

"That's because you like being the heavy-handed one," Malcolm replied.

"Are you going to let this new boyfriend in on all you've done? Speaking of, he must be very bad and very pretty, for you to drop so much money on him, and in such ridiculous ways."

"The money will recover with disgusting ease," Malcolm said dismissively. "Carlos' efforts alone will pull in good money eventually, never mind all the other stuff I've got going. I'll tell Cassidy eventually. I'd rather wait 'til after next Saturday, at least."

Way, way after next Saturday. Like, a hundred years from Saturday. Cassidy would probably take his buying Bluebird well enough, eventually, but not so much the manipulating of his band just to give Cassidy a chance to get back in it. But damn it, he wanted to see Cassidy get what he so obviously still wanted, and definitely deserved even if that meant being a scheming, heavy handed millionaire with a great white shark lawyer.

"So what are you doing the rest of the day?" Joey asked.

"I've been invited to dinner," Malcolm said, grinning. "Cassidy invited me over to his house, to eat with his family."

Joey just looked at him, and shook his head. "Your brothers weren't kidding. You do have it bad. Another one domesticated, sheesh. Who's next, Antoine?"

"Hah," Malcolm said, then narrowed his eyes. "When and why were you talking to my brothers?"

"I do tend to speak with all my clients on at least a weekly basis," Joey said.

"So talk business and stop gossiping about me."

Joey smirked, and said nothing.

Malcolm rolled his eyes, finished his coffee, and stood. "So how goes everything with Wally, speaking of business?"

"We've only just begun, but I have high hopes," Joey said, a gleam coming to his eyes that only appeared when he was plotting someone's downfall. "I've been looking forward to this divorce for a long time. She's almost making it too easy for me, really."

"I'm just happy the bitch is finally getting kicked to the curb," Malcolm replied.

"Honestly, they say we bloodsuckers are the evil ones," Joey said, taking a sip of coffee. "That woman could give lessons. Anyway, go primp for dinner." He stood up and clapped Malcolm on the back. "Good luck. If your pretty boy ever needs a lawyer, give him my card."

"Of course," Malcolm replied. "Take it easy. I'll see you Saturday." Leaving the office, he returned to his car, then abandoned downtown to do a bit of shopping before he had to run home to get ready.

It was seven thirty when he finally pulled into Cassidy's driveway. There was absolutely no reason to be nervous. He and Cass were doing well—better than—and he'd gotten along with Lindsay and Denny on previous questions just fine. But nervous he was, and he could only roll his eyes at himself as he clambered out of the car with host gifts in tow.

He rang the doorbell, and it opened almost immediately to reveal Cassidy in nice jeans and a short-sleeved button down that almost perfectly matched the blue of his eyes, and showed off the tattooed arms beautifully. He wore a hemp necklace around his throat, that made Malcom want to take a nibble of said throat. Best of all, though, the pretty curls were loose and unrestrained, just begging to be combed through and gripped

"Hey," Cassidy said softly, smile warm as he stepped back to let Malcolm in.

Malcolm stepped inside, then bent to steal a long kiss, and it was probably for the best that his hands were full. The sound of giggling drew his attention, and he laughed softly himself at Cassidy's red face before looking toward Lindsay, standing in the doorway between hallway and kitchen.

He presented her with the rose he held. "For the lady of the house."

Lindsay took them with obvious surprise and pleasure, beaming at him. "Thank you. They're beautiful. Oh! I can use that vase from graduation!" She bolted upstairs, leaving them alone again.

"Way to butter up my sister," Cassidy said, smiling

"I brought wine, beer, and whiskey to butter up the rest of you, or at least liquor up," Malcolm replied, flourishing the bags he still held.

Cassidy laughed. "I said drinks, not the entire liquor store."

"Yes, well, I was indecisive," Malcolm replied. About which of Cassidy's favorites to get, and it was easier to get them all than actually bother to make a decision.

"Come on," Cassidy said, and led him into the kitchen, straight to the delightful smells which had only teased him from the hallway.

Denny stood at the stove, intent upon whatever he was stirring, and greeted Malcolm with a wave and a brief, "Yo."

"Smells good," Malcolm told him.

"You smell better," Cassidy murmured quietly before bustling over to the fridge to put away the beer and wine Malcolm had brought, leaving Malcolm staring in surprise.

Then Malcolm grinned, and asked about glasses, going toward the cabinet Denny indicated. "What's your pleasure?" he asked them both, and Lindsay as she returned with the roses arranged in a square crystal vase.

"Did you say there was wine?" she asked.

"Yes," Malcolm said, and pulled down a wineglass for her, as Cassidy uncorked it. Cassidy and Denny and Malcolm all voted beer. He handed Lindsay her wine, and accepted his own beer from Cassidy. "Have a good day?"

Cassidy looked at him in exasperation and reluctant amusement. "The women informed me they approved one hundred and ten percent of our relationship, and I am obviously good for you, and should let them know if you do anything to upset or hurt me."

Malcolm made a face. "It's totally not fair they're taking your side, when they work for me and I've been around longer. Like I'd mistreat you, and I told them not to tell you they were on to us. Sorry. They pinned me in my office right before I vacated the premises."

"I'm still employed, for now," Cassidy said. "I just hope..." He shrugged, and took a swallow of beer. Then the exasperated look returned, with a hint of glare. "I also got a call from an old coworker this afternoon, telling me how the Bluebird had been bought out."

"Uh-oh," Malcolm said.

Lindsay stared wide-eyed, then started giggling, hastily muffling them when Cassidy's glare turned her way.

Cassidy turned back to Malcolm and said, "He said three guys showed up, talking about remodeling it. They apparently fired the Ogre on the spot. A man with bright red hair, a latino, and one who was apparently extremely pretty. One drove an Aston Martin, and the other a Maserati."

"I need to remember not to drive the Maserati, and to make myself ugly," Malcolm replied. "By the way, I bought the Bluebird Diner where you used to work, and fired the Ogre. Carlos is my partner in the venture; the one that will be doing all the work. He's going to give it a hell of a makeover."

"Why?" Cassidy asked.

"Because I wanted to, and was able? It's a business investment, too, though. Plus, it was fun firing someone who actually deserved it, and made your life miserable for so long."

Cassidy sighed, but after another long pull of his beer, relented. "I wish I could have seen her face. You're lucky she didn't trash your car."

"She wasn't going to after Carlos docked her pay for the shit she did break, and with my lawyer sitting right there. He was the redhead, by the way. Joseph Waterstone, friends call him Joey."

"You'd better not make a habit of shit like this," Cassidy said. "I'm not dating you because you're a millionaire who can actually do crap like that. Knock it off from now on."

"Not a habit, I promise," Malcolm assured. "If it makes you feel any better, I've done it before for my mother. There was this clothing store she loved when we were growing up, but it was filled with the sorts of snobs who only cater to higher snobs who can actually afford the clothes. After I came into my money, I took her there for her birthday. They were total bitches. So we left, I bought the store a few days later, fired the whole staff, and my mom still gets free clothes there. It's one of my more lucrative stores."

"But you work in an office?" Lindsay asked. "Why?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Working at Amberton-Lord helped improve my business skills, and it put some sort of normalcy to my life. It's no fun being me, when you have to do it alone I learned that lesson." He dredged up a smile. "Anyway, a lot of my stuff takes care of itself, and Joey is equal parts lawyer and business manager. He loves it. Anyway, my point is—"

"You do kind of make a habit of it."

"Only a little one, I swear."

Cassidy shook his head. "So what are you going to do with the Bluebird?"

"No clue. I'm the silent partner with all the cash. Carlos is the schemer; he's probably driving them all crazy right now. He loves it, even if tries to convince you otherwise. Give him a ring sometime, he'll be happy to tell you his evil plan. Just ignored everything he says about me."

"I dunno," Cassidy replied with a grin. "I still haven't heard those stories about you in drag."

Lindsay and Denny burst out laughing, as Malcolm buried his face in his hands with a groan. "You realize," he said after a moment, "that I can probably cozen embarrassing stories about you out of your siblings."

"Not if all parties want to continue breathing, and one particular party wants to continue getting laid," Cassidy said.

"Damn," Malcolm said. "Defeated."

"Later," Lindsay stage whispered at him, winking when Cassidy glared at her.

"Dinner's ready," Denny announced, and began to arrange pasta, sauce, garlic bread, and salad on the table. Cassidy fetched them all more beer and wine.

"This is delicious," Malcolm said after he'd eaten at least half of what was on his plate.

"Denny's not too bad a cook when he can be bothered to do it," Cassidy said, and beamed at his brother. "Which is good, because Lindsay and I both are barely passable."

"As you've no doubt figured out, Carlos does all the cooking in my family, though he learned it from our mom."

"So, how did you and your brother wind up working in entertainment?"

"College, mostly. Antoine always had corporate ambitions, and the friends he made there settled in that particular industry. I followed him because I wasn't picky, I just wanted a good number-juggling job and it was handy to mooch off Antoine's insane connections. He knows everyone. The college he went to was full of the business elite and future business elite. Wally and him were friends from the start, he's got buddies in the same firm Joey works for, he was suitemates with a Lord, and the list just goes on. It's sort of sickening, really."

"Wow," Lindsay said. She reached out and tousled Cassidy's hair. "You sure can pick them, big brother."

"Shush," Cassidy said, flushing.

Conversation then turned to more general things, peppered with family anecdotes, until it all began finally to wind down around dessert, which proved to be a chocolate cherry cake.

Lindsay was the first to finish, Denny almost right behind her. "All right. You are approved for the position of Cassidy's boyfriend on a trial basis. At the end of the six month trial period, you will be re-evaluated for a permanent position."

"Lindsay!" Cassidy hissed.

Malcolm laughed. "Yes, ma'am. I shall work very hard to prove myself."

Standing up, Denny alongside her, Lindsay cheerfully said, "And now we will leave so you can have sex."

"Lindsay!" Cassidy bellowed, while Denny laughed and Malcolm grinned and bid them goodnight.

"I'm going to kill them," Cassidy muttered when they had gone, glaring at the door through which they'd fled.

Malcolm only smirked. "So do I get a proper tour of the house?"

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "If you want, but we also offer the bedroom only tour, if that's of interest to you, sir."

"Oh, that does sound rather perfect," Malcolm replied. He stood up as Cassidy did, and quickly closed the space between them, taking a long, very thorough kiss. "I guess I'd better work extra hard over the next six months. I'd hate to lose this position."

"Shut up," Cassidy said, then dragged him through the house to his bedroom.

*CHAPTER TWELVE

Malcolm wanted nothing more than to take Cassidy in his arms and kiss him until he calmed down—until he was distracted by kisses and lust he forgot to be nervous and miserable. "Babe, calm down before you die of a heart-attack."

Cassidy shrugged, and tried to smile, but he still look like he wanted to throw up or run for his life. Since their arrival, he had very pointedly not looked toward the stage, but Malcolm could tell he wanted to, badly.

They had just wrapped up awards and announcements, and it had taken Malcolm well over an hour before he'd finally managed to extricate himself and Cassidy from their coworkers. He had no doubt that after they'd had a few, they would return to harass him again about resigning, and how dare he.

Moving to one of the many drink stalls, Malcolm requested two beers and handed one to Cassidy. He tugged at the long-sleeved tee Cassidy was wearing. "You could have worn a t-shirt. No one would have minded. Hell, most would have loved them."

Cassidy shrugged. "Habit, I guess. Anyway, this is still technically work."

Malcolm stifled a sigh, and did not even attempt to point out that at least half the attendees had chosen to show up wearing clothes that only barely met the legal definition of 'clothing'. It was summer, everyone was wearing as little as possible. He really hoped his scheming paid off. "No one will hold that kind of thing against you. Not here, when your money is made on guys like you, babe. Hell, the girls would positively die." He laughed. "They think you're a perfect, good little boy. They were afraid my life would be too much for you, the way I grew up and all."

At that, Cassidy gave a genuine laugh. "I don't think I'm the one who wore out first, last night. Who's too much for whom?"

"You're too much for any man," Malcolm said, a hint of growl to his voice, "but I sure as hell enjoy trying. Oh, there's your sister and brother." He waved, calling them over.

"Oh. My. God," Lindsay said, practically vibrating in place. "Do you know who I *saw*? I had no idea this thing would be packed with famous people. Denny almost molested that baseball player guy he has a man-crush on."

Denny poked her. "Shut up. At least the security guards weren't eying me suspiciously after I squealed like a stuck pig."

"You be quiet and drink your soda."

Grimacing, poking her again for good measure, Denny obeyed. "Man, I want a beer."

Cassidy laughed. "Sorry, no law-breaking in public."

Denny gave a long, aggrieved sigh. "So when does the music start? Have you seen your old friends yet, bro?"

"No," Cassidy said flatly. He looked away, making a point of crowd watching. Malcolm suspected he wasn't seeing a damned thing.

Denny and Lindsay rolled their eyes at Malcolm while Cassidy wasn't looking, but there was affection and understanding there, too.

"Mal!" The group turned as one toward the voice calling for Malcolm, to see Joey walk toward them in jeans, t-shirt, and flip-flops, red hair jewel-bright in the afternoon sunlight. Antoine was next to him, sleek, executive casual, holding a bottle of beer. "So you must be Cassidy," Joey said by way of greeting. "Nice to meet you. I'm Joey, Mal's lawyer and partner in crime."

"You're being redundant," Antoine said. "Anyone seen Carlos or Wally?"

Malcolm shook his head. "You'd know better than us where Wally might be, and Carlos is probably pestering the food stalls or being made to look at pretty things by his wife. Speaking of wives, is Wally bringing the bitch with him?"

"Nah, she'd melt in all this heat." Antoine made a face, and drank his beer. "Band is starting soon," he said, glancing at his watch. "Suppose I should go check on that. You kids have fun."

"So," Joey said into the silence that fell after Antoine's departure "Do you think after the divorce, Antoine will finally say something to Wally? I have a feeling he's next on the domestic chopping block you lot keep jumping up on."

Cassidy left off his brooding abruptly. "I thought they seemed close. I half thought they had something going already. The entire company certainly thinks so."

"Not that we've ever heard," Malcolm replied, eyes following his brother until Antoine finally vanished from sight. "Antoine would have told Carlos and me, if no one else, and he's never said a word." He smirked at Joey. "So when are you going up on the chopping block?"

"Never. Settled life is boring life. So any superstars going to get into fights this year?"

"I hope not," Malcolm said. "Stop looking for new clients, you bloodsucker, and have a little fun."

"Bloodsucking is fun," Joey replied, then his smile turned razor as he looked at Malcolm. "I'm just waiting for the big concert, like everyone else. Free kick-ass music, isn't that the real reason everyone comes to this thing? Missing Butterfly, that's the name, right? I've heard mostly good things about them. Rumor has it Antoine is closer to VP than ever; if all this comes off without a hitch, he'll be even closer."

Malcolm gave him a warning look, and said only, "Antoine won't be happy until he owns the whole company. He always had the most ambition."

Joey sniggered, and went to fetch another drink, flirting with the woman who served him.

Rolling his eyes, Malcolm said, "Let's go find Carlos, and maybe play some games. Want me to win you a teddy bear?" He asked, winking at Cassidy.

"Bet you can't," Cassidy retorted.

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to insult me?"

Cassidy fluttered his lashes in a way that made everyone howl around them. "I'm just saying, it's okay if you can't win the teddy bear."

Malcolm shot him a disgusted look. "You are *not* a nice boyfriend."

Cassidy laughed and drank his beer.

Heaving a sigh, Malcolm finished his own beer, then said to the snickering group, "If you'll pardon us, I have to regain my manhood."

"Have fun," Lindsay said. "I'm going to go find pretty boys of my own to flirt with. Denny?"

"No pretty boys for me, thanks," Denny replied.

"Not unless it's your baseball crush," Lindsay said with an evil grin. "You were totally making eyes at him." She laughed and bolted off when Denny roared in protest and lunged for, and they vanished back into the crowd.

Cassidy smiled after them, looking for a moment so happy and content, Malcolm wanted to kiss him. He didn't realize until he felt a soft gasp against his mouth that he'd given in to the temptation.

"You suck at keeping things quiet," Cassidy said, exasperated. "Though, I guess I should have known that when I saw the Maserati."

"So does that mean I can steal another kiss?" Malcolm asked sheepishly.

Cassidy sighed, but said with a faint smile, "If you must."

"Oh, I must," Malcolm murmured, and bent to steal it.

"Get a room," said a familiar voice a few moments later.

Malcolm drew back and smirked. "Like you and your lovely wife have any room to talk, King and Queen of the Kissing Contest."

Carlos smirked while his wife rolled her eyes. "Having fun, Cass?" Carlos asked.

"Lots", Cassidy replied.

"Good. I hear you're getting a teddy bear."

"Oh, for—" Malcolm threw up his hands and went to get another beer, while they all laughed.

Cassidy joined him a minute later, still laughing softly as he clung briefly to Malcolm's arm. "I was only teasing about the bear, Mal."

Even if he had been annoyed, hearing Cassidy call him 'Mal' would have banished it. "Oh, no," He replied, nipping the tip of Cassidy's nose. "If I don't win you a teddy bear, I will never hear the end of it. But I will have my revenge, fair warning."

"I'll have to keep you distracted, then," Cassidy murmured.

Malcolm felt his body go hot and tight, and it was only his view of the stage that kept him from dragging Cassidy somewhere secluded. "You are certainly welcome to try, babe. For now, teddy bears await." Especially if it kept Cassidy happy and smiling.

He was on his second round of ring toss, surrounded by tipsy, cackling, smack-talking office women, when an unfamiliar voice cut through the crowd. "Fucking hell—Cassidy?"

Cassidy jerked and went white, but turned around to face the speaker. "Bruce, man, long time no see."

"No shit!" Bruce said, and surged forward to embrace him, gripping his arm and clapping him on the back, laughing and cheering. Then he called out "Oi! Losers! This way! Look-it what I've found."

Malcolm thought he heard Cassidy mutter an 'oh, god' before two other men separated from the general crowd to join them. He looked all three of them over, as they mobbed Cassidy. Bruce was dark-featured and sort of rough-looking, but the way he smiled and spoke said it was all for show.

Jake was fair-haired with pale brown eyes, with a softer edge to him than Bruce. He was dressed more simply than the others, but there was a butterfly tattooed on the back of his hand. He was striking, rather than handsome...and it was damned interesting that the emerald ring he wore on his left ring finger exactly matched the one Eddie wore.

Eddie definitely had an edge the other two didn't; the sort of razor edge that spoke of authority, leadership. He was quite obviously in charge, and Malcolm recalled that Eddie was the drummer.

"Oh, my god!" Lindsay's voice cried out over the crowd, as she appeared abruptly from behind the ring toss. "I remember you!"

They all turned to face her, as she rushed up with Denny in tow. "You were his band buddies! I thought you were all the biggest dorks in the world." She laughed.

Bruce grinned and moved closer. "My, my, the little sister is all grown up, and so lovely."

"Hey, asshole," Cassidy said, yanking Bruce back. "Nine years doesn't mean the rules have changed. Rule number one is still Do Not Touch My Sister. I'll kill you."

Lindsay rolled her eyes, then smiled at Bruce. "Don't worry, I'll get his boyfriend to distract him, and then you can flirt with me."

"Boyfriend?" Eddie demanded, and rounded on Cassidy. "Never say Mr. Flirts With All Men has settled down with one man. What happened to hooking up all over the world with thousands of pretty boys?"

"Yes," Malcolm drawled, "what happened to those plans?"

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "I was eighteen. Anyway, you're pretty enough for a thousand, Mr. *Seventeen Modeling Contracts*." He turned to Eddie and said, "Shut up, Eddie. I can still kick your ass."

"Yeah, but then I'd have to kick yours," Jake interjected. "Or I'd get no sex for a very long time."

"What—" Cassidy gawked as they displayed their matching rings, both men looking somewhat embarrassed. "Since when—why the hell—goddamn it, you assholes, why didn't you tell me?"

"You sort of drifted away," Eddie said quietly. "We thought about bugging you a thousand times, but..." He shrugged. "Figured you'd moved on, didn't want to cling to what you'd put behind you. We always hoped you'd moved on to bigger and better things, man."

Cassidy shook his head. "I figured you didn't want to cling to the one who fell behind."

There was silence, then Jake laughed. "Guess you never noticed what we renamed the band."

"I didn't," Cassidy said. "Not until a month ago."

"Speaking of our name," Eddie said with obvious annoyance. "Ron's gone missing. He never came back to the hotel last night, and we still haven't fucking found him today. When I do find him, I'm going to tear his balls off and make him eat them."

Bruce grimaced. "On the bright side, this is the second time he's done this to us. Contract definitely broken."

"Yeah, but now we can't do the concert," Eddie said with a sigh. "That's *our* contract broken, and we really needed this chance."

Malcolm bit his tongue, really hoping someone else would suggest what he wanted.

It could not have been better than when the band mobbed Cassidy themselves. "Yo, Cass. Come sing for us. Bet anything you still can," Bruce said.

"What?" Cassidy stepped back, crashing into Malcolm. "That's crazy. Even if I could still sing that well—"

"Which you can," Malcolm cut in, shaking him hard from behind. "Unless you've never noticed on karaoke night that you leave a room full of hard-ons and wet panties."

Cassidy went bright red, and drove his elbow into Malcolm's stomach, while everyone else snickered.

"That aside," Cassidy hissed, twisting to shoot Malcolm a warning look before focusing on his old friends again, "I don't know any of your songs, or anything. I can't just pick up and go with it."

"Oh, screw that," Jake said, throwing an arm across Cassidy's shoulders. "Every song we've ever gotten from you, we've mastered. Well, as we can without you fucking bitching at us."

"Yeah," Jake said eagerly. "Totally sing with us, man. Just for today, if you want. It can be like old times, except you'll actually be up on a fucking stage like you always wanted."

Cassidy frowned and shook his head. "I don't—"

"Shut up," Eddie cut in. "Singers. Always so full of drama. Since when do you hesitate to steal the spotlight, Cass? Fuck, we couldn't slow you down in your race to get it."

"I see you're still as bossy as ever," Cassidy said with a scowl.

"Still the voice of sense and reason," Eddie retorted. "Come sing with us for the day. Even you sucking it up would be better than no singer at all, and I don't think you're capable of sucking at music. After that, you can go back to your normal life, promise. Whatever you want, man. Just sing with us tonight. We can be Four Butterflies again for a few hours."

Cassidy was silent, but not even a blind man could miss the longing in his eyes.

Malcolm turned him around and kissed him briefly—then shoved him hard into the circle of his band mates. "Sing a song for me, babe."

Before Cassidy could say a word, he was being dragged away toward the stage.

"Interesting," Antoine said from behind Malcolm, making him jump.

Malcolm glared at him—and at Wally, standing beside him. Antoine looked entirely too amused for Malcolm's health.

"We offered them a damned fine contract. One Butterfly Missing would be stupid to miss this chance. Never mind Ronald—had more than a few debts, he was in danger of being kicked out of the band. This performance would have fixed all that. But, I couldn't reach even his voicemail when I tried to call him. And with him oh so conveniently missing..."

Wally nodded in exaggerated agreement. "Curiouser and curiouser."

Malcolm gave a careless shrug, and studied his beer bottle. "Guess he found something better to do."

"I guess," Antoine said dryly, and rolled his eyes. When Malcolm said nothing, and clearly had no intention of speaking, he gave up with disgust and dragged Wally off into the crowds again.

Pointedly ignoring all the other curious stares he was getting, Malcolm went to find something to eat and another beer, and to hopefully win a teddy bear.

He'd just scored the ugliest electric blue and neon green bear in the world when the first strains of electric guitar stopped everyone short—and the sudden pouring out of Cassidy's smooth, smoky voice caused a long, startled silence.

Then the crowds of people exploded into noise and motion, headed for the stage as quickly as they could possibly manage. Drinks, food, games, and most conversation were all abandoned as everyone fought to get as close to the stage as they possibly could.

Malcolm cheerfully insinuated himself in the section cordoned off for the VIPs, nodding to Lindsay and Denny as they arrived with Antoine. He had a fresh beer in hand, but he was far more interested in drinking in Cassidy.

He looked born for the stage. He'd come to the picnic dressed still mostly as an office boy, if one relaxed enough to let Malcolm steal kisses.

Obviously his friend had scrounged some more fitting clothing and gotten Cassidy into them—or maybe Cassidy had gotten himself into them. That seemed more likely, really. Once Cassidy was in, he was all in.

And goddamn was he in—those too-tight jeans that looked so good, a black tank top, and goddamn if he hadn't managed a flat cap, pulled down low enough to add that indefinable something about him. The tease. Tattoos and rings, and the kind of voice that could make anyone and everyone do whatever Cassidy wanted.

The crowd was screaming and cheering before the song was half done, and were positively deafening after it wrapped up.

Malcolm spotted the Pack in the crowd, clustered close to the stage, and could tell they didn't yet recognize Cassidy.

"Greetings, beauties," Cassidy said to the crowd. "Lords and ladies, I hope you're up for real music. Anyone who prefers their rock watered down, leave now or suffer in silence. Joyce, you aren't screaming loud enough! Gimme a proper holler!"

Joyce's shriek that time probably deafened everyone in a ten-foot radius. "Cassidy? Oh, my fucking god, it's Cassidy!" At that, the rest of the accounting department women erupted into ear-splitting screams. Oh, lord, they would never leave Cassidy alone now. He'd better sign a contract just to escape them and save his life.

"Welcome to the party, one and all," Cassidy said. "Now let's get back to the music."

He began to sing again, only further entralling the enamored crowd.

Malcolm cheered louder than any of them, and could not wait to show Cassidy personally just how fucking he loved and adored him, and how goddamn incredible he was.

"You totally rigged this," Antoine shouted in his ear.

Malcolm smiled, but said nothing in reply.

Antoine rolled his eyes, but gave up and went back to enjoying the concert and having one of his silent conversations with Wally.

Finally, to everyone's obvious reluctance, the concert wrapped up. He turned to Lindsay and Denny to see what they thought—to find Lindsay in tears, and Denny damned close to them.

"I always thought he was the biggest, most embarrassing dork growing up, before our parents died," Lindsay said, smiling and laughing and crying. "I used to tell him that all the time. I know he gave up singing and I mean, he sings around the house and stuff...but he's never sung like that. He should be a star. He would've been..."

Denny only nodded along with everything she said.

Malcolm draped his arms over their shoulders. "We should go tell him how magnificent he is, then. Come, on."

He led them away from the crowds and into his car, then drove them to the club where rooms were rented for the VIP after party. A few minutes later, Cassidy showed up with his band, Wally, and Antoine.

"Cassidy!" Lindsay and Denny bolted toward him, and threw themselves into their brother's arms. Cassidy laughed and hugged them, laughing all the more at the way they talked and cheered and exclaimed.

Giving them a few minutes, Malcolm turned to the other band members. "Given you haven't seen him in nine years, you guys play together like a dream."

Eddie shrugged. "We all met in third grade, man. We've been playing together ever since. That never stopped, just because we were in different places."

"Now we just have to convince him to stick with us," Jake muttered, eying Cassidy. "It'd really suck if he didn't. Unless he really does have something better going?"

Malcolm shook his head. "This is precisely where he wants to be—and I think now he can be here, if he'll just realize that. I brought him this far, the rest is all him."

"Screw that," Bruce said. "The rest is up to how quickly we can duct tape him and throw him in the back of that Maserati I want to lift."

"Touch my car, and I'll kill you," Malcolm said.

Bruce rolled his eyes while the other two laughed at him.

"And no tying up my boyfriend," Malcolm added for good measure. "Or duct taping, or anything else."

"Who's tying who up?" Cassidy demanded.

Malcolm turned around and stole a kiss, fingers sliding through sweat-soaked curls. "Hundreds of people want to take you home tonight, babe. Lucky me, I'm the one who gets to do it."

Cassidy shook his head, but smiled and kissed him again. "Yes, you are. How did I do?"

"Perfect. Magnificent. Splendid. Sexy as fuck."

"You're already getting laid," Cassidy said with a laugh. "No need to flatter."

Malcolm took another lingering kiss, then reluctantly drew back. "So are you quitting the day job, too?"

"Yes," Wally said firmly, joining the circle. "Even if I have to tie him up and make him listen to bad music until he gives in."

"No," Eddie said matter-of-factly. "His boy toy already said no bondage."

Cassidy recoiled. "I—I can't just bail on my family now. It's hard, time-consuming work—"

"Cass!" Lindsay said, wiping away this. "We're fine. We'll be fine. Jeez, I'm in grad school and if Denny gets into trouble at college, cause I know you're fretting about it, you can fly over in your private jet and kick his ass, or whoever's ass."

"I don't have a private jet," Cassidy said in a weak attempt at a joke.

Malcolm scratched his nose and wisely said nothing.

"Yeah, bro," Denny said, voice a bit rough. "Go boss other people around for awhile. I'll walk the straight and narrow, if you're holding back for that. I'll punch them, or not, or whatever."

Cassidy stared at them hard—then he just seemed to let go, or melt. But all he said was a simple, "Okay."

"Okay?" Eddie demanded. "That's it?"

"Yeah, okay," Cassidy replied, grinning though he looked damned close to crying. "Your nine years of screwing around are officially over, bitches."

Malcolm swore the cheering then could be heard on the other side of the world. Then his arms were full of sweaty but happy and eager Cassidy, and Malcolm was more than willing to kiss him until the others finally made them stop.

"Uh—you don't mind me doing this, do you?" Cassidy asked, turning suddenly shy in that odd, endearing way of his.

Laughing, Malcolm tweaked Cassidy's nose and said, "Babe, I'm a jet set millionaire. Following my rockstar boyfriend around the country and world sounds like the life I've been waiting for."

Cassidy beamed, and kissed him again, ignoring the harassment of the others. Malcolm could feel him trembling ever so slightly, but fuck if he'd ever seen Cassidy happier.

Then Cassidy rounded on Wally and Antoine. "Shouldn't this require champagne or something? Especially after all the threats of duct tape and rope."

"Man, they weren't kidding about you being bossy," Antoine said. "It's already on its way. So, I guess the band name needs to change now, given you're found."

"Not change, so much as revert," Eddie said. "Metalmark, Pierrot, Karner, and Monarch has returned. The Four Butterflies are back."

Cassidy smiled, and threw himself at his band mates, embracing and laughing and recounting old stories until the champagne arrived and other guests began to trickle in.

✖EPILOGUE

It was a beautiful day for a ceremony. Sunny, warm but not hot, a nice breeze, barely any humidity, and everything, everyone, was just as bright as the weather.

The fact the graduation ceremony was outside also helped him look normal for wearing sunglasses and his hat, instead of causing him to stick out like a sore thumb. He messed with his tie as he watched Denny's row stand up to head for the stage, to join the line to march across it and received their diplomas.

A hand reached out and covered his, stilling his restless movements. Cassidy looked at Malcolm and matched the smile he found there watt for watt. On his other side, Lindsay was texting some friend or another as they waited for Denny's moment to finally arrive. As always, she was beautiful, wearing a green summer dress with her hair prettily twisted up and secured with jewel flower pins. She would be getting on a plane just a few hours after the ceremony, flying across the country to settle into her new place for a few months before school started and she began work on her PhD.

Denny, Cassidy knew, was planning on returning home for a little bit, to save up money and take a break from school while he debated graduate school versus working full time on his painting. He certainly would have his pick of graduate schools if that's what he chose, and he had already sold several pieces of art. So the choice definitely was Denny's to make.

Cassidy toyed with his mirrored sunglasses and glanced around at the people surrounding them. Today as about Denny; he'd feel like a complete ass if someone recognized him and he had to deal with fans rather than put all his attention on his little brother.

Beside him, Malcolm tried and failed to stifle a yawn. Cassidy laughed softly. "I told you to get some sleep while we could," he murmured in a low tone, careful not to disturb the people around them.

"But it was more fun staying awake with you," Malcolm said, then "After you dozed off, I took advantage of a chance to watch your new music video eleventy billion times. It was worth the loss of sleep."

Cassidy flushed and jabbed him in the ribs. "You're hopeless. Stop watching that stupid thing. God."

Malcolm grinned, and Cassidy just knew that behind Malcolm's mirrored shades, the eyes were sparkling.

The only thing more difficult than being an international star, was having a boyfriend even more recognizable. People often recognized Malcolm even before they noticed Cassidy's tattoos.

"Denny's turn," Lindsay said in an excited, squeaky whisper.

If not for the explicit request not to make any noise until the ceremony was concluded, and the need to keep a very low profile, Cassidy would have cheered at the top of his lungs. He'd been just as uncontainable at Lindsay's graduations. Fuck his own stardom, he loved seeing his siblings do so damned

well. Lindsay could have whatever job or college chair she desired, and he didn't doubt for a second Denny would have his own gallery someday.

He screamed and cheered just short of rendering himself hoarse when they were finally allowed. As the crowds began to break up, they slipped away and headed back to the apartment Denny shared with three other guys, waiting for the graduates to return.

While he waited, he stripped out of his fancy clothes and returned to casual. He'd have to put on some sort of jacket when they left, but for the moment he was good in his plain blue t-shirt.

About half an hour later, Denny and his friends came tumbling in, laughing and cheering and roughhousing. "Bro!" Denny said excitedly when he spotted Cassidy. It had been months since he'd seen either of his siblings, and man, he never stopped missing them.

Denny threw himself at Cassidy and hugged him tightly. "Thanks for coming. Did you hear? With fucking honors, man. I told you I'd be good and work hard."

"I always knew you'd do fucking amazing," Cassidy said, and hugged him again, before pulling away and clapping him on the back. He motioned to the other guys, who had gone still and silent and were doing the buggy-eyed, holy shit, gawking thing.

"Yeah, man," Denny said, and presented Cassidy to them. "Guys, my brother. I can totally tell I don't need to tell you his name."

"Fucking hell," said one. "You wanker, you said you *weren't* related to *that* Monarch."

"Actually, I just always managed to dodge the question," Denny said smugly. "This is my sister Lindsay. So much as try to flirt with her, or even look at her the wrong way, and I'll kill you. She's way too good for you."

Lindsay rolled her eyes, then giggled at the way they all continued to gawk at Cassidy. "I think Mal is the one who needs to worry about a Monarch getting jumped."

"Possibly," Denny said cheerfully. "They're all totally straight until they hear and or watch Cassidy."

"We're going to fucking kill you," said the same one who'd spoken before. "Seriously, Denny. You're an asshole. How could you keep this a secret?"

"Keep calling me names and I'll forget to invite you wankers to dinner. With me, and Linds, and Cassidy, and Malcolm, and the rest of Four Butterflies."

"You're an asshole," said one of the other guys, "but we like you anyway. Oh, my god. I cannot believe he—you—seriously, dude, you're so dead later."

Malcolm laughed and rose from where he'd been watching the proceedings from the couch. "Then I guess I'd better give you a reason not to kill him." He embraced Denny and said, "Congrats. Your brother bought you a pretty awesome graduation gift, but he kept shooting down my ideas. He said you couldn't have a flashy car yet, and then I was going to buy you a couple of professional football cheerleaders

from your favorite team, but he said the lawyers would kill him for that one, so finally I just decided to be lazy and double his gift."

"Which is?" Denny asked, looking amused and insanely curious.

"Instead of two, you get four sets of tickets and everything else needed to go tearing around Europe this summer."

Cassidy clapped his hands over his ears as comprehension dawned and the guys went crazy.

Lindsay rolled her eyes, but smiled, and toyed with her keychain, which sported a key to her own flashy gift for getting her Masters. As the noise finally died down she said, "Bruce texted me to say they're at the hotel, and ready to eat whenever we roll in."

"Why is Bruce texting you?" Cassidy demanded.

"I'm ignoring you," Lindsay replied. Then she turned to the four rowdy men and started to organize and direct them."

Left alone in the living room, Cassidy took the chance to slide into Malcolm's arms and steal a long kiss.

Malcolm smiled against his mouth, nibbling on his bottom lip a moment before finally saying, "I do like being the one who gets to do all the things everyone else fantasizes about."

"Stop being insufferable and smug," Cassidy said. "Only sulking makes you prettier."

Laughing, Malcolm said, "Everything makes me prettier. Though, I'm still not half so pretty as you in the new music video—"

"Shut. Up," Cassidy hissed, smacking Malcolm's ass hard. "You are so not allowed to watch those things anymore."

"All I'm saying is, it's a good thing you didn't actually dress that way when you worked in a real office. Then we *would* have gotten fired for inappropriate behavior."

Cassidy shook his head, and sighed a soft, "Hopeless." Then he stole another kiss before the living room was again flooded with rowdy, excited college kids and they were carried off to celebrate.

✧ F I N ✧